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Yokai: Monsters and the Monstrous in Japanese History

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The Buddhist Yokai

Buddhist cosmology and doctrine affected people's perceptions about the supernatural and supernormal by moralizing the actions of spirits. With the incorporation of Buddhism, supernatural entities were no longer supernatural entities just because, they were now in their specific form due to karma accrued from a past life. Karma accrued in their current life would affect the shape they took in their next life. Yokai and Shinto deities were suffering in samsara the same as people.

In Japanese Mythology, snakes are often associated with death and violence (Kelsey, 224). In stories where women become pregnant by thunder/snake deities, the appearance of the child tended to determine its fate. The Kamo Shrine origin tale has a maiden becoming pregnant and giving birth to a boy who when ascends to heaven and becomes a thunder deity after presenting sake to his father (Kelsey, 232). A story from the *Hitachi Fudoki* has a woman give birth to a snake who attempts to ascend to heaven to be with his father but is unable to after killing his uncle and being hit by a bowl (Kelsey, 231). In both these stories, a woman becomes pregnant by a deity and gives birth to a child who attempts to ascend to heaven to be with their father. But only the child who is human in appearance is able to do so; the reptilian child cannot ascend.

However, this trend of snake-like entities being associated with evil is not seen in the *Nihon Ryoiki. On a Boy of Great Strength Who was Born of the Thunder's Rejoicing* tells the story of a boy born to a farmer as a reward for not beating a thunder deity. The boy “had a snake twined twice around his neck, born with the head and tail of a snake hanging down behind” (Watson, 16). Given the tropes seen in earlier Japanese mythology, one might assume that this snake-child would be a vessel for misfortune and death. However, this is not the case. This snake-boy has great strength and goes on to apprentice at a Buddhist temple. He uses his great strength to defeat an ogre who had been killing monks. It is revealed that the ogre was the ghost of a wicked servant of the temple (Watson,17). The boy later uses his strength to unblock water to a rice field. He then becomes an ordained monk named Dharma Master Dojo. The text tells us “No doubt he performed many good and powerful acts of karma in his previous lives and thus was able to acquire this kind of strength” (Watson, 18).

This story shows a mixing of Yokai and Shinto mythology with Buddhist doctrine. It is a thunder deity, a distinctly Shinto figure, who blesses the farmer with a son. The boy has a monstrous appearance with reptilian features, but this does not prevent him from accruing good karma. In fact, his appearance matters little in the story. The ogre in this tale is determined to be the ghost of a wicked servant who once served the temple. It can be assumed that it is because of the wicked nature of the servant and his accruing of bad karma that he materialized as an ogre ghost. In this sense, Buddhism offers an explanation for Yokai like ogres- they are created through accruelement of bad karma.

Despite the boy's atypical appearance and great strength, he is nonetheless able to practice Buddhism and become a lauded monk. His great strength is seen as a reward for the actions of his previous life. His origin is distinctly supernatural in a non-Buddhist way, but this

story is a distinctly Buddhist story. It places supernormal figures, like Yokai and Shinto deities, in a Buddhist cosmology.

The Tale of Tamamizu further illustrates this combination of Yokai in a Buddhist cosmology. In Japanese folklore, foxes are depicted as shape-shifting tricksters (Kimbrough and Shirane, 306). In *The Tale of Tamamizu*, a fox falls in love with a woman and takes the identity of a human woman in order to get closer to her. When the woman is in the garden one day, Tamamizu in fox form sees her and instantly falls in love. Reflecting on the situation, he says “For what sin in a past life have I been reborn like this, as an animal? (Kimbrough and Shirane, 307).” The trickster fox is a stock character in many Japanese myths and folklores. In this story, the fox archetype is also Buddhist. Tamamizu laments that his actions in a past life must be the reason he was born a Yokai and therefore unable to truly be with the woman he loves.

When disguising himself as a young woman, Tamamizu is taken in by a family. The adoptive mother falls ill and Tamamizu discovers the cause of the illness is a curse placed on her by an old fox. The old fox has cursed the mother because her father killed his child. Tamamizu sympathizes with the old fox, but warns that “being pulled by our karma, we wander lost through the Six Realms of Darkness (Kimbrough and Shirane, 319).” Tamamizu acknowledges that them being animals is because of their karma, but that should not dissuade them from planting “good karmic roots” to ensure a better rebirth; they could be reborn in the human form, which is the form of the Buddha (Kimbrough and Shirane, 319). This change in form would allow them to one day achieve Buddhahood. Tamamizu advises the old fox to not kill the mother, as the weight of that sin and the grief it would cause others would weigh heavy on him; it would accrue bad karma.

The old fox rebuffs the possibility that he could accrue good merit in this life. Tamamizu tells the tale of a great snake who heard the Lotus Sutra and was therefore reborn as an empress. Tamamizu further advises to dispel evil thoughts, cultivate a desire for enlightenment, and trust in Amida Buddha to ensure a good rebirth. He tells the old fox that taking the life of the woman to avenge his child would be evil and saving her would be good (Kimbrough and Shirane, 320). The old fox is convinced by Tamamizu's words and spares the woman. He asks Tamamizu to pray for him and resolves to become a monk in the mountains and recite the *nenbutsu* (Kimbrough and Shirane, 321).

Both of these foxes are Yokai, yet they are capable to understanding and preaching Buddhist doctrine. Tamamizu and the old fox are both aware that their current station in life is the result of the karma in their previous life. Through actions undertaken in their current life, even if they have Yokai forms, they can accrue good karma and be reborn at a higher station and potentially achieve Buddhahood.

The Tale of Tamamizu paints the Yokai as a sympathetic figure. The reader can understand his plight and relate to it. After all, the reader might have been a fox in a previous life and was only born a human this time due to accruing good merit. The desire of the foxes to both improve their behavior and accrue good karma is an admirable one. The possibility of one day achieving Buddhahood is not a possibility just for the foxes, but for the reader as well.

Buddhism did not build over the Shinto practices of Japan but incorporated them into the Buddhist cosmos. Yokai and Kami are still depicted as having powers, and in some cases being gods, but they are nonetheless subject to karmic retribution. Their place in samsara is the same as people. In a way, they are humanized. Additionally, the fact that Yokai are capable of self-improvement, accrual of good karma, and becoming buddhas further emphasizes that ability

within people since in a cosmic sense, people are above Kami. Buddhist cosmology and doctrine affected people's view of the supernatural and supernormal by placing Yokai and Kami on the same journey of self-improvement and enlightenment as humans.

Works Cited

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