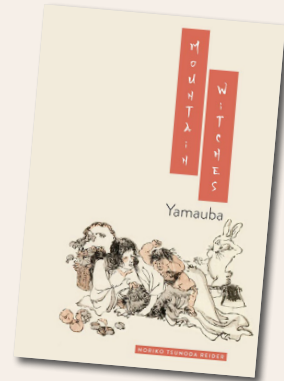


BOOK REVIEW

Mountain Witches: Yamauba

By Noriko Tsunoda Reider

Utah State University Press, 2021
224 pages.



Reviewed by SAKA Chihiro

Noriko Tsunoda Reider's *Mountain Witches: Yamauba* focuses on complex representations of the mysterious mountain women, *yamauba*, and covers a wide range of expressions including literary and folk narratives, religious beliefs, performances, visual imagery, and popular culture. *Yamauba* appear in folktales familiar to many Japanese, and their portrayal in the Noh play *Yamauba*, for example, has received a great deal of scholarly attention. However, this book is the first comprehensive investigation in English of *yamauba* in all their diversity and in the narrative transformations and imagery related to them. Reider explores how *yamauba* developed from *oni* (ogre) archetypes, demonstrating the process of the persona's recreation and reinterpretation over time.

As Reider states, *yamauba*, as the Other constrained by gender norms and the social expectations of the secular world, embody the ambivalent status of Japanese women in history and modern society. In this regard, they are an intriguing subject for scholars concerned with women, gender, and sexuality, and this book will certainly serve their interests. Reider's book sheds light on underexamined aspects of *yamauba* as they appear in multiple cultural spheres, and it will appeal to a diverse readership: scholars of Japanese literature, folk studies, and art history as well as those interested in contemporary Japanese culture.

The book consists of six chapters along with an introduction and conclusion. Each chapter highlights selected attributes and aspects of *yamauba*, showing their interconnections. Some attributes are well known and common to many *yamauba* examples, while others are less conspicuous and can be found only in specific cases. For example, a *yamauba*'s duality featured in chapter 1 and discussed in other chapters may be her most prominent and fascinating feature, since it distinguishes her from a simply frightful woman. On the one hand, her cannibalism and transformative ability probably originate in the anthropophagous nature of *oni*, who devour human flesh and change their appearance to deceive victims. On the other hand, a *yamauba* sometimes aids people in escaping from danger and bestows good fortune such as wealth, a blissful marriage, and safe childbirth. This positive, benevolent aspect may derive from her archetypal nature as a goddess. Reider summarizes this dual nature of *yamauba* by observing, "[She] brings death and destruction

as well as wealth and fertility, possesses the duality of good and evil, and has the power of transformation, able to manifest herself as an ugly crone or a young beauty” (p. 52).

In chapter 6, Reider investigates the contemporary adaptations of *yamauba*, thus distinguishing her book from previous studies that have focused primarily on representations in literary narratives and folktales. Reider even extends her analysis to the subculture of young Japanese women who came to be called *yamauba gyaru* (mountain-witch girls) in the 1990s. Their unique appearance, characterized by a dark tan, contrasting makeup, fair-colored hair, and platform shoes was a communal symbol that enabled them to establish a certain cultural position and acquire a sense of fellowship. Their collective behavior did not correspond to the image of independent, autonomous *yamauba* in folktales. However, neither traditional *yamauba* nor contemporary *yamauba gyaru* adhere to the normative concept of female beauty and established social and cultural expectations. In addition to *yamauba gyaru*, whom Reider defines as folkloresque or “yamaubaesque,” she discusses contemporary instances of adaptation including Yubaba in the film *Spirited Away* (2001), *yamauba* in the manga *Hyakkiyakō shō* (1995–) by Ima Ichiko, Tsuya in Setouchi Jakuchu’s novel *Yamauba* (2015), and *yamauba* in Itō Hiromi’s narrative poem *Watashi wa Anjuhimeko de aru* (1993). Although the image of folkloric *yamauba* is superimposed on these characters, they are reframed in the context of contemporary culture.

Several chapters investigate *yamauba* through such diverse aspects as her association with childbirth, aging, and dementia, as well as her ability to fly, to read people’s minds, and to foresee the future. I was most fascinated by chapter 4, with its focus on Yasaburō Basa, the folk figure who embodies features of *yamauba* and the Buddhist deity Datsueba, and eventually came to be worshipped as the goddess Myōtara Tennyō. According to one legend, after Yasaburō Basa’s identity as the flesh-eating hag was revealed by her son, she flew to Mt. Yahiko where she resided under a large tree hung with the clothes of people she had devoured. This representation overlaps with that of Datsueba, who takes the clothes of the deceased by the Sanzu River, which people cross after death, and hangs them on tree branches. Eventually, a Buddhist monk helped Yasaburō Basa amend her conduct, and she became Myōtara Tennyō, guardian of virtuous people and scourge of evildoers. Arguing that Yasaburō Basa/Myōtara Tennyō, Datsueba, and *yamauba* are all conflated in the perspective of common people, Reider discusses how old narratives evolve by drawing upon various tales and then creating new stories and images. I agree that these overlapping representations influenced one another, contributing to the development of the multifaceted characteristics of each distinctive figure.

Another intriguing discussion concerns *yamauba*’s association with spinning and weaving as explored in chapter 2. In folktales, *yamauba* sometimes weave cloth on a loom or transforms into a spider. Reider points out several features shared between *yamauba* and spiders, such as the dual nature of benevolence and malevolence, fecundity, and the recognition of beings living outside social norms. As noted above, duality is a most prominent feature of *yamauba*, as it is of spiders. Spiders eat prey as well as their own kind; they carry their babies on their backs; and they are sometimes regarded as good omens. Moreover, the *yōkai* spider Tsuchigumo is said to refer to indigenous people, and thus symbolizes the Other. *Yamauba* are also regarded as the Other, the embodiment of a non-normative female character. Captivated by this association between *yamauba* and spiders, I began to rethink Datsueba’s connection with cloth. Datsueba herself does not weave cloth.

However, in many examples of Datsueba worship, people offer clothing to Datsueba, and in some cases, this involves spinning, weaving, and sewing by the worshippers themselves.¹ Although Reider does not address this point, her analysis aroused my curiosity. In sum, by revealing the rich, multilayered nature of the mysterious *yamauba*, the book stimulates the imagination, and inspires readers to relate the figure to a broad range of issues.

REFERENCE

Saka 2018

Saka Chihiro. "The Function of Cloth in Datsueba Worship." *Japanese Religions* 43:1 & 2 (2018), pp. 69–96.

1 For the use of cloth in Datsueba worship, see Saka 2018.