



The Moon Bear as a Symbol of *Yama* Its Significance in the Folklore of Upland Hunting in Japan

The Asiatic black bear, or “moon bear,” has inhabited Japan since pre-historic times, and is the largest animal to have roamed Honshū, Shikoku, and Kyūshū since mega-fauna became extinct on the Japanese archipelago after the last glacial period. Even so, it features only rarely in the folklore, literature, and arts of Japan’s mainstream culture. Its relative invisibility in the dominant lowland agrarian-based culture of Japan contrasts markedly with its cultural significance in many upland regions where subsistence lifestyles based on hunting, gathering, and beliefs centered on the mountain deity (*yama no kami*) have persisted until recently. This article explores the significance of the bear in the upland regions of Japan, particularly as it is manifested in the folklore of communities centered on hunting, such as those of the *matagi*, and attempts to explain why the bear, and folklore focused on the bear, is largely ignored in mainstream Japanese culture.

KEYWORDS: *Tsukinowaguma*—moon bear—*matagi* hunters—*yama no kami*—upland communities—folklore

ANIMALS are common motifs in Japanese folklore and folk religion. Of the mammals, there is a wealth of folklore concerning the fox, raccoon dog (*tanuki*), and wolf, for example. The fox is regarded as sacred, and is inextricably associated with *inari*, originally one of the deities of cereals and a central deity in Japanese folk religion. It has therefore become closely connected with rice agriculture and thus is an animal symbol central to Japan's agrarian culture. The fox is also believed to be capable of witchcraft and shape-shifting behavior, sometimes malevolent in nature (JOHNSON 1974, 40–51).¹ Shape-shifting behavior is similarly associated with the *tanuki* (HARADA 1976). Generally, the *tanuki*'s shape-shifting and trickster behavior is comical or mischievous, rather than sinister—one notable exception being the folktale in which the *tanuki* protagonist clubs an old lady to death and serves her up to her husband as “old lady soup.”² The *tanuki* is also a symbol of good luck: statues with bulging bellies are found outside many establishments around Japan, especially restaurants and bars. While less ubiquitous, there is also a substantial body of folklore associated with the wolf.³ Much of the folklore surrounding the wolf concerns it being protective and benevolent.⁴ It is regarded as an *otsukai* お使い (messenger) at many Shinto shrines throughout Japan, the most well-known being Mitsumine Shrine. The *ofuda* 御札 (charm) from this shrine is used by farmers throughout Japan to protect their fields against agricultural pests (KNIGHT 1997, 137–43).

In comparison to these other animals, the bear is markedly less prominent in “mainstream” folklore, either religious or otherwise.⁵ The distribution of its cultural and spiritual significance is characterized by a clear geographical delineation: while it features prominently in upland culture, it is conspicuous in its relative absence in the mainstream culture of the lowlands of Japan.

Before proceeding further, an explanation of what is meant by “mainstream” and “lowland” is warranted. The Japanese landscape can be divided into two general categories: lowland areas comprised of coastal plains and river basins, where agriculture has predominated for much of Japan's history, and interior upland and highland regions, characterized by forested mountains. It is on the central lowland plains that Japan's economy, based primarily on rice agriculture, has been centered, and where Japan's main urban centers have developed. The uplands, and particularly those in the northeast of Japan, were historically isolated culturally, socially, politically, and economically from the center of the Japanese economy and government, based around the Kantō and Kansai regions. In the uplands, where climatic and topographical features made rice agriculture less viable, subsistence

lifestyles based on a combination of hunting, gathering, fresh-water fishing and slash and burn agriculture have persisted until recent times. Owing to the political and social isolation of these regions, and the clearly differentiated lifestyle necessitated by the geographical and climatic features of the uplands, people developed regional cultures quite distinct from the dominant lowland culture. An example of such an upland culture is that of the *matagi*, who relied primarily on hunting and gathering for much of the year in order to sustain themselves over the colder months when agriculture was not possible. *Matagi* villages are believed to have become established in the upland Tōhoku (northern Honshū) region of Japan from around the end of the sixteenth century (TAGUCHI 2000, 72).

The culture of the upland regions has on the whole been neglected by scholars and writers, featuring only in some travel essays (such as the Edo-Period work *Tōyūki* 東遊記 by Tachibana Nankei 橘南谿 (1754–1806), and later in the writings of ethnologists and folklorists Sasaki Kizen 佐々木喜善 (1886–1932), Yanagita Kunio 柳田国男 (1875–1962), and Chiba Tokuji 千葉徳爾 (1916–1989). In the last few decades, studies of upland culture, especially *matagi* culture, have proliferated, and it is through this literature that the significance of the bear in upland culture has become evident. The bear has long been an important animal, both symbolically and materially, from Kyūshū in the south to the far north of Honshū. This article explores the cultural significance of the bear in upland culture and seeks to explain the geographical distribution of the bear’s cultural significance, which is characterized by a clear lowland/upland delineation.

THE JAPANESE “MOON BEAR”

The Japanese archipelago is inhabited by two species of bear: the larger brown bear (*Ursus arctos*), the habitat of which is limited to Hokkaidō, and the smaller Asiatic black bear (*Ursus thibetanus [japonicus]*), which inhabits Honshū (the Japanese mainland) and Shikoku. The brown bear has traditionally had a strong significance in the culture of the Ainu, the indigenous people of Hokkaidō, and is the focus of the spirit-sending ceremony called the *iyomante* and a large body of Ainu ritual and folklore. Much has been written on the place of the bear in Ainu culture and the ceremonialism surrounding it, and this will not be discussed in this article,⁶ the focus of which is the Asiatic black bear (FIGURE 1).

The Asiatic black bear is known as *tsukinowaguma* 月の輪熊 in Japanese for the crescent-moon shaped marking on its chest.⁷ The bear is smaller than its “cousin,” the American black bear (*Ursus americanus*), its average weight ranging between 40 and 120 kilograms, and its average body length ranging between 110 and 150 centimeters (HAZUMI 1999, 208; OKA 2003, 51). Though omnivorous, vegetable matter constitutes the predominant part of its diet: grasses, sedges, herbs, and buds are preferred foods in spring, and berries and nuts in summer and autumn when it needs to eat high-energy foods to build up body fat for the hibernation period (HAZUMI 1999, 208; HAZUMI and KITAHARA 1994, 17; EZAKI 1993, 44). What animal matter the bear does eat is derived largely from small animals such as



FIGURE 1. An Asiatic Black Bear.
Photo: Scott Schnell

frogs, crabs, ants and other insects, and the carrion of animals such as wild rabbits and serow (*kamoshika*) (AZUMANE 1994, 27, 235; EZAKI 1993, 44).

The bear once inhabited the forests of Kyūshū, Shikoku, and Honshū, but is now thought to be extinct in Kyūshū, is facing imminent extinction in Shikoku, and its populations are becoming increasingly fragmented and isolated in western Honshū. The main threats to the sustainability of viable populations in Japan are high rates of culling (control-killing as pests), unregulated hunting, and habitat destruction. In terms of habitat destruction, human activities, particularly during the twentieth century, have resulted in little of its forested mountain habitat remaining undisturbed. Key impacts on the bear's forest habitat are from plantation forestry and the construction of ski-fields, roads and other leisure facilities and infrastructure. The bear's last stronghold is now north-eastern

Honshū, though even this is growing more tenuous as populations become increasingly fragmented.

FOLKLORE AND RELIGIOUS ASSOCIATIONS RELATING TO THE BEAR IN UPLAND JAPAN

Folklore relating to the bear has been documented in Kyūshū, Shikoku, Chūbu, and Tōhoku,⁸ but it is the culture of the *matagi* hunting communities of Tōhoku that is most well-known. This section will examine religious associations and folklore relating to the bear throughout Japan before turning specifically to the bear's place in *matagi* folklore in the next section. This discussion will be based on an examination of ethnological, anthropological, and historical literature, and the author's fieldwork in the Tōhoku region.

One important aspect of the traditional consciousness of the bear in upland areas relates to its association with the mountain deity (*yama no kami* 山の神), one of the main deities of Japanese folk religion (KAWASAKI 1993, 161; OGURA 1993, 99–100). The worship of the *yama no kami* is traditionally practiced among farmers and those whose livelihoods centered on the mountains, such as charcoal-makers and hunters. As such, the *yama no kami* fulfils a dual role over both the realm of mountains and the agricultural fields. In terms of its role in agriculture, it is believed that the *yama no kami* transforms into the *ta no kami* 田の神 (deity of the

fields) and descends from the mountains in spring to watch over the fields, returning again to the mountains in autumn once the crops are harvested (KITAMURA 1995, 125; MIYAKE 2001, 79, 85; HORI 1966, 7).⁹ But the *yama no kami* is also believed to reign over the mountains and the animals that live in them. Thus, in hunting communities, it is believed that when animals are hunted and killed, the *yama no kami* must be placated and thanked for letting the animals over which it has guardianship be sacrificed.¹⁰ The bear was traditionally seen by upland hunters as one of the creatures of which the *yama no kami* is “owner” or “guardian” (OGURA 1993, 99), a relationship of guardianship evident in many traditional bear hunting cultures.¹¹

In addition to this relationship of guardianship between the *yama no kami* and the bear, beliefs also developed concerning the bear being a messenger (*otsukai*) of the *yama no kami*. This belief is associated with Shugendō 修験道 (a syncretic religion based around sacred mountains) and the Suwa faith (a faith centered on Suwa Taisha or grand shrine) (MIYAO 1989, 177; CHIBA 1969, 366–81).¹² This belief was especially prominent in the case of bears with unusual pelage, as discussed below. It has been further overlaid by Buddhist-influenced beliefs that the bear is an earthly form of Buddhist avatars,¹³ perhaps a natural consequence of the highly syncretic fashion in which Shinto and folk religious belief systems were practiced for hundreds of years (ITŌ 1998, 67).

It has been suggested that the bear’s yearly “disappearance” in winter and its subsequent re-emergence in spring with cubs, resembling as it does the cycle of rebirth, has influenced the Japanese cosmology, particularly in respect to a consciousness of transmigration (MIYAO 1989, 64–65).¹⁴ In fact, it is for this reason, Miyao suggests, that the Japanese recognized the marking on the bear’s chest as a crescent moon (also associated with waxing and waning, and the cycle of rebirth), though this is a tenuous claim for which no evidence is provided.

The crescent moon marking on the bear’s chest was regarded as having special significance in many upland regions (MIYAO 1989, 64–65).¹⁵ There are various beliefs centered on the significance and origins of the bear’s pelage. According to local folklore in Kitaurahara-gun in Niigata, the white marking was left by an amulet given to the bear by the *yama no kami*: the amulet was wrapped in silk wadding that, when removed, left a white marking (SAKUMA 1985, cited in MIYAO 1989, 65). Conversely, in some hunting communities, it was believed that the bears *without* the marking were the most sacred. In Akita Prefecture for example, *matagi* hunters called these latter individuals *minaguro* (all black) or *munaguro* (black chest) bears, and believed that they were the special messengers of the *yama no kami*, and therefore particularly sacred. If they accidentally shot such a bear, they reportedly offered the bear to the *yama no kami* and gave up hunting from that time on (MIYAO 1989, 66–67). In Nagano, these bears were referred to as *nekoguma* (cat-bear) or *yami* 闇 (darkness), and similar beliefs and prohibitions against killing them existed (CHIBA 1969, 125; MIYAO 1989, 66–67).

There was also a belief among *matagi* communities that the killing of a bear in the mountains leads to a *kumaare* 熊荒れ or “bear storm,” owing to the idea

that the bear's spirit or soul has the power to affect the weather (TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 40; OGURA 1993, 98–99; SAKUMA 1980, 177, cited in KNIGHT 2003, 62).¹⁶ This belief may be connected to the practice of *ana-gari* 穴狩り, or den-hunting, which involved the luring of a bear out of its winter den and shooting it. *Ana-gari* hunting occurred in the spring, and was generally carried out on fine, clear days when hunters could easily move around on the frozen snow. Spring weather tends to go through regular cyclical changes, and so the chance of a bear-hunt being followed by bad weather was relatively high. The frequency of this coincidence may have led to the belief about *kumaare* (OGURA 1993, 98).

A special reverence for the bear and powers associated with it is evident throughout all regions where hunting was traditionally practiced, although the specific nature of spiritual or religious associations with the bear vary according to region. Following the introduction of Buddhism in the sixth century, Buddhist-based decrees prohibiting the killing of animals are likely to have brought a stronger moral dimension to existing folk-religious beliefs regarding the sacred nature of the bear. Upland hunting communities devised different strategies for dealing with the contradiction inherent in hunting a creature revered as sacred. Some, such as those of the Kiso area in Nagano, imposed strict prohibitions on hunting bears.¹⁷ Many others developed rituals to placate both the bear's spirit and the *yama no kami* and to avoid becoming subject to the bear's *tatari* (curse), such as the erecting of memorial stones, reciting special prayers or making sacrifices (SAKUMA 1980, 177, cited in KNIGHT 2003, 185; YAMAZAKI 1990, 26; TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 47).¹⁸ The *matagi* hunters of Tōhoku also practiced similar rituals but at the same time established a “secret foundation book,” which gave them a special mandate to hunt the bear and absolved them of guilt associated with *sesshō* 殺生, the taking of life (prohibited by Buddhist doctrine).

The manner in which hunting communities dealt with this spiritual and moral conflict appears to reflect how economically important the bear was in each region: in regions where the bear was important to subsistence or economically valuable, communities devised ways to “circumvent” this moral conflict and continue hunting. In Tōhoku, for instance, the bear and serow were the key game species—species that were plentiful in the west of Japan, such as wild boar and deer, were less common (CHIBA 1969, 381). Thus, for the hunting communities in these areas, it would have been a great sacrifice to give up the hunting of bears altogether, particularly as bear parts became highly sought-after commodities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (TAGUCHI 2000, 191–201; HAZUMI and YOSHII 1994, 29). In western Japan, where other large mammal species were more plentiful (and posed less danger to hunt than the bear), it was a simpler matter to impose and adhere to strict prohibitions on the killing of bears: such outright prohibitions of bear hunting are evident, for instance, in parts of Shikoku and the Chūbu region in central Honshū. In Kyūshū, there are instances of hunters giving up hunting altogether after inadvertently killing a bear (CHIBA 1969, 365–70).

As discussed above, the bear is notably absent as a symbol or totem in religious folklore associated with lowland culture, unlike the fox, for example. Even in the

upland areas, somewhat surprisingly perhaps, the bear features little in the iconography of the mountain-religion traditions, which are especially prevalent in the Tōhoku region. When it does feature, it is generally in association with the founding legends of a mountain temple or shrine, referred to as *kaisan engi* 開山縁起. These legends are usually associated with Shugendō. Shugendō became an organized religion in about the ninth and tenth centuries, when centers were established on hundreds of Japanese mountains traditionally regarded as sacred, and is an amalgamation of folk-religious, Taoist, and Buddhist beliefs and spiritual practices relating to sacred mountains (MIYAKE 2001, 79). The founding legends were disseminated to enhance the temple's reputation and its attraction to worshippers by explaining the “wondrous happening” (*reii* 靈異) that led to the temple being founded (BOCKING 1996, 26).¹⁹ The *kaisan engi* tales often take the form of a hunter (or hunters) following an animal into the mountains, and there witnessing the manifestation of a deity.²⁰ Though deer more commonly feature in these legends, there are a number of places in Japan where mountain temples are said to have been founded after a hunter followed (or was guided by) a bear into the mountains. The Oyama Shrine 雄山神社, located on the summit of Mount Tateyama in Toyama Prefecture, is one of the better known of such places.²¹ From ancient times, Tateyama was worshipped as one of the “three sacred mountains,” along with Mount Fuji and Mount Haku. The Tateyama mandala (*Tateyama mandara* 立山曼荼羅) illustrates one scene in the founding legend of Tateyama, showing a wounded bear running from the hunter after being shot and injured by an arrow (TOYAMA-KEN TATEYAMA HAKUBUTSUKAN 1994, 34).

The Hayachine Shrine 早池峰神社 near Tōno, central Iwate, has a similar founding legend, though in this case featuring a deer (FIGURE 2). This legend relates that Hayachine Shrine was established around 807 CE by two hunters who followed a deer into the mountains, and on witnessing the appearance of an avatar in a cavern on the top of the mountain, built a shrine there (KADOKAWA NIHON CHIMEI DAIJITEN 1978, 636; TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 42).²² What is notable about the shrine is that it is one of the few places to have religious artefacts—other than the Tateyama mandala cited above—featuring bears (albeit relatively recent in age). An *ō-ema* (large votive picture), depicting three Asiatic black bears against a backdrop of mountains, was gifted to the shrine in 1910 by three hunters from a village in the Tōno area.²³ While the significance of the bears in the *ō-ema* is not clear, the bear is



FIGURE 2. The entrance of Hayachine Shrine.
Photo: Catherine Knight

not an unlikely motif given the shrine's location in an area known for bear hunting, and given the shrine's strong association with hunting generally, both in terms of its patrons and its founding legend.

In terms of its general attributes, the bear is connected with such characteristics as courage, strength, and perseverance, particularly by hunters in upland areas (KNIGHT 2003, 184–85). It is also associated with motherly devotion: sows are admired for their maternal dedication and forbearance, connected both to their giving birth during the cold of winter, and the dedication required to nurture a tiny, blind and helpless new-born cub (MIYAO 1989, 18, 193; KNIGHT 2003, 166).²⁴ Hunters have been reported to admire the dedication shown by the sow when, preceding the birth, she leaves the winter den to drink water from a nearby stream so that she is able to lactate (TABUCHI 1992, 18, cited in KNIGHT 2003, 166).

These images of the bear as courageous, strong, and as a dedicated mother are demonstrated in Miyazawa Kenji's (1896–1933) short story, “The Bears of Name-toko,” which is said to have been based on an actual *matagi* hunter who lived in Iwate Prefecture (northern Honshū) at the time (NAKAJI 2002).²⁵ In this story, the central character, a hunter, encounters a bear, which implores him not to kill it on this occasion as “there are still things I've got to do” (MIYAZAWA 1972). Instead the bear promises to sacrifice itself in two more years, after taking care of these things. Though not stated explicitly, it is probable that the tasks the bear refers to are those of raising a cub to independence—certainly, the two year period would be consistent with this explanation. Another short story, called *Tsukinowaguma* (MUKU 1995), written by Muku Hatojū (1905–1987), explores the selfless courage and maternal dedication of bears, implicitly contrasted with the selfishness, short-sightedness, and greed of human beings. This story was written in the wake of the Second World War, and it is likely that the author was reflecting on these human vices, which had come to the fore during this period of warfare and devastation (MIYAO 1989, 191–93).²⁶ Both authors grew up in the northern Honshū region where the *matagi* tradition was strong, and it may be that this had an influence on their perceptiveness and admiration concerning the bear.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF *MATAGI* CULTURE

As noted, the bear, and bear folklore, is central to *matagi* culture, the culture of the hunting communities of the upland regions of Tōhoku.²⁷ Hunting was not limited to Tōhoku, and indeed bear hunting was practiced as far south as Kyūshū until relatively recent times.²⁸ However, it was in the Tōhoku region that it became a distinct “culture” in its own right, encompassing an established body of doctrine and strictures, strong religious associations (many in connection with Shugendō), and even its own argot.²⁹ The development of such a distinct “sub-culture” in the Tōhoku region appears to have been for two key reasons: one is that the hunting of bears, serow, and other animals in the upland areas of Tōhoku necessitated teamwork because the geography and harsh weather conditions meant that hunting simply could not be practiced individually. This led to the establishment

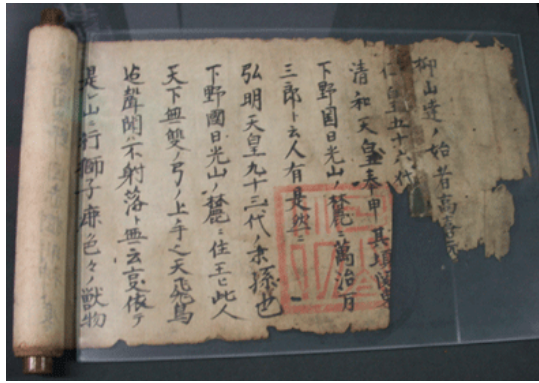


FIGURE 3. A display of the *Yamadachi konpon-maki* at the Ani-cho *matagi* museum in Akita. Photo: Scott Schnell

of upland settlements centered on hunting activity. Secondly, the climate and geography in these upland areas also meant that villagers could not make a living from agriculture alone—therefore hunting and gathering persisted as important activities to supplement food supplies over the long months when agriculture was not possible.

In the mid-sixteenth century, stimulated by the food and material shortages concomitant with the constant warfare during the age of civil war (*sengoku jidai* 戦国時代, 1493–1573) and the introduction of the gun, hunting became a subsistence activity increasingly central to the economy (MAITA 1998, 46; TAGUCHI 2000, 72; HAZUMI and YOSHII 1994, 29). Hunters in the Tōhoku region were ideally placed to satisfy the demand for animal products. Toyama became the center for medicine peddlers, often travelling hunters who sold bear and other animal products as medicine (HAZUMI and YOSHII 1994, 31). It was during this period that *matagi* hunting established itself as a distinct cultural entity.

Matagi hunted a variety of creatures, including the serow, fox, and rabbit, but the bear was the largest, most dangerous, and the most valuable in terms of sustaining a living.³⁰ *Matagi* hunting was governed by a framework of rules, rites and rituals, and hunting was to be conducted only as necessary for subsistence purposes, with genuine respect for the animals hunted (MAITA 1998, 46).³¹ *Matagi* believed that the hunting of animals was only as permitted by the mountain deity, and as such, hunting was carried out with a sense of utmost reverence (HAZUMI and YOSHII 1994, 29; NAUMANN 1963, 341). A strict *matagi* doctrine was established as a means of resolving the spiritual and moral conflict with the Buddhist doctrine against *sesshō* and the consumption of meat. For the *matagi* of the Akita and Iwate regions, the “mandate” to hunt in the mountains of Japan was provided by the authority of the Nikkō sect of *Shugendō* and was written in a “secret document” (*hidensho* 秘伝書) called the *Yamadachi konpon-maki* 山立根本卷 (translating approximately as the *matagi* foundation book) (FIGURE 3).³² This work was highly revered and passed from generation to generation (ŌTA 1998, 5). It is unclear when these “books” first appeared, but they are likely to date back to about the seventeenth century, when *matagi* culture was becoming firmly established.³³

THE BEAR'S PLACE IN *MATAGI* CULTURE

Bears were generally hunted from late autumn to early winter, before they hibernated, or during spring, either while the bear was still in its den or once it had left the den. Hunting was carried out over this period primarily because a relatively firm and thick layer of snow-covered vegetation and thus made movement, and tracking the bear, relatively straight-forward. Bear hunting techniques and strategies differed from region to region according to the physical environment. In steep mountain terrain, bear hunting was generally conducted in groups of up to ten people or more, using the *maki-gari* 巻狩り method. This is where a group of hunters surrounded the bear and drove it up the mountain to a waiting hunter where it was shot (TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 33). In some areas where the terrain was less rugged, such as the Kitakami mountain region in central Iwate Prefecture, hunting was primarily carried out in small groups or by a single hunter. *Ana-gari*, or den-hunting, was the preferred method.

Bear hunting expeditions could last up to two weeks or more, and could extend over large areas. *Matagi* built and utilized small huts in the mountains that acted as bases for their hunts (ŌTA 1998, 5–6). In the case of group hunting, the group was led by a *shikari*, or leader, who had absolute authority during the hunting expedition irrespective of his social position within the village. Hunting expeditions were both preceded and followed by rituals, and strict rules and taboos governed the hunt itself. Singing, drinking or smoking were prohibited while on a hunt (ŌTA 1998, 5).³⁴ A special mountain argot, which included language taboos, was also used. Language taboos were common in areas where hunting was conducted in large groups—where hunting was done in small groups or as an individual effort, such as in the Kitakami mountains in Iwate Prefecture, language taboos were largely not observed (TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 40). This may be explained by the fact that language taboos or substitute language appears to be prevalent in communities where communal cooperation is essential for tasks. For the same reason, substitute language, or *oki-kotoba* (open-sea argot), was also traditionally used by fishermen, and some of the substitute terms are common to both *yama-kotoba* and *oki-kotoba* (ŌTŌ 1963, 116–17).³⁵

One theory is that the purpose of using a special mountain argot was to avoid disclosing to the animals the hunters were pursuing what they planned to do (KANEKO 1993, 101; AZUMANE 1994, 9). Another is that it was to avoid the vulgarity of ordinary village language (ŌTA 1998, 6). In respect to the bear, hunters used various aliases such as *taishō* 大將 (or “boss”), *oyaji* (“old man” or “boss”), *nushi* 主 (“master” or “god”), and *ossama* (a respectful but colloquial term for a middle-aged man, uncle, or Buddhist priest) (KANEKO 1993, 101). The use of such aliases for the bear is consistent with the practices among other Boreal hunting cultures in which bear ceremonialism is evident. Usually these aliases take one of three forms: kinship terms, such as “father,” “uncle,” “granddad;” names that show reverence and respect, such as “king of the forest,” “sacred animal,” “great one,” “beautiful one;” or names that refer to physical or behavioral characteristics

of the bear, such as “the barefoot one,” “the honey-eater,” or “old man with a blanket” (LOT-FALK 1953, cited in MIYAO 1989, 61; ROCKWELL 1991, 189).

After a bear was shot, the *matagi* would perform a ritual prayer for the bear’s soul to ensure that its spirit rested in peace, and to prevent a curse being placed on the hunters by a vengeful spirit.³⁶ This ritual prayer was carried out either in the mountains or after returning to the village (ROY 1998; TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 13).³⁷ On returning to the village with the bear carcass (either in one piece or cut into easily transportable pieces), the hunters generally went to the shrine dedicated to the mountain deity to pay their respects. They would then gather at the *shikari*’s home, and the kill would be distributed equally among the group. In some cases, the group would then offer a toast to the mountain deity, have a celebratory feast, and disband (TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 13).

An important aspect of *matagi* culture is the similarity evident between their rituals and customs and those of the Ainu of Hokkaidō. Some of the *yama-kotoba* lexicon discussed above are clearly of Ainu origin, for example *wakka* (water), *setta* (dog), *sanpe* (heart), and *kappo* (skin). Examples of other *yama-kotoba* words that bear a strong resemblance to words in Ainu are those for “head” (*hakke* in *yama kotoba*, *pake* in Ainu), “big” (*horo* in *yama kotoba*, *poro* in Ainu), and “small child” (*hono* in *yama kotoba*, *pōno* in Ainu) (KUJI 2002, 80–81).³⁸ Indeed, it has been suggested by some scholars that the word *matagi* is itself of Ainu origin.³⁹ Kuji also points out various other similarities between Ainu and *matagi* customs: for instance, that before entering the mountains to hunt, both the Ainu and the *matagi* pray to the god(s) for a good hunt. Once the preparation stage has commenced, neither the Ainu nor the *matagi* hunter sleeps with his wife, and if a hunter’s wife is pregnant, he must abstain from hunting altogether. Before a hunt, the Ainu offer an *inau* (sacred shaved sticks of willow) to the god of hunting, while the *matagi* offer a *nosa* (a ceremonial staff made from dried grass) to supplicate the *yama no kami* for success and safety in the hunt (KUJI 2002, 206).

These parallels would appear to indicate that there is at least some connection between Ainu and *matagi* cultures, and it may be that some aspects of *matagi* ritual and beliefs have been influenced by the Ainu or even have their origins in Ainu culture, or perhaps more likely, that the upland hunting culture that predated the emergence of the *matagi* was influenced by Ainu culture. Here it should be noted that Ainu culture was not always restricted to Hokkaidō as it is today. It is thought that the Ainu inhabited much of northern Honshū relatively undisturbed by Yamato Japanese influence until the eighth century, when the imperial court sought to extend its eastern frontier further and sent out armies to conquer the “eastern wilds.”⁴⁰ Therefore, it is certainly not inconceivable that language and customs of Ainu origin have been absorbed into *matagi* and other upland cultures of the Tōhoku region. While a connection between *matagi* and Ainu culture is yet to be conclusively established, these similarities between *matagi* folklore and practices and those of the Ainu, an ethnic group entirely separate from the Yamato Japanese, underscore the distinctiveness of *matagi* as an example of an upland sub-culture in contradistinction to that of the lowland.

DISCUSSION: THE BEAR AS A SYMBOL
OF THE UPLAND/LOWLAND DIVIDE

As proposed in the introduction, there is a clear geographical pattern evident in the distribution of bear symbolism and folklore in Japan. While its relative absence is conspicuous in lowland culture, bear-centered folklore and beliefs are prominent in the folklore of many upland regions. What factors have led to this topographical delineation? It may be supposed that the bear's economic significance is the key factor determining the prominence and nature of beliefs and folklore surrounding the bear in various regions. In lowland regions, where the bear rarely ventured and where rice agriculture was central to the economy, the bear would have merely been the stuff of folktales, or an occasional allusion in poetry. Thus, generally speaking, the bear had little economic significance for lowland Japanese, and is likely to have featured in the lowland dweller's consciousness only as a symbol of the impenetrable and fear-inspiring realm of wilderness (or *okuyama* 奥山 in Japanese).⁴¹

In comparison, for many upland communities the bear undoubtedly had greater economic significance than it did for the lowland Japanese. However, even in these upland areas, its economic value varied markedly depending largely on what other game was available to hunters. As was noted above, in regions where other game, such as deer and wild boar, was plentiful, prohibitions on the killing of bears developed, probably stemming from existing folk religious beliefs about the sacredness of the bear, which were later overlaid by Buddhist and Shūgendō beliefs. In areas where other game was less plentiful, such as Tōhoku, these beliefs concerning the sacredness of the bear were, while still observed, "circumvented" by the establishment of a special mandate to hunt, strictly regulated by rules and rituals prescribed in the *matagi* foundation books.

Yet reverence for the bear and beliefs about its association with the mountain deity and other religious figures are consistently evident in upland regions regardless of its economic significance. Thus, the geographical distribution of bear-centered beliefs cannot be explained by economic significance alone. Parenthetically, anthropologists since the time of HALLOWELL (1926) have recognized that purely economic or materialist explanations alone are insufficient to account for the bear's appeal in cultures throughout the northern hemisphere.

How then can the significance of the bear in upland culture be explained? To the upland dweller, the forested mountains were an awe-inspiring and mystical place: they were seen as the dwelling place of the mountain deity and numerous other forest-dwelling spirits, and the world situated between the mortal and celestial worlds.⁴² At the same time, the forest was a place that provided a seemingly endless supply of resources essential to a subsistence lifestyle: timber for building, firewood, charcoal, plant foods, game, and, of course, water. For these reasons—both spiritual and material—it is understandable that the forested uplands were the object of great reverence by upland dwellers. The bear, in turn, was the largest and most powerful creature inhabiting the forest, and as such, it is likely that it was

viewed with the same reverence as the forested mountains in which it dwelt. Additionally, people were likely to have recognized that the bear resembles humans in many ways: in its appearance and behavior (for instance, in its ability to walk on its hind legs, its ability to use its front paws like human hands), and in that it shared a taste for many of the foods that were (and still are) valued by humans, namely, bamboo shoots, honey, nuts, and berries. The bear was therefore more likely to have been anthropomorphized in upland cultures than other mountain animals such as the deer or wild boar, for instance. Perhaps most importantly, it possessed a seemingly magical ability to “disappear” in the winter and re-emerge in spring, surviving on nothing more than a little water over the long winter months. This was an ability that no human possessed—truly god-like in nature. It is no wonder then that the bear was regarded as sacred by the upland dwellers who lived and worked in and adjacent to the forest, and were more likely to have been familiar with the bear’s life cycle and behavior.

The question remains, however, why the bear, and the upland culture surrounding it, has until recently been marginalized and largely ignored. This question must be considered within the context that all ethnic groups, sub-cultures, or traditions that did not fit into the neat model of Japan as a culture centered on rice cultivation have tended to be marginalized, a tendency further perpetuated by the advent of the *Nihonjinron* 日本人論 scholarly movement, which promulgated a model of Japan as a mono-cultural society made up of people of homogenous ethnic background.⁴³ The lack of discussion of upland hunting and subsistence-based regional cultures in Japan’s historical literature can to a great extent be simply explained: most of the “learned men” who wrote historical chronicles and other literature were based in Heian or subsequent administrative centers, and simply would not have been aware of the diversity of culture, folklore, and traditions found in “outlying” areas. When government officials were sent to such areas, it was invariably the case that they had fallen into disfavor: these distant provinces were regarded as backward, uncivilized and lonely places by people accustomed to the culture and relative sophistication of urban centers. However, added to this quite obvious explanation for the marginalization of hunting culture, there is likely to have been, for both economic and political reasons, an inherent prejudice against upland inhabitants whose lifestyles were largely subsistence based.⁴⁴ Not only did their mobility make them difficult to monitor from an administrative perspective, but because they did not grow rice—the main form of taxation—they were more likely to escape paying taxes. Furthermore, it is likely that those who inhabited the northeast of Japan, an area that was subjugated and incorporated into the Yamato empire only relatively late in Yamato’s history, and only after significant resistance, were the subject of ongoing suspicion from the distant government.

To this day, communities in remote, upland areas fear being stigmatized through their association with bears. In particular, some upland communities fear that adverse publicity about bear attacks exacerbate the problem of *yomebusoku*, or “bride shortage,” by making these remote upland communities even less attractive to prospective brides from other localities (KNIGHT 2003, 175). At the same time,

these communities are often marginalized, both socially and culturally, for other reasons: it is these communities that suffer most from rural depopulation: the out-migration of younger generations leaving predominantly older people to take care of the farms and other family concerns. These communities enjoy little government investment or support, and express feeling “betrayed” by the government that encouraged them to convert their land to forestry in the post-war years but which has subsequently largely abandoned domestic forestry in favor of inordinately cheaper timber imports (KNIGHT 2003, 35). In a kind of “double-jeopardy” effect, these communities are also most seriously affected by bear damage and attacks.

In addition to an inherent prejudice against upland dwellers, there has historically been evident among lowland dwellers a fear and discomfort in regard to the uplands themselves. The uplands in Japan are referred to in a general sense as *yama*, while the remote mountains where only hunters, swidden farmers, woodcutters, or religious ascetics ventured were referred to as *okuyama*, or deep mountains. Travellers would only pass through such regions out of sheer necessity, as they were regarded as dangerous, lonely, and wild places—the realm of spirits, gods, and monsters, as well as being the dwelling place of the dead. Any references to the bear in *Manyō* and other Heian-Period poetry refer to it as *araguma* 荒熊 (or wild bear) and generally associate it with *okuyama*, to the extent that the term’s usage almost appears to be metonymical for this geographical realm.

Thus, bears and culture relating to the bear were historically marginalized not only owing to their relative “invisibility” within the lowland culture of Japan, but also owing to the bear’s association with communities and regions regarded as remote and backward. In contemporary society this pattern continues in the sense that the problem of bear pestilence occurs most frequently in the remote upland communities that tend to be both socially and economically alienated, and thus is viewed as only a peripheral problem by central government bureaucrats and the largely urbanized general public. However, one fresh facet to the bear’s symbolism has emerged. In the growing discourse concerning wildlife conservation and management and the underlying problem of habitat destruction, the bear is taking on a new symbolism, this time in lowland culture. To ecologists, environmentalists, and conservationists, the bear has become the “barometer of the forest,” in recognition of the fact that its very survival is dependent on the existence of healthy, complex forest ecosystems. This could be considered a modern, ecological expression of an age-old reverence and respect for the “king of the forest” (*mori no ōja* 森の王者). It may represent an extension of the bear’s significance as a symbol, not only of traditional hunting culture but of a burgeoning ecological understanding of Japan’s upland wilderness and wildlife. Whether this will lead to a mobilization of society to preserve both the bear and its habitat, the forested uplands of Japan, is yet to be seen.

NOTES

1. The purpose of the transformation can be to perform poltergeist-like acts or mischievous tricks, or sometimes acts of a more malevolent nature, usually as a form of vengeance for some wrong done by a human (JOHNSON 1974, 40–51, 65).

2. The folktale in question is “Kachi-kachi yama” (Kachi-kachi Mountain).

3. See, for example, KNIGHT 1997; KNIGHT 2003; WALKER 2005; KURISU 2004.

4. In fact, even the scientific name for the Japanese wolf, *bodophylax* (*bodo* meaning “way” or “path,” and *phylax* meaning “guard”) is derived from a belief that it would accompany lone travelers through the forest as a protector, referred to as *okuri-ōkami*, in Japanese (KNIGHT 1997, 136).

5. This article discusses the place of the Asiatic black bear in Japanese culture. Therefore when “the bear” is used, it refers specifically to this species.

6. See, for example, BATCHELOR 1901; FITZHUGH and DUBRIEL 1999; WATANABE 1973.

7. While the term *tsuki no wa* more strictly refers to the ring around the (full) moon, it is clear from historical literature that in the case of the bear the Japanese used the term to refer to the “new (crescent) moon” (*mikkazuki* 三日月). For instance, the *Honchōshoku-kagami* 本朝食鑑, an encyclopedia of plants and animals used for foods and medicines published in 1697, refers to the mark as being the shape of a crescent moon. In the earliest extant documents that refer to the bear, such as the *Kojiki* 古事記 (completed in 712 CE) and *Manyōshū* 万葉集 (the oldest anthology of Japanese poetry, compiled between 744 and 759), it is referred to as *kuma* (bear) or *araguma* (wild bear). It is first referred to as *tsukinowaguma* in documents of the Edo Period (1600–1868). It appears that the origin of this appellation may be from colloquialisms used in upland hunting communities. The *Honchōshoku-kagami* states that the bear is known colloquially as *tsukinowaguma*. A later entry on the bear in *Wakansansai zue* 倭漢三才図会, an illustrated encyclopaedia published in 1712, states: “It has a crescent moon-shaped white patch of fur on its chest. It is referred to as *tsuki no wa* in colloquial Japanese. It always tries to cover this with its paw, [because] this is what the hunters aim for. If the bear is hit here it is killed” (MIYAO 1989, 67). It is unclear when the appellation entered standard Japanese.

8. See for example, CHIBA 1969; MIYAO 1989; GIFU-KEN HŌNYŪRUI CHŌSA KENKYŪKAI 1993.

9. NAUMANN (1963, 345) suggests that this dual form may have its origins in the practice of swidden agriculture in the mountains. The *yama no kami* was the protector of these mountain fields, and so it was merely as an extension of this role that it also became the protector of cultivated fields outside of the forest. Naumann suggests that this connection is evident in the offering of cakes or other foods made of millet or fruit, which were traditionally cultivated in these mountain fields, to the *yama no kami/ta no kami*.

10. The *yama no kami* can either be male or female, and is sometimes represented as a couple (ŌTA 1998, 5, 11). In many regions it was also believed that the mountain deity was female, but extremely ugly. It was believed that she would become jealous and bad-tempered if anyone more beautiful than her entered the mountains. (Stormy weather was thought to be one manifestation of her bad temper.) For this reason, *matagi* hunters would carry with them such things as the (particularly grotesque) dried body of an *okoze* (stone fish) to keep her in good temper.

11. See, for example, ROCKWELL 1991; HALLOWELL 1926; PEYTON et al 1999, 188–89, as cited in KNIGHT 2003, 162.

12. The Suwa Taisha in Nagano is one of the oldest shrines in Japan, and is mentioned in the *Kojiki*. In ancient times the gods enshrined there were worshiped as hunting deities (and later, following the introduction of wet-rice agriculture, as farming deities) (KODANSHA 1993, 280). Probably because of this ancient connection with hunting deities, the Suwa faith

appears to have been “adopted” by hunters, and has provided them with spiritual solace because of its teaching that the spirits of animals were “freed” though their death to go to paradise (HAZUMI and YOSHII 1994, 29).

13. See for example, YAMAZAKI 1990, 15–16; CHIBA 1969, 366–71.

14. It should be noted that the association between bears and rebirth has been made in many cultures in the northern hemisphere since pre-historic times.

15. The idea that the crescent moon marking was regarded as sacred in many places appears to conflict with an entry in the 1712 encyclopedia *Wakansansai* that states that hunters actually aim for this (see note 7). This sort of contradiction is not surprising, and can be understood in the context that the author of the encyclopedia probably had no first-hand experience of hunting culture or the bear.

16. The connection between the bear and weather phenomena is also evident among other cultures. Many North American tribes identified the bear with thunder because they believed that bears emerged from their dens with the first thunder of spring. In some northern European languages, the god of thunder and the bear are synonymous (ROCKWELL 1991, 189).

17. In this area, the hunting of bears was prohibited by law until the Meiji Period (1868–1912). Even after the law was abolished at the beginning of the Meiji Period, the idea that the bear was sacred persisted, and when one hapless hunter became the first person in the district to kill a bear, he was faced with the vehement disapproval of his fellow-villagers, who took the bear carcass from him, wrecked his house, and banished him from the village. As an indication of how localized these beliefs could be, in the valley adjacent to the Kiso Mountains this prohibition did not exist (CHIBA 1969, 380).

18. In particular, there are curses associated with pregnant bears: in the Sobo-Katamuki Mountains in Kyūshū, there is a saying, “Kill a pregnant bear, cursed for seven generations,” or such variations in consequences as “your family will no longer prosper” or “the hunter will be cursed and soon die himself” (NISHINA 1978; cited in MIYAO 1989, 68).

19. This process of founding a temple on a mountain is termed *yama o hiraku*, literally to “open a mountain,” a process described as that of “releasing its latent holiness” (BLACKER 1975, 245).

20. Kōyasan 高野山, Hokidaisen 伯耆大山, Hikosa 彦山, and Nikkōsan 日光山 are examples of sacred mountains with such founding legends (FUKUE n.d.).

21. It is unclear when the Oyama Shrine was founded, but there is a mention of its establishment in *Manyōshū*, dated 701.

22. As is the case with many of these legends, there is some disagreement about such details as dates, however both sources cite the early 800s.

23. *Ema* literally means “horse picture” and refers to small wooden tablets on which people write their wishes at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. In the Muromachi (1333–1568) and Tokugawa Periods (1600–1868) the *ō-ema*, or large sized *ema*, developed as a professional art form.

24. The ancient Greeks and Romans also associated the bear with maternal devotion (SANDERS 1993, 152; SHEPARD and SANDERS 1985, 113), but this association can be traced back to much earlier times: small clay figurines of a mother and child, both “wearing bear masks” were made by the people of the Vinca culture around 5000 BCE (SHEPARD and SANDERS 1985, 112).

25. Miyazawa Kenji was a poet and author of children’s literature. He was born in Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture, where he lived most of his short life. He graduated from agricultural college with a degree in agronomy, and became a teacher in this field. He devoted much of his life to assisting poor farmers in Iwate to improve their farming, particularly through better soil management techniques. He was strongly influenced by Buddhism, and many of his

stories carry underlying ethical and ecological messages that demonstrate his acute interest in the relations of humans, both with each other and other forms of life.

26. The story is now considered a masterpiece of childrens' fiction in Japan. Muku Hatojū was a prolific writer of fiction for children. Many of his stories featured animals.

27. There are various theories as to the origin of the word *matagi*, including that it is derived from the Ainu term for those who hunt in the snow (romanized as *mataunba*) and that it is derived from the bark of the Japanese linden tree, which hunters used as clothing. Yanagita Kunio believed that it was derived from the name for the staff hunters used for walking (*matatsubo*) (see ŌTA 1998, 4–5 for details of these and other theories). *Matagi* are also known as *yamabito* or *yamadachi* in some areas.

28. See, for example MIYAO 1989, 66.

29. Taguchi's research in the development of hunting culture in Japan points to *matagi* villages and culture becoming established in the Tōhoku region from around the end of the sixteenth century (TAGUCHI 2000, 72). While hunting culture is likely to have persisted in many other upland regions of Japan, these hunting communities do not appear to have developed an organized body of folklore and literature as did the *matagi*, and therefore are more problematic for ethnologists to document.

30. A note about the use of tense in describing *matagi* culture is warranted here. Even today, there are places popularly known as “*matagi* communities” (*matagi shūraku* マタギ集落) throughout Tōhoku, concentrated around the major mountain ranges, such as Ani village in Akita and Oguni village in Yamagata, which undoubtedly have *matagi* heritage. However, the *matagi* label is often employed to make the village attractive as a tourist destination rather than being a true reflection of the way in which residents now live. Whereas the term *matagi* principally refers to the hunters, in fact *matagi* culture was not possible without the community, and as such it may be more useful to refer to “the *matagi* community,” of which not only the hunters themselves, but women, children, and elders were an integral part. While there are still individuals who identify themselves as *matagi*, there are no longer such “*matagi* communities” that rely on traditional hunting as a subsistence strategy. Therefore, while some elements of *matagi* culture persist today, the past tense will be used for consistency in this discussion.

31. Not only did *matagi* strictures stipulate that bears should only be hunted at a level required for subsistence, harvest rates were also limited by the weapons available to hunters: originally spears, rather than guns. While the use of guns by hunters is first recorded in Shinshū (Nagano) in 1573, it was not until the Edo Period (1603–1868) that guns became widely used by hunters (MURAKAMI 2004, 251). In 1895, the hunting law was introduced, which permitted anyone to hunt provided they did so according to the law. In the mid-Meiji Period, the single-shot Murata rifle became readily available in Japan, and increasingly bears were killed as agricultural and livestock pests or as a source of saleable goods such as gall bladder, meat and hides.

32. *Yamadachi* was the name used in some regions by *matagi*. This book was also known as *Yamadachi yurai-ki* 山立由来記 in some regions.

33. Some historians date this document to 1193, owing to its purported connection with the famous deer hunt at the foot of Mt Fuji by Minamoto Yoritomo, founder of the Kamakura Period shogunate, related in the *Tales of Soga*. However, there is no conclusive evidence supporting this dating of the document, and both the style of language and signature would appear to support it dating to the Muromachi Period. See TAKAHASHI 1994 for a comprehensive discussion of this issue.

34. Similar taboos were observed by traditional fishing communities and farming communities in Japan (see, for example, KALLAND and MOERAN 1990).

35. Ōtō poses the question as to why taboos, including substitute language, have survived in fishing communities but not to the same extent among farmers. He suggests that while

farming required communal cooperation for many tasks, it is becoming increasingly automated and based on the labor of individuals. However fishing remains a group activity where one person's actions have an immediate impact on others. This reasoning may be applied to *matagi* group hunting also.

36. In Japanese referred to variously as *kebokai*, *indō o watasu*, *indō*, or *mizubiki* (TŌNO SHIRITSU HAKUBUTSUKAN 1998, 13 and 39).

37. Again, these customs are found in other bear hunting societies. ROCKWELL (1991, 183) notes that in bear hunting cultures in both Eurasia and America, hunters directed prayers to a supernatural being that acted as the “keeper of the game.” Many of these groups appear to have believed that the bear's spirit went to its owner (or guardian) after being eaten and reported how it had been treated by the hunters. The supernatural being would either release more game or withhold it, depending on the animal's treatment. The aspect of atonement is also common to bear hunting peoples on both continents: in northeastern North America, for example, the hunter would tell the slain animal that he was sorry, and ask the animal not to be angry.

38. Many words in the Tōhoku dialect and place names in Tōhoku also appear to have Ainu origins. For example, “cow/cattle” in the Tōhoku dialect is *beko*, and *peko* in Ainu (KUJI 2002, 80–1).

39. See, for example, IKEYA 1997; ŌTA 1998, 4–5.

40. The term “Yamato” is here used to refer to the people associated with the Yamato state, which became established in the sixth century in what is now Nara Prefecture. This population is thought to have been comprised of later (Yayoi) immigrants from the continent, ethnically distinct from the Jōmon people whose ancestors migrated to Japan using land bridges before the end of the last glacial period.

41. It should be noted that, whereas human-bear conflict is a major issue in rural Japan today, this is only a relatively recent (post-war) phenomenon. Agricultural, horticultural, and forestry damage has become a serious problem in the last few decades largely as a result of the destruction of the bear's mountainous forest habitat, as outlined above.

42. See HORI 1966; NAUMANN 1963, for a discussion of these aspects.

43. See, for example, BEFU 2001.

44. See SCHNELL 2006 for an in-depth discussion of this aspect of social history.

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