



Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message

Comparing Japanese *Kyara* with their Anthropomorphic Forebears

This article compares contemporary Japanese entities known as *kyara* (“characters”) with historical anthropomorphized imagery considered to be spiritual or religious. *Yuru kyara* (“loose” or “wobbly” characters) are a subcategory of *kyara* that represent places, events, or commodities, and occupy a relatively marginalized position within the larger body of *kyara* material culture. They are ubiquitous in contemporary Japan, and are sometimes enacted by humans in costume, as shown in a case study of a public event analyzed within. They are closely tied to localities and may be compared to historical deities and demons, situated as they are within the context of popular representations of the numinous created to inspire belief and spur action. However, the imperatives communicated by *yuru kyara* are not typically religious per se, but civic and commercial. Religious charms and souvenirs also increasingly incorporate the *kyara* aesthetic.

KEYWORDS: Japan—characters—cuteness—marketing—religion

THIS article explores possible connections between cute anthropomorphized cartoon characters (*kyara*) of domestic Japanese origin and use, and a long-standing tradition of anthropomorphized objects and animals used in spiritual or religious contexts. It broadly examines what similarities and discontinuities may be observed in comparing contemporary and historical anthropomorphized characters, their narratives, and their uses. This approach is not entirely original: the character Ultraman, for example, has elsewhere been likened to a Shinto savior of humanity (GILL 1998, 38). While scholarly descriptions of religious practice in this article may be categorized as Shinto or Buddhist, I am mainly concerned with what Reader and Tanabe have referred to as the “common religion” of Japan, embracing “the customs, beliefs and practices that are broadly accepted within a culture—including the scriptural influences and liturgical traditions, as well as the artistic and iconographic ones, that have shaped these customs, beliefs and practices” (READER and TANABE 1998, 29).

Kyara provide entertainment for contemporary Japanese, and in return, their consumers pay a sort of homage through their attention and consumption. *Yuru kyara* (“loose” or “wobbly” characters) are of particular interest because of their emergence from and involvement in specific localities, in contrast to the more globalized *manga* and *anime* characters.¹ I analyze the interactional properties of *kyara* in a case study of a live event in which a local *kyara* performance is enacted by humans in costume and consumed by shoppers at a mall. These modern representatives of local goods, places, and events are embodied in local events by participants wearing *kigurumi* (cartoon-character costumes).

DEFINING *KYARA*

The category *kyara* is ambiguous in everyday use and may potentially range from the nameless zoomorphic creatures that are used in posters that prescribe good manners (MILLER 2010), to Hello Kitty (Sanrio Corporation’s iconic decorative cat character), the characters of *manga* and *anime*, and even humans who serve in representative roles known as *imēji kyara* (“image characters”). For example, Tsuyoshi Kusanagi of the singing group SMAP appeared in television commercials dressed in workman’s overalls and a hard hat and rode in a “cherry

picker” lift advertising the 2011 shift to digital television and concomitant need for antennas. The *kyara* that I focus on this article are nonhumans whose primary identity is not dependent on appearance in *manga* or *anime*. Rather, they represent specific entities, companies, social groups, localities, and products—for example, the *chidejika* (“digital TV deer”) who accompanied and eventually replaced Kusanagi as the representative mascot in the shift to digital TV. These characters occupy a space in the world of celebrity, have personalities, names, and often stories associated with them; they are typically viewed as representatives of specific social and cultural messages. Though they may have animal features, they are anthropomorphic, and are portrayed or enacted as social agents within specific contexts to endorse actions related to capitalism, local identity, and civil society, as per the example of the shift to digital TV. *Kyara* are *animated* as in they embody “qualities perceived as human—life, power, agency, will, personality, and so on” (SILVIO 2010, 427).

Kyara occupy a prominent position in the Japanese aesthetic called *kawaii*, or “cute.” In KINSELLA’s analysis of *kawaii* style (1995), the taste for cuteness in writing style and other behaviors originating in 1970s youth culture was co-opted by commercial interests. Consumer goods companies such as Sanrio began to decorate notebooks and diaries, creating *fanshi guzzu* (“fancy goods”) with Hello Kitty and her ilk.² They now appear on a countless variety of goods including *omamori* (amulets) from shrines and secular versions of these, such as the dangling charms that decorate cell phones and school bags (see FIGURE 1). From their earliest formulation, *kyara* were typically rounded, neotenous, and childlike, “non-sexual, mute, insecure, helpless or bewildered” (KINSELLA 1995, 226). *Kyara* are not only differentiated by their drawn features but are usually attributed with brief narratives—origin myths, in most cases—that cement their identity and often explain the logic behind their naming and other features. Though not all are neotenous, or even cute, many *kyara* exploit the original semantics of *kawaii* which joins “cuteness” with the notion expressed in the adjective *kawaiisō* (“pitiable”).

KONDO (2006) states that commercially successful characters are also attributed with healing (*iyashi*) as well as enjoyable (*tanoshimeru*) effects (KONDO 2006, 6).³ Aihara Hiroyuki of the Bandai Character Research Laboratory provides data supporting this claim. His 2004 survey of 210 Japanese asking about the psychological benefits of being with character figures or goods placed “Peace of mind: Being together with characters relaxes the spirit and can effect healing” first in a list of eight attributes, followed by: protection; escape from reality; regression; self realization; hope for transformation; health and activity; and mood changing (AIHARA 2007, 27–28, 39–41).⁴ *Kyara* have been mobilized for these reported effects in the wake of the earthquake and concomitant disasters of 11 March 2011. A project called Teotsunago Daisakusen (“Project Holding Hands”) has provided images of domestic and imported licensed characters holding hands for free download (see FIGURE 2) “hoping to deliver smiles to everyone in Japan, from small children to all the adults fighting for survival in and also out of the disaster area.”⁵



FIGURE 1. Hello Kitty *omamori*, lower right, from Ōtsuka Hachiman Shrine, Miyazaki, Kyushu Prefecture. Image courtesy of Hachiman Shrine.



FIGURE 2. Teetsunago Daisakusen (“Project Holding Hands”). Image courtesy of Teetsunago Daisakusen.

Yuru kyara are symbols intended to invoke interest in, or desire for, an associated entity, location, or event. *Yuru kyara* are *yurui* (“loose,” “wobbly,” or “slack”) in comparison to more polished and better-known characters such as Hello Kitty. They were named by the illustrator and popular culture critic Miura Jun (MIURA 2009c, 1). He defines them as:

Characters designed for PR of local governing bodies, events, and local goods, especially when in *kigurumi* form. They have the Japanese trait of *fanshi* and at first glance one can understand the strong message they communicate about a local speciality or characteristic. There are also characters that need explanation for one to know what on earth they are. While bearing originality, when they are made into *kigurumi* they often have a sense of instability that makes them all the more lovable, and one’s heart feels healed [*iyasarete*] just by looking at them.

(MIURA 2004, 2–3; my translation)

Indeed, the design of local characters ranges from easy-to-understand motifs to hybrid and bizarre creations. Miura humorously reports feeling dumbfounded and frozen in his tracks upon his first sighting of the Hiroshima culture festival character called Bunkakkī, a combination of an oyster, a maple leaf, and the *hiragana* phonetic character for *hi* (MIURA 2009a, 160–61)—Bunkakkī has a body shaped like an oyster (*kaki*) and a maple leaf on its head.

Though many *kyara* are unique creations, this genre also borrows on historical anthropomorphic imagery such as the *kappa* (a legendary water imp), a former bogeyman who now appears in cuter versions. The *unagappa* city mascot of Tajimi City (in Gifu Prefecture, central Japan) is based on a local, legendary *kappa* who once controlled the rainfall. Its new incarnation does *zazen* meditation, is fond of classical music, and even appears in smartphone games available for download.⁶ Cute *kappa* along with *tanuki* (an Asian badger associated with trickster tales) imagery has also been used in recent advertising for DC credit cards (FOSTER 2009, 207). Foster describes this process of transformation of such *yōkai* (supernatural creatures) from scary creatures to cute *manga*-like icons as one of folklorism (FOSTER 1998). REIDER 2003 and FOSTER 2009 also credit modernity, industrialization, and commercialization as factors behind the defanging of *oni* (demons) and *yōkai* respectively. The current spread of *kyara* represents the trend of cuteness in Japanese popular culture and incorporates creatures such as these, while many new creatures, identities, and narratives are also created.

The following sections introduce the historical forebears of contemporary *kyara* imagery along with the narratives that may be associated with these early anthropomorphic creations. The long-running children’s *kyara*-based moral narrative cartoon *Anpanman* (“Bean-Jam Bread Man”) is then discussed, for its plethora of anthropomorphized characters may have played a role in inspiring the current boom.

NATURE, RELIGION, AND RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

Historians of Japanese religion have argued that play and entertainment are inherent aspects of Japanese religious practice. For instance, Kaminishi describes the use of *etoki* picture scrolls and their elucidation in the popularization of Buddhist narratives, drawing parallels between their entertaining aspects and those of *manga* (KAMINISHI 2006). Print media and performances in which *kyara* are enacted by people in full-body costumes provide playful means for purveying hortative messages by their sponsors (as in the shopping mall case study discussed later). These performances resemble the welcoming ceremonies Horton describes—that is, a genre of religious performance held in honor of bodhisattvas in which humans don costumes and enact a celebratory procession for spectators (HORTON 2007). Hur states that the association of prayer with play is “deeply rooted in Japanese notions of *asobi* [play], which has a distinctly religious undertone” (HUR 2000, 82–83). Furthermore, Plutchow describes the ritual singing and dancing performed at *matsuri* (festivals) as *kami asobi* (deity placation through entertainment), a legend-driven reestablishment of order via the human performance of artistic behaviors taught by gods (PLUTCHOW 1996, 48). The sun goddess Amaterasu was, after all, coaxed from her cave by dancing and laughter, as noted in the *Kojiki*, a compilation of legends.

These historical connections between play, entertainment, and worship provide a basis for us to understand why *kyara omamori* are sometimes sold at shrines and temples, and why these goods are also referred to as *omamori* (literally, “protector”) when they are sold in shops. Such obvious recruitment of characters into the category of religious imagery makes them liable to fulfil additional functions for their consumers. Morgan claims that “for those who use and cherish them,” religious and other power-based images, as well as visual practice, can provide the following functions: “Order space and time, imagine community, communicate with the divine or transcendent, embody forms of communication with the divine, collaborate with other forms of representation, influence thought and behavior by persuasion or magic, displace rival images and ideologies” (MORGAN 2005, 55). These functions may be attributed by users, but are potentially inherent within *kyara* as well, in that they embody cultural ideals about humans and nature that are themselves religious.

The logic some Japanese use to connect the visual representation of characters in contemporary Japanese popular culture and earlier examples of animism and anthropomorphism is the attitude that nature is potentially sentient and even numinous. It is neither controversial or even unusual to personify natural phenomena, either in discourse structure or image (HIRAGA 1999). Historical depictions of anthropomorphized creatures and contemporary *kyara*—both based on animal forms—invoke cultural ideals about nature. This “love of nature” sentiment is an enduring one which seeks to make cultural ideals seem like natural outcomes (OCCHI 2009). Yet this is paired with a fear of earthquakes and other dangerous phenomena. Certain natural phenomena have also been deliberately used as aesthetic representations for humans and social relations at least since the intro-

duction of Chinese poetry, Buddhism, and the writing system (ca. seventh century) and up to the present (EISENSTADT 1997; KALLAND 1997; LAMARRE 2000; THOMAS 2001).

Kalland argues that Japanese religion is characterized by a belief system in which all things potentially have a soul, even human-made objects (KALLAND 1997, 246–47). Evidence for this cultural logic emerges in art depicting the putative predecessors of *kyara* (anthropomorphized frogs, kitchen tools, and so on) shown in early scrolls. Buddhist practice also includes attention paid to ancestors or notable personages in two-dimensional representation (for example, mandala) or three-dimensional representation as statues and even humans dressed in the guise of statues (HORTON 2007). Shinto *kami* (god/s) are described on the webpage for the head association of Shinto, Jinja Honcho:

In order to comprehend the concept of *kami*, it is important to erase the pre-conception caused by the word “god,” an English translation that is often used for the word *kami*. In Shinto, there is no faith in the concept of an absolute god who is the creator of both human beings and nature.

The ancient Japanese never divided spiritual and material existence, but considered that both were inseparable, seeing everything in a spiritual sense. In other words, they did not draw a border between a certain object and the work of that object. According to Shinto cosmology, the world is created with the appearance of a single *kami* who represents the universe, next to appear are the *kami* of birth and growth. From heaven, a male *kami* and a female *kami* appear who give birth to various deities, the land of Japan and her nature as well as her people. The Shinto faith begins with a belief in this mythology. Therefore, Shinto does not recognize the difference or discontinuation between *kami*, nature, or human beings.⁷

The Japanese version of this page is clearly written for people with a different cultural context for understanding Shinto.⁸ However, what may potentially be deified is described much more concretely, including: gods of the ocean; mountains; wind and other natural things and phenomena; food; clothing; shelter; production; land development; illustrious people at the local or national level; protective ancestral spirits; and other such things as described by the phrase “eight million gods,” and so on, as mentioned in chronicles of legends such as the *Kojiki* and *Nihon shoki*, which were compiled in the Nara era (710–794).

READER (1998) provides a valuable summary of how *kami* manifest, with particular reference to deification of the scholar-turned-god Sugawara Michizane:

What the general notion of *kami* demonstrates is a highly pluralistic- and animistic-world view, in which the phenomenal world is seen as permeated by and given life by a spiritual world, in which various manifestations of life forces (*kami*) are present.... Indeed, Shinto’s world view suggests that humans who contribute to the enrichment of life may become *kami*, as was the case with Michizane, or with clan founders or ancestors who became *ujigami*, and thereby continue to assist in the life of this world. Moreover, in this human-*kami* relationship, it is

humans who play the crucial role of recognizing the presence of the *kami* in a natural feature, or as a result of some event or manifestation. It is also human beings who are operative in transforming spirits into *kami* through the process of recognition, veneration and enshrinement, as was seen by the transformation of the angry spirit of Michizane into Tenjin. (READER 1998, 46)

This suggests that deification is subject to human interpretation and that diverse entities can be deified. The historical figure Sugawara Michizane had gone through various categorizations before deification—he had been exiled (thus becoming a sort of *oni*, or demon), was characterized postmortem as an *onryō* (vengeful ghost), and later made a *tenjin* (god), his current status.⁹ These details, like those ascribed to *kyara*, make for a memorable narrative. They may also serve to generalize the assertion Foster has made regarding *yōkai* (goblins) that “these creatures survive in the cultural imagination because of their very ability to pivot easily between the credible and the incredible” (FOSTER 2009, 13).

Though this analysis is chiefly concerned with the comparison of two- and three-dimensional representations of anthropomorphic numinous (and in some cases deified) beings, it is worth considering the issue of religious belief versus practice. Based on questionnaire data, Ishii concluded that Japanese are not on the whole involved in religion to the extent their forebears were, either in strength of belief or frequency of practice. He cites a 1998 *Yomiuri Shimbun* poll reporting that Japanese people do not find Shinto or Buddhism particularly mysterious or frightening (ISHII 2000, 410–11). Many people go to temples and shrines at New Year and other times to pray, buy amulets, and read fortunes despite a lack of any professed belief in the numinous existence of shrine gods/buddhas, or faith in the religious or spiritual philosophy behind their practices. Other survey research indicates that while college students’ interest in organized religion has decreased, interest and involvement in religious folk customs is on the rise (INOUE 2004, 99). This finding echoes Reader’s observation that contemporary pilgrimages are described in the media not so much as religious excursions but as cultural and traditional ones (READER 2007). Concomitant with these changes is a recent phenomenon known as “*anime* pilgrimage” in which fans of *anime* travel to the locations where the stories take place (OKAMOTO 2009). These findings indicate that while overt motivations for pilgrimage may have changed, the practice is maintained.

There is also evidence indicating the contemporary merging of entertainment and religious imagery itself. Popular Japanese culture includes descriptions of religious pilgrimages and viewing of Buddhist statues in playfully entertaining terms, for instance in the writings of ITŌ and MIURA (1993) and HANA (2006), who discuss the attributes of statues in terms applicable to living humans, calling them sexy or comparing them to celebrities and rock stars. Miura has even described his early attraction to Buddha statues as a sort of conversion from a prior interest in monster figurines (MIURA 2011). The recent emergence of Buddhist-themed *kyara omamori* and an illustrated book of “Buddhirs” (*butsuzō kyara*—Buddhist statue characters), contains similarly entertaining descriptions of their various powers

and personality traits (MINEMURA and IZUTSU 2008). This recent move towards depicting bodhisattvas within the *kyara* aesthetic suggests that the contemporary, playful attitude towards religion has a broader realm of popular acceptability beyond the humorous writings of a few famous Japanese.¹⁰

EARLY ANTHROPOMORPHIZATION:

THE *CHŌJŪJINBUTSU GIGA* AND *TSUKUMOGAMI EMAKI*

Historical examples of religious imagery contain examples of playfulness. An early example of anthropomorphized representation is a nine-hundred-year-old scroll, the *Chōjūjinbutsu giga* (Caricature of animal-human characters). Beginning with the depiction of a sumo match, the first of its four parts consists of a series of scenes of animals including frogs, rabbits, and monkeys engaged in human activities (for example, dancing, swimming, running, shooting bows and arrows). In several scenes they wear clothing and perform Buddhist ceremonies, and even a funeral is depicted at the end of the scroll. In an altar scene the object of worship is a frog. Though they may have had a limited audience at the time of creation, these anthropomorphized creatures are currently part of the wider mediascape of contemporary Japan.

Another genre of anthropomorphized beings appearing in a Shingon Buddhist context was the *Tsukumogami emaki*.¹¹ These depictions of animals and everyday objects were drawn with human-like features and, it is said, used as bogeymen when depicted in the *Hyakki yagyō emaki*, (“picture scrolls of pandemonium”; literally, “a hundred night demons” parade; FOSTER 2009). The animals are the *kitsune* (fox) and *tanuki*, depicted in their folkloric trickster roles.¹² The other members of the parade are a variety of demonic creatures and animated household objects known as *tsukumogami* (“ninety-nine Gods”) who appear in non-parade mode in related scrolls as well. They are old, and having been discarded during preparatory cleaning for the New Year, seek revenge against their former owners. Lillehoj observes the humor found in these as well as in contemporaneous Chinese demon scrolls, but notes that the latter did not include depictions of “transfigured objects” (LILLEHOJ 1995, 21).¹³

In their comically fearsome parade the *tsukumogami* were used as bogeymen to keep people indoors on certain nights. A scroll belonging to Shinkyūan in Kyoto and dating to the Muromachi period (sixteenth century) shows *tsukumogami* conducting a *haikai* (poem contest) in a section of the scroll. At its end, the rising sun bathes the canvas not in light but in darkness—pointing to the uncanny nature of these creatures who flee the sun (HATA 2008). The *Tsukumogami emaki* kept at Sūfukuji in Gifu City, central Japan, as well as scrolls in the National Diet Library and the Tokyo National Museum, contain a narrative of the creatures’ origin, malicious acts (notably, killing and eating humans), and eventual enlightenment (LILLEHOJ 1995; REIDER 2009).

Tsukumogami are anthropomorphized objects acting against the humans who created them; though deviant and liminal in status, their stories exhibit links to vari-

ous belief traditions. Their origin myth, referred to in a text called *In'yō zakkī*, suggests that potential sentience resides in old objects who became *tsukumogami* as possibly having Taoist origins (LILLEHOJ 1995, 24; REIDER 2009, 2). This, as well as the creatures' appetite for human flesh, creates a possible description of *tsukumogami* as *oni* (KOMATSU 1999; REIDER 2007). In the narratives, they give up their evil habits and embrace Shingon Buddhism, thus endorsing it to the reader (REIDER 2009, 18). *Tsukumogami* are also typically categorized as *yōkai* and also as *kami* of an evil sort who can be appeased by worship (KOMATSU 1999, 2); hence their name.

The word *tsukumogami* itself includes *kami* in a complicated word play. Read phonetically, it could also mean “ninety-nine hairs,” indicating great age (often translated as meaning “an old woman’s long white hair,” and through metonymy, referring to the woman herself). This ruse plays on the single-stroke difference between “white” 白 and “one hundred” 百, and the homonymy of *tsukumo*, which can refer to the number “ninety-nine” or to a kind of water grass said to resemble hair. The link between old age and animated objects is reiterated here, and these kinds of language tricks echo the shapeshifting nature of these animated objects (FOSTER 2009). This trait also reflects the medieval phenomenon Grapard calls “linguistic cubism,” through which the belief of magical properties inherent to the Japanese language (*kotodama*) was exploited through puns that interweave Shinto and Buddhist deities into a single narrative (GRAPARD 1987, 219).

The *tsukumogami* contain an injunction against the thoughtless disposal of unwanted household objects lest they wreak revenge against their former owners. These entertaining images and their narratives apparently enjoyed a long span of popularity. One of the best-known records of these creatures and their associated legends was created in the Edo period by Toriyama Sekien, at a time when Japan was reviving Confucianism and other aspects of its historic culture (FOSTER 2009). He and other early folklorists categorized *yōkai* in a variety of encyclopedias that functioned as an archive during Meiji efforts to orient the populace away from mysterious legends and towards scientific progress, leaving *yōkai* “cast off along the evolutionary path” (FOSTER 2009, 158).

Though *tsukumogami*, and *yōkai* generally have been defanged and relegated to the realm of *kyara*-style decorations, there are still some traces of the concern for old tools and other possessions in contemporary Japan. A clearly religious example is the ritual of *kuyō* (mortuary rites) held for animals and various objects, including those performed for needles (KRETSCHMER 2000). However, popular culture yields further evidence beyond these formal rituals for consideration of the objects and materials used on a daily basis, and thus of their disposal. A 2007 *Nikkei Woman* magazine article expounding the contemporary discourse on the art of living a simple life through reducing one’s possessions (*danshari*) instructs the reader, “even if it’s not used up, even if it’s not worn out, [saying] ‘I don’t use it’ is a sign to throw it away. Let us, filled with the feeling of thankfulness, bravely part with these things” (MITANI 2007, 23; author’s translation).

The text suggests “the feeling of saying ‘*arigatō*’” (MITANI 2007, 23) falls just short of a spoken ritual of thanks. It employs the adverbial form of *isagiyoī*, “unde-

filed, pure, clean, righteous, gallant,” implying that thanking the unneeded objects purifies the action of *tebanasu* (“let go, part with, send away”). The advice goes on to recommend that if the owner should take the trouble to find out where such items may be sold to a recycle shop or at a flea market, it will be easier to decide to get rid of things and thus “return them to society” (*shakai ni kangen*). Nowadays, however, the society to which these items are returned is not subject to rampages of angry and dangerous anthropomorphized objects, but swarms of cute, happy ones encouraging further consumption.

PROLIFERATIVE ANTHROMORPHISM

The roots of this current boom in *kyara* can in part be attributed to *Anpanman*, a children’s story that considerably expanded the number of *kyara* and thus their recognition in Japanese popular culture. Available in printed form since 1972, as an animated television cartoon since 1988, and since 1993 on film, *Anpanman* has evolved from a printed *manga* to a televised *anime* and several movies. The simple narrative revolves around the hero, his creators (and constant recreators) Jamu Oji-san (“Uncle Jam”) and Batako-san (“Butter Girl”), a handful of “breadly” sidekicks, and his enemy Baikin Man (“Bacteria Man”). New *kyara* appear in nearly every episode and are typically anthropomorphized objects named after themselves, such as Ringo-chan (“Apple Girl”). Its sharply demarcated fan base is comprised of preschoolers and their parents; survey data indicates that older children reject it as they leave kindergarten.¹⁴

Anpanman is a cultural institution; its creator Takashi Yanase was officially listed in the *Guinness Book of World Records* in 2009 for the most characters in a single animation series, 1,768 having appeared on TV and in movies from 3 October 1988 to 27 March 2009.¹⁵ I have yet to meet a Japanese who does not know this show, its recurrent narrative, and its main characters.¹⁶

As Japanese children are socialized into this entertaining aesthetic, many find that shifting loyalties from *Anpanman* to *Pokemon* (“Pocket monsters”) is easy.¹⁷ Innumerable characters surround the child as she grows up, often as small, stuffed toy mascots that dangle from a school bag or cell phone as an *omamori*. Advertisers employ famous *kyara* as corporate representatives, or invent their own. Grown-ups continue to surround themselves with decorated *kyara guzzu* (“character goods”) ranging from office and kitchen supplies to postage stamps, as well as the stuffed toy replicas. The creation by *otaku* (“geek”) fans of cute, female anthropomorphized characters to symbolize physical and nonphysical entities as part of so-called *moe* (“budding, or burning”) subculture is rampant (KAWAGUCHI 2007).¹⁸ For instance, an almanac of Japanese history by the Japanese History Aficionado’s Club that spans the second-century Yamataikoku¹⁹ to the Russo-Japanese war (1904) introduces time periods and notable events, with each topic represented by its own *moe*-style anthropomorphized character (NIHONSHI AIKŌ KURABU 2009). At this point *kyara* are ubiquitous in popular visual culture, common in advertis-

ing, and for the past fifteen years have made gradual inroads into the aesthetics of food arrangement, including *obentō* (lunchboxes) (OCCHI 2010a).

ROLES OF *KYARA* IN MODERN SOCIETY

Japanese *kyara* used in marketing have an aesthetic often considered childlike; they are usually designed with neotenus features, as Kinsella noted long before. As Aihara's extensive survey of *kyara* consumption and related behavior shows, consumers report turning to *kyara* for psychological reasons, particularly stress relief, even treating them as interlocutors (AIHARA 2007). This potential was (as mentioned earlier) exploited by the Teotsunago Daisakusen project which emerged after the 2011 Tohoku disasters. Concomitantly, advertisers exploit this aesthetic in creating pleasant associations with products. The process of associating *kyara* with commercial entities illustrates what Manning discusses whereby consumers may anthropomorphize brands (MANNING 2010, 36). Localities that are marketed as brands are further personified by *yuru kyara*, whose traits echo the features of the place they represent.

The naming of *kyara* follow similar punning games to those found in the word *tsukumogami* in that names are often formed by taking part of the name of the things they represent. The name for the "digital TV deer" (*chidejika*; "deer" is normally read as *shika*, but changes to *jika* when combined with *chide*) refers to the change (*ka*) from analog to digital TV. The deer's antlers resemble and represent the new antennas necessary for TV reception, thus emphasizing the change.²⁰

Considering *kyara* as social beings of a sort who replace human celebrities in endorsements (for example, *chidejika* above), *yuru kyara* are often invented by amateur artists. This adds to their "wobbliness" and indeed, they often struggle in the marketplace for recognition and legitimation. Thus a strong narrative is crucial for their success. Amateur creation of *yuru kyara* is often accomplished through public design and naming contests. The success of this move to involve consumers in creating *kyara* whose messages are eventually targeted back at them reverberates with Jhally's contention that advertising works by successfully rechanneling preexisting symbolic practices and cultural references already prevalent in the audience's social life (JHALLY 2002, 329).

To give an example, the wide, rounded shape and short legs of Bunkakkī renders its movement as a *kigurumi* wobbly and difficult. Miura has exploited these *yurui* charms and other clumsy *yuru kyara* costumers in televised competitions he titled "All Japan *Yuruchara* Grand Prix" (MIURA 2009b). In these comic battles, *kigurumi* compete in various activities including sumo and footraces in which a wind machine just past the finish line threatens the competitors' progress. His competitions provide a spectacle of nationwide competition between local *yuru kyara*, and there are also occasional events in which *yuru kyara* of a locality parade in broad daylight. These events afford the opportunity to witness spontaneous human-character interaction in a public, performative space.²¹



FIGURE 3. A *yuru kyara parédo* poster. The parade was held on 11 October 2010, at the Aeon Mall, Miyazaki. Image courtesy of the GooNeeds Corporation.

CASE STUDY: THE “WOBBLY CHARACTER” PARADE

On Monday 11 October 2010 Japan celebrated the yearly national holiday *Taiiku no hi* (Sports Day), marked by school sports events held nationwide. Sports Day in Japan is not usually associated with playing indoors with toys. But on that day from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. in the AEON mall in northern Miyazaki city, Miyazaki Prefecture, Kyushu, a *yuru kyara parēdo* (“wobbly character parade”) was also held. This yearly event takes place at the open areas at both ends of the first floor of the mall and in a public hall on the second floor to introduce and celebrate several local *yuru kyara*. Some of the local Miyazaki *kyara* are named in honor of Miyazaki: Misshi-chan, (-*chan* is a diminutive naming suffix), Zakki, Miya, and Sakira. Misshi-chan’s naming also plays on three words that contain *shi* し: *shizen* しぜん (nature), *shinwa* しんわ (mythology), and *shoku* しょく (food)—all things for which Miyazaki is renowned. By reading *mi* as “the number three,” the name Misshi-chan can therefore be taken as “Three-[things that begin with] *shi*” as well as a reference to the place name itself. Naming conventions for *kyara* often include parts of the thing named (as “Misshi,” “Zakki,” “Miya,” and “Sakira” are similar to “Miyazaki”). Many *kyara* names resemble Japanese onomatopoeia, a word class associated with ideas of naturalness, essentialism, and untranslatability (OCCHI 1999).

All but one of the *kyara* were present in *kigurumi* mode; that is, they were represented by humans wearing large, prefabricated costumes that obscured the wearer’s natural shape and identity in favor of the representation of the *kyara*—for example, a dinosaur with a green pepper for a head. Several of the costumes impeded the wearers’ vision and movement, making them all the more *yurui* (both literally and according to Miura’s aesthetic) and perhaps even more loveable for some. The exception was a character known as Sanshoku Kamen (tricolor mask), a person who simply wears a stretchy pro-wrestler-style head mask with a sign resembling a bus stop on his forehead and is otherwise dressed like a bus driver. Not surprisingly, babies found him frightening, and like the sweaty bodhisattva actors Horton has described, who removed their masks and lost the audience’s attention at a temple event, his ability to command attention was poor compared to the characters in full-body costumes (HORTON 2007, 57). However, his costume allowed him to converse with spectators, unlike the other *kyara* who did not speak.

This event is essentially performative in that it provides a “purposeful enactment or display behavior carried out in front of an audience” (BEEMAN 2010, 119). It exemplifies Beeman’s criteria for performativity through its aim of changing the audience’s cognitive state ideally via attainment of flow experience and a sense of *communitas* with the audience produced by a series of displayed and received emotional states. According to Beeman, these states are invoked by affective communication initiated by the performers that engage spectators—something as simple as greetings will suffice (BEEMAN 2010, 132). In fact, the performativity allowed by the restrictive *kyara* costumes is limited to greetings: waving of hands

where possible, jiggling from side to side, and nodding. Announcers and other attendants to the *kyara* set and maintain the frame of interaction by verbally cueing the audience to clap, answer questions, and perform other simple tasks.

All the staging areas were watched keenly by small children with their parents or grandparents, though spectators of all ages were present. The twenty-one characters were separated into three teams: Ganbarō Miyazaki Chīmu (“Hang in there Miyazaki Team”), Kankō Miyazaki Chīmu (“Miyazaki Tourism Team”), and Miyazaki Genki: Umai Mon Chīmu (“Delicious Food and Healthy Spirits Team”), each of which performed in rotation at the three performance spaces. Their individual names, sponsorships, and other attributes are introduced in TABLES 1, 2, and 3 respectively.

The first floor stage areas had a space for spectators and a stage for performers. One of the two areas had rows of chairs and an actual raised stage; the other had a roped-off space with a backdrop suspended from one side of the escalator. The *kyara* were introduced, after which their attributes were repeated by the children to the announcers via a series of quiz shows complete with sound effects similar to those used in television. Small gifts were provided to those who knew the correct information. Through this practice, the children were acquainted with the characters and their respective sponsors, and this knowledge was then reinforced. The children were very enthusiastic, dancing, hugging, and petting the characters as the announcers guided the activities.

The second floor hall contained a large backdrop where pictures with characters were being taken. I entered the room at about the same time as Misshi-chan, the Miyazaki Tourism Promotion *kyara*, and Mīya, one of the two “meat fairies” representing the prefectural consumer’s association.²² The two girlish characters took their positions against the backdrop, waving to and beckoning children who joined them while their families took photos. The *kyara* were in constant motion: kneeling with the smaller children, leaning in towards the bigger children and making the “peace” sign Japanese often do for photos, and nodding and tipping their large heads. Tables with backdrops along the sides of the room were assigned to represent each character and its sponsor. In the center of the room more tables with chairs were provided, along with blank coloring pages of *kyara* and colored pencils so that children could enjoy quiet play while focusing on the event’s star players. In this playful atmosphere, attendants at these tables distributed flyers and other free items depicting the *kyara* that contained further information about the sponsors. On the back wall a series of posters showed each of the characters against a uniform background, giving the sponsor, the character’s name, and at the bottom, data including the name (again), the *kyara*’s duty or function (*yakume*), and its special abilities (*tokugi*), not unlike the encyclopedic treatment given *yōkai* or *Pokemon*.²³

At the table sponsoring Risai-kuru-man (“Recycle man”; an anthropomorphized milk carton), table assistants had us complete a form matching ten items to be disposed of with their respective categories of refuse, offering suggestions where needed.²⁴ None of the trash-related imagery resembled the fearsome *tsukumogami*: however coercive the messages about *mottainai* (“wasteful”) and recycling

Name	Sponsor	Promotion	What it is
Happī waon	AEON Corp	debit/point card	dog
Kaguraidā	Miyazaki Cultural Affairs Office	city events, goodwill	hero, protector of nature, humanoid, silver “ranger”-type action character
Zakkī	Miyazaki Prefecture	lifelong sports	humanoid, palm tree on head
Risaikuru-man	Miyazaki Environmental Management Division	trash separation, 4R (see note 19), <i>mai baggu</i>	humanoid, milk carton head
Mirai-kun	Miyazaki Electric	PR, commercial	humanoid, projection on head
Rokkī	Honda Lock soccer	PR, commercial	bird in soccer uniform
Mīmō (with Piyo-zo, and Kūtan)	MRT Broadcasting	PR, commercial	humanoid, propeller on head, bird, teddy bear

TABLE 1. Participants in the *yuru kyara parēdo*; the Ganbarō Miyazaki Chīmu.

Name	Sponsor	Promotion	What it is
Misshi-chan	Miyazaki City Tourism Association	PR, tourism	humanoid, palm tree on head
Sanshoku Kamen	Miyazaki Transport	PR, tourism	man in bus driver garb wearing a wrestler’s mask with a bus stop sign on forehead
Basuka-kun	Miyazaki Transport	PR, tourism	humanoid, bus for a head
Danshingu fearī mīya	Miiya Project	Meat safety, labeling practices	humanoid in fairy costume, two sidekicks
Noboru-kun	Nobeoka City Noboru-kun Festa	PR, event	monkey in <i>noborizaru</i> “climbing monkey” costume
Takanabe taishi-kun	Takanabe Chamber of Commerce	PR, event	humanoid, stone buddhas on head
Mirai-chan, Ikīru-kun	Sun Messe Nichinan	PR, tourism	anthropomorphized Moai statues

TABLE 2. The Kankō Miyazaki Chīmu.

Name	Sponsor	Promotion	What it is
Yuppī	UMK Broadcasting	PR, commercial	dolphin, heart with “u” on chest
Nik-kun	Nikumaki Honpo	PR, commercial	<i>nikumaki</i> wearing <i>bachimaki</i> headgear
Hanī-chan	Nishizawa Bee Farm	PR, commercial	bear in an apron
Yuruyuru sengun una renjā	Omori Tansui	environmental protection	five “ranger”-type action character birds
Manpuku taitei	JA Miyazaki	meat day	lion wearing a crown
Bokujo no ōji bēbū	Takachiho Farms	milk	cow wearing a crown
Grīnzaurusu	JA Miyazaki	green peppers	dinosaur, green pepper for a head

TABLE 3. Miyazaki Genki: Umai Mon Chīmu.

may be, they do not inculcate fear nor are they represented by intrusive goblins, and we each received a box of tissue paper for our efforts. The box was replete with slogans and informational text as well as six different graphic emblems (including Recycle Man and a similar female *kyara*) and a simple, repetitive campaign song.²⁵ The song is a first-person refusal of plastic grocery bags entitled *Motte ikō mai baggu* (“let’s go out with *mai baggu* [my personal reusable bag]”); anyone can say the main refrain (“I don’t need a bag [from you]; I’ve got *mai baggu*.”) The chorus repeats the song title with gentle imperatives towards *minna* (everyone) as well as *mama* and *papa*, hinting that the most preferred identity of the singer would be a young child.

These giant, furry *kigurumi* are benefactors, bringing festival-style enjoyment and material goods—all the while promoting specific principles, practices, places, or products towards their spectators. They are approachable in a way that *Anpan-man* and his comrades on television are not. *Yuru kyara* allow themselves to be physically handled by the children, as if they were large dolls or stuffed toys rather than a stranger in a costume. Yet they are alive, seeking and responding to human attention. Noticeably adroit were the girlish *kyara*, the meat promotion fairies Mīya and Sakīra as well as Misshi-chan, whose legs and arms were clad merely in stretchy fabric which afforded their cute, dainty movements. Their cartoonish heads were disproportionately large in comparison to normal humans, rendering a cuteness lacking in the relatively menacing Sanshoku Kamen. The rest of the *yuru kyara* were cute in a more corporal manner, having extremely short arms and legs relative to trunk size. Like Bunkakkī, these *kigurumi* were often physically wobbly due to the limitations of their block-shaped costumes which may also obstruct much of the vision of the person inside; many of them needed handlers to lead them safely

away from the stage area and through the crowd after their performances. In this respect they are again reminiscent of the bodhisattva statues at the welcoming ceremonies, who also required escorts (HORTON 2007).

In the closing ceremony all the *kyara* and approximately one hundred spectators gathered at one end of the mall, forming enough of a crowd to make it difficult for the non-spectating shoppers to pass through. The announcer asked over the loudspeaker: “Has everyone become friends with the Miyazaki wobbly characters today?” Clearly, one major outcome of events like this is the simple promulgation of *yuru kyara* as spokespeople, authoritative “friends” bearing gifts and instructions. Whether the children retained any of the content of the promotional messages is not clear, though they were keenly interested in the characters themselves. They were becoming socialized if not habituated to the combination of cuteness and moral instruction; certainly their parents were, and their parents also witnessed the promotional messages throughout the day’s events.

Though some of the *yuru kyara* represent objects such as the Moai statues of Easter Island, and by extension the *yuru kyara* theme park and the cultural exchange with Easter Island peoples, others act as abstract symbols, such as the promotion of socially defined behaviors and institutions like “meat day” on the twenty-ninth of each month, or the necessity of separating one’s trash into ten distinct categories. These imperatives promoted by various sponsoring organizations are done through *kyara*. However playful, they manifest the use of nature-human metaphors to naturalize cultural as well as commercial imperatives. In this way they go beyond their *fanshī guzzu* forebears and harken back to an earlier use of anthropomorphism to spur action.

CONCLUSION

Kyara exist as playful objects for consumption not only of aesthetic and other associated functions, but of the specific messages their producers promote. Japanese consume them in visual media, goods, or in the case of *yuru kyara*, in live festival contexts. They are inherently intended for consumption; through this entertaining experience one consumes not only the aesthetic but also the messages which support compliance to the social order. They are even marketed through religious goods including *kyara omamori* and the *kyara*-style bodhisattva images known as Buddhirs. By acknowledging their place in the historical continuum of anthropomorphized beings, we can see that *kyara* are neither reemerged figures from the past, nor are they isolated from it.

Following from SPITULNIK’s argument (1996, 181), the *yuru kyara parēdo* circulates and concentrates media discourse by re-presenting these specific messages usually made separately in a single event in a public place, in this case a shopping mall where anyone present could participate. It also allows spectators to experience first hand the behavior towards *kyara* they may have witnessed on TV shows in which *yuru kyara* or other *kyara* interact with children in the studio audience. They reflect their locality, and are even described as local heroes—see for example

the description of a similar event.²⁶ Spectators are already accustomed to seeing moral messages delivered by *kyara*—the TV characters of *Anpanman* frame the moral imperatives of kindness, cleanliness, and cooperation in their narrative. *Yuru kyara* exploit that imperative power further into the realms of consumption and other acts beneficial to society.

NOTES

* This article is based on a presentation given at the 2010 Anthropology of Japan in Japan (AJJ) Spring Workshop held on April 24 and 25 at Tenri University, Tenri City, and has benefited from comments I received there as well as from *Asian Ethnology* reviewers and others, especially Janet S. Shibamoto-Smith and Salvador Jimenez Murguia. Some data derive from my fieldwork carried out in Japan since 2001, as well as from earlier sojourns beginning in 1995, and prior interview fieldwork with Japanese people. I am also grateful to the priests of Ōsaki Hachiman Shrine, the creators of Teotsunago Daisakusen, GooNeeds Corp., and the sponsors of the characters listed in TABLES 1, 2, and 3, for permission to use their images.

1. *Manga* are printed cartoons, and *anime* are animated cartoons.

2. *Fanshī* is a loanword derived from “fancy” and refers to decorative designs, while *fanshī guzzu* are small, cute, decorated personal items marketed to young women.

3. Contemporary Japan is in the throes of an *iyashi* boom, a trope for relaxation sought through consumption of various environments, practices, objects, and images including celebrities, pets, and characters.

4. SILVIO (2008, 201–203) describes the use of Japanese toys and figurines along with non-Japanese ones as religious icons in Taiwan, including a set of art sculptures that depict character toys as bodhisattvas (in Buddhist thought, enlightened beings); the artist claims to feel peaceful when observing the sculptures.

5. See <http://www.teotsunago.com/> (accessed 15 December 2011). There are critics who do not find *kyara* pleasant and are skeptical of such findings; nonetheless, this data is supported by my observations and is unremarkable to Japanese, including those who do not care for these aesthetics.

6. See <http://www.unagappa.com> (accessed 20 February 2012).

7. See “What is Shinto?” at <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/en/shinto/index.html> (accessed 22 February 2012).

8. See *Shinto e no sasoi* [Invitation to Shinto] at <http://www.jinjahoncho.or.jp/izana/index.html> (accessed 22 February 2012).

9. However well and often humans may be caricatured and become *kyara*, when I displayed (in a public lecture in Japan) an *omamori* I bought at Yushima Jinja with Sugawara Michizane in Hello Kitty guise and described it as a depiction of his taking on her form, an audience member replied that in fact it was “Kitty-chan doing cosplay [costume play].” Such descriptions of *kyara* as social actors are not uncommon.

10. The representation of actual bodhisattvas as *Buddhirs* for sale contrasts with the controversial *kyara* Sento-kun, whose depiction as a monk with deer antlers representing the thirteen-hundredth anniversary of Nara Heijō-kyō was unsettling enough to provoke initial protests and spur the development of rival characters such as Manto-kun. Nonetheless, goods depicting each of these *kyara* were available in souvenir shops in Nara in February 2012, two years after the anniversary. See also the best-selling *manga* depicting Gautama Buddha and Jesus Christ as roommates, *Seinto Oniisan* (NAKAMURA 2008–2010).

11. *Tsukumogami emaki* are picture scrolls of legendary creatures, including objects that receive souls upon reaching one hundred years of age.

12. The fox appears as a beautiful woman who tricks men—though she brings fortune, she leaves when her tail is discovered—and the badger often takes a traveler’s guise. Fox metaphors connected to religiosity are discussed in SMYERS 1996 and 1999.

13. Chinese demon scrolls are scrolls of demon processions, night parades such as the *tsukumogami*, though they do not include anthropomorphized objects. LILLIHOJ (1995) states they feature Zhong Kui, a “demon queller,” but includes no illustrations.

14. This information is taken from a lengthy handout (Character Databank. 2011. Character Communication: *Kyarakutā, Komyunikēshon, Fuōramu* [Character communication forum] Tokyo: Character Databank) that I received at a seminar on the character business on 17 February 2011 in Tokyo.

15. *Anpanman* officially registered in *Guinness Book of World Records*. <http://www.ntv.co.jp/english/an/06pr/09/20090716.html> (accessed 29 January 2010).

16. YAMADA (2006) draws parallels between the main characters of this narrative and gods in the *Kojiki*.

17. FOSTER points to ludic and taxonomic similarities between *Pokemon* and *yōkai* (2009, 214); these characteristics link other *kyara* back to *yōkai* as well.

18. GALBRAITH describes *moe* characters as “infantile and bright and have massive, wet, dog-like eyes. They can seem almost animal-like, alien, or androgynous” (2009, 154).

19. Yamataikoku was an ancient country said by the Chinese to exist in Japan.

20. Another possible reading is that *shika*, in the context of *chidejika*, could mean “only,” that is, only with *chideji* can people switch to the new digital system.

21. The performance of *yuru kyara* at the shopping mall is open to all who happen to be there, in contrast to the brief performances at theme parks I have witnessed (for example, Sanrio Harmonyland, *Anpanman* Children’s Museums) where costumed players come out briefly to pose for photos, or to perform on stage, for fee-paying attendees.

22. Miyazaki suffered an outbreak of foot and mouth disease that temporarily wiped out its beef and pork industry; in its wake the prefecture is heavily promoting new food labeling and safety measures. The “meat fairies,” as decorations on a colorful, giveaway plastic file, explain the beef labeling system and in a *manga* on the reverse side, explain *torēsabiriti* (“traceability”) of beef based on registration numbers placed on ear tags, which the beef *kyara* Gyūtārō displays as “earrings.”

23. Several encyclopedias of *yuru kyara* have been published; my survey of five of these (MIURA 2004, 2009c; GOTŌCHI KYARAKUTĀ ZUKAN SEISAKU IINKAI 2009a, 2009b; KABUSHIKI GAISHA REKKASHA 2009) available in print while writing this article has yielded a database of over one thousand unique characters.

24. The back of the form was a coloring page depicting *ekogarū*, an “eco” kangaroo. The answers were checked with a red pencil, after which we were awarded two items. One of these was a foldable, reusable shopping bag (popularly known as a *mai baggu*, “my personal reusable bag”) embellished with an unnamed *kyara* that was not part of the day’s festivity. This creature was drawn with a shape resembling a map of the prefecture and holding a bag labeled “MY,” representing the *mai baggu kyanpēn* (“my bag campaign”) of the Miyazaki Prefectural Cooperative Association for Promotion of the 4Rs (refuse, reduce, reuse, recycle), the sponsoring body whose name was printed below the image. Neither of these characters were part of the larger event, yet they were introduced to us via the materials on hand.

25. This rich variety and amount of information intended for the consumer is reminiscent of that found on the box of the Morinaga cookie brand *Dear* described in OCCHI 2010b.

26. Takanabe Chamber of Commerce, 2009. <http://www.miyazakicci.or.jp/takanabe/blog2/2009/05/57.html> (accessed 15 October 2010).

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