

Umbrella-Shaped Yokai

In Japan, *yokai* (supernatural spirits) often appear as motifs, even in anime, manga, and video games. One type is characterized by umbrella-like shapes; in Japanese, *kasa yokai*. We turned to Komatsu Kazuhiko, the former director-general of the International Research Center for Japanese Studies and the foremost expert on *yokai*, to learn more about the origin of *yokai*, along with *kasa yokai* and more.

(Text: Tanaka Nozomi)



Above: A *kasa yokai* clad in common Chinese clothing of the time.

Below: *Yokai* visible behind the performers in Utagawa Kunisada's *Kabuki Ichigatsu Kogyo* ("Kabuki Performance in January").



Above: Damaged umbrella *yokai*, from *Yokai Emaki* ("Yokai Picture Scroll").

Below: Utagawa Yoshimori's *Shinpan Bakemono Zukushi* ("A New Collection of Monsters"), a sort of pictorial guide to *yokai*.

Left: A *kasa yokai* that has grown a leg and two arms is shown in silhouette in Mano Gyotei's *Toto Senjafuda Ogai Hiro* ("Collection of Votive Tags from the Eastern Capital (Edo)").



Kasa yokai are depicted in a *yokai motif sugoroku* game board as well. Ooshinpan Bakemono Tobimawari Sugoroku ("New Frolicking Monsters Sugoroku")



Nishimonai Bon Odori festivities in Akita Prefecture, registered on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list. *Kasa* hats keep dancers' faces almost completely hidden from sight.



Photo: PIXTA

Scattered among the dancers wearing *kasa* hats, which are considered to be *yorishiro* that draw or summon divine spirits, are some wearing black *hikosa zukin* hoods said to be representative of deceased people's spirits. Festivals in which participants dance wearing black hoods are very rare.

Y*okai* are entities representing strange, abnormal phenomena incomprehensible to the unaided mind, which have been given physical form. While much folklore concerning *yokai* had been found in various parts of Japan, the belief became more prevalent after artists in cities began painting works such as the *Hyakki Yagyo Emaki* ("Night Parade of the Myriad Goblins Picture Scroll")¹ around the 14th century. In this picture scroll, *yokai* taking the forms of various old worn-out tools take center stage, shown in procession. Among them is a *yokai* peeking out from under a damaged umbrella. Stories associated with the paintings also formed, saying that the tools and other objects formerly used in daily life had transformed into *yokai* out of resentment toward people after they wore out and got discarded.

While depictions of *yokai* range from frightening to humorous, this *kasa yokai* (*yokai* with an umbrella form) features a startlingly endearing expression. Within the *ukiyo-e* form that flourished in the 18th and 19th centuries is a genre called *omocha-e*, or "toy"-like prints for children. These *omocha-e* also present a range of different *kasa yokai*, with appearances ranging from adorable to comical.

The conception of *yokai* fundamentally stems from nature worship, or animism, practiced in Japan since the distant past. This includes the belief that all things—from flora and fauna to rocks and even tools and so on—while they may have different outward appearances—experience emotions and have a spirit.

Umbrellas are implements originally meant to repel rain. In Japanese, two words, both pronounced

kasa, refer to different types: *kasa* hats worn directly on the head, and handled *kasa* umbrellas; (see page 6 for reference). There is also a form of *kasa* hat worn in Bon Odori dance festivities,² *kagura* ritual dances,³ and so on. These *kasa* worn for dancing often have shapes that cover the wearer's face. Covering the face is equated with concealing one's true form, which has given the *kasa* hats impressions of being tools enabling the wearer to assume different forms, as well as being frightening, as the wearer's true form cannot be seen.

Kasa umbrellas with handles, similarly, are considered to function as *yorishiro*⁴ due to the similarity of their shapes with mountains, where spirits were believed to descend.

There is speculation that the invention of *kasa yokai* may stem from the way people saw Japanese *kasa* hats as frightening since they concealed the wearer's true form, combined with how people thought of handled *kasa* umbrellas as *yorishiro*.

In modern Japan, *wagasa* (traditional Japanese umbrellas) are considered traditional implements with graceful beauty. The fact that they once even lent their forms to *yokai*, however, might be taken as a sign of Japanese people's fertile imagination with regard to objects. ■

1. *Hyakki Yagyo*: The procession of a myriad (literally "hundred") widely varied *yokai* jostling along through the night. *Emaki*: an ancient Japanese form of painting in which sheets of paper or silk are lined horizontally to create a very long canvas where sequential representations of scenes or stories can be painted.
2. Bon (O-Bon): A period when deceased ancestors return to the world of the living and grave visits are practiced. Bon Odori: Dances performed at festivals that take place during this period.
3. *Kagura: Odori* or *mai* dances performed at Shinto shrines as offerings to *kami* deities with musical accompaniments played with instruments including Japanese traditional flutes and *taiko* drums.
4. *Yorishiro*: Objects that draw or summon *kami* deities and spirits.