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WHAT ARE YOKAI?

In ancient times, people believed all things had souls. Trees, for example, had **tree spirits**. Stones had **stone spirits**. At night, these spirits would come out and dance.

These ancient beliefs combined with the stories and impressions of the Edo period to create what we now know as yokai.

By impressions, imagine walking down a street at night next to a rice field. It is pitch black, and you are suddenly overcome with a sense of unease. As you quicken your pace, your feet feel heavy, as if something is clinging to them. Unease becomes terror. Putting a name to this, it becomes the yokai called **Sunekosuri**.

Yokai are born in such ways, to allow humans to express sensations they otherwise cannot explain or things they cannot see. In ancient times, before electricity, people lived much of their lives in this spooky dark.

Looking at things scientifically, current science cannot explain the mystery of yokai. It is possible that as science advances, we may find evidence that such things as yokai actually exist. Wouldn't that be fun?



DANCING **TREE** AND **STONE** SPIRITS



SUNEKOSURI



ZASHIKI WARASHI



TORIYAMA SEKIEN

However, to borrow the words of another scholar, “we cannot with absolute certainty determine the existence or nonexistence of yokai.”

Yurei—ghosts—appear in different forms. They often have a grudge against a specific person, and their appearance is terrifying. Yokai can also be scary, but they rarely manifest from resentment. They are there and have simply always been there. **Zashiki warashi**, for example, exist in their location regardless of humans.

People have been imagining yokai since ancient times. However, their most definitive appearance comes from the hand of artist **Toriyama Sekien**, who lived two hundred years ago. Toriyama illustrated several books on yokai. He included his own original creations alongside stories passed through the ages. Many artists were inspired by Toriyama to create their own yokai and yurei illustrations. There was often little intent beyond these other than to frighten people.

Yanagita Kunio also recorded living yokai legends in his book *Yokai Dangi (Discourses on Yokai)*. However, he didn’t include illustrations. I have drawn many yokai from Yanagita’s books using old art as reference as well as designing my own.

I created about thirty new yokai for my comic series *Kitaro*. But I don’t think this should be done lightly. It is not the same as creating new kaiju monsters for films. Yokai are a legacy from the past. It is our responsibility to preserve them and hand them down to future generations.



WHAT KINDS OF YOKAI ARE THERE?

The most common yokai are fireballs. Toriyama Sekien found them difficult and boring to illustrate, so he restricted the number he included in his books. However, when looking at regional stories, they are by far the most frequent.

I remember how excited I was as a child when I saw Onibi. Most people's first encounters with yokai are **Onibi** or **Hitodama** (which are essentially the same thing).



ONIBI



HITODAMA



OLD HOUSES HAVE AN ATMOSPHERE SUITABLE FOR YOKAI

That is usually followed by **house yokai**. Many old houses have a certain feeling of yokai. Even more so if there are cobwebs.

In those houses in the dark, there is a sense of dread, even though nothing is there. Many yokai come from putting a shape to that feeling.

These fears are inherited from ancient times, the way our coccyxes are remnants of vestigial tails.

In abandoned houses, the tattered mosquito netting hangs heavy with dust and mold. They are creepy enough to look at, but even more disturbing when they wrap around your neck. This sensation became the yokai **Shironeri**. It looks like a ragged net with a red mouth.

Also, when you go into old houses, there are often disturbing stains on the ceiling, like streaks. These are a sign of the **Tenjoname**, a yokai that comes out at night and licks the ceiling.

Some creatures appear during funerals and try to steal corpses from coffins. **Kasha** have a face that looks like a cross between a wild boar and a wolf. They emit an aura of fire so one can get close. They arrive in a gust of wind.

On the streets of old Kyoto, the yokai **Wanyudo** appeared at night. It rolled around deserted streets and is said to be emblematic of poor neighborhoods in ancient times.



SHIRONERI



KASHA



WANYUDO THAT TRAVELED THE STREETS OF KYOTO



TENJONAME

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WHERE DO YOKAI LIVE?

Yokai live in places conducive to yokai. They rarely appear in modern, artificial places covered in concrete, or interlinked with trains. Perhaps they dislike pollution.

Bathrooms were once a place of fear, but since flushing toilets have become common, children no longer dread a ghostly hand arising from a dark and mysterious hole. They are no longer haunts for yokai.



YOKAI RARELY APPEAR WITHOUT NATURAL PLACES



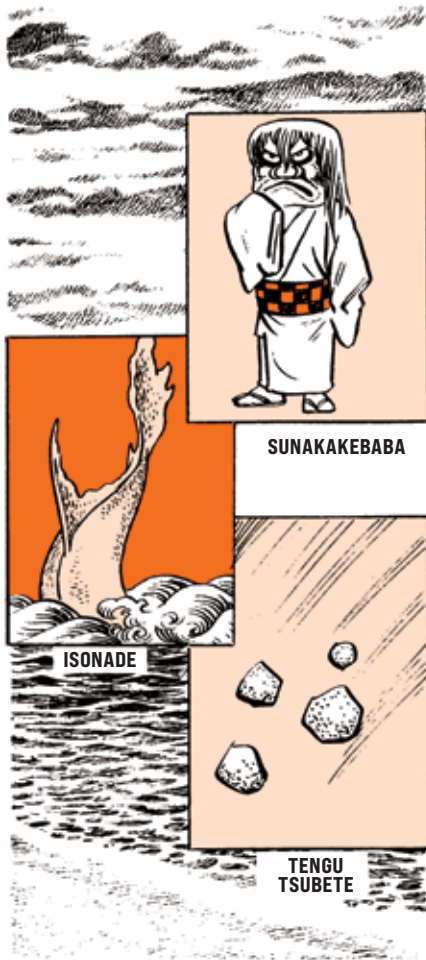
YOKAI OFTEN APPEAR IN MOUNTAINS



SORAKIGAESHI IS A YOKAI THAT LIVES IN MOUNTAINS

Yokai still live in mountains. If you still want that delicious thrill of an encounter with the supernatural, it is to the mountains you must go.

Especially when camping in isolated mountains, you are often surrounded by mysterious noises. You might hear the sound of a massive tree falling, but when you go to investigate nothing is there. That is an old yokai called Sorakigaeshi.



YOKAI ALSO APPEAR ON ISOLATED BEACHES

Yokai also live in oceans and rivers. However, these cannot be places with large human populations—where there is more urine than seawater. They must be isolated and lonely.

Go to a place where you can go for a swim. As you peek under the water with your goggles while the sun sets, you suddenly want to go home. Realizing no one else is around, a gentle wind blows, chilling you with fear. At such a time and place, you might encounter a yokai.

Of course, you won't see the creature itself. But if you are pelted by sand, that would be a **Sunakake Baba**. If you hear a mysterious sound, that is **Isonade**. If you are hit by stones, that is **Tengu tsubete**.

Should another person be even within a hundred yards, it will spoil the mood and the yokai will not appear.

It is similar with house yokai. They do not manifest in places where the family gathers. Only when you are alone at night studying for exams, or quiet nights when you switch off the lights, you might feel the presence of a yokai.



WHY ARE YOKAI SCARY?

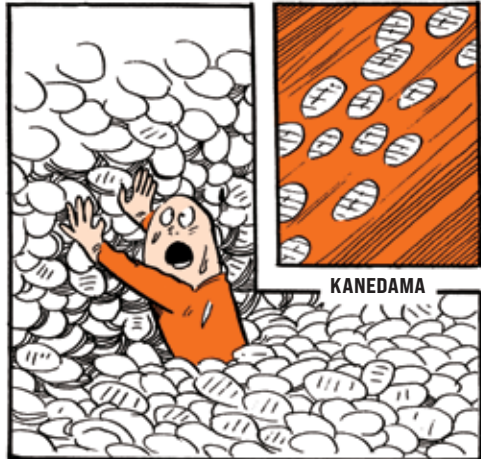


YOKAI ARE NOT AS SCARY AS YUREI

People are afraid of yokai, probably because subconsciously we are afraid they will eat us or spirit us away to a mysterious dimension. But unlike **yurei**, most yokai don't have any particular animosity towards humans.

They really aren't that scary.

One yokai called **Kanedama** will fill old storehouses to bursting with gold and silver coins. They don't even need to be asked.



KANEDAMA



MANGA ARTIST



SINGER

In modern times, you might see this with a pop singer or manga artist who is suddenly blessed with success. When the Kanedama favors them, the wealth never seems to end. However, should the Kanedama abandon them, they will soon be reduced to their original poverty.



Instead, they have been possessed by the **Binbogami**—the god of poverty. I would say this is even more frightening than any yokai.

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WHAT POWERS DO
YOKAI HAVE?

By nature, yokai love to startle people. Some may suddenly shout in loud voices. Some may yell out “Uwan!” Some women yokai may cackle at you.



Most yokai only have a single ability. They laugh or howl or do their thing and then disappear. Once they are gone, everything returns to normal. **Mikoshi nyudo**, for example, surprises people walking on mountain paths. Its task done, it vanishes.

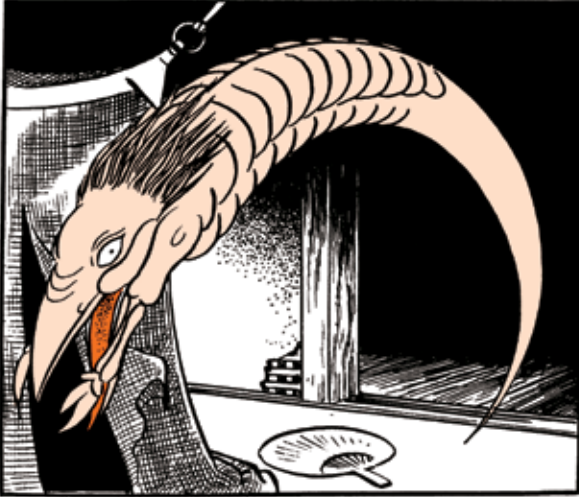


One yokai, **Konaki jiji**, has two abilities. It appears deep in the mountains and cries like an abandoned baby. When someone comes to help and picks it up, it increases its weight to almost nine thousand pounds. It’s best to be wary of things like that.



A woman yokai called **Ubume** has a similar power. And the **Kawa akago** can also cry like a baby. Although this might be a shape-shifted kappa.

TOP TO BOTTOM: MIKOSHI NYUDO, KONAKI JIJI, UBUME, KAWA AKAGO



AMIKIRI

Generally speaking, yokai will not attack you unless you attack them. **Amikiri** is an exception. They will cut your mosquito netting unprovoked. That's not quite as devastating as a kaiju attack, but still bothersome.

The yokai **Onyudo** is as large as Mount Fuji. Its feet are massive enough to crush entire towns when it walks. Like most yokai, however, it walks its own silent path. Unlike humans, yokai rarely desire fame.



ONYUDO

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CAN YOKAI DIE?

Yokai are not bound by boundaries of life and death, money, or school. They live in a different dimension, beyond our ability to reach. From what I see, they live their lives unhurried, content to enjoy their nonsense every day, effectively immortal.

(As a side note, the yokai lifestyle seems ideal. I want to live that way!)

Some yokai live in streams, like **Azuki togri**. It sits on riverbanks making the sound of beans. But there also seems to be hidden yokai villages. We don't know much about these places, but the yokai must be happily living there.

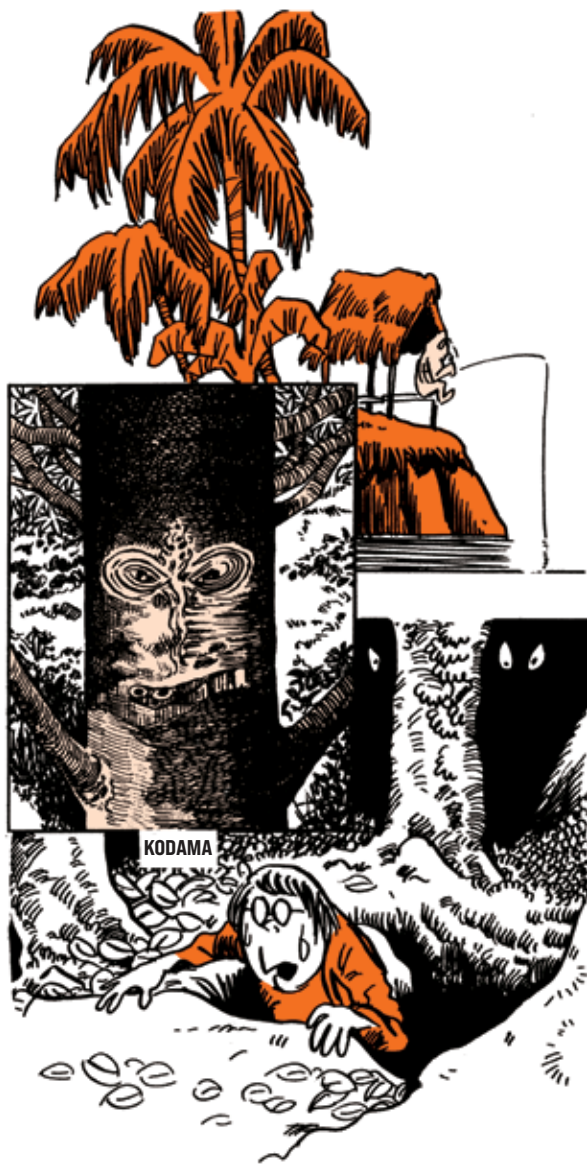
Recently, new roads have been laid through places it seems yokai would live. As cars drive through belching exhaust fumes, this must encroach on **yokai habitats**.



AZUKI TOGI



HIDDEN YOKAI VILLAGE



There used to be stories of woodcutters in the forest and encounters with **Kodama**. They no longer exist in Japan today.

One time, in the jungles of the South Pacific, I met a Kodama. I was climbing a mountain, surrounded by indescribable greenery. I couldn't tell you why, but no matter how high I climbed, I never tired. It was so euphoric I thought I might disappear forever, joining the jungle. However, I came to my senses and hurried down the mountain.

This was in a place far removed from any other people. I thought it must have been like what happened with others in the past, who encountered Kodama.

With this brief encounter, I almost became a tree.



ARE THERE STILL YOKAI IN THE MODERN WORLD?



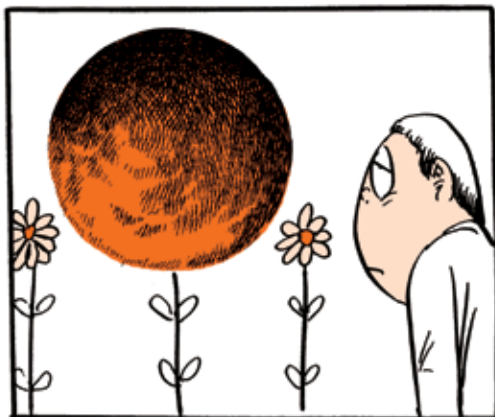
LEFT: YOKAI EXIST IN THE
SPIRITUAL WORLD;

RIGHT: FEAR OF THE
DARKNESS IS THE MOST
PRIMITIVE EXPERIENCE
OF YOKAI

Aside from Kodama, I've had several experiences with yokai in my life. They aren't something you can touch or taste. Yokai exist entirely in the spiritual world.

Fear of the darkness and the things that hide there is primitive. This is the seed of yokai. If the only thing you fear is humans, this means your senses have dulled considerably.

To sense yokai requires recognizing a world beyond the one that we can see. This is vital.



SENSING YOKAI REQUIRES AN OPENNESS TO
WORLDS BEYOND THE ONES WE EXPERIENCE
WITH OUR SENSES



THE FEELING OF SOMETHING
THERE IN THE FOREST

I was always an oddball. When I was sixteen, I thought there might be a race of small people living in the mountains. I wasn't completely sure. Still, I went every day into the mountains with a pair of fire tongs that were handy for digging holes. I was obsessed with insects and would dig for them. Sometimes I was so focused that I wouldn't even notice when night fell.

In the forest in the dark I couldn't see my way. I felt afraid, that the night parade of a hundred demons was passing nearby. I couldn't see anything. But I sensed it.

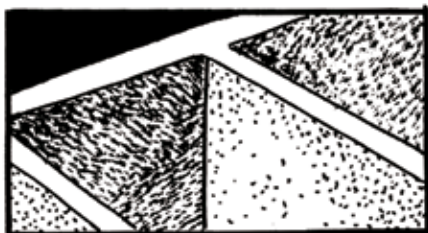
Years later, when I saw Toriyama Sekien's *Night Parade of a Hundred Demons* illustrations, I recognized them as what I had felt in that forest. I knew there was something there in the dark. Now I knew what they looked like.

There are about a hundred and fifty yokai in Toriyama's books. They express moods. Reading his works felt like discovering a kindred spirit.

I wonder if people still see yokai today? I should clarify—I mean sense, rather than see. Most people live in modern cities, in apartments made of poured concrete. These artificial structures do not feed the imagination. They make it difficult to sense yokai. That is not a place where yokai feel at home.



THOSE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE HAVE AN EASIER TIME
SEEING YOKAI



IT'S DIFFICULT TO SENSE YOKAI IN THE CITIES,
SURROUNDED BY CONCRETE