

visual), as well as the constant lively interplay of tradition and individual creativity in the making of monsters.

Ninmenju

In one of his many encyclopedic compendia of *yōkai*, Mizuki describes a tree in Aomori Prefecture that, according to legend, would bleed when cut. He suggests that this strange plant might be a version of the *ninmenju* or *jinmenju*, a monstrous tree with human heads instead of flowers.²⁸ The *ninmenju* was pictured two centuries earlier by Sekien, who explains that it is found “in the mountains and valleys. Its flowers are like human heads. They do not speak, but merely laugh constantly. If they laugh too much, it is said, they will fall off.”²⁹ The tree in Sekien’s illustration skirts the left-hand side and top border of the page, with a spiky leafed branch bearing bald heads. Sekien apparently borrowed his tree from one similarly portrayed in the *Wakan-Sansaizue*, but intriguingly the *Wakan-Sansaizue* illustration features not only the tree, but also a man standing to the right of it. More intriguing still is that this entry is not in the section of the encyclopedia dedicated to plants; rather it is located in the section on “peoples from foreign lands.”³⁰ In fact, what is featured here is not the tree itself, but the land with which it is associated, a place called “Daishi.” The *Wakan-Sansaizue* passage refers to an earlier Chinese text, the *Sancaituhui* (circa 1609), where the land is called “Da-shi,” possibly a transliteration of “tazi,” a Persian word meaning “Arab.” Continuing this journey back in time and down the Silk Road, we find different versions of the great Persian epic poem, *Shahnama* (Book of Kings) by Firdawsi (d. 1020), containing illustrations of a man conversing with a human-headed tree. The man, it turns out, is Sikandar, or Alexander the Great, and the illustrations portray his legendary encounter with a talking tree, sometimes called the Wakwak Tree, which prophesized his death.³¹

I trace (very superficially) this complex lineage simply to underscore the dynamic movement of imagery and ideas across space, time, and cultures. Here a picture of Alexander the Great becomes associated with “foreign lands” and enters Japan (through China) during the Edo period (a time, ironically, known for its relative isolation). Eventually man and place are elided and we are left only with a mysterious tree located somewhere in “the mountains and valleys” — a plant

28 Mizuki Shigeru, *Zusetsu Nihon yōkai taizen* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1994), p. 249.

29 Inada and Tanaka, *Toriyama Sekien*, p. 191.

30 Terajima, *Wakan-Sansaizue* 3, p. 319.

31 See, for example, “Iskandar at the Talking Tree,” an illustration by an unknown artist from the fourteenth century, which shows a man on a white horse seemingly in conversation with a tree with human heads: <<http://www.asia.si.edu/collections/zoomObject.cfm?ObjectId=10115>>, accessed July 5, 2010. On legends of the Wakwak Tree, see David Williams, *Deformed Discourse: The Function of the Monster in Mediaeval Thought and Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996), p. 210.

monster to join the expanding pantheon of Japanese *yōkai*. The tree, in turn, not only becomes part of the national cultural imaginary, but is specifically associated with a local legend in one corner of Japan. The process illustrates the discursive transmission and transformation of legend and imagery over time, space, and cultural context, and demonstrates one of many ways in which a “Japanese” monster can come into being. A seemingly indigenous *yōkai*, it turns out, may have begun as an Islamic illustration of Alexander the Great!

Gojira

Commercial and political factors also contribute to the creation and promulgation of Japanese monsters. Perhaps the most internationally famous of all Japanese monsters is, of course, Godzilla—or *Gojira* in the Japanese original. As mentioned earlier, *Gojira* is generally labeled *kaijū* or fantastic beast. The original 1954 film (in contrast to the Hollywood re-edit of 1956) explicitly critiques American Cold War policy and Japan’s burgeoning post-war democracy. *Gojira*, a deep-sea monster awakened from its slumbers by American weapons testing, works as a powerful metaphor of culture versus nature and for the terrors unleashed by the nuclear age and the unforeseeable forces—political, environmental, technological—that would influence everyday lives in the decades after the war.

Gojira, both movie and monster, also influenced the commercial world of popular culture, spawning an entire genre of monster films. While later creations did not possess the same gravitas as *Gojira*, many of their stories followed a similar narrative pattern: an ancient slumbering beast is brought to life and violence through inadvertent human intervention, be it technological carelessness (*Gamera*; 1965) or commercial ambition (*Gappa*; 1967). In most cases, the *kaijū* in question comes from somewhere offshore, either a distant Japanese island or foreign lands/waters. In this context, Japan’s own native folk monsters, the *yōkai*, seem quaint and anachronistic.³²

Kuchi-sake-onna

Indeed, given post-war Japan’s vibrant media culture, rife with monster movies, manga, and anime, it is tempting to believe that the folklore-inspired *yōkai* of the past are no longer viable. In 1979, however, a new phenomenon emerged that

32 In a mash-up of *kaijū* movies with more traditional *yōkai*, a recent (2010) film called *Death Kappa* features a gargantuan *kappa* rampaging through the cityscape. For more on *Godzilla* and other monster movies, see William Tsutsui, *Godzilla on My Mind: Fifty Years of the King of Monsters* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); William M. Tsutsui and Michiko Ito (eds), *In Godzilla’s Footsteps: Japanese Pop Culture Icons on the Global Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Takahashi Toshio, *Gojira no nazo: Kaijū shinwa to Nihonjin* (Tokyo: Kōdansha, 1998).