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Monsters of Japan and the Globalization of Folklorism:

Oni and Their Representations in *Inuyasha* and *The Legend of Zelda*

Japanese monsters—or rather, their influence—have by now become an indelible part and easily recognizable feature of global culture. Whether they appear as a vengeful, longhaired woman like Sadako of *Ringu* (1998) or as a loveable, electric mouse like *Pokémon's* Pikachu, these imaginary creatures have become the mortar for Japan's "character empire" that has ingrained itself deep into the global marketplace. Indeed, as Allison postulates, "no country in the world has become as thoroughly inundated with character fetishism—both economically and cultural—as has Japan today."¹ In a world of high stress, exploding populations, and alienation, characters have come to serve as nodes of connection in the contemporary milieu; they connect us to one another, serving as the "lifeline of human relationships."² Originally, many of these characters were born from the influence of local folklore and mythology—combining with newer elements to form the unique amalgamations we find today—but eventually they were recognized as entities with

¹ Allison, Anne. "New-Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends: Pokémon Capitalism at the Millennium." Tokiko Yoda and Harry Harootunian. *Japan after Japan: Social and Cultural Life from the Recessionary 1990s to the Present*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006. p. 353.

² Hashino Katsume and Miyashita Makoto. *Kyarakutā bijinesu* [The Character Business], Tokyo, 2001, p. 4. Cited in Allison, "New-Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends," p. 353.

potential commercial, ideological, or didactic value. Since then, characters influenced or borrowed directly from these folkloric and mythological traditions have been mobilized to reinforce particular ideals or encourage certain activity, whether it be *Pokémon's* capitalist mimicry or the peach boy Momotarō's WWII nationalist propaganda.

In any case, what we see is a definitive move toward commodifying these “monsters.” In this paper, I will focus on this commodification of folklore, with a primary focus on one of Japan's most historic and recognizable creatures, the *oni*. Exploring the oni's representations in the popular Japanese animated series *InuYasha* as well as the hugely successful video game series *The Legend of Zelda*, I will attempt to delineate how oni have been crafted by time and socio-cultural transformations to become the figures we recognize today. We will see how these depictions illustrate our contemporary concerns, and how oni often stand as surrogates for our fears, frequently embodying the notions we find detestable as examples of how not to act. Before we examine these two works, however, it is useful to first offer a somewhat comprehensive representational and epistemological history of oni in general.

History of Study

The study of Japan's rich spectrum of supernatural creatures, then, generally known as *yōkai* (妖怪) or *bakemono* (化物, literally “changing thing”), has become an increasingly popular ethnographical field of research since Hirata Atsutane (1776-1843) and other *kokugaku* (国学), or national studies, figures began documenting

such cultural phenomenon during the Tokugawa period (1603-1867). Hirata, though—unlike many of his kokugaku contemporaries—understood that the information most valuable to nativist interest lay primarily amongst the common “folk,” and he often implemented the vernacular idiom in his writings about the supernatural, becoming one of Japan’s first real ethnographers. Gerald Figal posits that “the real importance of Hirata’s particular opening up and delving into the spirit world—whether it concerns *kami*, ancestors, foxes, or *tengu*—existed as a scholarly precedent for the recording and interpretation of reports of contemporary supernatural incidents.”³ In other words, Hirata was one of the first to recognize the value inherent in Japan’s common folk belief, and it is his, at the time, unprecedented research concerning supernatural phenomena that have lent him his historical significance. In fact, he—like the vast majority of the Japanese populace at the time—truly believed that many supernatural creatures were constantly interacting with “our world;” he was even said to have an informant from the spirit world, a 14-year-old Edo guttersnipe named Kozo Torakichi who had reportedly been apprenticed by a bird-like demon known as a *tengu*, and it was with the boy’s aid that Hirata purportedly learned much of his knowledge of the spirit world. But even though Hirata and other nativist figures were some of the first to conduct empirical research about the supernatural in Japanese folk beliefs, they were not as concerned with broadening the parameters of the folklore episteme as much as they were with advancing nationalist interests (such as evidencing Japanese racial and

³ Figal, Gerald. *Civilization and Monsters: Spirits of Modernity in Meiji Japan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999. p. 36.

cultural superiority, or delineating the form and function of the uniting “Japanese spirit”).

It was not until the modern period that scholars began to recognize the cultural value inherent in these folk beliefs. One of the first people to truly pursue Japanese folkloric studies in the name of scholarly research and academic cultural preservation was the famous Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962), a name now inescapable within the discourse. Yanagita—often called “the father of Japanese folklore studies,” better known as *minzokugaku*—and his disciples, such as Orikuchi Shinobu, though frequently just as absorbed with advancing a nationalist agenda, were more concerned with capturing the essence of traditional Japanese customs, portraying themselves as mediums “between the urban intellectual world of early-twentieth-century Tokyo”⁴ and the rural otherworlds of the periphery, where hints of traditional ways still persisted in the daily lives of the common folk. Thanks to these early ethnographers, contemporary scholars now have a relatively wide epistemological understanding of Japanese folkways, as well as their transformations, since the Tokugawa period.

Since then, scholars from around the world have recognized the inherent value in studying Japan’s traditional folk customs and beliefs. It is interesting to note that *most* of these scholars have been unconcerned with the ontological reality of these folk beliefs, although that is not to say that such dialogue has not taken place. Many of the studies on Japanese folk beliefs have tended to focus more on cultural

⁴ Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of the Yōkai*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2009. p. 178.

preservation and appreciation or (in some cases) delineating theories of Japanese uniqueness within the discourse of *nihonjinron*,⁵ but others—such as Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), for instance—have formulated their entire scholarship concerning folklore specifically around the concept of belief itself. As mentioned earlier, Hirata Atsutane, along with a surprisingly high percentage of the Tokugawa-era populace, believed that supernatural beings/creatures actually existed, often forming by their existence alone a connection between this world and the next, and between the living and the dead. This relationship between life and death forms a huge portion of Japanese folkloric subjects. Iwasaka and Toelken, in *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*, assert that “death is not only a common subject in Japanese folklore but seems indeed to be the *principal* topic in Japanese tradition; nearly every festival, every ritual, every custom is bound up in some way with relationships between the living and the dead, between the present family and its ancestors, between the present occupation and its forebearers.”⁶

During the Meiji period (1868-1912), however, with the influx of new ideas and the institutionalization of rationalist thought under the banner of *bunmei kaika* (civilization and enlightenment), scholars such as Inoue Enryō sought to reconfigure this connection between the living and the dead—and thus that between the natural and the supernatural—in the common cultural imagination. It is at this time through the machinations of Enryō’s *yōkaigaku* (monsterology) project that, as Foster

⁵ *Nihonjinron*, or “theories on the Japanese,” is a series of popular and academic nationalist discussions concerning Japanese national and cultural identity amidst the effects of post-modernized, post-WWII Japan (Figal, p. 14).

⁶ Iwasaka, Michiko and Barre Toelken. *Ghosts and the Japanese: Cultural Experience in Japanese Death Legends*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1994. p. 6.

proposes, “we find the first systematic and rigorous attempt to exorcize the spirits from the Japanese landscape.” Indeed, Enryō was heavily influenced by Western science, and in an attempt to modernize Buddhism through Western philosophy as well as enable Japan to evolve into a modern and globally competitive nation, he directed his scholarship toward eradicating “the many superstitions and outmoded traditions that still haunted Japan.”⁷ By systematically demystifying the concept of yōkai and the supernatural ideological foundation by which they were supported, as well as other forms of popular superstition such as *kokkuri*,⁸ Enryō’s efforts demonstrate the effects of Meiji modernization and Westernization on the discourse on the supernatural, and suggest the start of a conceptual reconfiguration regarding the common understanding of yōkai and their interactions with this world. Of course, this is not to say that such a reconceptualization occurred ubiquitously among the folk (or, more specifically, outside intellectual circles) all at the same time. Rather, Enryō’s dialogue powerfully affected the direction of the epistemological understanding of yōkai at the time, and by equating them as antithetical to what is modern, his “polemics and ideology of progress out of which they emerged helped fuse yōkai with the concept of ‘tradition.’”⁹

⁷ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade*, p. 77-79.

⁸ Kokkuri is a kind of divination game, similar to Western table-turning, that became hugely popular in the mid-1880’s. The practice involved several people sitting around a covered board balanced on three bamboo legs. Each person would place their hands on the board, and they would ask questions regarding fortune and the future, supposedly receiving answers from the otherworld. For more information on kokkuri and its application and significance, see chapter three (“Science of the Weird: Inoue Enryō, Kokkuri, and Human Electricity”) of Foster’s *Pandemonium and Parade* (p. 77-114).

⁹ Foster, p. 114.

Naturally, as *yōkai* and the concept of the supernatural began to alter under the weight of Meiji modernization, the way in which they were depicted transformed as well. Though Enryō sought to expunge the false mysteries (*kakai*) of the *yōkai* from the cultural imagination, their images still haunt us today (just through different mediums) and, as Figal maintains (perhaps to Enryō's chagrin), these "ancient monsters bred in twilight do not vanish in modern times—they merely change their shape."¹⁰ Verily, the images and representations of *yōkai* in the contemporary era understandably differ (often drastically) from those of previous periods, when the common understanding of such phenomena was not influenced by the breadth of scientific knowledge now at our disposal.

Classic Oni Characteristics and Depictions

One of the most pervasive representatives of the *yōkai* tradition in popular media today is that of the *oni*, and the very word *oni* now carries with it a complex array of images and associations. But before exploring how the *oni*'s representations have altered and shifted over time, it is useful to first delineate what an *oni* actually *is*. Unfortunately, *oni* are extremely hard to classify. While some are easily identifiable at first glance, other *oni* have very little resemblance to the classic mold, and may take on forms and characteristics wholly different than their usual depictions. The word *oni* (鬼) is generally translated into English as demon or ogre, though this appellation can be problematic. Occasionally, these translations may be replaced by a more natural-sounding word, depending on the context. Or, further

¹⁰ Figal, p. 222.

complicating identification, the appellation oni may never even be attached to a particular figure, though he or she may possess many of the identifiable characteristics normally associates with oni.

But what are these characteristics? In the popular Japanese imagination, oni are large hominoids (similar to the popular image of a devil) with red, blue, green, or maybe even purple skin. They often have one or two horns protruding from the top of their heads, and are only covered by a loincloth, revealing their muscular builds. Sometimes they have a third eye on their forehead, or maybe just one eye in all. Sharp canine fangs protrude from the top and/or bottom jaw, and they may have matching claws on their hands and feet. Many carry a large *tetsubō* (a hexagonal metal club), a hammer, or some kind of blunt object as a weapon. They are frequently depicted as servants of Emma-ō¹¹ in *Jigoku*, or Buddhist hell, punishing those who had sinned during their lifetimes.¹² But oni are not limited to the boundaries of *Jigoku*; they are able to inhabit and freely roam the earth as well, appearing in both urban and rural areas.¹³

Noriko Reider, in her book *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*, demonstrates how varied the oni's representations in literature, art, and popular culture have truly been, outlining the many powers and characteristics attributed to oni. One of the most quintessential attributes of oni is cannibalism. In

¹¹ Emma-ō, in Buddhist mythology, is the overlord of hell: both their king and their judge. He has a fierce expression with a red face, protruding canine teeth, and a crown emblazoned with the character for "king." As he and Susano-wo are both rulers of the underworld, they are often identified as one and the same.

¹² Ashkenazi, Michael. *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. p. 144, 230.

¹³ Reider, Noriko. *Japanese Demon Lore: Oni from Ancient Times to the Present*. Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 2010. p. 14.

the sixth episode of *Tales of Ise* (*Ise Monogatari*, 945 CE), for example, a man kidnaps a woman with whom he has fallen in love, and during a thunderstorm she stays inside a shelter while he stands guard outside. Meanwhile, she completely disappears, and it is assumed that she was devoured by an oni.

A similar occurrence appears in the story “On a Woman Devoured by an Oni” (*Nyonin akuki ni kegasarete kurawareshi en*) in *Miraculous Stories from the Japanese Buddhist Tradition* (*Nihon ryōiki*, 823 CE). In the tale, a daughter is married to an exorbitant suitor, and on their wedding night, her parents hear her cries of pain coming from the bedchamber and dismiss them as her not being “used to it.” The next morning, her mother, checking in on the new couple, is horrified to find only her daughter’s severed head and a finger, and “people claimed it was the work of an oni.”¹⁴ Significantly, no one in these particular tales ever actually sees an oni eat the victims, or even sees an oni at all.

This illustrates another common trait of oni: their elusiveness. Many stories attribute people’s mysterious disappearances or dismemberments to the actions of oni, though no one actually witnesses the event or their presence. Another example can be found in the Japan section of the Heian anthology *Tales of Times Now Past* (*Konjaku Monogatarishū*, early 12th century). In tale 24 of chapter 24, “How the Lute Genjō was Snatched by an Oni,” we learn that during the reign of Emperor Murakami the lute Genjō, an imperial treasure, suddenly disappears. The Emperor laments that the heirloom was lost during his reign, and people speculate that perhaps it had been stolen by some person with a grudge against the Emperor and

¹⁴ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 14-15.

had destroyed it. But one night, while mourning the lute's disappearance a man named Minamoto no Hiromasa, who "knew all there was to know of the Way of musical instruments," hears the sound of Genjō's strings coming from the south. He follows the sounds all the way to Rashō gate, and finds that the notes are coming from the upper story. "That's no human being playing the instrument," he thinks in amazement. "It can only be an oni or some such being." He then yells, saying that the lute has gone missing and he has come to retrieve it, and at that moment the playing stops and the lute is lowered down by a cord. Hiromasa takes Genjō back to the palace, and is praised by all. Now what is significant about this story is that, while no one ever sees an oni, the theft is assumed to be one's foul play. In this tale, the oni is completely harmless, if only thieving.

However, it could even be that Genjō itself is the oni. The ending of the tale notes that Genjō "is just like a living being," failing to resound if played clumsily or not cleaned properly, and that one can even tell its mood just by looking at it. And there is a rumor that once, when the palace caught fire, Genjō escaped on its own accord, for no one carried it out, and was found in the courtyard. Nevertheless, this tale illustrates the complex nature of oni and the difficulties of identifying them. Here, the oni is not evil, nor is it cannibalistic, yet still Genjō's unfortunate disappearance is understood to be the doing of an oni.¹⁵

Other stories in *Tales of Times Now Past* also exemplify some of the common characteristics and powers of oni, particularly those of transformation. In the tale "How a Woman Who Was Bearing a Child Went to South Yamashina, Encountered

¹⁵ Ury, Marian, trans. *Tales of Times Now Past: Sixty-Two Stories from a Medieval Japanese Collection*. Berkeley: University of California, 1979. p. 146-149.

an Oni, and Escaped,” a female servant becomes pregnant without a proper husband, and to find a secluded place to give birth and abandon the child she walks into a forest deep in the mountains. There she finds the ruins of an ancient mountain estate nestled among the cliffs. Deciding to give birth here, she enters the estate and encounters a white-haired old woman who treats her with kindness, allowing her to safely give birth in her house. Afterwards, while taking a nap alongside her newly-born (whom she has decided to keep), the young woman hears the old woman mutter, “Only a mouthful, but my how delicious!” The young woman then realizes that the old woman is an oni and plans to devour them both. Later, the young woman escapes with her child, and the story concludes, “Now think: ancient places of that sort always have supernatural beings living in them. ‘Only a mouthful, but my how delicious!’ Only an oni could have looked at an infant and said that. This shows that you should never go into such places alone.”¹⁶ Aside from offering another example of cannibalistic oni, this tale also illustrates their shape-shifting abilities, which are limited to neither sex nor human beings. Generally, however, oni usually transform into humans (often women) to trick unsuspecting victims. Reider observes that “an oni often uses the power of transformation to prevent warriors from accomplishing their heroic tasks” or uses “female sexuality as a ploy to achieve its goal,” and this is still frequently the case even in many modern depictions today.¹⁷

Another tale, “How the Hunters’ Mother Became an Oni and Tried to Devour her Children,” shows the opposite side of this shape-shifting process, depicting not

¹⁶ Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, p. 161-163.

¹⁷ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 17-18.

an oni transformed into a woman, but a woman transformed into an oni. On a moonless night, when two brothers are in a forest in the mountains hunting, an “emaciated and withered” hand seizes one of the brothers from above. He calls for help, and the other brother shoots an arrow toward his brother’s cries, severing at the wrist the hand that held him. Upon returning home, they find that their mother is now missing the same hand, and the story contends, “Senile and demented, their mother had become an oni and followed her children into the mountains to devour them. When parents become extremely old they always turn into oni and try to eat even their own children.”¹⁸

This particular story is significant for multiple reasons. For one, it exhibits the concept that something considerably old can eventually attain some kind of separate supernatural spirit. Foster comments:

From the Kamakura period (1185-1333) onward, one prevalent image of *mono-no-ke* [spirit, mysterious or weird being] was the *tsukumogami*, common household objects with arms and legs and an animated—even riotous—life of their own. According to “*Tsukumogami-ki*,” a Muromachi period (c. 1336-1573) *otogizōshi* (companion book) tale, “When an object reaches one hundred years, it transforms, obtaining a spirit [seirei], and deceiving [*taburakasu*] people’s hearts; this is called *tsukumogami*.”¹⁹

Though this does not specifically deal with the historical timeframe during which the *Konjaku Monogatari* was written, it does demonstrate the influence that these early tales had on the cultural perception of old objects and their ability to attain souls. Frequently, the appellation *tsukumogami* was used to characterize

¹⁸ Ury, *Tales of Times Now Past*, p. 163-165.

¹⁹ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade*, p. 7.

anthropomorphized inanimate objects, but it could also be applied to humans and animals. In the story, the brothers' mother becomes so elderly that the spirit of an oni is able to take residence in her body, thus not only transforming her into an oni, but also instilling within her the desire to devour her own children.

Secondly, this tale, as well as the previous one, highlights an important aspect of oni and yōkai superstition: the connection between the supernatural and mountainous areas. Yanagita Kunio, in his 1925 essays *Yama no jinsei* (Life in the Mountains), and his rural correspondent Sasaki Kizen note that in the popular imagination entering the mountains indicated mental deviancy. Indeed, the mountain forest commonly functions as a fantastic space and was often associated with madness because of its “symbolic relationship with this world and the other world.” The mountains operate as an in-between space, a twilight space that can induce “a kind of ‘divine madness’ given the popular belief in mountains and forests as being sacred sites.”²⁰ What is more, people who live in the mountains would lead a drastically different kind of lifestyle to those who live in the plains, and this alterity is enough for plainsmen to view any people living in the mountains and forests as Others, separated from the way “normal” people live. Thus, it is unsurprising that people living in the plains might consider those living in the mountains as oni.

Certainly, the representations of oni as evil Others have been common throughout their existence. However, oni have not all been depicted as depraved, bloodthirsty, thieving monsters. By the Edo period (1603-1867)—with the

²⁰ Figal, *Civilization and Monsters*, p. 175-176.

increasing trends toward decadence, commercialization, and commodification—it became much more common to see oni in a more sympathetic and humorous light. Reider writes, “The oni as a dark, enigmatic force threatening the central authority of the court retreated, by this period, into the cultural background. While the oni may have no longer troubled the councils of the imperial court, they thrived nonetheless in the minds of common people and remained visible in their literary and visual arts,” particularly as entertaining figures.²¹

She goes on to demonstrate how the image of oni was “de-demonized,” transforming from a vicious, corrupt, and immoral entity into an often cute, sexy, or even comically foolish pseudo-human. Citing Chikamatsu Monzaemon’s Edo version of the medieval tale *Shuten Dōji*, entitled *Shuten Dōji makurakotoba* (*Shuten Dōji Pillow Words*, 1708), Reider emphasizes how the representation of the eponymous oni—who is portrayed in the original version with all the classic characteristics usually associated with evil oni—reflects a new understanding of supernatural beings and how we interact with them. Chikamatsu’s version depicts a much more humanized oni, lending him the pathos associated with human feelings and morality.²² This marks the beginning of a modern reinscription of oni and yōkai in general into the popular imagination.

More importantly, it signifies not only one of the most significant alterations to the common conceptualization of yōkai, but also the beginning of the processes to which this understanding will eventually be implicitly subjected: commodification and commercialization. With the rise of globalization in the modern age and the

²¹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 90.

²² Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 92-95.

millennial cross-cultural communications such as the Internet and XBOX live, cultural goods are now increasingly being exchanged by countries whose markets had mostly been previously self-sufficient. By now, these cultural goods have become many countries' primary exports, and Japan has become perhaps one of the most exemplary countries of this phenomenon. Iwabuchi Kōichi refers to this economic dispersion of power as the “recentering” of globalization, characterized by the rise in “new sources of cultural influence in global trendsetting” as well as “an expansion of new consumer marketplaces.”²³ Such influence is readily suggested by the exceptional popularity of goods such as Hello Kitty and Pokémon. Indeed, the vast majority of contemporary youth today relate to Japan only through products such as *manga*, *anime*, video games, film (particularly horror), entertainment technology, trading cards, character merchandise, and so forth.²⁴

Considering the deep cultural attachment to the yōkai tradition that we find in Japan, it is thus unsurprising that the influence of yōkai has so permeated the exports and popular media of today—and that the influence of commercialization has so heavily affected the yōkai culture in return. Anne Allison, in her book *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*, explores the implications of the global popularity of Japanese youth goods as well as the cultural traffic between Japan and the United States, revealing the reciprocity inherent in the commercial machine. In her examination of the Pokémon phenomenon vis-à-vis the

²³ Iwabuchi Kōichi. *Recentering Globalization: Popular Culture and Japanese Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002. Cited in Anne Allison. *Millennial Monsters: Japanese Toys and the Global Imagination*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2006. p. 7.

²⁴ Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, p. 6.

yōkai milieu, she considers this reciprocal influence between traditional and modern culture, writing:

[...] what is both distinct and compelling about a fantasy product like *Pokémon* is the “Japanese sensibility” (*yasashisa*) it captures that, characteristic of Japan’s spiritual culture, is transmitted to present-day kids and helps them to face the next century (Nagao 1998:142). This intermixture of the old (spirituality) with the new (digital/virtual media) in Japan exemplifies what I have earlier dubbed techno-animism: animating contemporary technology and commodities with spirits and recuperating cultural traditions with New Age practices.²⁵

To be sure, oni—along with *yūrei*, *kappa*, *tengu*, and general Shintō *kami*—are at the forefront of this “techno-animism.” Oni as a traditional embodiment of evil has been superseded by its cuter, more nonthreatening modern counterpart, and incorporated into the ever-burgeoning technological commodities of today, whether in visual media, Internet forums, or video games. The oni (and yōkai in general) of folklore have been commandeered and rebirthed into the sphere of entertainment commodities, transforming them into the contemporary images by which most global youth today would recognize them.

Oni and *InuYasha*

In few places is this techno-animism more conspicuous than in *manga*, *anime* and video game culture, and the popular animated television show *InuYasha* (犬夜叉, 2000-2004) as well as the ground-breaking video game series *The Legend of*

²⁵ Allison, *Millennial Monsters*, p. 21.

Zelda (ゼルダの伝説, 1986-) are two of the most evident examples—though in the case of *Zelda*, perhaps not at first glance. Let us begin first with *InuYasha*. *InuYasha* originally gained popularity as a serialized *manga* series by Takahashi Rumiko that ran from 1996 until 2008, but for the purpose of this paper—and because most non-Japanese are more familiar with its animated counterpart—I will focus primarily on the television series. The story primarily follows the title character Inuyasha, a *han'yō* (half-yōkai, half-human) born to the *daiyōkai/inugami* (great yōkai/dog deity) Inu no Taishō and his human lover Izayoi, and Kagome Higurashi, a 15-year-old girl from contemporary Tokyo. One day Kagome, the reincarnation of the powerful sorceress (*miko*) Kikyō, is pulled into the Bone Eater's Well (*Honekui no ido*) behind her house and finds herself in the *Sengoku* (Warring States) period of medieval Japan. She contains within her the powerful *Shikon no tama* (Shikon Jewel, Jewel of Four Souls), and when the jewel is separated from her body and stolen by a carrion crow coveting the immense power engendered by it, she shoots the crow with an arrow, inadvertently shattering the sacred jewel and scattering its shards across the land. Thus, Kagome and Inuyasha join together to unite all the shards of the *Shikon no tama* to not only prevent any other yōkai from attaining its nearly unlimited power, but also enable Inuyasha to become a full-fledged yōkai himself.

It is relevant to note here the prominent role that *tama* (jewels) play in Japanese mythology, forming powerful symbolic elements in both Shintō and Buddhist traditions. In Shintō *tama* often appear as emblems of great strength, authority, and even purity. In the *Kojiki*, for instance, the sun goddess Amaterasu weaves several jewels into her hair, which are then chewed by her brother Susano-

wo, incidentally birthing a number of lesser deities. And later, a similar set of jewels are used to lure Amaterasu from the cave in which she has hid. The round flaming tama associated with the fox god Inari, too, demonstrates the importance of jewels to the Shintō tradition, representing wealth and (depending on the interpretation) the kami's *mitama* (spirit) or Buddha nature.²⁶ Additionally, a large number of the weapons found in Shintō mythology are jeweled, such as the giant spear that is used to stir the brine of the earth and thus separate the land from the seas—or the jeweled spear wielded by Susano-wo.

Tama appear regularly in Buddhist myths as well as symbols of purity (or even nirvana) with the ability to purge evil, satisfy desires, or bring about good fortune and happiness.²⁷ Kokūzō, the bosatsu (bodhisattva) of space and potential, for example, brandishes the magical jewel of existence in his left hand and the sword of happiness in his right, representing the wisdom, luck, and bounty of the heavenly deities.²⁸ Nearly every mention of tama in the Shintō and Buddhist traditions equate them with supreme power, prosperity, good fortune, and material and spiritual wellbeing.

Linguistically, it is important to consider the homonymic association between tama (玉, ball or jewel) and tama (魂, soul or spirit), particularly because the Shikon no tama, representative of Kagome's significant priestess powers, bursts painlessly from her abdomen after she is thrown high into the air by the yōkai *Hyakusoku jōrō* (Mistress Centipede) in Episode 1. Indeed, the Shikon no tama is the

²⁶ Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, p. 180.

²⁷ Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, p. 180-181.

²⁸ Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, p. 207.

single most important item in the entire *InuYasha* cosmology. It is the sole reason Kagome is initially pulled into the time well, and thus the only cause for which her help is needed. Moreover, the English translation of Shikon no tama is the Jewel of Four Souls. This is because, according to the *InuYasha* mythology, the jewel formed, and burst from her chest, after the priestess Midoriko—having balanced the “four souls” of courage, wisdom, friendship, and love within her own soul—sacrificed herself in her quest to seize and purify the souls of evil yōkai.

InuYasha, then, with its blend of folkloric traditions projected into the technological entertainment media of today, is a particularly poignant example of this techno-animism—and this commodification of yōkai and their mythological associations is also directly related to Hans Moser’s concept of *folklorismus* (folklorism). Since the term’s introduction in 1962, a number of scholars have attached their own definitions, almost always encoding a recognition of the sheer breadth of the term. In essence, folklorism is any folklorically influenced creation, a consciously recognized product of folklore pulled from its original cultural context and altered or invented for a specific purpose. Gulnar Kendirbaeva defines it broadly as “the professional artistic creation of folklore in all its forms: in science and in pedagogy, on the stage, at festivals and during holidays (including ceremonies), in the mass media, in recordings and advertisements, in tourism, in crafts, and in everyday life.”²⁹ I might even take that a step further, suggesting that

²⁹ Foster, Michael Dylan. “The Metamorphosis of the Kappa: Transformation of Folklore to Folklorism in Japan.” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Volume 57, 1998: 1-24. p. 11.

the resultant creation has to be neither professional nor artistic—and this allows even the academic study of folklore to be embodied by the expression.

Foster, in considering how folklorism has transformed the image of the *kappa* over time, stresses the continuum between folklore and folklorism, which is the very concept complicating a strict definition: once a particular folk group becomes aware of the commercial, cultural, artistic, educational, or epistemological value of its indigenous traditions, they may consciously manipulate the folklore item into an item of folklorism, which may even serve a function similar to that of the original folklore item in the first place. In other words, a folk group can foster their own folklorism, further fading the line between what is folklore and what is folklorism.³⁰

This is perhaps the case when we examine entertainment products conspicuously influenced by folklore such as *InuYasha* and, as we will see, *The Legend of Zelda*. Drawing on various folkloric elements, *InuYasha* also adds a new dimension of understanding to the *yōkai* presented throughout the series. In other words, the show supplies the folkloric tradition with altered conceptualizations of the very elements from which it borrows. But how are these representations modified?—and how do they compare to the original folkloric depictions? For the purposes of this paper—and because analyzing multiple *yōkai* is far beyond the scope—we will stick to the oni.

In general, oni in *InuYasha* are portrayed most similarly to their medieval folkloric counterparts—and this is reasonable considering the late-medieval,

³⁰ Foster, “The Metamorphosis of the Kappa,” p. 11-12.

Sengoku era setting. (After all, the full title is *Sengoku Otogizōshi InuYasha*.³¹) These oni most frequently tend to have red eyes, huge bodies, colored skin, horns, fangs, claws, cannibalistic desires, and little intellect; but of course this is not always the case. If we recall, common representations of oni during the medieval period—if they even had a body at all, that is—depicted huge inhumanly colored bodies with horns and fangs and a lust for flesh. Let us, then, look at a couple examples typical of their depictions throughout the series. In episode three of *The Final Act* (the last season), “Meidō Zangestsuha,”³² after Inuyasha’s older brother Sesshōmaru finally masters the technique, forming a complete *meidō zangetsuha*, the great bladesmith Tōtōsai leads him to an ethereal realm in which he can practice it. A gigantic oni—much like one we might find in a, say, 13th century scroll—with blue skin, large fangs, and two curved horns emerges from the ground. The oni howls in rage, and Sesshōmaru instantaneously uses the technique, sucking the oni into the Netherworld. In this instance, the oni is only a mindless creature on which Sesshōmaru can practice his new skill, again resembling the hostile and unintelligent oni of the medieval conceptualization.

In fact, Sesshōmaru, much like this scene, is often portrayed controlling oni.

As one of the most powerful yōkai alive, he is able to easily defeat or gain control

³¹ The title is usually rendered in English as *InuYasha: A Feudal Fairy Tale*.

³² *Meidō Zangetsuha* (Dark Path of the Dawn’s Moon Wave) is a sword technique first learned by Inuyasha’s older brother Sesshōmaru. It is an incredibly powerful offensive technique that, rather than injuring the victim directly, opens a direct path to the Netherworld. The technique was stolen from the yōkai Shishinki by Inuyasha’s and Sesshōmaru’s father, who forged the sword Tenseiga to contain the immense *jaki*, or evil energy, associated with the technique. Tenseiga was then given to Sesshōmaru because, as a han’yō (half-yōkai), Inuyasha—who received the more powerful sword Tessaiga instead—is unable to withstand such powerful *jaki* without being overcome by the evil.

over weaker and less intelligent yōkai. In one of his first appearances in the series, Sesshōmaru enters riding atop the shoulder of an enormous oni with crooked horns, long messy white hair, fangs, and clawed hands. The oni has completely red, pupil-less eyes, indicating his hollow and wicked character. Here, the oni is only a presence to highlight Sesshōmaru's power; it has almost no perceivable intelligence, and is quickly dispatched by Inuyasha. Again, there is little departure from the standard oni image.

All oni in the series, however, are not simply mindless creatures at the main characters' disposals. In episode seventeen of *The Final Act*, "Magatsuhi's Evil Will," Sesshōmaru encounters two yōkai who, having heard that Sesshōmaru is without his sword, have come to gain prestige by defeating the seemingly defenseless daiyōkai. One oni has only a single horn growing from his head, while the other has two. They both have pale colored skin (brown and blue), pointed ears, and huge muscular bodies that tower over Sesshōmaru's hominoid form. A row of spikes trails down each of their backs, and matching fangs jut from their snarling jaws, likening these oni to their evil medieval counterparts. Their yellow eyes and beady pupils suggest at least some level of intellect, as do their machinations to gain repute by killing Sesshōmaru. The two oni tell him (they can speak!) that once they are finished with him, they plan to eat Kohaku, a human demon-slayer, thus demonstrating their cannibalistic tendencies. Sesshōmaru, however, quickly severs both their heads from their bodies and walks away nonchalantly. The two oni in this scene, while again accentuating Sesshōmaru's offensive capabilities, depict a more

intelligent breed of oni capable of basic analytical thinking, if only for the purpose of acquiring power.

The previous examples of oni display the characteristics of the evil, bloodthirsty oni of the medieval Japanese cultural imagination. Resembling the oni we saw earlier in texts such as *Konjaku Monogatari*, they possess little to no intellectual capabilities and are relatively myopic in their acquisition of power and human flesh. Notwithstanding, we still frequently find particularly astute and competent oni or oni variants in the *InuYasha* universe. Being oni, though, any level of intellect is usually allocated to the accession of strength, power, and dominion—and indeed this is even true for the majority of the main characters as well. Inuyasha and the primary villain, Naraku—who we will discuss later—are both han'yō (half-yōkai, half-human) vying to become full yōkai, ridding themselves of their human traits and therefore attaining significantly more strength. Regarding these desires, Reider observes, “Likewise, all the *yōkai* characters in *InuYasha* look down on humans as weaklings. This may simply be a contemporary story element, or it could be a social satire or commentary on humankind’s preoccupation with the acquisition of strength and power.”³³

To be sure, considering the frequent interaction between the past and the present in the *InuYasha* series, social commentary is relatively common, if only implicit, throughout it. These han'yō are even willing to cede their human sides for more power, and this is perhaps metaphorically reminiscent of many political leaders or military strongmen throughout history. In the *InuYasha* mythology, the

³³ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 164.

human side of a han'yō is what permits him or her to feel compassion towards others, to be understanding and feel compelled to help someone in need. Whenever Inuyasha is exposed to high amounts of *jaki* (evil energy) and capitulates his human faculties to his yōkai self, his eyes turn bloodshot red, his fangs elongate, and he becomes unable to differentiate between friend or foe, indiscriminately attacking anybody in the vicinity—much like the numerous mindless oni stumbling through the *InuYasha* narrative. It is only his love for Kagome, a distinguishably human characteristic in the series, that he is able to overcome his belligerent compulsions and restore balance within himself.

As a full yōkai, Sesshōmaru, too, must learn how to love, an attribute extrinsic to most yōkai, before he can ultimately reach his full potential and eventually become more powerful than even his father had been—and thus stronger than any other living yōkai. In the third movie, *InuYasha the Movie: Swords of an Honorable Ruler* (*Eiga InuYasha: Tenka Hadō no Ken*), after Sesshōmaru begrudgingly admits to his own father Inu no Taishō that he would kill him to obtain his great swords, So'unga and Tessaiga, his father asks him, “Do you desire power that much? Why do you seek power? [...] Sesshōmaru, is there something you want to protect?” However, all Sesshōmaru desires at this time is strength, and throughout the series he must find someone he cares to protect—learn what it means to love another being—before he is capable of wielding his most powerful techniques and thereby attaining true supremacy. As Deborah Shamoan proposes, “the character arcs of both Inuyasha and Sesshōmaru are primarily about them gradually giving up their wild, destructive nature to become more involved with humans: Inuyasha in his love

for Kagome and Sesshōmaru through his adoption of an orphan girl named Rin.”³⁴
Admittedly, the overarching moral of the series is that love is power.

Unfortunately (or perhaps fortunately for the viewer!), even the more intelligent oni in the program are ordinarily blind to this principle. Like Sesshōmaru, clever oni—being oni and hence yōkai—tend to veer towards the megalomaniacal rather than the compassionate, preferring the power offered by the Shikon no tama over the emotions provided by relationships. Probably the most notable exemplar of intelligent oni is Naraku’s incarnation Goshinki. He first appears in episode forty-three, “Tessaiga Breaks,” as a werewolf-eque figure with two oppositely oriented knee joints and noticeably elongated arms and neck. He has purple skin, a white mane, a long tail, and jagged fangs projecting from his snout: definitively established oni characteristics. The spider scar on his back evidences his affiliation with Naraku, and the sharp protrusions from his wrists lend him a particularly terrifying yet unique aura. His taste for horse and human meat, along with his muscular build and clawed hands, further indicate his oni influence. His large red eyes and tiny pupils suggest not only his malevolence, but also his intelligence. The primary contributor to his mental capacity is his ability to read minds. In fact, his name Goshinki (悟心鬼) translates to “mind-reading oni.” His special skills, nevertheless, are not limited only to telepathy; he also has the ability to move faster than human eyes can follow

³⁴ Shamoan, Deborah. “The *Yōkai* in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime.” *Marvels & Tales*, Journal of Fairy Tale Studies, 27.2 (2013): p. 4. Web. 8 April 2014.
<<http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/marvels/vol27/iss2/9>>.

(recall the elusiveness of ancient oni), as well as the strength to break Tessaiga, a sword forged from the fang of Inuyasha's father, with a single bite.

Goshinki, then, is a particularly atypical example of oni in *Inuyasha*, but it does illustrate the wide variety of representations of oni that we find throughout the 193-episode series. To be sure, it is safe to assert that nearly half of the oni depictions in the series are at least in some way anomalous—and indeed we could say the same thing about oni in popular culture. Shamoons contends that it is the “modular nature” of yōkai that allows “Takahashi [the author of the *manga* series] to play with folklore traditions about the *oni* without being bound by them,” imbuing these familiar motifs with a fresh air of originality.³⁵ By “modular,” she is referring to the encyclopedic mode developed by early Chinese and Japanese scholars, and later expanded by Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788). Sekien's books, for instance, operate more like encyclopedias than novels, comprised of individual disassociated “units of information that can be studied, learned, and applied to other contexts.”³⁶

Sekien's approach—“presented in book rather than scroll form, with one page of text and illustration dedicated to each creature, minus any narrative linking them together”³⁷—infused the work, and thus the yōkai within it, with a sense of freedom as well as a playful sensibility. “Not only does this playfulness eventually lead him [Sekien] to create entirely new monsters,” Foster writes, “it also transforms yōkai into multivalent metaphors through which he can talk of other things and implicitly question the boundaries of the real and the imaginary in ways

³⁵ Shamoons, “The *Yōkai* in the Database,” p. 5.

³⁶ Shamoons, “The *Yōkai* in the Database,” p. 2.

³⁷ Shamoons, “The *Yōkai* in the Database,” p. 2.

that still resonate today.”³⁸ And in truth it is through this modular approach that Takahashi and the directors of the animated series are so easily able to suffuse social commentary within the *InuYasha* narrative—though of course they are far less limited by censorship than were artists such as Sekien. This method of conceptualizing yōkai, then, extracting them from their original folkloric contexts, actively engages the readers of the encyclopedias, inviting them to take part in this folklorism and imagine each yōkai in a separate space of its own. In this space, as a site of disassociation, the reader is able to reapply yōkai into other narratives or catalogues, reformulating their conception in the cultural and popular imagination.

Consequently, myriad representations of oni and yōkai in general exist throughout not only the *InuYasha* franchise, but also popular culture. This modular approach permits artists to more readily draw on these figures for their own creative works, encouraging them to borrow certain elements from folklore holistically or, more commonly, atomistically. As a result, many creatures we may designate with the appellation of “oni” are only thus because they share enough attributable characteristics to warrant the term. They may not be oni in the exact folkloric sense, but they display enough influence that the designation is justified. After all, this is the process by which folklorism operates in the first place.

Furthermore, this folklorismic process is also how we are able to definitively identify Goshinki, who is constituted of many influences unattributable to oni (such as the werewolf of European folklore), as one. Interestingly, were we possessed to do so, we could even consider Goshinki as only a part-time oni. In the episode

³⁸ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade*, p. 57.

following his death (episode forty-four, “Kaijinbō’s Evil Sword”), Sesshōmaru finds his severed head and commissions Kaijinbō, a former apprentice to the bladesmith Tōtōsai, to forge a new sword with one of Goshinki’s fangs. From this fang, Kaijinbō fashions the sword Tōkijin, but Goshinki’s spirit, lusting for revenge, manifests itself as an *onryō* (vengeful spirit) in the form of Tōkijin and possesses Kaijinbō. Undeniably, the *onryō* motif appears frequently throughout Japanese folkloric and artistic history; stories of wronged wives turned vengeful ghosts or, more generally, strong emotions—particularly anger, sadness, jealousy, or lust—mutating otherwise nonconfrontational people into vengeful spirits or hideous monsters (reflecting their interiority) are exceedingly common in Japanese cultural narratives.³⁹

What is important here, however, is Goshinki’s transition from oni, a particular *yōkai* with corresponding properties, to *onryō*, a completely different and unrelated *yōkai* in the database. Does this transition indicate that Goshinki has become an altogether unrelated entity, separate from his previous self and ipso facto disassociated from the oni classification? Or due to the fact that his spirit, not his body, is what took possession of Tōkijin, can we still consider this *onryō* and oni? Indeed, highlighted here is a particularly unexceptional phenomenon in folklorismic representations: that of a single being incorporating the attributes of multiple *yōkai*.

Certainly, the primary antagonist, Naraku, embodies one of the more interesting examples of this occurrence in the *InuYasha* series. Naraku, whose name means “hell” in Japanese, is a *han’yō* like Inuyasha and, like any ambitious *han’yō* (apparently), seeks to unite the shards of the Shikon no tama in order to become a

³⁹ Shamoan, “The *Yōkai* in the Database,” p. 5.

thoroughbred yōkai—and the most powerful one at that. In fact, Naraku used to be a human, but after trying to usurp control over a band of thieves (portending his later insatiable hunger for power), his entire body was badly burned and his legs broken due to the previous leader’s retaliation. Significantly, his human name was Onigumo (oni spider). But lusting for the priestess Kikyō, who had single-handedly nursed his injuries, he allowed a multitude of lesser yōkai to devour his body and soul and thereby reincarnate him as the han’yō Naraku. But traces of Onigumo still remain in Naraku, such as his latent desire for Kikyō and the spider figure on his back.

The imprint of a spider on his back as well as the “oni” in Onigumo, however, reveal more than just his demonic disposition. In truth, Naraku is a direct representative of the folkloric creature *tsuchigumo*, or earth spider. Reider claims that the term *tsuchigumo* “is an appellation used derogatorily in ancient Japanese literature for those who defied imperial (central) authority. [...] An earth spider defies central authority, has different customs and manners, and different physiological features from the mainstream body culture. In that sense, the earth spider is considered to be one of the most ancient types of oni.”⁴⁰

Moreover, *Itsubun Settsu Fudoki*, a text misplaced from the *Topography of Settsu Province* and known only from other sources, offers that, “In the reign of Emperor Jimmu, there was a villain called *tsuchigumo*—he was given the disdainful name of earth spider because this person always dwelled in a pit.”⁴¹ Naraku, too, after being disfigured from his burns lived in a sort of pit dwelling in a cave beneath

⁴⁰ Baba Akiko. *Oni no kenkyū*, p. 170. Cited in Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 166.

⁴¹ Uegaki Setsuya, ed. *Fudoki*, Vol. 5 of SNKBZ, p. 437. Cited in Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 167.

a cliff, completely marginalized from the rest of society.⁴² He is further alienated after becoming a powerful han'yō, as he becomes one from whom most other characters either hide the Shikon no tama or cower in fear. Additionally, we must not forget his human name (*Onigumo*) nor the spider mark on his back—and when Naraku is in battle, he often grows spider-leg-like projections from his chest (similar to a spider) with which he traps opponents' movements or otherwise uses as weapons. Therefore, we can safely label Naraku as a *tsuchigumo* and, by extension, an *oni* as well—and one constituted by disparate *yōkai* characteristics, at that.

Though Naraku may not be an archetypal example of medieval *oni*, I argue that he is indeed a quintessential example of modern *oni*—not because a fair number of his general attributes correspond to any checklist of classic *oni* representations, but rather it is due to the very fact that he is not *just* an *oni*. Naraku is an amalgamation of multiple *yōkai*, both physiologically and influentially; he is a product of folklorism, influenced by a creature that is now being influenced by him. In other words, Naraku's depictions, which are undoubtedly affected by cultural and historical precedents, are implicitly reformulating our contemporary conceptualization of the very creatures that influenced those depictions in the first place. In this case, the *oni*—previously conceived as huge people-eating ogres or evil spirits negatively affecting our lives, engendered by humanity's need to make sense of and bring order to our otherwise chaotic world—are now able to be incorporated into hybrid beings, or adopt positive connotations—and be known for doing so, so common is the occurrence. As Reider maintains, “[...] *oni* have become just one of

⁴² Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 167.

many *yōkai*, and appear on the screen with some modern-day additives to the original images, whether *tsuchigumo* or *yasha*. The images are evolutionary rather than set in stone.”⁴³ It is true that oni are particularly known for their shape-shifting abilities, and they will only increasingly evolve as they navigate globalized popular culture, not only morphing into new shapes and beings, but reconceptualizing the very definition of oni as well.

Oni and *The Legend of Zelda*

As mentioned earlier, in the *InuYasha* series oni are almost always depicted as figures of repulsion—much like they were in their original conceptualization—formulated as sites of alterity through which the audience identifies with the good-willed protagonists. In other words, they are outwardly established as Others, opponents to be conquered or taught moral lessons. This is certainly true for the oni variants found in Nintendo’s *The Legend of Zelda* series.

The original title in the series, *The Legend of Zelda*, was released in 1986 to demonstrate the Nintendo Entertainment System’s (NES’s) expanded capabilities (such as in-game saving), and the latest title, *The Legend of Zelda: A Link Between Worlds*, in 2013 to employ the Nintendo 3DS’s 3D capabilities. The storyline for most of the games in the series is relatively the same: Link—the Chosen Hero of the gods, reincarnated nearly every century to defeat the correspondingly reincarnated evil (usually embodied by Ganon)—must obtain the three pieces of the Triforce—representing courage, wisdom, and power—to defeat the evil and save the Princess

⁴³ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 182.

Zelda. Though several of the games in the series have made clear departures from this narrative convention, it is usually an expected practice, or at least a significant concept, within the games' mythology.

While the word "oni" is never actually used in the series, there are several characters whose depictions display enough oni influence to, like Naraku, warrant the designation. A particularly interesting example (and easily the most recognizable) is the primary antagonist of the series, Ganon, and his alternate form, Ganondorf. Ganon is always portrayed as the personification of evil, with names like the Great King of Evil, the Prince of Darkness, or Dark Lord. In the Japanese version, he is often referred to as *Maō* (魔王), which in English means Demon King—and this is a common title in both languages throughout the series. Although he is never explicitly labeled an oni, he does embody many oni characteristics, and the Japanese character for oni (鬼) can be found as a radical within the first character of *Maō*.

Unlike many modern oni narratives—narratives that orient whether the audience perceives the oni as good or evil as a matter of perspective—the oni variants found in *Zelda* are on all occasions malevolent, as they have to be to support the ethos of the legend. The series goes to great lengths to establish Ganon as a figure of wickedness and corruption. For instance, in the well-known title *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (1998) for the Nintendo 64, when the protagonist Link first visits Princess Zelda in Hyrule Castle for the first time, Ganondorf by sheer coincidence happens to be walking past the window, and Zelda points to him, saying:

Can you see the man with the evil eyes? That is Ganondorf, the leader of the Gerudos. They hail from the desert far to the west. Though he swears allegiance to my father, I am sure he is not sincere. The dark clouds that covered Hyrule in my dream... They must symbolize that man! [...] I can sense that man's evil intentions! What Ganondorf is after must be nothing less than the Triforce of the Sacred Realm. He must have come to Hyrule to obtain it! And, he wants to conquer Hyrule... no, the entire world!

The imagery surrounding Ganondorf's introduction to the narrative establishes him as the force of opposition, the embodiment of greed, dishonesty, and hate. He is the leader of the Gerudos, a clan of thieves into which only one (evil) man is born each century. And significantly, he feigns allegiance to the king of Hyrule only to gain access to the kingdom in order to steal the sacred Triforce.⁴⁴ Thus, Ganondorf is a figure beyond the control of central authority, a defining characteristic of historical oni.

Ganon's only desire is the complete acquisition of power, hence transforming the world into a land of chaos, darkness, and death. Jonathan Walls agrees, noting that Ganon "accurately represents universal evil, not only mirroring the corruption that can occur in human hearts on account of such evil, but causing similar

⁴⁴ In *Zelda* mythology, the Triforce is a sacred relic composed of three triangles embodying the virtues of Courage, Wisdom, and Power. It was left behind at the node from which the three Golden Goddesses—Farore, the Goddess of Courage; Nayru, the Goddess of Wisdom; and Din, the Goddess of Power—ascended to the heavens, in a connected dimension known as the Sacred Realm after creating the lands of Hyrule and Lorule. The Triforce has the power to grant the true desire of whomever touches its completed form, molding the Sacred Realm to reflect the person's heart. Its constituent pieces take up residence in the hands of whomever most epitomizes each virtue—in most cases, Link (courage), Zelda (wisdom), and Ganon (power).

consequences within the larger framework of *Zelda's* fiction."⁴⁵ In *Ocarina of Time*, Ganondorf's greed for power plunges Hyrule into complete pandemonium. Hyrule's castle town, once a place of bustling commerce, music, and games, becomes a dark wasteland full of undead enemies ("ReDeads") who scream horrifically when Link passes. Zora'a Domain, a village of friendly aquatic hominoids, flowing water, and opportunity, freezes over, disrupting the Zora's only way of life. And Kokiri Forest, Link's childhood home full of natural scenery and abundant life, is overrun by monsters and is no longer protected by the sacred, late Great Deku Tree.⁴⁶ Moreover, Ganondorf's greed and hate not only transform the landscape of Hyrule into a wasteland devoid of joy, reflecting the inner terrain of his heart, but also precipitate—similar to the principle operating behind an onryō—his later metamorphosis into the huge, beastly form of Ganon.

Reminiscent of the standard images of traditional oni like those found in *Konjaku Monogatari* or *InuYasha*, in this incarnation Ganon has several thick strands of fiery red hair flowing from between two enormous curved horns. He carries two broad swords in each hand, and spiked claw-like projections protrude from his wrists (similar to the ones born by Goshinki). A long tail, one of his weak points, hangs behind him, and his wolf-like legs end in hooves rather than feet, minimizing his human characteristics. His towering muscular body, like that of a traditional oni, is covered only by a loin cloth, several pieces of patterned fabric on his wrists and shoulders, and a tiny tattered red cape. Sharp fangs project from his

⁴⁵ Walls, Jonathan L. "Trouble in the Golden Realm: Ganondorf and Hyrule's Problem of Evil in *Ocarina of Time*." Found in *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*. Walls, Jonathan L., ed. United States: Gray Matter Books, 2011. p. 31.

⁴⁶ Walls, "Trouble in the Golden Realm," p. 38.

snout, and his hollow green glowing eyes suggest some sort of possession. This image of Ganon, or one similar to it, is his most frequent depiction throughout the series. Similar to Goshinki from *InuYasha*, Ganon is able to transform himself by sheer anger, only this time into a more powerful being *before* his defeat: from a weaker human to a stronger oni-like beast. As we have seen, oni are well known for their powers of transformation, and this particular depiction of Ganon heavily resembles that of medieval oni, albeit with some added features (as is expected from a contemporary incarnation).

Furthermore, it is significant to note Ganon's association with lightning. If we recall the sixth episode of *Ise Monogatari*, in which a kidnapped woman is devoured by an oni while her captor is standing guard outside, it is particularly noteworthy that she disappears during a thunderstorm. Nobody actually witnesses the oni eating the woman, but because it is a mysterious disappearance—one that takes place during a lightning storm, no less—the act is accredited to an oni. Indeed, oni and lightning, two incredibly powerful forces, are often associated in the Japanese cultural imagination. In fact, Kondō Yoshihiro proposes that the origin of oni can be found in people's fears in the destructive powers of nature, especially those of thunder and lightning.⁴⁷ Likewise, the 17th century painter Tawaraya Sōtatsu, in his work *Fūjin raijin zu* (a picture of the god of wind and the god of thunder), depicts a thunder god with features eerily similar to oni, and this was frequently the case in many Japanese artworks. Also, the Heian scholar/poet/politician Sugawara no Michizane (849-903), known in Japanese cultural legends as both an oni and an

⁴⁷ Kondō Yoshihiro. *Nihon no oni: nihon bunka tankyū no shikaku*, p. 16. Cited in Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 23.

adversary to imperial power, in one tale uses lightning as a weapon against the imperial family—and in 955 became officially recognized as the chief deity of thunder demons.⁴⁸

In this light, then, it is unsurprising to find that several oni variants in the *Zelda* series have the ability to wield lightning as a weapon. In several games, including *A Link to the Past* and *Ocarina of Time*, Link in order to defeat Ganon/Ganondorf must play what has become known as Dead Man's Volley; in this "game" Ganon charges a ball of electricity in his hand and flings it at Link, who must then hit the ball of lightning back at him in a form of makeshift tennis until it finally strikes him, cracking with the sound of a thunderstrike. In several other games in the series, too—such as *Oracle of Ages/Seasons* and *A Link Between Worlds*—Ganon wields energy balls resembling lightning that Link must dodge. And in *Four Swords Adventures*, Ganon explicitly shoots lightning in various directions from his trident. Clearly, there is an obvious link between Ganon and lightning throughout the entire series, further strengthening his portrayal as an oni.

Regarding oni and their connection to lightning, Reider argues that, "By superimposing the oni onto natural disasters or inexplicable destructive phenomena like thunder or lightning, people had a clear target for their fear and anger; in this vein, the oni represent a self-designed coping strategy, helping people come to terms with nature's unpredictable fury by personifying it and giving substance to the inexplicable."⁴⁹ In other words, the association between oni and lightning arises from humanity's compulsion to make order out of chaos, to render

⁴⁸ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 23-24.

⁴⁹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 24.

the mysterious into the known. After all, this is the very goal of both science and religion. Walls suggests that, “Every great drama needs some opposing force, a wrong or evil that must be put right,” evoking “a basic human desire to see integrity win out over injustice.”⁵⁰ This desire to find some tangible substance to morality is the very concept that positions Ganon as the “servant of evil,” dictating that he must be defeated to not only complete the games, but extract a positive ethical message as well (a principle for which the series is famous). Ganon *must* be evil; were he not the oni around which the forces of good could unite, we would find no game at all, and no lessons to learn.

As previously stated, however, historically oni have often been designated to the category of Otherness. To be sure, as the predominant voice of evil, Ganon—as an individual not fitting into the categories of normality, a Gerudo of different social customs, and a force outside the realm of the emperor’s control—is nothing but the Other. During the Second World War, the term oni was used to describe the Allied Forces, Japan’s enemy. They, like Ganondorf, were depicted with large noses, different customs, and a self-interested agenda outside that which was prescribed by the Japanese emperor. *Manga*, for example, the only comic magazine that existed during the war, depicted Allied leaders such as Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin all as evil demons, oni with horns and malevolent intentions. Even the caption on one of Roosevelt’s portrayals reads “*oni wa washi, oni wa washi*” (I’m the oni, I’m the oni), a

⁵⁰ Walls, *The Legend of Zelda and Theology*, p. 31-32.

play of the customary *setsubun* expression “oni wa soto, fuku wa uchi” (Demons out, fortune in).⁵¹

Klaus Antoni, in his article entitled “Momotarō (The Peach Boy) and the Spirit of Japan: Concerning the Function of a Fairy Tale in Japanese Nationalism of the Early Shōwa Age,” demonstrates how various folkloric and mythological narratives had been propagated as political allegory to advance the Japanese post-Restoration imperialist and ideological agenda. He convincingly delineates how folk figures such as Momotarō and Yamato Takeru were conflated as paragons of the infamous “Japanese essence” promulgated in educational and militaristic spheres as well as in wartime propaganda. The story of Momotarō in particular served as a point of departure from which the Japanese government could exploit its ideological function, imbedding within the cultural imagination a divine legitimization.⁵²

In the story, an old woman finds the divinely sent Momotarō floating down the river in a peach. As he ages, he becomes an unusually strong and able young man, and when he hears news of oni with great treasures on the island of Onigashima (Oni’s Island), Momotarō sets out to conquer them. With his grandmother’s millet dumplings in hand, he befriends a dog, a monkey, and a pheasant—representative of the other Southeast Asian countries within the ideology of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere—and they all work together to defeat the evil oni and leave with their treasure as spoils of war. In this narrative, what Dower calls the “Momotarō-

⁵¹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 107.

⁵² Antoni, Klaus. “Momotarō (The Peach Boy) and the Spirit of Japan: Concerning the Function of a Fairy Tale in Japanese Nationalism of the Early Shōwa Age.” *Asian Folklore Studies*, Vol. 50, 1991: p. 155-188.

paradigm,”⁵³ Momotarō is the manifestation of Japanese pride and heroic courage (“the pure self”), while the oni are situated as uncultivated, morally inferior foreigners in need of enlightenment (“the demonic other,” i.e., the Allied Forces).⁵⁴

This “Momotarō-paradigm” is dangerously similar to the narrative frameworks by which both *The Legend of Zelda* and *InuYasha* series operate: that of the ethical, relatable protagonists versus the evil, ultimately inferior Other. Ganon and Naraku are easily identified as the demonic (oni) Other of their respective spheres. Both villains, situated as peripheral foreign figures of power and chaos, are the forces of egocentric evil that the virtuous and team-oriented protagonists must outsmart and ultimately vanquish. The similarities do not end there, however; in both series these villains are vying to collect the fragments of a disassembled sacred power (the Triforce or the Shikon Jewel) that has the ability to grant the one wish of anyone who can successfully reassemble the divine relic. Interestingly, these sacred relics, supposedly formed by divine entities as symbols of purity and transcendence, do not discriminate between the ethos of good and evil, and can still be corrupted by malign desires.

In *Zelda* mythology, then—and implicitly imbedded within the mythos of *InuYasha* as well for that matter—the agency of wisdom and heroic courage must be realized in order to defeat the forces representative of power. Intelligence, valor, and teamwork are therefore superior to ability. Throughout Link’s quest to navigate treacherous dungeons and defeat the Demon King, he (the player) must analyze his

⁵³ Dower, John. *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*. New York: Panteon Book, 1993. Cited in Antoni, “Momotarō (The Peach Boy) and the Spirit of Japan,” p. 165.

⁵⁴ Antoni, “Momotarō (The Peach Boy) and the Spirit of Japan,” p. 165-166.

environment, offer aid and compassion to those in need, and solve problems (both his own and those of others) to eventually receive aid himself, collect the necessary items, and reconstruct the Triforce. *The Legend of Zelda* and *InuYasha* series both, therefore, propagate certain ideological agendas of their own. Of course, the objectives of these two commodities stand in complete opposition to the intentions promulgated by the Shōwa Momotarō paradigm. Rather than advancing imperialist, quasi-social-Darwinist ideology, indoctrinating the folk into an imagined community of morally superior kinsmen, these products illustrate how the ideals of love, wisdom, and courage unite to form an altogether stronger authority than that which can be accumulated unassisted, revealing the true weakness inherent in the personal acquisition of power.

In this reasoning, *Zelda* and *InuYasha* can be seen as reactions against Japanese wartime aggression and colonialist ideology. Thus, in this Momotarō paradigm the antithetical relationship between the oni and the Momotarō party is inverted; when one is defined by the other, the distinctions between the two blur, and who is the tyrannical and invasive oni-like Other and who is the innocent and righteous protagonist simply becomes a matter of perspective in what Reider identifies as “the carnivalesque flux that characterizes the dichotomy of self and other.”⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 179.

Conclusion

Finally, Anne Allison, in her article “New-Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends: Pokémon Capitalism at the Millennium,” evidencing how the forms of play, exchange, and consumption employed in the Pokémon franchise mimic the mechanisms of capitalism, finds the arena of commodification as the most conducive sphere for “the reinvention of a premodern past: a world of spirits, communitarianism, and otherworldly relations.”⁵⁶ Pokémon, she affirms, as well as other folklorismic products like *InuYasha* and *The Legend of Zelda*, offer a connection to what has been lost in the breakneck pace, materialism, and industrialization of globalized culture: a sensitivity to the immaterial, the supernatural, and interpersonal relationships that characterize this premodern past.⁵⁷ As contemporary Japanese popular and consumerist culture continues to incorporate preexisting mythology and folklore, the entities of the past—whether they are folktales, legends, oni, onryō, or yōkai in general—will likewise continue to morph into figures less recognizable with each incarnation. Newer representations will draw more and more atomistically from the depictions established in ancient or medieval narratives, and more comprehensively from the images produced by modern commodities—unless, of course, it is in a direct attempt to reestablish a connection with the original conceptions.

This folklorismic process, along with the commercialization that has become inextricably linked with it in global capitalist society, will not fail to engender newer visions of oni, constantly transforming them like the bakemono (changing things)

⁵⁶ Allison, “New-Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends,” p. 332.

⁵⁷ Allison, “New-Age Fetishes, Monsters, and Friends,” p. 345.

they are. And when the popularity of commodities such as *Zelda* and *InuYasha* fade, there will arise other (oni) Others to take the place of Ganon and Naraku, and teach us what it means to be different, what it is to be “good people.” Reider, attempting to delineate the mysterious origin of oni, finds that like many popular yōkai, their origin is still debated amongst scholars. Some claim that oni originated as demons in the Buddhist pantheon, constituting one of the six orders of life in Buddhist cosmology,⁵⁸ while others argue that they have never actually been exclusively Buddhist notions. She offers Komatsu Kazuhiko as an example, who notes that “the term oni was used in *onmyōdō* (the way of *yin* and *yang*) to describe any evil spirit(s) harmful to humans (“Supernatural Apparitions and Domestic Life in Japan”).”⁵⁹

Indeed, one aspect of oni representation that may never vanish is that of oni as an evil Other—and this has perhaps been their most significant role throughout history. Just as Walls suggested that every grand narrative needs a force of evil around which the good can unite and exemplify the supremacy of love, there will always exist a demand for the evil oni archetype. We can only hope, however, that the image will not be abused or negatively exploited to advance any nationalist or ethnocentric justifications.

The depictions of oni have varied so widely throughout different eras and cultures that from the very beginning it has been difficult to identify exemplary portrayals. In ancient China, for instance, oni and their corresponding hieroglyphs symbolized spirits of the dead, both ancestral and evil, and in some cases even

⁵⁸ Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*, p. 230.

⁵⁹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. xix.

denoted a dead body itself.⁶⁰ Similarly, in a number of Japanese mythological and artistic works oni were conceptualized as demonic, barbarous, and evil humans, and still in other instances, we find the definitively nonhuman image of a giant ogre craving the flesh of weak and helpless humans. Moreover, when we examine oni representations in the contemporary period we find cute, nonthreatening, and even girlish oni with smiles and decidedly human facial features.

As Reider notes, the vast multitude of “representations [of oni] came into being adopting, embodying, and assimilating multifaceted elements, concepts and characteristics of entities that draw from Chinese origin, Buddhist religious traditions, and *onmyōdō*. Oni can thus be said to be genuinely pan-Asian in their roots.”⁶¹ While oni might be pan-Asian in their historical origins, their use is definitely not limited within the continent. By now, with their absorption into technological and global arenas, oni have become global figures themselves, encased in worldwide popular culture and finding popularity in numerous non-Asian countries. Rather than entities of terror and mystery, they have become figures of entertainment.

Whereas traditional folklore and mythology bespeaks the fears, concerns, and interests of the people who believed them at a given time—and still do to a large extent—it is now the technological entertainment industry that primarily administers this momentous task. It is of the utmost importance, then, that we recognize the value inherent not only in our depictions of these cultural and mythological figures—whether they be oni, Momotarō, or Hello Kitty—but also in

⁶⁰ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. 4-5.

⁶¹ Reider, *Japanese Demon Lore*, p. xix.

their capacity as tools useful in both connecting to a past that is now forever gone, as well as uniting the citizens of the world together, under the umbrella of humanity, as one.

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