

Noriko Tsunoda Reider, *Mountain Witches: Yamauba*

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The *yamauba/yamanba/yamamba* (mountain witch) is distinctive among Japan's pantheon of supernatural beings. Ubiquitously represented within a diversity of legends, folktales, noh plays, woodblock prints, narrative poems, films, and other cultural forms, she personifies an entire category of enigmatic personae. She can be an elderly woman, deity, ancestral spirit, *oni* (demon), *yōkai* (monster), and can even shift between those forms. She also embodies myriad apparent contradictions: the demonic and divine, malevolent and benevolent, fearsome and seductive, voracious and secretive, maternal

and murderous, female and male. Developed over many centuries, her collection of identities invites further study but also defies easy summation.

Noriko Tsunoda Reider's *Mountain Witches: Yamauba* embraces these contradictions. The book's six chapters adeptly catalog a far broader assemblage of historical and literary *yamauba* than one might imagine possible. Its first four chapters fashion a vast body of tales and legends into a rough taxonomy of *yamauba* personae. Japan's mountain witches are far older than we would imagine. Her archetypes are traceable to ancient goddesses described in Japan's earliest mythohistories and for centuries were connected to mysteries concealed within the country's mountainous landscapes. Her associations with demons and monsters evolved alongside the changing (declining) position of women in medieval Japanese society. *Shugenja* (mountain ascetics) tended to demonize and subjugate solitary women living in the highlands, casting them as temptresses and sources of societal disharmony. Other forms of systemic misogyny affirmed the dualistic natures of real and imagined mountain-dwelling women, upholding the cultural vilification of those individuals. Consequently, Reider maintains, such women "found their emotional outlet in ghostly, monstrous figures" (5). The *yamauba* as a literary identity crystallized in the Muromachi period (1336–1573) through transitional texts like the *noh* play *Kurozuka*. It was at this moment that "the good and evil aspects of an *oni*, an *oni*-like creature, and a goddess merged to create a *yamauba*" (162).

The book's final two chapters shift from literary characters to living individuals. Chapter 5 discusses how nonconforming women variously afflicted by old age, abandonment, dementia, or eating disorders were subjected to societal scorn as living embodiments of legendary *yamauba*. Chapter 6 focuses on contemporary iterations of *yamauba*. It opens with a discussion of the teenage denizens of Shibuya called *yamanba gyaru* (*yamamba* girls), the character Yubaba in Hayao Miyazaki's film *Spirited Away* (2001), and the *yamauba* character in a 1995 episode of the manga *Hyakkiyakkō shō*. Analysis here draws only weak connections to traditions covered in the preceding chapters. Indeed, Reider concedes that Yubaba and the fashion-obsessed *yamanba gyaru* are only "yamanbaesque" (146) and not true inheritors of their pre-Meiji forebears. They nonetheless testify to the *yamauba*'s malleability and continuing cultural allure.

Mountain Witches is arranged both chronologically and thematically, a structure that enables Reider to recast the ancient *yamauba* as a thriving, cosmopolitan icon. This organization also enables her to complicate the genealogy by blending analysis of premodern, modern, and even foreign *yamauba* variants. The tangle of threads becomes impossibly frayed in the modern period, when pop culture, media, and international influences dissolve any semblance of thematic or aesthetic continuity. *Yamauba* characters created by Ōba Minako (1930–2007), for example, were influenced by fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm and the Finnish author Zacharias Topelius, and those in Kurosawa Akira's film *Throne of Blood* (1957) were based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Connections become more abstruse with discussion of the teenage *yamanba gyaru*. Clearly, modern iterations of *yamauba* can no longer be considered neither indigenous historical tropes nor strictly "Japanese."

Whereas much of the book's textual analysis is wonderfully rich, it is not always contextualized historically or theoretically. Citations from Japanese and English secondary sources are often deployed uncritically. A narrative may, for instance, incorporate interpretations from eighteenth-century nativist Motoori Norinaga, early twentieth-century folklorist Yanagita Kunio, and sundry contemporary authors without

historicizing those respective voices. At other times, the process of assembling those puzzle pieces can feel disjointed. Admittedly, the task at hand—teasing a comprehensive narrative from a bewildering collage of sources and scholarly commentary—is daunting, but the author’s efforts to honor its complexity sometimes feel scattered. Composed of several originally independent studies, the monograph occasionally suffers from redundancies and awkward transitions. Pages 15 and 54, for example, repeat a quotation from religious scholar Hori Ichirō.

Sometimes the book’s coverage of provocative historical issues also leaves the reader wanting more. Its discussion of how “gender transcendent” *yamauba* defied societal gender constructs, for example, is compelling in its own right, but surely it could add more about these defiant personae as countercultural figures and their broader impacts on systemic patriarchy. Reider’s important characterization of *yamauba* as “two sides of the same coin” (34) also invites further commentary. One can surely extend the *yamauba*’s fascinating ability to embody and thereby reconcile opposing qualities to many other aspects of Japanese thought and aesthetics. A monograph cannot (and should not try to) do everything, and one may applaud the author for resisting the temptation to digress from her topic. Nonetheless, I could not help feeling the book would be more impactful if it connected these aspects of the *yamauba* to historical or cultural points of broader interest.

There is no denying, however, that *Mountain Witches* successfully offers a uniquely comprehensive genealogy of the *yamauba* as a cultural icon. Specialists and non-specialists alike will appreciate how it demonstrates the longevity and multiplicity of *yamauba* as a living tradition that continues to resonate with contemporary Japanese life.

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