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# Creating Monsters: Toriyama Sekien and the Encyclopedic Imagination

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Among the many Japanese books concerning the supernatural published over the last decade or so is a paperback entitled *Zusetsu Nihon yōkai taizen*, a compact compendium of *yōkai* from all over Japan.<sup>1</sup> We can garner from this volume that “*yōkai*” refers to any number of mysterious creatures and phenomena, including what we might call ghosts, unexplainable occurrences, haunted houses, spirits, monsters, demons and sometimes even deities. In Japanese, of course, there are many different words for these things—*bake-mono*, *yūrei*, *oni*, *kaii genshō*—but in recent years, the word *yōkai* has come to encapsulate a whole range of “supernatural” beings and phenomena. *Zusetsu Nihon yōkai taizen* was written and illustrated by Mizuki Shigeru, an artist particularly famous for the Manga and Anime series called *Ge Ge no Kitarō*, but also well known for his research into the folklore, literature, and history of *yōkai*. This small encyclopedia of monstrous creatures is only one of many in which he draws on his intimate knowledge of *yōkai*, illustrating and explaining their appearance, habits, and habitats.

Each page of the book presents an illustration and short explanation of a particular *yōkai*. Page 391, for example, features a picture of a *himamushinyūdō*, an ugly, long-necked creature slithering up from beneath the floor to lick the oil of a lamp. Mizuki explains that this is the after-death incarnation of a person who was lazy all his life; he now comes to slurp up lamp oil and disturb people trying to work late into the night. Mizuki also notes that during the Edo period there were several other

*yōkai* known for their propensity to lick oil. And he inserts a light-hearted comment about how, with the advent of electricity, these oil-licking *yōkai* are certain to face extinction.

I mention this book here, and the sort of entry it contains, in order to illustrate one of the more common ways of contending with the invisible world and the beings that inhabit it. Mizuki, who played a major role in spurring a resurgence of interest in *yōkai*, is only one prominent example of many whose fascination with ghosts and monsters is expressed through encyclopedic discourse. That is to say, *yōkai* come to be isolated from their narrative or functional context—be it folkloric, literary, dramatic or religious. Extracted from their natural environments, they are listed as in a field guide to birds, complete with illustrations and descriptions of their appearance and habitat. This desire to collect, label, list, classify and describe is one of the major impulses with regard to *yōkai*, what I refer to as the “encyclopedic imagination,”

a way of approaching a subject through an emphasis on: 1) the presentation of an inclusive collection of knowledge about a subject; 2) the compression of knowledge into compact, self-contained units; and 3) the listing and organization of these units. Of course, this is not the only way people have tried to understand *yōkai* on an academic and popular level, but it is an extremely common approach. By exploring its history we can gain insight not only into the way creatures of the imagination are understood, but also how

they come to take on certain shapes and meanings within the cultural imaginary.

Most modern-day scholars of the supernatural in Japan look back to Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788) as the first cataloger of *yōkai*. Between 1776 and 1784 Sekien produced four sets of catalogs which illustrate over two-hundred different “types” of *yōkai*.<sup>2</sup> As evidenced by their rapid publication, Sekien’s catalogs were extremely popular. One of the reasons for their popularity was that they contained sophisticated illustrations, full of word and image play, constructed in the tradition of comic versification or *kyōka*, a favorite Edo Period pastime. Sekien’s books, however, also serve as comprehensive compendia of *yōkai*: he labels each *yōkai* and often comments briefly on its characteristics, breaking down information into discreet non-narrative units of knowledge. Although there are numerous earlier examples of *yōkai* illustrations, this is the first time *yōkai*, as a distinct category of their own, are placed into an illustrated *encyclopedic* format.

Sekien derives his individual monsters from many sources, Japanese and Chinese, folkloric and literary. Rather than hunting down their origins, however, I am more interested in exploring the function of his format: this encyclopedic, all-inclusive, non-narrative mode of expression. The encyclopedic imagination demonstrated by Sekien’s work reflects a broader outlook developed during the early part of the Edo period when scholars such as Fujiwara Seika (1561–1619) and Hayashi Razan (1583–1657), both of whom would wield influence with the Tokugawa Shogunate, promulgated a Neo-Confucian ideology based on the philosophy of Zhu Shi (1130–1200). This ideology extolled rationality, order and pragmatism, encouraging intellectual curiosity and the “investigation of things.”

As part of this intellectual *zeitgeist*, Ming Period texts on *materia medica* or pharmacology (*honzo-gaku*) were imported from China. Remedies were commonly derived from plants and grasses; *honzo-gaku* was very much related to the study of botany. Animal parts too were often prized for their medicinal value, so the study is also a predecessor of modern zoology. All of this fed into a more inclusive examination of the natural world that would come to be known as *hakubutsugaku*, generally translated as “natural history.” In the fertile ground of the Neo-Confucian “investigation of things,” *hakubutsugaku* itself grew increasingly

comprehensive—taking as its object of inquiry not only the natural world, but human-made products, dwelling places, and the like. Information on these things came to be expressed in concise units of knowledge, organized by category: that is, in an encyclopedic format.

The first Japanese illustrated encyclopedia was the *Kinmō zui* compiled by Nakamura Tekisai (1629–1702). Published in 1666, this multi-volume text circulated so widely that an edition found its way into the hands of Engelbert Kaempfer and made it back to Europe, where parts of it were reproduced in his *The History of Japan* (1727). In Japan, the *Kinmō zui* represented a large-scale educational and enlightenment project, reflecting both Neo-Confucian ideas regarding the systematization and promulgation of “practical” knowledge, as well as a growing desire among the populace to learn more about the world. Consisting primarily of simple illustrations, each labeled with Chinese name, Japanese name, variant pronunciations and sometimes a brief explanation in vernacular Japanese, the *Kinmō zui* was particularly geared toward children, appealing to them through its simple writing and clear visual images.

In 1713, almost half a century after the initial publication of *Kinmō zui*, an Ōsaka medical practitioner named Terajima Ryōan published the *Wakansansaizue*, an even more ambitious encyclopedic project. This 105 volume compendia of peoples, plants, animals, geography and all manner of natural and human-made phenomena is scholarly in style and sophisticated in commentary, written in *kanbun* with quotations from numerous Chinese sources. The *Wakansansaizue* is illustrated, but the images are small and often overshadowed by text. Although, with its comprehensive character, it includes a number of the creatures that Sekien would later incorporate into his *yōkai* catalogs, the *Wakansansaizue* tends to fold these beings seamlessly into categories dedicated to other “real” creatures, elements of a complex natural system.

Both these encyclopedias—one geared for simplicity and easy understanding, the other for completeness and sophistication—came to be part of the popular imagination of the mid-Edo Period. I would contend, however, that apart from their multi-faceted contents, the encyclopedic *format* itself also became entrenched in the cultural imaginary of the time. An important element of this encyclopedic mode was its authoritative character: the didactic *Kinmō zui* was clearly normative

in intent, while the academic style of the *Wakansansai zue* endowed it with a prescriptive quality even in its most descriptive passages. This sort of condensed, organized, systematic presentation of knowledge came to take on an authoritative tone; each entry not only informed the reader about a particular subject, but also legitimized the existence and importance of that subject.

Toriyama Sekien would adopt this same format, and its aura of authority, for his series of monster catalogs. In the earlier volumes, with a style reminiscent of the *Kinmô zui*, he presents only an illustration labeled with the name of the *yôkai* in question. In later volumes, as he chooses increasingly obscure *yôkai*, he begins to describe his creatures in more and more detail. For example, Sekien explains that the *ninmenju* resides “in the mountains and valleys. Its flowers are like human heads. They do not speak, but merely laugh constantly. If they laugh too much, it is said, the flowers will fall.”<sup>3</sup>

This particular *yôkai* is extracted from the *Wakansansai zue* (which in turn adapts it from the Chinese *Sancai tuihui*) where the illustration portrays a man looking up at the strange tree. The entry is in the section for “people of foreign countries” and labeled *daishi*, a reference to Arabs.<sup>4</sup> While keeping to the general description in the *Wakansansai zue*, Sekien not only eliminates the “Arab” man from the picture, but his description changes the name of the tree to one more in fitting with its physical characteristics, divorcing the image from any association with a particular foreign country. By taking liberties with the *Wakansansai zue* entry, Sekien essentially creates a *yôkai*, and hints that it may be found in the valleys and mountains of Japan. Despite the alterations he makes to the character of this tree—turning a picture associated with a foreign land into an illustration of a native *yôkai*—Sekien retains the encyclopedic format. His new *yôkai* is as believable, as legitimate, as the others.

As he continues producing his *yôkai* catalogs, Sekien’s descriptions turn increasingly poetic and his *yôkai* themselves become more and more inventive, further divorced from the natural world and existing systems of belief. According to one researcher, of the more than two hundred *yôkai* portrayed in his catalogs, some eighty-five owe their existence to Sekien’s inventiveness.<sup>5</sup> Of course, it is always difficult to trace the origins of subjects as elusive (and illusive) as *yôkai*, but whether he

fashioned creatures from scratch or not, we can certainly posit that Sekien’s creative agency served to 1) popularize those *yôkai* that were not well known—making them an established part of the Edo cultural imaginary; 2) genericize and synthesize beliefs in certain similar *yôkai*—lessening distinctions among local variations. Although his texts are rife with word play and parodic jest, they retain the authoritative format of encyclopedic discourse. This infuses Sekien’s *yôkai*—even those he creates himself—with a powerful sense of legitimacy.

Jorge Luis Borges, in his story “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” relates the discovery of an encyclopedia from another world. The concepts detailed in this foreign encyclopedia gradually infiltrate our own world, altering and replacing existing knowledge: “already a fictitious past occupies in our memories the place of another, a past of which we know nothing of certainty—not even that it is false.”<sup>6</sup> Sekien’s monster catalogs may not have replaced Japanese knowledge of the natural and supernatural world, but his creations, infused with the authority of the encyclopedic mode, have altered the way people understand and visualize the ghosts and monsters of their own folklore, literature, and local belief systems. By questioning the boundaries of what is real, natural, supernatural, or made-up, Sekien not only creates monsters, but also helps to establish the character of a specifically Japanese “other world.” His subtle blending of invention and tradition serves to redefine both, making it difficult to determine which *yôkai*, which memories, are “real” and which are “false.” Take, for instance, the long-necked oil-licking creature noted by Mizuki in his compendium of *yôkai* from around Japan. The *himamushi-nyūdō*, it turns out, does not in fact have an ancient heritage. Rather, it is one of the monsters Toriyama Sekien created.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Mizuki Shigeru, *Zusetsu Nihon yôkai taizen* (Kôdansha, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> *Zuga hyakkiyagyô*, 1776; *Konjaku zuga zoku hyakki*, 1779; *Konjaku zuga hyakki shûi*, 1781; *Hyakki tsurezure bukuro*, 1784.

<sup>3</sup> Takada Mamoru ed. *Toriyama Sekien: Zuga hyakki yagyô* (Kokusho kankô kai, 1992), 191. This modern edition contains handsome facsimiles of all four of Sekien’s catalogs.

<sup>4</sup> Apparently a Farsi word for “Arab,” *tazi* was transliterated into the Chinese *da-shi*, from which the *Wakansansai zue* derived *daishi*.

<sup>5</sup> Tada Katsumi, *Hyakki kaidoku* (Kôdansha, 1999), 20.

<sup>6</sup> “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius,” in Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 18.