

# Mountain Witches

Yamauba

Noriko Tsunoda Reider

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# Introduction

## *Yamauba's Topos, Archetype, History, and Gender*

IN MANY CULTURES, WHEN HUMAN BEINGS ENCOUNTER SOME inexplicable phenomena—especially if it's mysterious and inspires fear—they endeavor to make sense of them by invoking supernatural creatures. This is true of Japanese culture and society. As Michael Dylan Foster writes in *The Book of Yōkai*, *yōkai* (weird or mysterious creatures) have often been called upon in Japan to explain incomprehensible phenomena (Foster 2015, 5).<sup>1</sup> A *yamauba* (sometimes *yamanba* or *yamamba*), often translated as a mountain witch or mountain crone, is one such being. To many contemporary Japanese, the word *yamauba* conjures up images of an unsightly old woman who lives in the mountains and devours humans. The witch in the Grimm Brothers' "Hansel and Gretel" and Baba Yaga of Russian folklore can be considered Western/Eurasian counterparts of the *yamauba* figure. A *yamauba* is commonly described as tall, with long hair, piercing eyes, and a large mouth that opens from ear to ear (Komatsu 2000, 428). As Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell write, a *yamauba* appears in various Japanese texts as "a god, a demon, an entertainer, a mother; enlightened, tormented, helpful, and harmful" (Bethe and Brazell 1978, 8). She is an enigmatic woman living in the mountains.

In recent years, the figure of the *yamauba* has attracted much attention among scholars of women's literature as a woman not constrained by conformative gender norms or social expectations (Kobayashi Fukuko 2016, 2). Thus a *yamauba* connotes not only a mysterious female in the mountains but also the ambivalent status of Japanese women past and present, as well as the Japanese psyche that creates and re-creates prototypes. Broadly speaking, the old women who appear in the 156th episode of *Yamato monogatari* (*Tales of Yamato*, ca. mid-tenth century) and in "The Old Woman on the Mountain" and "How the Hunters' Mother Became an Oni and Tried to Devour Her Children," tales from the *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Times Now Past*, ca. 1120), may be considered *yamauba*, and their portrayal has relevance to contemporary daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationships, elder issues, and dementia.<sup>2</sup>

Situating the yamauba within the construct of yōkai and archetypes, this study investigates the attributes of yamauba, and offers an interpretation through the examination of yamauba narratives including folktales, literary works, legends, modern fiction, manga, and anime. I believe a holistic image of yamauba will emerge through an examination of both yamauba's well-known and lesser-known traits. Investigating how and why these attributes have appeared in various texts over time sheds light on the process of adaptation and re-creation of a prototype. Hence, this study also involves the creation, dissemination, and transformation of narratives and imagery.

### YAMAUBA AS YŌKAI

According to Ema Tsutomu (1884–1979), historian and the author of *Nihon yōkai henge-shi* (History of Japanese yōkai shape-shifters, 1923), the majority of yōkai shape-shifters in narratives created before the Muromachi period (1336–1573) took male form when they appeared in front of humans. However, in narratives created after the Ōnin War (1467–1477), and especially in the early modern period, the number of yōkai shape-shifters in female form increased dramatically, appearing two and a half times more often than male figures (Ema 1923, 131). The reasons for this were, Ema writes, because in tales of the early modern period ghosts and apparitions were motivated by passion or grudges, traits associated with women because they form stronger attachments than men. Yōkai that originally appeared as animals, plants, or tools were also probably transformed into women because, Ema states, being female made it easier for them to trick and cajole men (Ema 1923, 131).

Folklorist Miyata Noboru's (1936–2000) explanation for the large number of female yōkai is more sympathetic to women. He contends that in narratives young women often played the role of messengers between this world and the world beyond, and in doing so they had a tendency to become yōkai. Miyata noted that a young woman's spiritual power, a kind of spirit possession, was at work, particularly among young maids of the lowest social strata. Fundamentally this is because of the spiritual power that women possess. Women are said to be more attuned to the spiritual realm than men; Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962), the founder of Japanese folklore studies, called this power *imo no chikara* (women's power) (Miyata 1987, 117, 248–49).<sup>3</sup> But the question remains whether men were considered to be more attuned to the spiritual realm than women before the Ōnin War. I speculate that a key to the answer lies in societal changes surrounding women in Japan. The period of increasing numbers of female yōkai in narratives coincides with a decline in the status of women.

The early modern period is often referred to as a dark age for Japanese women (Hayashi R. 1982, 325), a time when women's social activities were extremely limited (Fukuda M. 1995, 257). Even before the early modern period, attitudes toward women had steadily declined. "Conventionally, the fourteenth century is known as the period when virolocal institutions (*yomeiri kon*) became common, as evident in the delivery of dowries and a new term for divorce (*oidasu*, 'to chase out [the wife]'). Moreover, the wife increasingly came to be viewed as the husband's possession" (Farris 2006, 156). Probably women, increasingly confined and suppressed by societal and cultural norms and constraints, found their emotional outlet in ghostly, monstrous figures. In the same vein, men's feelings of guilt or sympathy toward such women may have helped create and increase the number of female *yōkai*.<sup>4</sup>

### THE TERM YAMAUBA (YAMANBA OR YAMAMBA)

The terms *yamauba*, *yamanba*, and *yamamba* are presently all written in the same kanji, or sino-characters, 山姥, and many Japanese use these terms interchangeably. Some dictionaries, however, make the distinction that the pronunciation *yamauba* often seems to be used for legendary or folkloric figures, whereas the nasalized forms, *yamanba* or *yamamba*, are used in texts for the performing arts such as *noh* and *kabuki*.<sup>5</sup> In this study, I have chosen to primarily use *yamauba* because of my heavy reliance on folktales and legends.

Whereas the characters 山姥 are used in contemporary Japan, various other characters were used in premodern times. For example, the characters 山優婆 (literally, gentle crone in the mountains) are used to describe the *noh* play *Yamanba* (early fifteenth century), generally attributed to Zeami (1363–1443), and in an *otogizōshi* tale titled *Tōshōji nezumi monogatari* (Tales of mice at Tōshōji temple, 1537).<sup>6</sup> The edition of the Japanese dictionary *Setsuyōshū* from the second year of Kōji (1556) defines the term *uba*, 優婆, as an "ordinary old woman" (Sasaki R. 2008, 203). Isshiki Tadatomo (d. 1597), a military lord and poet, also used the characters meaning gentle crone in the mountains in his *Getsuan suiseteki* (Getsuan's collection of tales) (Isshiki 2008, 84). But the *yamanba* of the *noh* play had also been written as 山祖母 (grandmother in the mountains), 山婆 (old woman in the mountains), and 山伯母 (elder aunt in the mountains) (Sasaki R. 2008, 203).

The first appearance of the term *yamauba* in literary materials occurred in the Muromachi period (Komatsu K. 2000, 428; Orikuchi 2000, 300). As attested by early works that describe *yamauba*, including the aforementioned

noh play *Yamanba* and the entry on the sixth month of 1460 in *Gann nikenroku*, a diary of Zen priest Zuikei Shūhō (1391–1473), the term predates the Ōnin War. It does not appear in the *Wamyō ruijushō* (Japanese names for things classified and annotated, ca. 930s), the first Japanese-language dictionary, or in an encyclopedia compiled during the Muromachi period titled *Ainōshō* (ca. 1446). However, the *Nippo jisho* (*Japanese-Portuguese dictionary*), compiled by a Jesuit missionary and published around 1603–1604, has an entry for yamauba that reads: “The face of the yamauba is not known. They are believed to live in the mountains” (Doi et al. 1980, 809). Several years later a yamauba is mentioned in the entry for the fourth month of 1609 in *Tōdaiki* (Records of the present age), a historical record possibly written by Matsudaira Tadaaki (1583–1644), a maternal grandson of the founder of the Tokugawa shogunate, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543–1616). In this entry, a yamauba appears in a show in the area of the Tōfukuji temple of Higashiyama in Kyoto: “Her hair is white and she is red around the eyes. She swallows her food in a gulp. The high and low see her. If one listens carefully, she is a crazy albino, so I hear” (Zoku Gunsho Ruijū Kanseikai 1995, 149).

Interestingly, the *Wakan sansaijue* (Japanese-Chinese collected illustrations of the three realms, ca. 1713), an encyclopedia, explains the yamauba as an animal, native to the regions of Guangdong and Guangxi in China, that has only one leg, three toes and three fingers on each hand, and begs for food from people at night. The author, Terajima Ryōan (b. 1654), mentions nothing about Japanese yamauba. I should note, however, that the presence of three toes and three fingers is typical in portrayals of *oni* (demons, ogres, monsters). Yamauba have a very strong relationship with *oni*.

Yamaoka Genrin (1631–1672), a widely recognized intellectual of seventeenth-century Japan, states that the *uba*, 姥, of yamauba is more in line with the *hime*, 姫, of Tatsutahime (goddess of autumn) and Yamahime (princess of the mountains), interpreting it more broadly than meaning simply an old woman (Yamaoka 1993, 46). This is the same as Yanagita Kunio’s observation that yamauba and yamahime were originally euphemisms (used by villagers) for a mysterious woman living deep in the mountains (Yanagita 1978–1979, 1:255). In the same vein, folklorist Konno Ensuke (1914–1982) explains that yōkai-like creatures that are believed to live in the mountains are usually considered the yamahime type; and if they are old, they are called yamauba or *yamahaba* (literally, mountain mother). As there are a number of people who believe that *hime* refers to young women and *uba* to old women, they came to be thought of as two distinct types: young and old, yamahime and yamauba. But originally there was probably only one type: strange women in the mountains.



Figure 0.1. Yamauba in *Bakemono zukushi emaki* (Picture scroll of monsters, Edo period), by Hokusai Suechika. (Courtesy of International Research Center for Japanese Studies.)

Konno categorizes female yōkai into three types: yamauba, spirits of snow (*yuki no sei*), and strange creatures of the ocean (*umi no kai*) (Konno 1981, 221; 223–66).<sup>7</sup> Ōba Minako (1930–2007) writes in her short story “Yamanba no bishō” (“The Smile of a Mountain Witch,” 1976): “Surely these old witches [yamauba] cannot have been wrinkled old hags from birth . . . For one reason or another, however, we never hear about young witches living up in the mountains” (Ōba M. 1991, 195).

### YAMAUBA’S TOPOS: MOUNTAINS WHERE EERIE THINGS HAPPEN

“Perhaps no image signifies the danger of the uncontainable, ravenous female as readily as the *yamamba*,” writes Rebecca Copeland, scholar of Japanese literature (Copeland 2005, 21). As she says, the voracious appetite of the yamauba, especially her man-eating trait, is her most well-known characteristic. Indeed, a survey conducted by Komatsuzaki Susumu and

Komatsuzaki Tatsuko reveals that “the image children have of yamanba is fixed regardless of their age or gender”; children say that “a yamauba eats people and changes her appearance. She knows everything about mountains. She lives in the mountains and eats people who are lost. She eats oxen and horses. A creepy old woman” (Komatsuzaki and Komatsuzaki 1967, n.p.).<sup>8</sup> The survey notes that yamauba’s fixed image could be due to well-circulated folktales, but the influence of illustrated children’s books and manga is believed to be significant, too.

As Mizuta Noriko (1937–), scholar of comparative literature, emphasizes, “Yamauba’s identity is the topos of mountains” (Mizuta 2002, 13). Mountains are considered to be sacred places in many cultures, and this is true in Japan as well. Miyake Hitoshi (1933–), scholar of religious studies, gives several reasons for this, but two are especially pertinent to this study: “Mountains are viewed as the dwelling place of spirits of the dead and ancestor spirits. Tombs are built on mountains,” and “Mountains are regarded as liminal space between this world and the otherworld. The mountain is an avenue to heaven; a mountain cave is an entrance to the otherworld” (Miyake 2001, 78–79).

The idea that mountains are “the dwelling place of spirits of the dead and ancestor spirits” reminds one of the *mukashibanashi* (old tales, folktales) called “Obasute-yama”—stories of abandoning old people, especially old women, in the mountains. While there is no evidence of abandoning old people in agricultural societies, such tales are still popularly narrated in various media. Ōshima Tatehiko (1932–), folklore scholar, notes that *mukashibanashi* and legends of Obasute are deeply related to Japanese funeral customs such as aerial sepulture (*fūso*) and the double-grave system (*ryōbosei*). In the double-grave system, a single deceased person has two graves, one for burying the body and one a tombstone erected by the family to visit and pray for the deceased. The place where old women are abandoned in Obasute stories would correspond to the burial site or aerial sepulture, where the actual dead body is buried (or abandoned). The word *obasute* is considered to have come from the term *obatsuse*, originally meaning a burial site. That is, Obasute was a name for a graveyard called Ohase or Ohatsuse. Hase temple and Hatsuse in Kyoto are located on the borderline between the *sato* (settlement, village) and the mountains, indicating there was once a cemetery there (Ōshima 2001a, 4–5; Miyata 1997, 20).

There are many cases in real life where a mountain is designated as a place for burial. The purpose was to appease deceased spirits through the spiritual power of the mountain (Saitō 2010, 274). Indeed, in the *noh* play *Yamanba*, Yamanba projects a mountain landscape of the dead in her song:

“Awesome, the deep ravines. In graveyards, beating their own bones, fiendish wraiths groan, bemoaning their deeds from former lives. In cemeteries, offering flowers, angelic spirits rejoice in the good rewards of enlightened acts” (Bethe and Brazell 1978, 217; *SNKBZ* 1994–2002, 59:575).

Wakamori Tarō (1915–1977), historian and folklorist, assumes that the “Obasute-yama” stories focus on a belief in the existence of some eerie beings deep in the mountains or at the bottom of nearby mountain valleys. Wakamori suspects this belief arose because of the strange or disorienting experiences villagers had when they went into the mountains, including having hallucinations or visions of human-like beings. Perhaps long ago, villagers surmised, people were pushed into deep valleys or mountains to put an end to their lives, and their angry spirits, forced to die untimely deaths and unable to go on to the other world, appeared in the mountains to harass villagers (Wakamori 1958, 215). Although Wakamori is writing about the Obasute stories, these eerie beings can be easily interpreted as old women, yamauba. The basis for the belief that something eerie existed in the mountains was already there, and the groundwork for yamauba to emerge in the medieval period (1185–1600) already existed in ancient times.<sup>9</sup>

Baba Akiko (1928–), poet and critic, asserts that “it is important to acknowledge these *setsuna* (tale literature or narrative; myths, legends, folktales, anecdotes, and the like) have been handed down as reality.<sup>10</sup> That is, people had strong beliefs of and fear about the existence of strange, aged woman in the mountains—like a mountain mother who could be a counterpart of a mountain father . . . these women never wanted to live a life outside the mountains” (Baba Akiko 1988, 279). Baba finds a clue to an origin of yamauba in a description of three entertainers met by Lady Sarashina (the daughter of Sugawara no Takasue, b. 1008) at Mt. Ashigara. Lady Sarashina left a memoir known to us as *Sarashina nikki* (*As I Cross a Bridge of Dreams*, ca. eleventh century). In the memoir of her experience traveling to Mt. Ashigara as an impressionable twelve-year-old girl, Lady Sarashina writes: “We lodged at the foot of the mountain, and I felt fearfully lost in the depth of the moonless night. From somewhere in the dark three women singers emerged, the eldest being about fifty, the others about twenty and fourteen . . . Our party was charmed by their appearance and even more impressed when they started singing, for they had fine, clear voices that rose to the heavens . . . We were all so sad to see them disappear into those fearful mountains” (Sugawara no Takasue no musume 1971, 47; *SNKBZ* 1994–2002, 26:287–88). Baba believes that these entertainers made their based on being near the mountains, and she conjectures that as these women became old, they become yamauba. The text of the noh play

*Yamauba*, Baba continues, reveals the existence of such mysterious women (Baba Akiko 1988, 276–77).

Yanagita Kunio provides some suppositions as the basis for the origin of mountain woman traditions: yamauba were believed to exist in the deep mountains both in the past and in the present (in his case, 1925, when his article was first written); and there were women who went into the mountains of their own volition (Yanagita 1968, 378–80). Certainly the women whom Lady Sarashina encountered were willing residents of the mountains.

#### APPEARANCE OF YAMAUBA IN THE MUROMACHI PERIOD

Why did the term *yamauba* appear during the Muromachi period? In the ancient and medieval periods of Japan, fear of the unknown or of something strange and eerie often manifested in narratives in the form of oni, as seen in the stories in *Konjaku monogatari-shū*. One tale, “Sanseru onna minami Yamashina ni yuki oni ni aite niguru koto” (“How a Woman with Child Went to South Yamashina, Encountered an Oni, and Escaped”), describes an old woman who eats babies.<sup>11</sup> A young pregnant woman secretly gives birth in the mountain hut of a seemingly kind old woman, only to discover that she is actually an oni who plans to eat the newborn baby. As the appellation *yamauba* was not yet coined at this time, any anthropophagous being, regardless of sex, was simply called an oni. If the term *yamauba* had existed in the twelfth century, surely this woman would have been called that.<sup>12</sup>

I suppose the term or signifier *yamauba* came into being during the Muromachi period because such women in the mountains, true or imagined, became more visible and noticeable to villagers and travelers, including religious practitioners. These mountain women could not be identified simply by the term *oni*—perhaps because they possessed helpful, supportive elements (from humans’ viewpoint), the positive side of their duality. As travelers or villagers started to meet or imagine good and kind mountain women, a new term was required to separate these mysterious females from oni.

According to William Farris, between the period 1280 to 1450, the population of Japan expanded from around 6 million to about 10 million: this was a 67 percent increase from the early medieval era to 1450 (Farris 2006, 128). The fourteenth century has been considered a turning point in Japan in several aspects: industry, agriculture, shipping technology, commerce, family structure, and demographic expansion. “In particular, for the half century from the cessation of widespread hostilities in 1368 until the famine of 1420, residents entered an age appropriately termed ‘the Muromachi

Optimum,' when the new shogunate was at its height and social and economic expansion most vigorous" (Farris 2006, 94–95). Commerce grew during the period of the northern and southern courts, "when even military encampments served as markets . . . Mt. Kōya oversaw eight markets in one of Japan's most advanced areas, Kii Province . . . Monks and local peasants also bought and sold at these centers" (Farris 2006, 143).

Farris notes, "With the massive expansion of the old capital's population and religious and government building during Yoshimitsu's era [1358–1408], it is not surprising to find merchants going farther and farther afield to locate adequate supplies. Hida, Mino, and Shikoku were especially popular" (Farris 2006, 149). As more people went into the mountainous areas hitherto relatively unknown—to cut trees or hunt, to travel to a newly created marketplace, to transport goods, for religious pilgrimages, or simply to live in the mountains—people would encounter various strange creatures, and may well have wondered who those strange creatures were.

Moreover, Shirane Haruo writes that the area known as *satoyama*, which included both *sato* (human settlement) and *yama* (surrounding hills), came to the fore around the twelfth century and that the *satoyama* landscape was saturated with deities (*kami*) of different types, many of them related to farming, hunting, and fishing. The mountains (and sometimes large trees and rocks) surrounding the *satoyama* were believed to be the homes of gods (Shirane 2012, 114–16). The *satoyama* landscape expanded with economic and technological advancement. "The gods of the mountains (*yama no kami*) were often believed by rice farmers to come down in the early spring to become the gods of the rice fields (*ta no kami*) and then return to the mountains in the autumn. Shrines were built at the foot of the mountains" (Shirane 2012, 116). Farm villagers might have wondered if a mysterious woman from the surrounding mountains could be related to the god of the mountains, or could herself be a mountain deity.

#### APPEARANCE OF YAMAUBA AND THE ROLE OF YAMABUSHI

As people from all walks of life wandered, wondered, and talked about their strange experiences in and around the foot of the mountains, I speculate that the *yamabushi*'s role was particularly significant. The timing of the appearance of *yamauba* coincides with the secularization of *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics, practitioners of Shugendō). *Yamabushi* were most active and influential during the medieval period. They went through rigorous training and wandered through the mountains with bases in Yoshino, Kumano, Mt. Hakusan, Mt. Haguro, Mt. Hiko, and others, performing

incantations, prayers, and exorcisms. During times of war, they traveled all over Japan, sometimes employed as exorcists and healers for a certain clan, and sometimes as spies (Miyake 1978, 5; 44–47; Murayama 1970, 18). The activities of yamabushi saw the most development involving politics and the military during the sixty-year period of civil war, from Emperor GoDaigo's (1228–1339) plot against the Kamakura government through the unification of the northern and southern courts in 1392 (Murayama 1970, 224). Tokunaga Seiko reports that the establishment of the term *Shugendō* in terms of the medieval concept (with the components of exoteric and esoteric Buddhism) dates from the late thirteenth to early fourteenth century; she writes that the word *shugen* with the specific meaning of training by traveling through mountains to acquire miraculous powers didn't appear until after the twelfth century, and the emergence of the use of the word *Shugendō* was in the late thirteenth century (Tokunaga 2015, 86).

*Sendatsu* (leaders of yamabushi or *shugenja*) brought their *danna* (patrons), including priests and nuns of regional shrines and temples, family members or servants of warriors, and common people such as farmers and merchants, from all over the country to Kumano. The *danna*'s religious needs and arrangements for lodging were taken care of by escorts known as *oshi*. During their long journeys through the mountains, or even in the course of short errands, I would imagine, people saw some mysterious dwellers. They may have been explained as the manifestation of mountain spirits, dead spirits, or evil spirits that act against religious practitioners and others. As mentioned above, as the frequency of travel through the mountains increased, the number of encounters with strange creatures inevitably increased as well, and it is possible that people recounted the strange events of their journeys back in their villages. While the associations of *sendatsu* were founded in the fifteenth century, the first appearance of *oshi* in writing predates this era, seen in the 1109 account of Fujiwara no Munetada's pilgrimage to Kumano (Miyake 2001, 14; 18–23). It is also conceivable that yamabushi who had settled in villages during the Muromachi period told some interesting and/or miraculous stories, including those about yamauba, to villagers for entertainment (see Murayama 1970, 304).

#### YAMABUSHI SUBJUGATING YAMAUBA

Tokuda Kazuo, scholar of Japanese literature, writes that the folktale known as “Yamauba to ishimochi” (“Yamauba and Stone Rice Cakes”) is recorded in medieval documents that tell of miracles at sacred grounds in the mountains. In “Yamauba to ishimochi” a yamauba meets her demise by eating

burning-hot stones.<sup>13</sup> Tokuda argues that a story framework in which a religious practitioner subjugates an evil creature had already existed and taken root in the sacred mountains of various provinces.<sup>14</sup> An example of this story type appears in *Daisenji engimaki* (Legends of Daisenji temple, ca. early 1320s) of Hōki province (present-day Tottori Prefecture) (Tokuda 2016c, 43). Mt. Daisen of Hōki province has been known from the olden days as an important place for Shugendō.

According to *Daisenji engimaki*, there was a great sendatsu and renowned ascetic named Shuchi Kongōbō in Nankōin on Mt. Daisen. While he was leading many yamabushi for training, sometimes a frightening-looking *ubai*, 優婆夷 (transliteration of Sanskrit *upāsikā*, devoted lay female follower of Buddhism) would appear around the Batō cavern and harass the yamabushi. Late one night, this *uba*, 優婆 (the name changed from earlier *ubai*) secretly came and warmed her breast at the sacred fire. Kongōbō, surprised and thinking she must be the one causing trouble, mentally uttered magic words of the fire realm. He then asked who she was and told her to leave immediately. The “oni-woman” responded that she was warming her chest because it hurt and asked for medicine. He threw a round, burning-hot stone to her, saying it was medicine. She immediately ate it. After this was repeated two or three times, the sendatsu gave her a bowl of oil, saying that candy (the oil looked like candy) went well with rice cakes. When the oni-woman drank the bowl of oil, she immediately breathed fire from her mouth. As Kongōbō continued his incantation, her pain became unbearable; she ran to a valley and was incinerated. After this, the yamabushi could practice their ascetic training without any hindrance (Kondō and Miyachi 1971, 198–99).<sup>15</sup> The story ends with praise for the miraculous power of Shingon Buddhist magic words and for the unparalleled virtue of the practitioner who uses this power. Interestingly, the frightening-looking *ubai* is described as an *uba* and later as an oni-woman.

An *ubai* is a woman who approaches monks and listens to their sermons, makes offerings to monks, and helps with their daily lives. *Ubai* also means “attend to” or “wait on” (Hirakawa 1972, 244). In the aforementioned yamabushi tale, the *ubai* or *uba* is cast in an evil role, which seems to fit the general Buddhist view of women. While the yamabushi’s enemy appears here as an *ubai* or *uba* and is identified as an oni-woman in *Daisenji engimaki* from the early fourteenth century, almost seventy years later, at the beginning of the Muromachi period, this oni-woman is literally named yamauba in *Hōki no kuni Daisenji engi* (Legends of Daisenji temple in Hōki province, 1398). The sino-characters used to describe this yamauba are 山優婆, which is *yama* 山 (mountains) plus *ubai* 優婆夷 (devoted female

follower of Buddhism) minus *i* 夷 (foreign, barbarian). If one interprets each character of yamauba, 山優婆, independently and then puts them together, it means “gentle old woman in the mountains.”<sup>16</sup> The plot of the story in *Hōki no kuni Daisenji engi* is the same as the earlier version: a great miracle-working ascetic named Shuchi Kongōbō in Nankōin on Mt. Daisen is training around Batō cavern on Mt. Daisen when a yamauba comes and asks for chest medicine. He gives her a burning-hot stone, calling it medicine. As soon as she eats the stone, fire comes out of her mouth and she burns up completely. After this, yamabushi could train themselves on the mountain without worries (Hanawa 1959, 213; Tokuda 2016c, 42).<sup>17</sup>

One may speculate from these stories that the term *yamauba* was used (or even coined) in the late fourteenth century in religious settings to promote their institutions. The demonic being that harassed Shugendō practitioners was first symbolically described as an oni-woman and ubai. Then the evil existence became a yamauba. As will be explained in more detail in chapter 1, in the noh play *Yamanba*, the protagonist laments that she is considered an oni-woman, although the entertainer traveling through the mountains for religious purposes sees her as one; this mixing of the images of oni and yamauba fits the above narrative.

## YAMAUBA AS ARCHETYPE

Gorai Shigeru explains that the original or fundamental nature (*genshitsu*) of mountain deities served by yamabushi can be understood from the viewpoint of Shugendō as souls of the deceased who used to live at the foot of a mountain. These souls go into a different realm of the mountain after death and stay there. These souls also become ancestral spirits who may protect and love their descendants or punish them: they have dichotomous aspects (Gorai 1984, 13; 30; 43).

As a mountain deity, yamauba is also portrayed as symbol of fertility. An often-cited example of yamauba's fertility is a legend in Shimoinagun, Nagano Prefecture, which tells of a yamauba giving birth to 7,800 children at one time. Yoshida Atsuhiko (1934–), scholar of mythology, recounts that this yamauba was having difficulty giving birth and asked for water from Ōyamazu no mikoto, who happened to be hunting in the mountains. Because Ōyamazu no mikoto helped the yamauba deliver the 7,800 babies and name them, he was rewarded by an abundance of game. Yanagita theorized that yōkai were deities who had become degraded—that is, had fallen from their status as deities, and following Yanagita's thoughts, Yoshida asserts that yamauba used to be worshipped as goddesses and that

the remnants of their worship and rites are visible all over Japan (Yoshida 1992, 31–41).<sup>18</sup>

Hori Ichirō (1910–1974), scholar of religion, writes: “In the popular belief of rural areas, the mountain deity is believed to be a goddess who gives birth to twelve children every year. She is therefore called Mrs. Twelve (*Jūni-sama*), and her twelve children symbolize the twelve months of the year” (Hori I. 1968, 167). The aforementioned fifteenth-century diary entitled *Gann nikkenroku* notes that “the reason why the summer of that year had lots of rain was because the yamauba gave birth to four children, namely, Haruyoshi (Good spring), Natusame (Summer rain), Akiyoshi (Good autumn), and Fuyusame (Winter rain)” (Tokyo Daigaku Shiryō Hensanjo 1961, 125). The year’s abundant rainfall, the priest suggests, is the result of the yamauba’s multiple childbirth. The children’s names seem to reflect an expression of reverence to a higher power and hope for good seasonal weather to come. An archetype is “a symbol, usually an image, which recurs often enough in literature to be recognizable as an element of one’s literary experience as a whole” (Frye 2006, 331).<sup>19</sup> A yamauba may be understood as a goddess or as an archetype that represents four seasons: “In the divine world the central process or movement is that of the death and rebirth . . . This divine activity is usually identified or associated with one or more of the cyclical processes of nature” (Frye 2006, 147).

Orikuchi Shinobu (1887–1953), Japanese literature scholar and folklorist, writes that yamauba was originally a maiden who waited on a mountain deity; although one tends to associate the term *uba*, うば, with the kanji 姥 (old woman), it has a commonality with *oba*, 小母, a term used to address any unrelated adult woman. First the maiden nursed the deity to health and later she became his wife. Orikuchi speculates that these maidens tended to live long, so people started to think of *uba* as old women (Orikuchi 1995, 363). As to why the notion of mountain deities in female form spread among the populace, folklorist Yamagami Izumo (1923–) argues that in folklore studies it is thought that because the masters of religious ceremonies for mountain deities were women, the genders of these male deities and female masters of ceremonies were mixed up. However, Yamagami notes that a prototype of yamauba was the divine wife of a mountain dragon or thunder deity and that one has to seek the emergence of the concept of yamauba in mythological worlds (Yamagami 2000, 374–75).

Baba Akiko (1988) considers yamauba legends as representative of the downfall of *kunitsukami* (deities of the land), who were relegated to lower positions by the imperial authority in the lineage of heavenly deities. It seems that Baba follows Yanagita’s theory of degradation (1968). Further,

Yoshida Atsuhiko writes, roots of the yamauba can be found in various female deities in Japanese myths such as Ōgetsuhime in the *Kojiki* (Ancient matters, compiled 712), the oldest imperially sponsored chronicle of the mytho-history of Japan, and Ukemochinokami in *Nihon shoki* or *Nihongi* (Chronicles of Japan, 720), the second oldest chronicle in Japan; these deities produce food from different parts of their bodies. He goes further and asserts that the real identity of yamauba is the mother goddess (*boshin*) that Japanese had been worshipping since the very ancient times of the Jōmon period (14,000 BCE–300 BCE) (Yoshida 1992, iii; 108–12).

Komatsu Kazuhiko (1947–), anthropologist and authority on yōkai culture, observes that conventionally in folklore studies yamauba's older forms or origins have been sought in mountain deities or goddesses, and that yamauba is thought of as a ruined form of these originals; that is to say, the yamauba's horrifying attributes are a result of their downfall from their earlier status as mountain deities or goddesses. Komatsu warns, however, that this downfall theory is only a supposition, and that the yamauba described in literature and folklore materials have always possessed a duality of good and evil. Yamauba are characterized by this very duality, and which aspect is emphasized depends on the relation between yamauba and individuals or the interests of the time period (Komatsu K. 2000, 429–30). Unlike Yanagita Kunio, who considers that yōkai are deities fallen from grace, Komatsu grasps that worshipped supernatural beings are deities and unworshipped ones are yōkai (Komatsu K. 1994, 283). One half of yamauba's genealogy goes back to goddesses, and the other half to oni (Komatsu K. 2000, 432; 1994, 297–304). Indeed, while there are many legends of yamauba as mountain deities, they are simultaneously inseparable from oni, as we will see throughout this book. It is not that yamauba fell from the high position she held in ancient Japan and was relegated to the negative side as time passed. She was perceived by contemporary people, at least people in the capital, to be oni-like from the beginning of her appearance in the medieval period.

According to Yamaguchi Motoko (1954–), a Jungian psychologist, the image of yamauba is an archetype that is deeply rooted in the collective unconsciousness of the Japanese; it could be considered a distinctive Japanese manifestation of the “Great Goddess”—an archetype that exists widely in the human imagination (Yamaguchi 2009, 44). The Great Mother brings fertility and wealth as well as death and destruction, similar to mythico-religious figures such as Isis and Kali. In medieval Europe, the pagan archetype of the Great Mother who always possessed two aspects did not become less complicated as it fell under the influence of Christian

civilization; the light side was represented by the officially worshipped Virgin Mary, and the dark side, excluded from the image of Mary and maintaining much of its pagan influence, degenerated into a witch (Franz 1974, 105, 195).<sup>20</sup> Kawai Hayao (1928–2007), a Jungian psychologist, regards Kannon as the positive image of the Great Mother in Japan, and the yamauba, who appears in fairy tales as an all-devouring mountain witch, as the negative image (Kawai 1996, 27–66).

Yamauba encompass good and evil sides. While yamauba's roots are found in ancient goddesses, I believe yamauba are the products of the medieval zeitgeist. For people who were awed and frightened by mountains, strange women in the mountains symbolized manifestations of mountain spirits and seasons. The name and characteristics of the yamauba were creations of the medieval period, amalgamating various elements—both positives and negatives—into an archetype.

### YAMAUBA'S GENDER

As mysterious and contradictory as yamauba can be, her overarching qualities are connected to mountains and her female sex. As we will see in the following chapters, yamauba is often mixed up with an oni-woman—a female oni. However, the gender of an oni-woman can actually be male because an oni can freely transform itself. The sex of a yamauba, a mother of many children, is always female. Here, I use *sex* to refer to a set of biological attributes and *gender* to refer to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and expressions.

A brief explanation of oni's gender may be required here. In ancient times, oni were invisible. In early Onmyōdō (the Way of yin-yang), the word *oni* referred specifically to invisible evil spirits that caused human infirmity (Komatsu K. 1999, 3).<sup>21</sup> Takahashi Masaaki identifies an oni as a deity that causes epidemics (Takahashi Masaaki 1992, 4), while Kumasegawa Kyōko interprets an oni as an individual and/or societal shadow (Kumasegawa 1989, 204). The character to express *oni* in Chinese, 鬼, means invisible soul or spirit of the dead, both ancestral and evil. According to the aforementioned *Wamyō ruijushō* (ca. 930s), the word *oni* is explained as a corruption of the reading of the character *on* (hiding), “hiding behind things, not wishing to appear . . . a soul or spirit of the dead” (Takahashi Masaaki 1992, 41).<sup>22</sup> Peter Knecht notes that the expression *kokoro no oni* (oni in one's heart), used in Heian (794–1185) court literature, shows one aspect of the multifaceted oni: “In this case the oni serves to give concrete form to an otherwise hard to express and invisible disposition in one's mind, namely

the dark and evil side of one's heart, such as evil or mischievous thoughts and feelings toward fellow humans. This kind of oni is said to hide in a dark corner of the heart and to be difficult to control. However, in consequence of an impetus from outside it may be thrown into consciousness and its noxious nature may show itself" (Knecht 2010, xv). Thus, invisible oni were not related to either gender, and I assume the Japanese associated the negative qualities they attributed to oni—rage, murderous thoughts and actions, cold-bloodedness, and the like—as separate from any specific gender, until they were manifested in a character.

But now oni are popularly portrayed as masculine. I believe that this assumption regarding gender comes primarily from the pictorial representation of oni's appearance. According to Kosugi Kazuo, scholar of Japanese art history, the Japanese oni received its appearance from Chinese *guishen* (ghosts and spirits) around the twelfth century at latest (Kosugi 1986, 205). More often than not, oni are depicted with muscular bodies and are scantily clad, wearing a loincloth of tiger skin. Oni are hairy and customarily portrayed with one or more horns. They sometimes have a third eye in the center of their forehead, and they vary in skin color but most commonly they are black, red, blue, or yellow. They often have large mouths with conspicuous canine teeth.<sup>23</sup>

According to Hayashi Shizuyo, who has studied the sex of oni in the tales collated as *Yomigatari* (Reading aloud [old tales], 2004–2005), the majority of oni are male, and when female oni appear in these stories they do so with an age signifier such as *oni-baba*, *oni-banba*, or *oni-basa*, all meaning old oni-woman or oni-hag (Hayashi S. 2012, 78).<sup>24</sup> No such signifiers are attached to male oni. Hayashi surmises that all the oni-women in *Yomigatari* are described as old because their aged appearance might resemble a frightening male oni (Hayashi S. 2012, 79). Further, when a male oni is implied, the word *oni* stands by itself, without any suffix. In other words, in order to depict the creature as female, a female suffix must be added. In the aforementioned story titled "Sanseru onna minami Yamashina ni yuki oni ni aite niguru koto" from the *Konjaku monogatari-shū*, the old woman is described simply as an oni—not an oni-woman. A female oni could be a male oni transformed—as often appears in literary sources.

For that matter, in the medieval period the label *oni* was applied to the specters of ordinary household objects such as tools and containers after they reached a hundred years of age. These abandoned man-made objects, *tsukumogami*, bear grudges against people.<sup>25</sup> Household objects do not have gender in Japanese. He, she, or it, *oni* is invariably situational, and may arguably be considered gender-defiant.

Compared with the ambiguous gender of oni, yamauba are and have always been female. The term *female* may invoke a symbolic outside or the Other.<sup>26</sup> Claire R. Farrer quotes Simone de Beauvoir's in *The Second Sex*: woman "is defined and differentiated with reference to man . . . she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is Subject, he is Absolute—she is the Other" (Farrer 1975, xiii). As Farrer states, the image of women as Other has had a constraining influence (Farrer 1975, xiii), especially in a patriarchal society like premodern Japan. Yamauba, however, are much less constrained by the traditions, customs, and social norms expected of women. And that is the major reason why yamauba have attracted much attention recently among scholars of women's literature.

From the viewpoint of gender studies, Mizuta Noriko says yamauba is gender transcendent. She contrasts yamauba with the women of the sato. The sato is considered a safe place where people are protected and insulated from the dangers of the mountains. According to Mizuta, the women of the sato are idealized and standardized—they are good mothers, good wives, chaste, humble, and obedient to their fathers and husbands (Mizuta 2002, 10–12). Conversely, a yamauba is someone who falls distinctly outside of the norm. Although she often has excessive fertility, she lacks the feminine traits ascribed to the women of the sato, namely, chastity, obedience, and compassion. Mizuta notes that the norm for the sato's women cannot be applied to yamauba, for her essential qualities are so nebulous and polysemous that she nullifies it. In other words, the yamauba exists outside the sato's gender system (Mizuta 2002, 12–15). She refuses to be assigned a household role such as mother or daughter and will not be confined. Mizuta emphasizes that while the women of the sato stay in one place, yamauba are comparatively nomadic, moving constantly through the mountains, appearing in an array of locales, often outside or away from a town's territorial boundary (Mizuta 2002, 10). A yamauba moves about as she wishes. The common thread of the mysterious, enigmatic creatures called yamauba living in the mountains is that they are female beings.

### YAMAUBA'S FEATURES

What are the specific features of yamauba as they appear in oral and literary tradition? Yamauba's well-known attributes are that she is an anthropophagous woman living in the mountains, she possesses the duality of good and evil, and she has the transformational power to manifest herself as an ugly crone or a young beauty. Invisible yamauba also exist. Some yamauba are mothers of divine children. Lesser-known attributes of yamauba include

flying and bloodsucking Miyata Noboru writes that the image of childbirth lurked in the shadows of mountain women (Miyata 2000, 189). Yamauba in some tales can foretell the future and read people's minds. Yamauba's relationship to spiders and spinning are often pointed out. Just as yamauba are fertile, spiders are fecund. As recounted in narratives, an attack by yōkai *tsubigumo* (earth spiders) on warriors leads to the spiders' demise; likewise, yamauba's assaults on men backfire. How and why did these traits or features come into being? Are there any modern interpretations of some of yamauba's behaviors? A yamauba is often considered a type of oni-woman; the terms are frequently used interchangeably. What, then, makes a yamauba distinct from an oni-woman? It is said that "the yamamba is one of the best known yōkai in Japan" (Foster 2015, 144). What is the appeal of yamauba and what do yamauba have to say to us in present Japanese society? These are the points I address in this book.

### ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1, "Man-Eating, Helping, Shape-Shifting Yamauba: Yamauba's Duality," examines yamauba's familiar features, in particular duality, in relation to oni or oni-women. Although malevolent yamauba in such folktales as "Kuwazu nyōbō" ("The Wife Who Does Not Eat"), "Ushikata to yamauba" ("The Ox-Leader and the Yamauba"), and "Sanmai no ofuda" ("Three Charms") are contrasted with the benevolent yamauba that appear in "Ubakawa" ("The Old Woman Skin") and "Komebuku Awabuku" ("Komebuku and Awabuku"), and the otogizōshi *Hanayo no hime* (*Blossom Princess*, ca. late sixteenth or early seventeenth century), there is a complementary relationship between the good and evil yamauba. Their stories possess a complementary narrative format as well. The chapter further addresses how and why yamauba's traits came into being. While the noh play *Yamanba* is an indispensable text in understanding medieval yamauba and beyond, I also consider the noh play *Kurozuka* (Black mound, mid-fifteenth century) with its "taboo of looking" theme, a critical text in the formation of yamauba's image.

Chapter 2, "Mother Yamauba and Weaving: Childbirth and Bloodsucking, Spinning and Spiders," discusses yamauba as a mother of divine children or children with superhuman power. I believe yamauba's motherly aspects became well known during the early modern period through legends, folktales, literary works, woodblock prints, and performing arts. As mentioned above, Miyata Noboru writes that the image of childbirth follows yamauba. I surmise that yamauba's bloodsucking attribute is a vestige of oni.

The chapter also examines yamauba's association with strings, spinning, and weaving. In many stories of "Kuwazu nyōbō," a representative yamauba story, the real identity of the protagonist wife is a spider, known for spinning. I speculate that the connection between yamauba and spiders is also deeply related to their commonalities with oni.

Chapter 3, "Reading Minds and Telling Futures: 'Yamauba and the Cooper,' 'The Smile of a Mountain Witch,' and *Throne of Blood*," studies yamauba's mind-reading ability through an examination of the folktale "Yamauba and the Cooper" and its predecessors, as well as Ōba Minako's modern short story, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch." I speculate on the origin of yamauba's mind-reading attribute and how the idea or inspiration for the yamauba protagonist came to Ōba Minako. Further, the chapter discusses yamauba's ability to tell one's fortune. A foretelling yamauba appears in such tales as "Naranashi tori" ("Picking Wild Pears") and Akira Kurosawa's film *Kumonosu-jō* (*The Castle of the Spider's Web*, 1957), known in the West as *Throne of Blood*. The evil spirit of *Throne of Blood* corresponds to the three weird sisters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, upon which Kurosawa's film was based. Kurosawa's witch spins out the thread of fate of two ambitious generals.

Chapter 4, "Yamauba, Yasaburō Basa, Datsueba: Images of Premodern Crones, Yamauba's Flying Ability, and Re-creation of a Prototype," examines a prototypical image of premodern crones and yamauba's flying power. In some folktales and legends, yamauba are described running fast through the mountains in pursuit of their victims. Recently I encountered a description based on the legends of Yasaburō Basa (Yasaburō's old mother), who lived on Mt. Yahiko in Niigata Prefecture, in which a yamauba is able to fly. Can a yamauba really fly like a witch? What is Yasaburō Basa and how does Yasaburō Basa relate to yamauba? The narrative of Yasaburō Basa legends and the statue of Myōtara Ten'nyo—Yasaburō Basa's deified name—remind one of Datsueba (literally, stripping-clothes old woman), who sits at the Sanzu River and mercilessly strips the clothes off the dead. Is there a relationship between yamauba, Yasaburō Basa, and Datsueba? This chapter addresses these questions and further studies classical and folkloric oni stories in relation to Yasaburō Basa.

In premodern times, an extraordinarily long-lived creature, or even object, was believed to become an oni. The yamauba of *Hanayo no hime* who has outlived her descendants and lives in the mountains forever becomes an oni's companion, and although she does not eat humans, she is seen as an oni herself. There is a certain connection between long-lived beings and yamauba or oni. Chapter 5, "Aging, Dementia, and Abandoned Women: An

Interpretation of Yamauba,” considers a modern interpretation of yamauba and examines issues of aging and family conflict through the stories of Obasute-yama (abandoned women in the mountains), narratives still popular in contemporary aging Japanese society.

Chapter 6, “Yamamba Mumbo Jumbo: Yamauba in Contemporary Society,” studies current depictions of yamauba and yamauba-like figures such as *yamanba-gyaru* (yamauba gals) whose unique fashion took major cities, particularly Shibuya in Tokyo, by storm from 1998 through 2000. Kuraishi Tadahiko, a folklorist, observes that the appearance of the yamanba-gyaru in Shibuya is fitting, considering yamauba’s proclivity to appear in village marketplaces (quoted in Shibuya Keizai Shinbun Henshūbu, 2002). This chapter also looks into contemporary depictions of yamauba in various types of literature and media, including film and manga.

Japanese names that appear in this work are written according to Japanese custom, with the family name appearing first. For example, the family name of Komatsu Kazuhiko, a folklorist and scholar of anthropology, is Komatsu. The exception to this rule occurs when names are well known outside of Japan. For example, the name of film director and animator Hayao Miyazaki appears in this order, even though Miyazaki is his family name.