

Where *Yōkai* Enter and Exit the Human Body:

From Medieval Picture Scrolls to Modern Folktales in Japan

YASUI Manami

Translated by Kristopher REEVES

1. *Yōkai* and the Body¹

Let us begin by taking a look at **Figure 1**, an image from a thirteenth-century illustrated scroll entitled *Kitano tenjin engi* 北野天神縁起. Here we see an illness-stricken Fujiwara no Tokihira 藤原時平 (871–909) with two snakes crawling out of his ears.

A priest was summoned to pray for the recovery of Tokihira, and during his prayers, two snakes crawled out of his ears. The two snakes were the vengeful spirit of Sugawara no Michizane 菅原道真 (845–903), Tokihira's former rival, who had died six years prior, after being publicly shamed and exiled. The snakes commanded a certain courtesan to stop the priest from praying. No sooner had the priest halted his prayers and left the room than Tokihira passed away.

It was believed that sicknesses and maladies of all sorts were caused by the intrusion into the body of evil spirits and *yōkai*. According to the historian Kuroda Hideo 黒田日出男 (1943–), a popular belief held throughout the early formative

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¹ Komatsu Kazuhiko, who is arguably Japan's foremost folklorist and cultural anthropologist, has analyzed the history and culture of *yōkai*, and has constructed a definition, building upon his many articles and books. In *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture; Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History* (2017 [originally published in Japanese in 2006]), he points out that “*yōkai* is an ambiguous term among both academics and lay-people. Generally speaking, it means creatures, presences, or phenomena that could be described as mysterious or eerie” (12). Note that the term *yōkai* includes malevolent and unobtrusive entities alike, both corporeal and incorporeal.

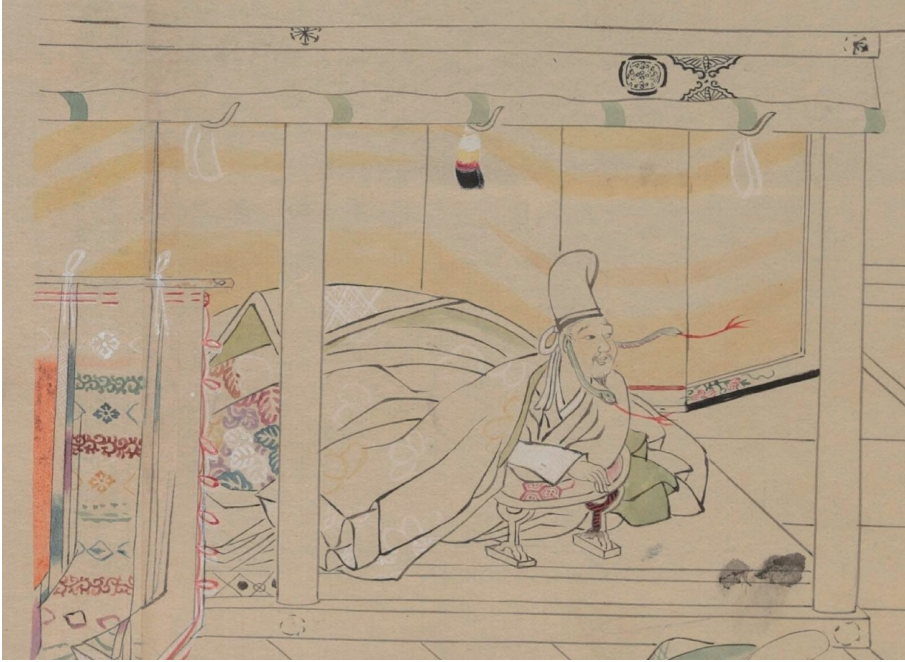


Figure 1. Illustration from *Kitano tenjin engi*, depicting two snakes emerging from Tokihira's ears. (NIJL, *Kitano seibyō engi* 北野聖廟縁起)
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years of Japan's medieval period saw the pores of the skin as a primary entry-point for sickness.² Pores and ears, both of which are perpetually open to the outside world—unlike the eyes and mouth, which may be closed at will—were thought to be easy targets for *yōkai*.

The present paper aims, by looking at medieval illustrated scrolls of the sort just mentioned and modern folktales, at enumerating those specific parts of the body most commonly used by *yōkai* as points of entry into and exit from the human body. In order to carry out this analysis I have taken advantage primarily of two rich sources of information: First, the early twelfth-century *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集, particularly that section dedicated to so-called secular tales (*sezokuben* 世俗編) set in Japan (*boncho* 本朝), hereafter known as “secular Japanese tales”; second, the database of *Folktales of Strange Phenomena and Yōkai* (Spirits, Ghosts, Monsters) (*Kaii yōkai denshō detabesu* 怪異・妖怪伝承データベース), created and made publicly available on-line by the International Research Center for Japanese Studies (Kokusai Nihon Bunka Kenkyū Sentā 国際日本文化研究センター), which includes data gleaned mainly by early-modern Japanese scholars of folklore studies.³ I wish to show the manner in which the illustrations

² Kuroda 1986, pp. 251–253.

³ This database may be accessed via the following link: <http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/youkaidb/>.

from medieval scrolls and various tales of *yōkai* entering and exiting the body were later reinterpreted in similar tales of the supernatural from the early modern period.

Komatsu Kazuhiko 小松和彦 (1947–), the leading scholar of *yōkai*, points out that “It seems probable that all those particular spaces and places where *yōkai* are most accustomed to appear and disappear are of a liminal character.”⁴ Applying this observation to the human body, those places where *yōkai* are most wont to appear and disappear, that is, enter and exit the body, are likewise liminal spaces (*kyōkai* 境界). Indeed, the pores in our skin, seen in the popular medieval imagination as primary points of entry for supernatural sickness-causing agents, are just such a liminal space, acting as a border between the world inside the body and the environment without. Similarly, according to the compilers of *Histoire du Corps*, “the body as a whole is itself a liminal zone, for which reason it has been placed at the center of a cultural dynamics, ample evidence of which is to be found in the social sciences.”⁵ Considering that the human body is a liminal zone, it is no wonder that *yōkai*, being accustomed as they are to appear and disappear in liminal spaces, are continually understood as entering and exiting the body.

In the illustration cited at the beginning of this paper, the two snakes are seen to be emerging not from the pores or the mouth of Tokihira, but from his ears. While we must certainly consider differences in detail between oral tales and illustrated depictions, we may at least presume that there were certain areas or orifices of the human body through which *yōkai* preferred to enter and exit. Furthermore, it should be possible, by focusing our attention on these particular areas or orifices, to gain a clearer picture of how the human body was envisioned throughout the ages. By examining tales about *yōkai* and the human body, and by looking at the human body as a liminal zone, this paper aims at taking a few steps towards research into ways in which the human body has been imagined throughout Japanese history.

2. Areas of the Human Body Most Susceptible to *Yōkai* Intrusion

Based on what we have seen in the case of *Kitano tenjin engi*, we might be justified in assuming that, in the corpus of medieval Japanese literature, one may find numerous tales of *yōkai* entering and exiting the human body through orifices, like the ears, that are continually open to the outside world. Is such an assumption correct? In order to find the answer, I have made a search of the aforementioned “secular Japanese tales” section of *Konjaku monogatari shū*, focusing my search on the word “ears”.⁶ As it turns out, though the phrase *mimi ni suru* 耳にする, to listen or to hear, appears several times in this collection of tales, not a single instance of *yōkai* entering or exiting through the ears is to be found therein.

⁴ Komatsu 2016, p. 5.

⁵ Corbin, Courtine, Vigarello 2010, p. 14.

⁶ Komine 2001.

Following this, I searched the database of *Folktales of Strange Phenomena and Yōkai* for any data pertaining to *yōkai* and the human body. This database, which, at the time of this writing, was last updated in 2014, contains a total of 35,826 entries. While, as already mentioned, most of the items appearing in this database have been gleaned from the works of early-modern and modern Japanese scholars of folklore studies and local histories, some of the items have been gleaned from essays written by scholars active during the end of the Edo period. Consequently, this database includes tales of *yōkai* composed from the latter half of the nineteenth century and onwards.

My first step when using the database was to conduct a search using a list of common terms referring to the body. I referred to the entry for *karada*, or body, in the well-known Japanese dictionary *Daijirin* 大辞林 (Sanseidō 1988), which divides the body into four main sections: *atama* 頭, head; *dō* 胴, torso; *te* 手, hands; and *ashi* 足, feet. I then searched for these four words in the database. I also searched a total of thirty-seven other words related to smaller divisions of the body and facial features.⁷ Among the total number of hits for each such term—*te* (hand), for example—I selected only those that related directly to the body, thus giving me what I called my data sets. It was these data sets, and not the total number of hits, that I used in my analysis. The total number of hits as well as their respective reduced data sets are listed in **Figure 2**. As may be seen from Figure 2, in which I have tabulated the top twenty most frequently occurring areas of the body, feet, hands, eyes, head, neck, hair, stomach, and back contain the largest data sets. It would appear that *yōkai* tended to target these areas most frequently when seeking entrance or exit from the human body. The feet and the hands have the largest data sets, something which may be explained by the fact that it is the feet and hands, more than any other part of the body, that are most frequently injured during daily manual labor. People tended to imagine that the frequent injury of hands and feet was caused by malignant *yōkai* interfering in human labor.

3. *Yōkai* Intrusion through Perpetually Open Orifices

My next step was to list all those orifices of the body, such as the ears and nostrils, which are, in virtue of their very anatomical structure, perpetually more-or-less open to the outside world. Having listed these in descending order of frequency, I found that those orifices with the largest data sets were the ears, nose, and mouth, in that order. On the other hand, those orifices with the smallest data sets were the vagina and the anus.

Let us take a look at tales relating to *yōkai* and the ears. Lafcadio Hearn (1850–1904), in his collection of Japanese stories entitled *Kwaidan* (1904), includes an account of Miminashi Hōichi 耳なし芳一, or Earless Hōichi. According to this tale,

⁷ Yasui 2014, pp. 205–229.

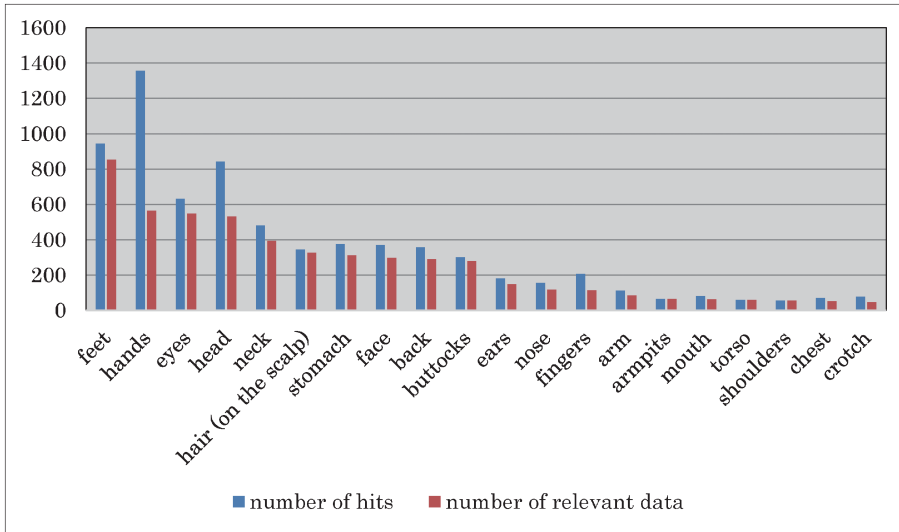


Figure 2. Total hits and reduced data sets for selected top twenty parts of the human body.

The number of hits is higher than the actual relevant data due to the incidental appearance of target terms in phrases that are actually irrelevant to my purpose. For example: “to lend someone a hand” would come up as a hit, as it includes the target word “hand,” although here the meaning is simply to offer help.

a blind *bina* player by the name of Hōichi is commanded by a deceased spirit of the Taira clan to play him a tune. As a precaution, Hōichi requests a monk to write scriptural verses over his entire body, thereby serving as divine protection against the intrusion of *yōkai*. Here, we see how the skin was understood as a liminal zone separating the inside of the body from the outside environment. Unfortunately, this monk neglected to write verses on Hōichi’s ears. When the vengeful Taira spirit, having listened to Hōichi’s tune, finally decides to depart, it tears off the poor man’s unprotected ears as it goes. Tales of *yōkai* tearing off people’s ears are frequent in folklore accounts from the early-modern and modern period. For example, a report from Naze City, Kagoshima Prefecture, published in 1970, informs us that parents used to warn their crying children that a *yōkai* by the name of Mindon ミンドン would come and take off their ears if they did not stop their weeping. The initial *min* in Mindon is a dialectical variant of the word *mimi*, or ears.⁸ A report from Itoman City, Okinawa Prefecture, first published in 1949, tells of Mimikiri bōzu 耳切り坊主, the ear-chopping monk, who went around the town at night with a knife looking for random ears to chop off.⁹ These are examples of *yōkai* cutting off ears. There are, however, examples from all over Japan of ears presaging death. For example, it is said that when one hears a ringing in the

⁸ Tabata 1974, pp. 31–46.

⁹ Miyanaga 1949, pp. 28–31.

ears—the ringing is supposed to sound something like *jīnjin*—someone of the same age has recently passed away, or is soon to pass away. The ears were supposed to be able to pick up messages pertaining to border-crossings between this world and the next faster than any other organ of the body.

However, the image from *Kitano tenjin engi* introduced above, in which two snakes are seen emerging from Tokihira's ears, is not something that can be found in any of the ethnographical writings from the early-modern or modern period. The absence, throughout the medieval and early-modern period, of tales about snakes coming out of people's ears might be attributed simply to the general disappearance of such tales over time, or—and this might explain the disappearance—a preference for tales in which snakes emerge from other parts of the body besides the ears. If this latter supposition is true, we ought to ask ourselves from where, if not the ears, snakes were most likely to emerge.

Let us turn our attention to the nose, being the orifice with the second largest data set. There is a particular species of Japanese goblin known as the *tengu* 天狗, the nose of which is conventionally depicted as being extremely prominent. Japanese novels from the early-modern period, such as Akutagawa Ryūnosuke's 芥川龍之介 (1892–1927) *Hana* 鼻, include vivid depictions of the human nose. What I wish to focus on here, however, is not the nose, as such, but the nostrils, that is, the orifices of the nose. Tachibana Nankei 橘南谿 (1753–1805), a prominent Edo-period essayist, wrote a collection of strange tales entitled *Kōkadō inwa* 黄華堂医話, which includes a typical example of a tale centered around the nostrils. This tale is about a certain twelfth-century general by the name of Fujiwara no Hidehira 藤原秀衡 (1122–1187) who was active in northern Japan. When Hidehira had grown quite old, he got word of a famous physician named Kentesei 見底勢, who happened to be a native of Makkatsu 鞆 (Ch: Mohe), a region in northeastern China once inhabited by a tribe of Tungus people.

This doctor was famous for his miraculous ability to cure all manner of illness.¹⁰ According to this tale, in order to save a mother and her child, both of whom died during childbirth, this doctor stuffed a quantity of medicine into the mother's nose, inserted acupuncture needles into her nose, mouth, and back a total of three times, and fumigated her naval. The mother promptly regained consciousness. As for the stillborn baby, the doctor blew powdered medicine into its nostrils, opened its mouth and inserted a dough-like substance called *ryūchichi* 龍乳 and wrapped its body in cloth.¹¹ The baby, likewise, regained consciousness. That is not all. A certain old man wished to give some of his remaining years to a young man who had recently passed away. Doctor Kentesei produced a tube, one end of which he inserted into the old man's mouth, the

¹⁰ Mori, Kitagawa 1980, p. 238.

¹¹ The exact nature of the apparently medical substance *ryūchichi* 龍乳, or “dragon's milk,” remains uncertain. The proper reading, likewise, is not known. Possible readings include *ryūchichi* and *ryūnyū*.

other end of which he inserted into the dead man's nostril. After smearing the old man's back with medicine and inserting acupuncture needles into the dead man's back, the former passed away while the latter suddenly came back to life. Doctor Kentesei was able to resurrect the dead by inserting medicine into the nostrils or by means of a tube inserted into the nostrils. His common methods included medicine applied to the nostrils, mouth, and back, as well as acupuncture needles inserted into the back. That the life of one patient should be exchanged for the sake of another through the nostrils seems reasonable when we consider that the nostrils are one of the orifices through which the air of life passes.

Aside from their appearance in medical tales, the nostrils were also seen as convenient points of entry for *yōkai*. In 1932, an eighty-year-old woman living in Tokushima Prefecture gave a first-hand report of an incident that occurred in relation to an individual known as an *inugamisuji* 犬神筋, that is, someone believed to have an intimate connection with and control over *inugami* 犬神, or dog spirits. According to this woman's account, there was a large group of people staying together in the same inn. When most of the people had fallen asleep, this woman noticed a tiny dog no bigger than a bean emerge from the nostril of the *inugamisuji*. The little creature proceeded to run and frolic about the room. This done, it headed back towards the nostril from whence it had first emerged. Unfortunately, the bean-sized canine missed the mark and entered the nostril of another man. The woman claims that this second man was afterwards prone to sudden possessions by dog spirits.¹² It is said that travelers wary of encountering a similar fate were accustomed to erect small folding screens beside their pillows. It should be noted here that the dog spirit in the above account did not emerge or reenter through the open mouths of snoring sleepers, but rather through the nostrils, which are perpetually open, and therefore seen as exceptionally vulnerable, entry points for specters of all sorts. As has already been noted, the nostrils serve as passageways through which life-giving air can pass, and are consequently closely associated with the life of the individual. It is for this same reason that *yōkai* are wont to enter and exit through the nostrils.

Let us next turn our attention to tales involving the mouth. Interestingly, about eighty percent of all tales in the database of *Folktales of Strange Phenomena and Yōkai* involving the mouth feature the notorious Kuchisakeonna 口裂け女, a female *yōkai* sporting a grotesquely large mouth, both corners of which look as though they have been cut nearly up to her ears. In most cases, this modern *yōkai* wears a mask to hide her mouth. The very first report of this specter was published in December 1978, when Kuchisakeonna was apparently sighted somewhere in Gifu Prefecture. Sightings quickly increased; children all over Japan became frightened of this *yōkai*. Aside from accounts of Kuchisakeonna, there are

¹² Ōta 1936, pp. 54–55.

no other tales of specters or evil spirits concerning the mouth. This may be attributed to the fact that, unlike the ears and the nostrils, the mouth may be closed at will, thereby ensuring that no unwanted *yōkai* will enter.

4. Snakes Entering and Exiting through the Vagina

Next I would like to look at tales relating to the vagina, though this is an area of the human body with a rather small data set. There is a memorable scene in *Kojiki* 古事記, in which Ame-no-uzume bears her genitals and performs a comical dance, making all the gods roar with laughter. This she does expressly in order to lure Amaterasu, Goddess of the Sun, out of a stone cave into which the latter has secluded herself, thereby flooding the world in utter darkness. There are many other tales involving the vagina in Japanese mythology. In the tale of the god of Mt. Miwa 三輪山, a woman is impregnated when an arrow painted all over in red finds its way into her vagina. Similarly, in the tale of Nyogo-ga-shima Island 女護ヶ島, a woman becomes pregnant when a gust of wind blows across her genitals. Despite numerous such tales in Japanese mythology from the ancient period, the database of *Folktales of Strange Phenomena and Yōkai* contains very few examples of this sort. It is likely that modern-day Japanese folklorists and scholars of local history, having been deeply influenced by the conservative tendencies of Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962), were reluctant to report any tales involving the genitals. This, at least, would explain the dearth of tales involving the vagina in early-modern ethnographical reports.

Among the very few tales of this sort is one in which a snake finds its way into the vagina of a woman who happens to be taking an afternoon nap. Once in, the snake cannot be removed.¹³ The magazine *Dorumen* ドルメン includes numerous similar reports, all taken between 1933 and 1934, from all over Japan. The snake in this tale can, of course, be interpreted as a male penis, in which case the tale becomes a practical warning to women, urging them not to fall asleep out of doors, where they are bound to be almost utterly defenseless.

The tale of the snake finding its way into a woman's vagina is found as early as the twelfth century, in the “secular Japanese tales” section of the already cited *Konjaku monogatari* 日本霊異記.¹⁴ This tale begins with a young woman who climbs a mulberry tree in order to pick leaves for her silkworms. A large snake then coils himself about the base of the tree. No sooner does the young woman jump out of the tree than the snake darts forward and lodges himself within the woman's vagina. No manner of pulling can remove the snake. In fact, the origin of this tale goes back even further, all the way to the early-ninth century Japanese anthology of Buddhist anecdotal tales, *Nihon ryōiki* 日本霊異記.¹⁵ In the *Konjaku monogatari* version of this tale, a doctor pours a medicinal concoction into the woman's vagina,

¹³ Nakaichi 1936, pp. 5–6.

¹⁴ Komine 1994, pp. 400–401.

¹⁵ Nakada 1979, pp. 267–274.

whereupon the snake at last decides to make its escape. Moreover, the snake's children, which it had apparently given birth to inside the woman's vagina, and which are still creeping about the poor woman's genitals, are likewise expelled by means of medicinal treatment.

It is interesting to note how a tale first told in *Nihon ryōiki* was later incorporated into the medieval *Konjaku monogatari*, and, many centuries later, retold in similar form in early-modern ethnographical reports. For one reason or another, the motif of a snake entering a woman's vagina remained a set theme in Japanese literature. I would go so far as to argue that the dearth of tales involving snakes emerging out of people's ears might be due to a general preference for tales involving snakes entering women's vaginas.

Like tales involving the vagina, those involving the anus are also extremely rare. Among those that do exist, most are variations on a single theme: a *kappa* 河童, or water imp, inserts his hand into someone's anus in order to pluck out a *shirikodama* 尻子玉, a small jewel believed to be couched somewhere in the anal cavity. Aside from this motif, there are a few examples of *yōkai* entering the body through the anus. The anus, it would seem, is not merely an orifice for the release of bodily waste, but another entry point for *yōkai*.

To summarize what has been said above, tales of *yōkai* from the early-modern and modern period reveal that, among those orifices that are perpetually open to the outside world, the nostrils and the anus were exceptionally vulnerable to spectral intrusion. As I have hoped to make clear, tales of snakes emerging out of the ears, as seen in the illustrated scene from the medieval scroll *Kitano tenjin engi*, are not to be found in early modern ethnographic reports. Instead, what we do find are tales of snakes entering women's vaginas, tales which have appeared in Japanese anthologies of ancient tales as far back as the eighth century.

Oddly enough, according to the database of *Folktales of Strange Phenomena and Yōkai*, evil spirits and specters are not accustomed to enter or exit through the eyes, ears, or mouth, despite the fact that these are prominent orifices on the face. It would seem that specters are not simply aiming indiscriminately at just any opening, but are focusing their efforts on a select few orifices. This preference for one orifice over others is likely due to the inner workings of a rich Japanese imagination as it sought to envision the body in relation to otherworldly entities. We must now ask ourselves, aside from the orifices discussed above, what other part of the human body did *yōkai* employ as points of entry and egress?

5. Protecting the Body against Specters

Human beings were not merely the helpless victims of *yōkai* intrusions. Various measures were actively taken to protect the body against such attacks. An examination of these measures will benefit our understanding of how Japanese people envisioned their bodies. For example, in the past, it was customary to sew a

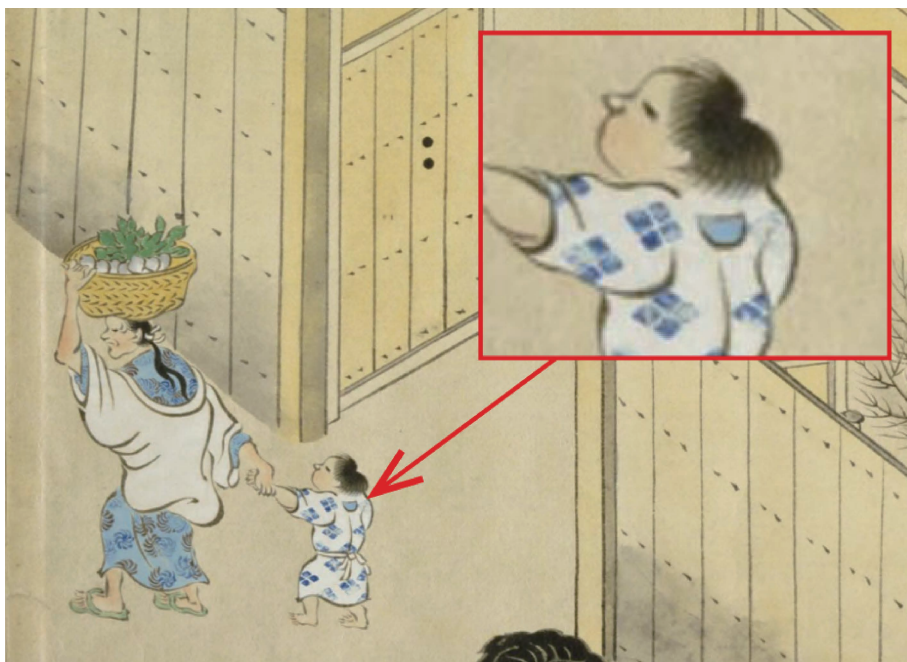


Figure 3. A child's *semamori* as depicted in an adapted illustration from *Kasuga gongen genkie*, vol. 16, in the National Diet Library Digital Collections.

<https://doi.org/10.11501/1287501>

charm into the back seam of two- to three-year-old children's kimonos as a means of fending off *yōkai* that might attempt to enter their bodies from behind. These charms were known as *semamori* 背守り, literally, protection (*mamori*) for the back (*se*), or as *senui* 背縫い, that which is sewn (*nui*) into the back (*se*) of a kimono. Let us take a look at a fourteenth-century illustrated scroll entitled *Kasuga gongen genkie* 春日権現験記絵. A mother leads her barefooted child by the hand (see **Figure 3**). Note the semicircular *semamori* sewn into the back of this child's kimono. The fact that charms of this sort were sewn into the backs of children's kimonos is significant. Japanese people used to believe that the backs of children were easy entry points for *yōkai*.

Another example that further supports what has just been said is to be found on the island of Amami Ōshima 奄美大島, where it is believed that one's spirit may leave the body via the back. To prevent this, the people of Amami Ōshima sew a triangular charm, representative of a butterfly, into the backs of their children's kimonos up until the age of seven, a period when children are thought to be most vulnerable to such things. In Kōchi Prefecture, when a child falls down, it is customary to slightly loosen the collar and back portion of the child's kimono. The child is then carried three times around the house, during which time the child's name is called out aloud. Then, three grains of rice are dropped

into the opening that was created by loosening the back (*semamori*) of the child's kimono. Finally, the child is made to eat these grains of rice.¹⁶ It is thought that these grains of rice represent the child's spirit. We may understand from this that the back is thought by at least some Japanese people to be the entry point for a child's spirit when entering—and reentering—its body. This seems to be the case not only with children but with adults who have become temporarily stunned or who have fallen into a momentary state of stupefaction. It was once common practice to give such adults a brisk strike on the back in order to bring them back to their senses, that is, in order to call back their wandering spirit, which would consequently reenter through the back.¹⁷

The back, as has been seen, was not simply the place from which a spirit could escape a body. It was also that place to which a child's spirit would return, as well as that place via which *yōkai* were likely to intrude. For this reason, the back had to be protected by charms of the sort discussed above. The back was a gateway between this world and the next; the way to open this gate was by rapping or rubbing the back. Unlike the nostrils, vagina, and anus, all of which are more-or-less open orifices, the back, despite its closed nature, was also seen as a point of entry and exit for specters. The perceived vulnerability of the back was due to the simple fact that human beings cannot see their own backs. Considering that this is true of all human beings, it should not come as a surprise that the back is traditionally seen as a vulnerable entry point for *yōkai* in virtually all cultures throughout the world. In those cultures where the back is not seen as a vulnerable entry point, we can be sure that the reason lies in a unique vision of the body that is different from other cultures. A comparative examination across cultures of the various ways in which people envision the body in relation to *yōkai* is sure to produce fruitful results.

¹⁶ Katsurai 1973, p. 140.

¹⁷ Katsurai 1973, p. 141.

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