

Imagining the Spirits of Deceased Pregnant Women: An Analysis of Illustrations of *Ubume* in Early Modern Japan

YASUI Manami*

In this paper, I explore how the deaths of pregnant women have been imagined and expressed in eighteenth and nineteenth century Japan. The spirits of deceased pregnant women, known as *ubume*, constituted a popular theme in *yōkai* and the supernatural, which many eighteenth-century artists depicted through woodblock prints. I explore several features of *ubume* in *yōkai* illustrations and discuss the cultural and social background of the people who imagined the appearance of the deceased pregnant woman. I hope to shed new light on early modern Japanese popular perspectives of life and death as they relate to childbirth. This issue connects with both religious practice and with legends of deceased pregnant women.

Kawanabe Kyōsai's illustrations feature bird-like *ubume*, clearly under Chinese influence. In order to clarify the confusion between the contrasting images of the *ubume* as a woman in Japan and as a bird in China, this paper turns to a detailed study of Chinese texts. In the seventeenth century, the Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan introduced the Chinese image to Japan, and connected it with the Japanese *ubume*, that is the *yōkai* as deceased pregnant woman or woman who died in childbirth. The early modern Japanese image of *ubume* thus developed into a hybrid bird-like woman. In Japan, after all, the *ubume* was already a popular motif. By focusing on images of *ubume*, I hope to advance the understanding of the attitudes of people in bygone ages not only towards women who had died while pregnant and those who had died during childbirth, but also towards the unborn child.

Keywords: *ubume*, *yōkai*, *yōkai* illustrations, afterlife, *mi-futatsu* (burial ritual), the Blood Pool Hell, *gubuniao*, *Honzō kōmoku*, *Wakan sansai zue*

Introduction

The spirits of women who die during late pregnancy or in childbirth are known as *ubume* (産女 or 姑獲鳥), a category of *yōkai* 妖怪, or supernatural being. *Ubume* are regarded as female, and their femininity is most apparent in that their death relates to pregnancy and childbirth. In this paper, I explore how people imagined and portrayed deceased pregnant women and their unborn fetuses by analyzing a selection of *ubume* illustrations from the latter half of the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century. In order to understand

the social and cultural background of *ubume*, I will discuss beliefs, legends, and burial customs as they relate to deceased pregnant women and women who died in childbirth. There is already important research focusing on *ubume* imagery. Kiba Takatoshi 木場貴俊, for example, has analyzed historical developments in *ubume* images from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. He has identified an “*ubume* code” of features common to all *ubume* pictures.¹ In her thought-provoking study of art history, Zilia Papp has traced the evolution of *ubume* images in contemporary media such as movies, animation, and novels featuring *yōkai*, back through to the Edo- and Meiji-period *yōkai* art form.² Shimazaki Satoko has pointed out the ubiquity of *ubume* in the theater and literature, and shows, for example, that they appear in almost all of Tsuruya Nanboku’s 鶴屋南北 (1755–1829) major ghost plays.³ Elsewhere, I have explored the relation between *ubume* images in *yōkai* representations and local burial customs that separate a fetus from the dead body of the mother.⁴ I have also analyzed individual transitions in *ubume* and *tengu* 天狗 images from early modern to contemporary Japan.⁵ As previous research shows, *ubume* became a popular motif in such media as *yōkai* illustrations, theater, and literature.⁶

My discussion has two primary purposes. The first is to trace historical documents relating to *gubuniao* 姑获鸟 (姑獲鳥) in China, which influenced the portrayal of *ubume*. *Gubuniao* were introduced to Japan in the tenth century, and again in the early seventeenth century through *Ben Cao Gang Mu* 本草綱目, known in Japan as *Honzō kōmoku* 本草綱目 and compiled in 1578 by Li Shizhen 李时珍.⁷ I analyze Chinese texts related to *gubuniao* to explore the process by which the *ubume* acquired bird-like characteristics.

The second purpose is to examine the *ubume*-related custom of *mi-futatsu* 身二つ, to understand better the social and cultural background of *ubume* images. The custom in question is burial for deceased pregnant women, which involved separating the fetus from the dead mother’s body. There was a belief that women who died during late pregnancy or childbirth would remain in the living realm after death as *ubume*, unless the fetus was ritually separated from them.⁸ Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken have analyzed legends of *ubume* and *kosodate yūrei* 子育て幽霊 (ghosts who provide candies and rice cakes for deceased children). They point out that some legends cling to an older idea that it was in fact the baby born in the grave that was to be feared rather than the ghost of the mother.

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1 Kiba 2010, p. 222.

2 Papp 2010, p. 22.

3 Shimazaki 2011, p. 209.

4 Yasui 2003a, Yasui 2003b.

5 Yasui 2015.

6 The popularity of *yōkai* today is reflected in the hosting of several international exhibitions of *yōkai* art. They include “Kyōi to kaii: Sōzōkai no ikimono tachi” 驚異と怪異：想像界の生きものたち; “Regnum Imaginarium: Realm of the Marvelous and Uncanny,” National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, 2019 (Yamanaka 2019); “Japan Supernatural,” Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, November 2019 to March 2020 (Eastburn 2019); and “Yōkai: Ghosts, Demons & Monsters of Japan,” Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA), Santa Fe, 2019 (Katz-Harris 2019), among others.

7 The first citation of *gubuniao* was in *Honzō wamyō* 本草和名 (918) by Fukae Sukehito 深江輔仁 (d.u.) and then in the medical text, *Ishinpō* 医心方, completed in 984 by Tanba Yasunaga 丹波康長 (912-995). See Kiba 2020, p. 264.

8 Yamaguchi 1953, Yasui 2003a, Itabashi 2000, Yasui 2003b, Williams 2008, Glassman 2008.

This is because the baby after birth remains an unritualized newcomer. Iwasaka and Toelken show the importance given to such rituals by the community.⁹ An analysis of images of *ubume* and their unborn children should lead to a better understanding of how notions surrounding the death of pregnant women and unborn children changed over time. This in turn will equip us to discuss unborn fetuses and deceased pregnant women in contemporary Japan.¹⁰

A “*Yōkai* Revolution” in the Latter Half of the Eighteenth Century

According to Komatsu Kazuhiko 小松和彦, who has conducted anthropological research into *yōkai* for over four decades, *yōkai* is an ambiguous term for both academics and laypeople.¹¹ Komatsu divides *yōkai* into three “domains”: *yōkai* as incidents or phenomena, *yōkai* as supernatural entities, and *yōkai* as depictions.¹² The third domain is the most relevant in terms of *ubume* illustrations. Komatsu points out that it was the naming of *yōkai* that led to their dissemination, and this in turn prompted groundbreaking change in the cultural history of *yōkai* in the Edo period (1603–1867). People of the era took great delight in inventing and naming new *yōkai* for specific events and phenomena, further developing them into a medium of entertainment.

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, as woodblock printing technology developed, artists began to depict *yōkai* in the form of mass-produced illustrated books, in addition to the earlier medium of *emaki* 絵巻, or picture scrolls. These printed collections became a popular form of entertainment, especially among people living in urban centers.¹³ Prior to the development of woodblock printing technology, many picture scrolls also depicted legends and tales of the common folk, including stories of confronting and defeating *yōkai*.¹⁴

Figure 1 is a graphic rendition of an *ubume* originally drawn by Toriyama Sekien 鳥山石燕 (1712–1788) in *Gazu hyakki yagyō* 画図百鬼夜行 (An illustrated catalogue of the Demon’s Night Parade, 1776), which is one of a series of collections.¹⁵ He was a prominent print designer trained in the Kanō 狩野 school, and this illustration is one of his more famous. There are two hundred different *yōkai* in his collection; each is labeled and often includes a brief description or commentary.

Kagawa Masanobu 香川雅信 has analyzed the new style of encyclopedic form manifested in *Gazu hyakki yagyō*, applying a scheme proposed by Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things*.¹⁶ Kagawa has spoken of an “Edo *yōkai* revolution,” and he points out that in the latter half of the eighteenth century, *Gazu hyakki yagyō* caused a great transformation in

9 Iwasaka and Toelken 1994, pp. 65–66.

10 In the early 1970s, *mizuko kuyō* 水子供養, the religious practice of holding memorial rites for fetuses lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion emerged. There is extensive research both in Japan and overseas on this issue. See for example LaFleur 1992, Morikuri 1995, Hardacre 1997, and Takahashi 1999. In addition, Suzuki Yuriko 鈴木由利子 has analyzed the current situation of *mizuko kuyō*. See Suzuki 2014.

11 Komatsu 2017, p. 12.

12 Komatsu 2017, p. 12.

13 Komatsu 2017, p. 19; Yumoto 2003, p. 4.

14 Komatsu 2017, p. 12.

15 See also *Konjaku gazu zoku hyakki* 今昔画図続百鬼 (1779), *Konjaku hyakki oni shūi* 今昔百鬼拾遺 (1781), and *Gazu Hyakki tsurezure bukuro* 画図百器徒然袋 (1784).

16 Foucault 1970.



Figure 1. *Ubume* illustrated by Toriyama Sekien, *Gazu hyakki yagyō* in 1778. Toriyama 2005, p. 35.

yōkai art, because Sekien had for the first time amalgamated a selection of *yōkai*, dedicated a single page to each one, and given to each a name, occasionally with a description.¹⁷ And Michael Dylan Foster maintains that the *Gazu hyakki yagyō* is the earliest manifestation of the encyclopedic form with *yōkai* as the exclusive object of cataloging.¹⁸

The encyclopedia was already well known owing to such precursors as *Kimmō zui* 訓蒙図彙 (1666) by Nakamura Tekisai 中村惕斎 (1629–1702) and *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会 (Illustrated Sino-Japanese encyclopedia of the three realms; d.u.) by Terajima Ryōan 寺島良安 (d.u.). These and other multivolume works became popular due both to their illustrations and to their role in society as “everyday encyclopedias.”¹⁹

Analysis of *Ubume* Illustrations

In this section, I analyze early modern images of *ubume* beginning with an illustration by Sekien (figure 1). My purpose is to draw out and compare several pertinent features. First, there is appearance. The *ubume* is wrapped in a white, blood-stained sheet from the waist down, standing on a narrow path near a river, her long black hair cascading down her back. She is bent over at the waist, clutching her newborn in her right arm. Her left arm is raised, her hand on her forehead in a state of despair or, perhaps, merely shielding her eyes from the driving rain. According to Kiba Takatoshi’s “*ubume* code,” *ubume* of the seventeenth century were often portrayed without the baby, simply wearing a white, blood-stained cloth wrapping from the waist down. White symbolized death, and blood symbolized birth.²⁰

17 Kagawa 2005.

18 Foster 2009, p. 55.

19 Marcon 2015, p. 113.

20 Kiba 2020, pp. 269–270.

Second, there is evidence here of folk customs as they relate to death. Traditionally, after an extraordinary death such as a suicide, a murder, or a death in childbirth, a special ceremony known as *nagare kanjō* 流灌頂 (flowing anointment) was performed next to a river.²¹ In the ritual practice of *nagare kanjō*, a small piece of cloth was stretched out between four waist-high poles driven into the ground. Buddhist scriptures were often written upon the cloth.²² Women who died in childbirth were believed to be bound for the Blood Pool Hell (*chi no ike jigoku* 血の池地獄), and the *nagare kanjō* was performed by the bereaved to ensure the dead woman was saved, and became a buddha (*jōbutsu* 成仏).²³ The Blood Pool Hell was the destination for women on account of the pollution of the female body, namely menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth. But, as I explain below, it was death in childbirth that was the deepest cause of pollution. Passersby, including those unrelated to the deceased, would scoop up some river water with a ladle and pour the water over the cloth. They did this until the color of the cloth, or the text written upon it, was washed away. The purpose was to appease the spirit of the dead woman, and to provide salvation for her in the afterlife. In the top left corner of Sekien's illustration, we can see the outline of a *nagare kanjō*, a regular feature of illustrations of *ubume*.

Third, there is water symbolism. Most *ubume* stand near a river and are rained upon. In Buddhist belief, there is the Sanzu River (Sanzu no kawa 三途の川), which must be crossed on the way to the afterlife. The river in *ubume* illustrations duly symbolizes the boundary between this world and the next, a liminal place in which the *ubume* exist. Fourth, there is the dead infant. It is worth noting that it is only the mother, not the infant, who becomes a *yōkai*. One possible reason for this is to be found in folkloric notions of the afterlife. Some, like Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962), claim that funerals for babies and infants in Japan were traditionally different from funerals for adults.²⁴ This could explain why the infant is incorporated into the *ubume*, and why the tragic death does not lead to the creation of two separate *yōkai*.

Variety of *Ubume* Illustrations

How did the image of *ubume* develop from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century? Figure 2 shows an example of an *ubume* from *Hyakkai zukan* 百怪図鑑 (Encyclopedia of one hundred mysteries, 1737) by Sawaki Sūshi 佐脇嵩之 (1707–1772). *Hyakkai zukan* is a picture scroll depicting thirty *yōkai*; alongside each is its name or title, giving to the scroll a kind of encyclopedic quality. According to the postscript, this is a duplicate made in 1737 from an original drawn by Kanō Motonobu 狩野元信 (1476–1559) in the fifteenth or sixteenth century.²⁵ It is uncertain whether Motonobu actually drew *Hyakkai zukan* at this time, but it is surely the case that Motonobu's *Hyakki yagyō* picture scroll, which Toriyama Sekien says he consulted, might have been *Hyakkai zukan* or other similar scrolls, which Kagawa

21 Aoyagi 1985, p. 425.

22 According to reports from 1930, this custom was also called *kawa segaki* 川施餓鬼 and *mizu segaki* 水施餓鬼. See Onshi Zaidan Boshi Aiikukai 1975, pp. 324–332.

23 Manabe 1994, p. 489; Glassman 2008, p. 185. Kawauchi 2016.

24 Yanagita (1946) 1962, p. 146. Scholars today criticize the claim made by Yanagita Kunio that, until the age of seven, a child belongs to the gods (*nanatsu mae wa kami no uchi* 七つ前は神のうち). See Shibata 2008.

25 Fukuoka-shi Hakubutsukan 2012, p. 102.

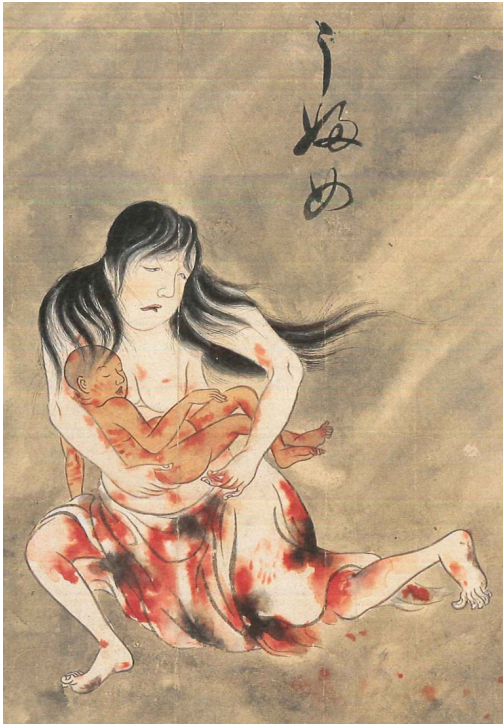


Figure 2. *Ubume* painted by Sawaki Sūshi, *Hyakkai zukan*, 1737. Fukuoka City Museum 2012, p. 109.

Figure 3. *Ubume* and *yukionna* by Koikawa Harumachi in *Bakemono shiuchi hyōbanki*, 1777. National Diet Library Digital Collection. <https://www.dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/9892372> (eighth frame).



Masanobu named *bakemono zukushi* 化物づくし picture scrolls. Sekien undoubtedly took many ideas from *Hyakkai zukan* and incorporated them into his *Gazu hyakki yagyō*.²⁶

While *Hyakkai zukan* is an illustrated handscroll, it also incorporates the characteristics of an encyclopedia, depicting thirty different *yōkai* in vivid color, giving to each a rich individuality, unlike the black and white woodblock prints. This marks the start of a transition in *yōkai* art from picture scrolls such as *Hyakkai zukan* to books consisting of multiple pages, like *Gazu hyakki yagyō*. In *Hyakkai zukan*, the *ubume* wears a blood-stained cloth and holds a child, but the child appears to be two- or three-years old. Moreover, this *ubume* is in the act of fleeing. Sekien depicted his own *ubume*, standing near a river, holding a baby, not fleeing like the one in Motonobu's piece.

Figure 3 is an *ubume* with a “snow woman” (*yuki onna* 雪女) from *Bakemono shiuchi hyōbanki* 妖怪仕内評判記 by Koikawa Harumachi 恋川春町 (1744–1789), a disciple of Toriyama Sekien. This 1777 work, contemporaneous with Sekien's *Gazu hyakki yagyō*, belongs to the genre of *kibyōshi* 黄表紙 or illustrated fiction, the major features of which were humor and parody.²⁷ Adam L. Kern points out that *kibyōshi* merit attention if only because of their megalithic presence in the popular culture of late eighteenth-century Japan.²⁸ Given the popularity of the genre, their images of *ubume* must have fired readers' imaginations.

Bakemono shiuchi hyōbanki does not have an overarching storyline, but in this illustration the head of the *yōkai*, Ōnyūdō 大入道, has called an assembly of various kinds of *yōkai* to practice their transformation from worldly form into *yōkai*. The scenes are a parody of kabuki rehearsals. The text explains that the *ubume* is a *yūrei*, and hence has no feet.²⁹ It continues in a satirical manner to comment on and evaluate the *yōkai*'s transformations. The author, Koikawa Harumachi, evaluates these two *yōkai* as “superior, third class.” Both *ubume* and another famous female *yōkai*, *yuki onna*, appear in front of a handsome samurai, trying to converse with him, but he ignores them both. The text in the picture states, “*Ubume* is a kind of *yūrei*. The lower body of the *ubume* is bloody; she is holding a baby and asking passersby to take it. But rarely does anyone take the baby. *Ubume* are truly frightening *yōkai*.”³⁰ The *yuki onna* calls out to the samurai, “Hey, Mr. Samurai, come warm me up,” but he ignores her. *Ubume* were already the target of parody soon after Sekien printed his drawing in 1776. *Bakemono shiuchi hyōbanki* captures their utter state of despair.

In the Edo period, Katsukawa Shunshō (Haruaki) 勝川春章 (1726–1792) depicted *ubume* in his *Hyaku bobogatari* 百慕々語. *Hyaku bobogatari*, literally meaning “One hundred Tales of the Vagina,” is the first book of erotic prints (*shunpon* 春本 or *enpon* 艶本) all of whose characters were *yōkai*.³¹ According to Timothy Clark and Andrew Gerstle, “With the increasingly intricate connections between *shunga* and other forms of popular art and literature in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries, rhetorical devices such as playful,

26 Kagawa 2005, p. 126.

27 Kabat 2001, pp. 34–44.

28 Kern 2006, p. 37.

29 *Yūrei*, usually translated into English as “ghost,” are another type of *yōkai*. The large number of extant *yūrei* stories, paintings, performances, and novels has confused many into thinking of them as a distinct category. See Komatsu 2017, p. 137.

30 National Diet Library Digital Collection. <https://www.dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/9892372> (eighth frame).

31 Suzuki 2017, p. 39.



Figure 4. *Ubume* by Katsukawa Shunshō (Haruaki), *Hyaku bobo monogatari*, 1771.
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/edit/conditions-dutilisation-des-contenus-de-gallica>.



Figure 5. *Ubume* drawn by Kawanabe Kyōsai. *Gyōsai hyakki gadan* 暁齋百鬼面談, 1890. International Research Center for Japanese Studies Library. Database of Folklore Illustrations, International Research Center for Japanese Studies. https://shinku.nichibun.ac.jp/esoshi/picture_spread.php?id=419&from=sr&small=pictures/148/S148_027.jpg&disp=JP (twenty sixth frame).

sometimes satirical, parody come to the fore.”³² As for Katsukawa’s choice of title, *Hyaku bobogatari*, there was during the Edo period the custom of friends gathering to exchange *kaidan* 怪談 or mysterious tales. They would sit in a circle with one hundred lit wicks in an oil lamp. Taking turns to tell ghost stories, they would extinguish a wick at the end of each story until none were left. Katsukawa’s series, whose title was clearly a play on this custom, was published five years prior to Toriyama Sekien’s seminal *ubume* piece. *Shunga* artists were always looking to push the boundaries of their art form, and it was only a matter of time before they incorporated *yōkai* and *yūrei*. Figure 4 depicts an *ubume* scenario with blood-stained white clothes, a *nagare kanjō*, rain, and long black hair. However, the *ubume*’s face is a vagina and, instead of her dead baby, she cradles a phallus.³³ This particular piece, printed in the latter half of the eighteenth century, is more provocative than erotic, and it was surely yet another attempt to push back further the boundaries of *shunga*.

We have so far traced various *ubume* pictures in the Edo period, mainly in the eighteenth century. All of them imagined a woman holding her baby. Figure 5 is an *ubume* drawn by Kawanabe Kyōsai 河鍋曉斎 (1831–1889), a prominent *ukiyo-e* print designer—“the last virtuoso in traditional Japanese painting”—who flourished in the mid-to-late nineteenth century.³⁴ In 1868, when the Tokugawa shogunate was overthrown, Kyōsai was thirty-seven years old, and already renowned for his *kyōga* 狂画 (crazy pictures) and *nishikie* 錦絵 prints.³⁵

The noteworthy point about Kyōsai’s *ubume* is that the arms of the woman seem to be covered in feathers, symbolizing a bird. Kyōsai knew that in China *ubume* were to some extent related to the shape of birds. In trying to express this, he invented a hybrid.

Guhuoniao: The Image of *Ubume* in China

To explain the particular form of the *ubume* image, and the attitudes towards women, disease, and death it embodies, it is instructive to trace the creation of Chinese *guhuoniao* and their introduction into Japan. In this section, I also seek to clarify the differences between Chinese and Japanese images of *ubume*. Significantly, Toriyama Sekien stated that for his *Gazu hyakki yagyō*, he had referred to both Kanō Motonobu’s *Hyakki yagyō* and *Sengai kyō* 山海經 (Ch. *Shan hai jing* 山海经) from China.³⁶ However, direct influences of *Sengai kyō* on Sekien’s *Gazu hyakki yagyō* are not obvious.³⁷ I refrain therefore from analyzing the extent to which *Sengai kyō* influenced *ubume* illustrations in Japan.

Guhuoniao were first recorded in a legendary work named *Xuan Zhong Ji* 玄中记 compiled in the third or fourth century, and attributed to Guo Pu 郭璞 (276–324 AD). *Guhuoniao* were ghosts or deities in the shape of birds when cloaked in feathers, and in the shape of women without them. In his discussion of *guhuoniao*, Guo Pu mentions neither the death of women during pregnancy or childbirth, nor women with infants.

The first description connecting *guhuoniao* to women who died in childbirth came in 739 *Bencao Shiyi* 本草拾遗 (A supplement to materia medica) by Chen Cang Qi

32 Clark and Gerstle 2013, p. 22.

33 Suzuki 2017, p. 41.

34 Clark 1993, p. 16.

35 Yamaguchi and Oikawa 1998, p. 295.

36 *Sengai kyō*, a Chinese geographic compendium compiled between the fourth and the first century B.C., contains many figures of unusual shapes.

37 Kagawa 2005, pp. 126–127.

陈藏器.³⁸ The original *Bencao Shiyi* is no longer extant, but the *Bencao Shiyi Ji Shi* 本草拾遗辑释 (Compilation and interpretation of a supplement to materia medica) by Shang Zhi Jun 尚志钧 included a description of the *gubuo* 姑获 in section 522, on birds and beasts.³⁹ The text states that the *gubuo*, were also known as *rumuniao* 乳母鸟, stole people's souls and became manifest at the death of a woman in childbirth. *Bencao Shiyi* was perhaps an important turning point in the solidification of the definition of the Chinese *gubuniao*. Duan Chengshi 段成式 (800s?–863 AD) in his *You Yang Za Zu* 酉阳杂俎, a collection of natural knowledge and folklore tales, also described *gubuniao*, stating that they are incarnated from women who died in childbirth.⁴⁰

In 1578, Li Shizhen 李时珍 compiled *Ben Cao Gang Mu* (Jp. *Honzō kōmoku* 本草綱目; Compendium of materia medica). It was a large encyclopedia of 1,903 entries in fifty-two fascicles, featuring medicinal plants and herbs and sections on mountain-dwelling animals and birds. Li included *gubuniao* as well, categorizing them in the bird section (*kin bu* 禽部), with the following description:

Cang Qi 藏器 said: *Gubuniao* can take away human spirits. *Xuan Zhong Ji* recorded: *Gubuniao* belongs to the ghost-deity kind. It turns into a flying bird when wearing feathers (garments), and into a woman when not. It is said to be formed from a woman who died giving birth. Thus, it has two breasts on its chest, and likes taking away the children of others and raising them by itself. Those who have a child at home should not dry the child's clothes outside during the night. For the bird flies at night and will mark the child's clothes with blood. Thereafter, the child will be immediately attacked by diseases like epilepsy and infantile malnutrition, the "disease without reasons."

The important point here is the connection between *gubuniao* and fatal pediatric diseases such as epilepsy and malnutrition. Medical books like *Ben Cao Gang Mu* imply a belief among people that these pediatric problems may be caused by drying their children's clothes at night. Even now, people in some places in China follow the superstition that the clothes of children should not be dried outside during the night.⁴¹

Interweaving: The Emergence of *Ubume* in Japan

Knowledge of the *gubuniao* was introduced into Japan at the start of the seventeenth century mainly owing to *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, which was imported through Nagasaki. Known in Japan as *Honzō kōmoku*, it came to exert a huge influence on scholars of herbalism (*honzōgaku* 本草学). The famous Confucian scholar Hayashi Razan 林羅山 (1583–1657) encountered *Honzō kōmoku* shortly after its introduction. Hayashi later compiled the *Tashiki-ben* 多識編, which involved him putting a Japanese name to each object in *Honzō kōmoku*. The *Tashiki-ben* exerted a strong influence on the development

38 Yang 楊 2017, p.185. Chen Shi Yun 陳世昀 has also explored various descriptions of *gubuniao* historically, and specified the relation between *gubuniao* and women who die in childbirth. Chen 2017, pp.79-80.

39 Shang Zhi Jun 2002, p.219. Shang indexed the *gubuniao* 姑获鸟 as *gubuo* 姑获. The two words are synonymous; *niao* means bird.

40 Xu 2017, p. 289. Yang 2017, p.185.

41 When I presented a paper on *ubume* in 2019 in Shanghai, a Chinese lady, around fifty years old, told me she now finally understood why her mother and relatives always said not to hang out children's clothes at night.

of the study of *materia medica* in Japan.⁴² In his revised version of *Tashiki-hen*, the *Shinkan tashiki-hen* 新刊多識編 compiled in 1631, Hayashi equated *gubuniao* with already existing entities of Japanese oral tradition, namely the *ubume* and the legendary *nue* 鵺 bird.⁴³ He used the original three Chinese characters of *ko* 姑 (the husband's mother), *kaku* 獲 (seize), and *chō* 鳥 (bird), and annotated them as *ubumedori* or *nue*. Hayashi was the first to read these three Chinese characters as *ubumedori*.

Why did Hayashi read the characters 姑獲鳥 as *ubumedori*? As Kiba Takatoshi points out, Hayashi Razan, in his *Nozuchi* 野槌, stated that *nue*, known as a ghost bird, was in fact a real bird, a *toratsugumi* (white's thrush) associated with bad fortune because it cried at night.⁴⁴ In this respect, it resembles the *gubuniao*. The commonality between the *gubuniao* and the *ubume* of Japanese oral tradition is that both come into being after the death of a pregnant woman. Due to these similarities, Hayashi conflated the Chinese *gubuniao*, the *nue*, and *ubume* and assigned the Japanese word *ubumedori*. This explains why *ubume* in Japan began to be written as 姑獲鳥 in addition to 産女, although the legends in Japan and China were wholly distinct and unrelated.

The Illustration of *Ubumedori*, the *Ubume* Bird

Terajima Ryōan published *Wakan sansai zue* and cited the Chinese encyclopedia *San Cai Tu Hui* (Jp. *Sansai zue* 三才図会; Collected illustrations of the three realms) with its three subsections of “Nature” (*ten* 天), “Land” (*chi* 地), and “People” (*hito* 人). Matthias Hayek has pointed out that *Wakan sansai zue* also drew on the *Honzō komoku* in terms of structure, as well as the original *Sansai zue*. This was compiled by Wang Qi 王圻 and his son Wang Siyi 王思义 and completed in 1607 in 106 volumes.⁴⁵ In *Wakan sansai zue*, Ryōan explained each word with Chinese examples and illustrations, and added his own Japanese examples. This collection not only offers the reader detailed information on aspects of Chinese culture, but it also opens up a window onto Edo culture. As Matthias Hayek shows, at the beginning of each category in *Wakan sansai zue*, there are the most representative and normative things, and in the last part there are *yōkai*-like entities, which were far from the norm.⁴⁶ For example, in the last part of *kinbu* 禽部 (section on birds), there are ten *reichō* 靈鳥 (spiritual birds), from *hōō* 鳳凰 to *nue* 鵺 (鵺), including *ubumedori*. This is the text accompanying the illustrations (figure 6).

Ubumedori 姑獲鳥 (also known as *yakō yūjo* 夜行遊女, *tentei shōjo* 天帝少女, *nyūbochō* 乳母鳥, *iki* 讒譖, *mukochō* 無辜鳥, *inhi* 隱飛, *kichō* 鬼鳥, *kousei* 鈎星).

Honzō kōmoku describes the following: *Ubume* belong to the category of *kijin* 鬼人, or ghost-deity. *Ubume* can devour the spirits of people. They were frequently seen in Jingzhou (荊州, Jp. Keishū). They turn into flying birds when wearing feathered garments and into women when not. They were formed from women who died immediately after giving birth. Thus, they have two breasts. They favor grabbing the children of others and raising them by themselves. Parents who have a child at home

42 Kiba 2020, p. 102.

43 Kiba 2020, p. 268.

44 *Nozuchi* is Hayashi's annotated edition of the *Tsurezuregusa* (*Essays in Idleness*).

45 Hayek 2018

46 Hayek 2018, p. 96.



Figure 6. *Ubume* in *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会, by Terajima Ryōan. National Diet Library Digital Collection. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/2569727?tocOpened=1> (sixteenth frame).

should not dry the child's clothes outside during the night. The bird flies at night and will mark (the clothes) with blood. Thereafter, the child will be immediately attacked by diseases like *kyōkan* 驚癇 (epilepsy) or *kanshitsu* 疳疾 (infantile malnutrition). These are diseases without reason (*mukokan* 無辜). The birds appear only as female, never male. They fly and hurt people during the night in the seventh and eighth lunar calendar months.

Comments: *Ubume*, commonly referred to as *ubumedori*, were said to be formed from women who died after giving birth. This is a farfetched idea. Although it is said that there are lots of these birds in Jingzhou, China, and on the coast of Saikai 西海, the western sea of our country, I believe them to be a different type of bird, born of *indoku* 陰毒 (toxic gloom). People in Kyushu say that when leaving their residences on a dark, drizzly night, every now and then, they see will o' the wisp (the fire of burning phosphor), and this is a sign of the birds' presence. The birds are similar in appearance and size to seagulls, and sound like seagulls as well. They can change shape into a woman bringing forth a child. In this form, whenever they meet a passerby, they plea for them to carry the child for them. If the passerby flees in fear, the *ubume* will become angry and inflict on the passerby a strong cold and a high fever leading to death. If the passerby is brave and strong and promises to carry the child, there will be no harm. When



Figure 7. *Ubume* in *Tōsho zōho kinmōzui* 頭書增補訓蒙圖彙, an encyclopedia with illustrations edited by Nakamura Tekisai, 1695. National Diet Library Digital Collection. <https://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/11446236> (fifteenth frame).

the passerby nears his home, he may feel the weight of the child on his back lighten before it disappears completely. In the area in and around Kinai 畿内, nothing like this has ever been heard of, although there are shapeshifting foxes and raccoons.⁴⁷

It is clear that *ubumedori* came from the description in *Honzō kōmoku*, and were considered as demons (*kijin* 鬼神), similar to *ubume*.⁴⁸ Ryōan thought it farfetched that in *Honzō kōmoku*, *gubuniao* appeared from the spirit of a woman who had died in childbirth. He insisted that *ubume* were a kind of bird living in both China and Japan, and that these birds appeared in places saturated with *indoku*.⁴⁹ Ryōan used yin-yang theories to explain *ubume* as born of a “toxic gloom” in a place full of “gloom” (*inki* 陰気). In this way, Ryōan placed *ubume* in an ordered and comprehensible realm of thought, explaining *ubume* as birds and illustrating them as such. Importantly though, there were no illustrations of *gubuniao* in Chinese documents such as *Ben Cao Gang Mu*. Figure 7 is another illustration of *ubume* found in the “birds” section (*kinrui* 禽類, volume 13) of *Tōsho zōho Kinmō zui* 頭書增補訓蒙圖彙 (1695).

Burial and the Fear of *Ubume*

Edo-period Japanese of all classes enjoyed *ubume* illustrations as entertainment. At the level of religious practice, however, there were specific burial customs to be followed for a deceased pregnant woman or a woman who died during childbirth. These arose in order to cope with extraordinary deaths, such as suicides or murders, and prevent the spirit casting curses on the living. One traditional custom, practiced widely throughout early modern

47 *Wakan sansai zue* 和漢三才図会 by Terajima Ryōan. National Diet Library Digital Collection.

48 *Kijin* is a referent to the overarching category of all things demon-like. See Koyasu 1992.

49 On this point, see Hayek 2018, p. 100.

Japan, was to open the abdomen of the deceased woman, remove the fetus, and bury the two bodies together in the same grave. The custom of fetus removal before burial was sometimes referred to as *mi-futatsu* 身二つ or “separating the two,” *mi* meaning “body” and *futatsu* meaning “two.”⁵⁰ Folklore research has revealed that in some areas, people believed that this burial custom prevented the spirit of a deceased pregnant woman becoming an *ubume*, wandering near her house, and bringing bad fortune on the household.⁵¹

One reason for removing the fetus from a deceased woman’s body related to the belief that it was a great sin for the woman to die during late pregnancy or childbirth. The custom offered the woman’s spirit a means of achieving salvation and avoiding the fate of the Blood Pool Hell, or, indeed, becoming an evil, haunting spirit, such as an *ubume*. This belief was influenced by the *Blood-bowl Sutra* (*Ketsubonkyō* 血盆經; Ch. *Xuepen jing*), composed in China in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Hank Glassman points out that the idea of a special Blood Pool Hell for women had become established in ritual practice by the sixteenth century in Japan, although the notion of the Blood-bowl Sutra was known from the middle of the Muromachi period (1392–1568).⁵²

According to Tsutsumi Kunihiro 堤邦彦, Sōtōshū 曹洞宗 Buddhist monks began to conduct alternative customs symbolically separating mother and fetus, instead of physically opening the abdomen of the deceased woman and removing the fetus.⁵³ One such custom using *kirigami* 切紙 (cut paper with mystical spells inscribed on it) appeared between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. One example, the *do kaitai mōja kirigami* 度懷胎亡者切紙, detailed magical methods that were as effective as fetus removal.⁵⁴ According to Duncan Ryuken Williams, *kirigami* rituals enabled proper funerary attention and signified the “birth of the child” in the coffin or the “expelling of the fetus.”⁵⁵

However, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and indeed in the early twentieth century, *mi-futatsu* customs were still practiced in rural areas, sometimes supported by medical physicians, based on the knowledge and methods held by the Kagawa school inherited from Kagawa Gen’etsu 賀川玄悦 (1700–1777). In his *Sanron* 産論, Kagawa described a method for saving the mothers by means of an operation on their unborn babies. Such practices were already widespread in the eighteenth century, and well known among medical physicians.

In the early twentieth century, it was still not uncommon for a pregnant woman to die before, during, or immediately after, childbirth. The maternal mortality rate, which was 463.5 per 100,000 live births in 1900, decreased to 176.1 in 1950.⁵⁶ This was still relatively high compared to 83.3 in the USA at the same time.⁵⁷ By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *mi-futatsu* ritual had all but disappeared in Japan. My research reveals that

50 I have discussed this burial custom and associated legends and beliefs in previous papers. In addition, I have analyzed the last practice of this custom which took place in 1950. See Yasui 2003a, Yasui 2003b, Yasui 2014.

51 Onshi Zaidan Boshi Aiiiku kai 1975.

52 Glassman 2008, p. 177.

53 Tsutsumi 1993. The noted Sōtō monk Menzan Zuihō 面山瑞方 (1683–1769) criticized *mi-futatsu* removal practice. See Williams 2008, p. 224.

54 Tsutsumi 1993, pp. 44–45. Ishikawa 1987, pp. 185–186.

55 Williams 2008, p. 224.

56 It finally dropped to 6.6 in 2000. See Boshi Eisei Kenkyūkai 2001.

57 Maternal Mortality, Women’s Health USA 2009. [https://mchb.hrsa.gov/whusa09/hstat/mh/pages/237mm.html#:~:text=The%20maternal%20mortality%20rate%20has,1990%20\(8.2%20per%20100%2C000.](https://mchb.hrsa.gov/whusa09/hstat/mh/pages/237mm.html#:~:text=The%20maternal%20mortality%20rate%20has,1990%20(8.2%20per%20100%2C000.)



Figure 8. *Ubume* by Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎, in Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴. *Beibei kyōdan* 皿皿郷談. Waseda University Library collection. <https://www.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kotenseki/html/>.

the last physical removal of the fetus was conducted in 1950, as reported by Yamaguchi Yaichirō (1902–2000).⁵⁸ I conducted interviews with women who were involved, and with the obstetricians at hospitals who had cut the abdomen of the deceased pregnant woman to remove the fetus from the body.⁵⁹ This example shows that belief in *ubume* still existed in 1950. The fact is that the family were more concerned about preventing the appearance of an *ubume* rather than grieving for the loss of life.

Conclusion

Shimazaki Satoko has pointed out that, in the late Edo period, the image of the *ubume* as a bird became more popular and was embedded in both drama and fiction.⁶⁰ She introduces a frontispiece (*shūzō* 繡像) by Katsushika Hokusai 葛飾北斎 (1760–1849) for Kyokutei Bakin 曲亭馬琴's *Beibei kyōdan* 皿皿郷談 (A country tale of two sisters, 1815), depicting an avian *ubume* standing in the right side of the picture (figure 8). This is the ghost of a woman who has come to ask a man to hold her baby. Shimazaki points out that here, in a visual fusion of the two motifs, the *ubume* as a bird is a perfect symbolic representation of the ghost.⁶¹

This paper has analyzed several images of *ubume* in *yōkai* illustrations depicted by *ukiyo-e* 浮世絵 print designers in the latter half of the eighteenth century, the age of the “*yōkai* revolution.” For example, Toriyama Sekien depicted *ubume* in his *Gazu hyakki yagyō* by using elements synonymous with *ubume*, based on the customs and folk beliefs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These visual motifs included the *ubume* with long black hair, standing by a river, holding a baby, and the practice of a *nagare kanjō*. However, artists

58 Yamaguchi 1953.

59 Yasui 2003b, Yasui 2014.

60 Shimazaki 2011, pp. 223–224.

61 Shimazaki 2011, p. 224.



Figure 9. *Ubume* drawn by Kawanabe Kyōsai. In *Mono to zuzō kara saguru kai, yōkai no sekai* モノと図像から探る怪異・妖怪の世界. Yasui 2015, frontispiece.



Figure 10. *Sai no kawara no zu* 賽之河原図, by Santō Kyōden. *Honchō sui bodai* (*Mukashigatari Inazuma Byōshi* 昔話稲妻表紙), Yūhōdō, 1913.

were not always able to depict all the characteristics of *ubume* in their pictures, so naturally they chose an element easy to understand, namely the mother holding a baby. Some *ubume* illustrations in the sixteenth century, for example, depicted a woman with no baby, but in these cases specific stories accompanied illustrations. This suggests that even if the woman was not holding a baby, the texts alone would have revealed her to readers and viewers as an *ubume*.

Some *ukiyo-e* artists tried to invent their own *ubume*, using images of birds that originated with the Chinese *gubunioniao*. As Shimazaki pointed out, avian depictions of *ubume* had already become popular, so illustrators were free to embellish upon this motif. The genesis of these bird-like *ubume* images was Hayashi Razan's conflation of Chinese *gubunioniao* and Japanese *ubume*. No illustrators depicted the *ubume* just as a bird though; rather, they favored hybrid images. Due to the established belief that *ubume* manifested in a female form, along with *mi-futatsu* burial practices, people in Japan invented images of *ubume* as a woman rather than as a bird.

Chinese people by contrast associated birds flying and squawking at night with infantile diseases, drawing on Li Shizhen's sixteenth-century *Ben Cao Gang Mu*. In addition, we also saw above that the *Xuan Zhong Ji*, compiled in the third or fourth century, did not relate *gubunioniao* to the death of women during pregnancy or childbirth. Descriptions of *gubunioniao* sometimes warn that children can suffer various diseases if their clothes are left out at night, since a *gubunioniao* might mark it with blood. The image of the *gubunioniao* as a bird served to remind people of pediatric diseases, which is important in the context of *Ben Cao Gang Mu*, which imparted knowledge of nature, medicinal herbs, and treatments. We can thus confirm that the *ubume* in Japan and *gubunioniao* in China were different, and that it was after Hayashi Razan's conflation that hybrid images of the two occurred, leading to an appreciation of *ubume* as entertainment.

Figure 9 is another of Kawanabe Kyōsai's *ubume*.⁶² It is not a bird but a woman holding a baby. However, above her there is a *reika* 靈火 (*reien* 靈炎) representing a person's spirit, so the image seems to be a skyborne *ubume*. In addition, her posture is like that of a bird flying. Kyōsai invents an *ubume* here by fusing a woman and a bird. The images of *ubume* in *yōkai* hint at popular perspectives on women who die during late pregnancy and childbirth, as well as on unborn babies. Wakita Haruko 脇田晴子 has pointed out that people in the sixteenth century regarded the fetus as a life separate from the mother.⁶³ And, according to Sawayama Mikako 沢山美果子, people in the eighteenth century started to regard the fetus in its fifth month as a human being. She reaches this conclusion from her analysis of images of the developing fetus in *Onna chōhōki* 女重宝記, which shows the monthly development of the fetus in the womb.⁶⁴ The shape of the fetus here is of course not the shape of a real fetus visible in ultrasound tests today, but the shape of a child. Furthermore, the *Honchō sui bodai* 本朝醉菩薩 (figure 10) depicts unborn fetuses crawling with lotus leaves on their heads symbolizing the placenta, together with other two-or-three-year-old children.⁶⁵ Such

62 This picture is to be dated after 1871, when he started using the signature that can be seen here.

63 Wakita 1985.

64 Sawayama 1998, pp. 265–266.

65 *Honchō sui bodai* is a novel of the Edo period by Santō Kyōden 山東京伝 (1761–1816) with illustrations by Utagawa Toyokuni 歌川豊国 (1769–1825).

depictions demonstrate that there were differences in recognition of what constituted an unborn baby and a dead child in early modern Japan.

Popular perspectives on the unborn baby or fetus have changed drastically from early modern to modern times, and to the present day, when ultrasound testing provides a clear image of the fetus. Through increased medical knowledge and technological advancements, the infant and maternal mortality rates have continued to decline.

In such a situation, there has in recent years been an increase in perinatal bereavement care in the obstetric field for mothers and their families after miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death.⁶⁶ As previously stated, *mizuko kuyō*, the practice of holding memorial rites for fetuses lost through miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion, emerged in the early 1970s.⁶⁷ The biggest change since 1950 is that people's attention has shifted from the spirit of the deceased mother to that of the deceased infant. This is a matter I shall return to in a separate paper.

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⁶⁶ Yasui 2019, pp. 139–141.

⁶⁷ See above, note 10.

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