

ROBERT ITO

SPEAK, MEMORATES

IN *TONO MONOGATARI*, A TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY JAPANESE FOLKLORE CLASSIC, GHOSTS AND MONSTERS ARE FRIENDLY AND SYMPATHETIC CREATURES. WHY ARE THE “REAL” PEOPLE DESCRIBED IN THE STORIES ALMOST UNIFORMLY HORRIBLE AND CRUEL?

DISCUSSED: *Cruel Monkeys, Mauled Wrestlers, Fish Brides, Seductive Ogres, Dismembered Kappa Babies, Fierce Tengu, The Rice-Growing Peasants of Japan’s Low Lands*

On November 4, 1908, Kunio Yanagita, a thirty-three-year-old government bureaucrat and self-taught anthropologist, met Ki-zen Sasaki, an aspiring writer from the tiny village of Tono, in northeastern Japan. The two were introduced by a mutual friend who felt they would enjoy each other’s company, since Yanagita loved hearing ghost stories and tales of the weird, and Sasaki, then twenty-two, enjoyed telling them. Tall and bespectacled, Sasaki had dropped out of medical school after two years to study history and literature, and spoke with a thick Tohoku accent which Yanagita



initially found difficult to understand. Over the course of the following year, Sasaki enthralled the older man with story after weird story, all set in and around his hometown of Tono, a place teeming with spooks, demons, and

mysterious “mountain men.” The area’s forests, Yanagita discovered, were home to all manner of fantastical beasts, from vicious, grudge-holding wolves to red-faced goblins who kidnapped and impregnated the local townswomen. Small household idols sprang to life and lent a tiny hand with the rice harvests; monkeys, cruel and lecherous, routinely pelted the villagers with stones and nuts.

The human residents of Tono were equally peculiar,

and quite unlike the typical rural folk—tight-knit, loyal to home and kin—that one expects to find in such places. Where generosity was called for, they were tightfisted. When bravery was required, they retreated in fear. In one of Sasaki's stories, a local wrestler is mauled to death by a wolf while his friends stand idly by, unmoved by the man's piteous cries for help. In another, an entire family dies after eating poisonous mushrooms; the next morning, their relatives come from near and far to make off with all of the family's possessions, down to the jars of miso paste in the kitchen. In nearly every story, the villagers' actions are motivated by greed, fear, lethargy, self-interest, or meanness. It's not only that the villagers of Tono sometimes don't make the right choice; it's how astonishing, how befuddling, their wrong choices can be. In one story, a hunter is toasting rice cakes over a fire and receives a visit from a large man he does not know:

The stranger entered the hut and gazed in wonder at the toasting rice cakes. Then, unable to resist, he reached out, took some cakes and ate them. When all the cakes were eaten, the stranger left. Thinking the man would come back again the next day, the hunter placed some white stones that resembled the rice cakes along with the cakes over the fire. The rocks became quite hot. The stranger came back as expected and ate the rice cakes as he had done the previous day. Then he put a hot stone into his

mouth thinking it was a cake. He charged out of the hut in shock and disappeared. It is said that the hunter later found the man dead at the bottom of the valley.

What sets these stories apart from similar ghost stories and fairy tales—besides, of course, the mystifying actions of their protagonists—is that all of the events in them actually happened, or so said many of Sasaki's contemporaries. These were not “once upon a time” tales, but real events witnessed in the recent past by people familiar to many in the village. Scattered throughout Sasaki's stories were the names of real Tono-ites, from Old Oto, the town drunkard, to Yanosuke, an accomplished hunter and flautist. In some cases, Sasaki vouched for the veracity of the witnesses. “Marukichi,” he said of one, “is a very modern and intelligent person and he is not the kind of person to tell a lie.” Sasaki also gave approximate dates for many of the events in his stories.

In 1910, after selecting 119 of Sasaki's most intriguing tales and traveling to Tono to visit some of the places mentioned in them, Yanagita published *Tono monogatari* (*The Legends of Tono*). “Kizen is not a good storyteller,” Yanagita wrote in the book's preface, “but he is honest and sincere. I have written the stories down as I understood them, without adding a word or phrase.” It was an odd thing for Yanagita to have said about his young colleague, not to mention ungracious. Sasaki certainly knew a lot of stories of all different sorts, and had a way with

the single, creepy detail, and if his accounts sometimes ended abruptly, what of it? For many of them, this abruptness—indeed, their very brevity—only added to their eeriness.

Yanagita had 350 copies of the book produced at his own expense, and gave nearly all of them to family and friends. (The writer also published two other books that year: *Nochi no karikotoba no ki*, a record of hunting terms used in southern Japan, and *Ishigami mondo*, a compilation of letters written about small roadside gods.) A few of Yanagita's friends wrote reviews of *Tono monogatari*, but the book attracted scant literary or commercial attention at the time, either in Japan or abroad.

Today, however, *Tono monogatari* is considered a classic throughout Japan, and has inspired two films and a popular manga series. Its author (Yanagita, that is, not Sasaki) is heralded as the father of Japanese folklore studies, while the town of Tono has done a lively business as a destination for “folklore tourists” the world over, who are guided to various sites mentioned in the book where ghosts appeared and demons trod. While other collections of Japanese spook stories have come and gone since Yanagita's time, his is still the only one to draw all of its tales from a single town and storyteller. The novelist Yukio Mishima, no slouch when it came to the creepy and unsettling, praised the stories for their coldness, their tonal flatness, their “unforeseen ghastliness, like when someone starts to talk and then suddenly stops speaking.”

This year marks the hundredth

anniversary of the book's publication. To commemorate the event, Lexington Books has released a new edition of Ronald Morse's English translation, first published in 1975, with maps, archival photos, and an updated preface. In June 2010, the town of Tono will host an international symposium, where scholars and fans will celebrate the area's tales and legends, and the two men who brought them to the world.

So what is it about *Tono monogatari*—a critical and commercial bust when it was first released—that so intrigues readers now? Were the spooks and demons of Tono real? And why is nearly everyone in the stories so very, very mean?

Tono monogatari is a small book. Not counting its preface and index, the English translation is only sixty-three pages long, with no chapters, story titles, chronological structure, or commentary. A few of the stories are lumped together by common theme—"animal attacks," for instance, or "household gods that come to life"—but most flow from one to the next in no discernible order. There are 119 "legends" in all, although many are not really legends in the traditional sense, let alone stories. The longest go on for about a page; the shortest consist of two or three sentences. Some are simply descriptions of the local customs: ways to foretell the future using rice cakes and walnuts, dances and rites of the new year festivals, and so on. Others, like this one, describe the local fauna:

Vicious old monkeys are like humans. They become desirous of females and often steal off the village women. They coat their fur with pine resin and then sprinkle sand on it. This makes their fur and skin like armor, and even bullets cannot penetrate it.

Most of the stories are *memorates*, a term coined by the Swedish folklorist C. W. von Sydow in 1934. According to von Sydow, memorates are personal accounts of experiences that either deal with the supernatural or illustrate a specific set of beliefs, often religious. If someone truly believes in fairies, say, and then sees one and tells his friends about it—that's a memorate. After some time, if the story gets told often enough to enough people, the memorate can itself become a fairy tale, or a legend. Since the first-person experiences behind memorates are often based upon fairy tales or myths themselves, the whole process can become circular: fairy tale spawns memorate spawns fairy tale. The glue holding them all together is that initial belief, whether that belief is about a fairy, or a demon, or a god.

The beliefs illustrated in many of Yanagita's memorates can be summarized in this way:

1. Monsters and specters live among us.
2. We know this, because lots of folks we know, like Old Oto, have seen them.
3. Some of these creatures are human, some are animals,

some are maybe a mix of the two. One of them might even be a deceased relative, or a loved one.

4. Some of them may hurt you, if only given the chance. Others are harmless.
5. Since it's impossible to tell the difference between the harmless ones and the ones that may hurt you, it's prudent to treat all with caution.

After a brief overview of the Tono region—its geographical history, its rivers and villages—the book opens with seven tales about the area's *yamabito*, or mountain people. Little is known about them, beyond a few physical descriptions. They are tall, with "strange-colored" eyes, and shun the people from town. The women have long hair, which they leave unbound; many of them are former villagers who were kidnapped and now live, far from home and loved ones, with their *yamabito* "husbands."

Theories abound about who the *yamabito* were, or how and why they came to seek refuge in the woods of Tono. Were they, as Yanagita suggested, simply Japanese fleeing from the hardships of civilized society? Were they the offspring of unions between the local Japanese and European traders (hence their unusual height and "strange-colored" eyes)? Were they Ainu, descendants of Japan's indigenous people?

Whoever they were, their relations with the townsfolk of Tono were strained, at best. In the book's

first yamabito encounter, Kahei Sasaki, a local hunter, spies a beautiful woman in the woods combing her long black hair. Sasaki fires upon and kills the woman, who is “rather tall,” then cuts off a lock of her hair as a trophy, “as evidence of his shooting skill.” On his way home, Sasaki dozes off. While he is in a half-asleep stupor, another man, “also quite tall,” takes the lock of hair and runs off. “That must have been a man who lives in the mountains,” Sasaki says to himself.

In the next encounter, a man spies a yamabito with a baby on her back. “Her feet did not seem to touch the ground,” wrote Yanagita. The woman comes, “passes indifferently,” then leaves. Struck with fright, the man develops a lingering illness,

then dies. In the third encounter, a hunter spies a yamabito in the woods and is about to shoot her. “Aren’t you my uncle?” the woman cries out. “Don’t shoot!” The woman—it is the hunter’s niece, after all—was kidnapped by a yamabito years ago, and is now his wife. “I have had many children,” she tells the hunter, “but he eats them all. I am all alone now. I will spend the rest of my life here with him, but don’t tell anyone about me. You are in danger now, so please leave at once.” So her uncle leaves. “It is said,” the story ends, “that he ran off without finding out where she was living.”

Why didn’t the woman simply stay with him? One possible reason is that the yamabito and their abductees, strange and spooky as

they may sometimes appear, have as much to fear from the townspeople as the townspeople have to fear from them—perhaps more, thanks to the “shoot first” policy of the town’s many hunters. Many of those who have been kidnapped don’t want to be found, nor do the villagers appear all that keen on looking for them. It’s not that they don’t sometimes miss their old world or past lives; some do. In one story, a young girl is kidnapped by a yamabito, only to return to her village thirty years later, old and haggard. “I just wanted to come back and see everyone,” she tells them. “Now I am off again. Farewell.”

A similarly strained relationship exists between the Tono-ites and the *kappa*, mischievous water

EILEEN LUHR MICRO-INTERVIEW, PART II.

THE BELIEVER: What are the musical/cultural antecedents to Christian rock? Can you trace its development from an earlier point in time, or is it revolutionary and sui generis?

EILEEN LUHR: Protestants, especially revivalists, have a tradition of incorporating contemporary musical forms into their worship practices. The most common quotation one sees in articles about Christian music is the saying “Why should the devil have all the good music?”—which was also a Larry Norman song. The quotation dates to a nineteenth-century Methodist clergyman named Rowland Hill. Examples abound.

African American churches during the Great Migration provide the best antecedent to Christian rock. Mainline churches refused to allow migrants to bring their music into church, so migrants joined small

Pentecostal churches instead. Finally, Thomas Dorsey, who played in Ma Rainey’s band, blended religious themes and the blues to create gospel blues. Eventually, musicians like Sam Cooke—the son of a minister and veteran of the gospel group the Soul Stirrers—brought the sound of the black church into the “secular” marketplace.

When it comes to the “usable past” for Christian rock, the origin story that I find interesting is white evangelicals’ claims on Elvis, who grew up in an Assemblies of God church. Elvis’s backup group, the Jordanaires, was a gospel quartet; he sang a Thomas Dorsey song, “Peace in the Valley,” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*; and when Elvis, Jerry Lee Lewis, Johnny Cash, and Carl Perkins recorded the impromptu Million Dollar Quartet sessions, they sang traditional gospel songs because they were all familiar with the music from their upbringings. ★

spirits that live in rivers and ponds. A full-grown kappa is about the size of a human child, with a shell like a tortoise, a beak for a nose, and a dislike depression on the top of its head which holds the kappa's life-sustaining, strength-giving juices. A trickster figure, the kappa is famed for hijinks that range from the playful (peeking up kimonos) to the horrific (eating a child's guts). In most areas of Japan, their faces are green; in Tono, however, they are red.

The impish creatures appear in five Tono tales. In one story, a kappa is captured after trying to pull a boy's horse into a deep pool. The villagers consider killing the beast, but let it go after it promises not to bother any of the other horses. In another story, a kappalike baby is born in Kamigo village. "There was no definite proof that it was a kappa's child, but it had bright red skin and a large mouth," Yanagita wrote. "It was indeed a disgusting child." A man—it's not revealed whether he is the cuckolded husband—abandons the child at a fork in a road, but then reconsiders, figuring he could make money by showing the creature to paying customers. Alas, it's too late.

When the man returns, the kappa baby has already fled. That particular infant was one of the lucky ones: "When the kappa-children

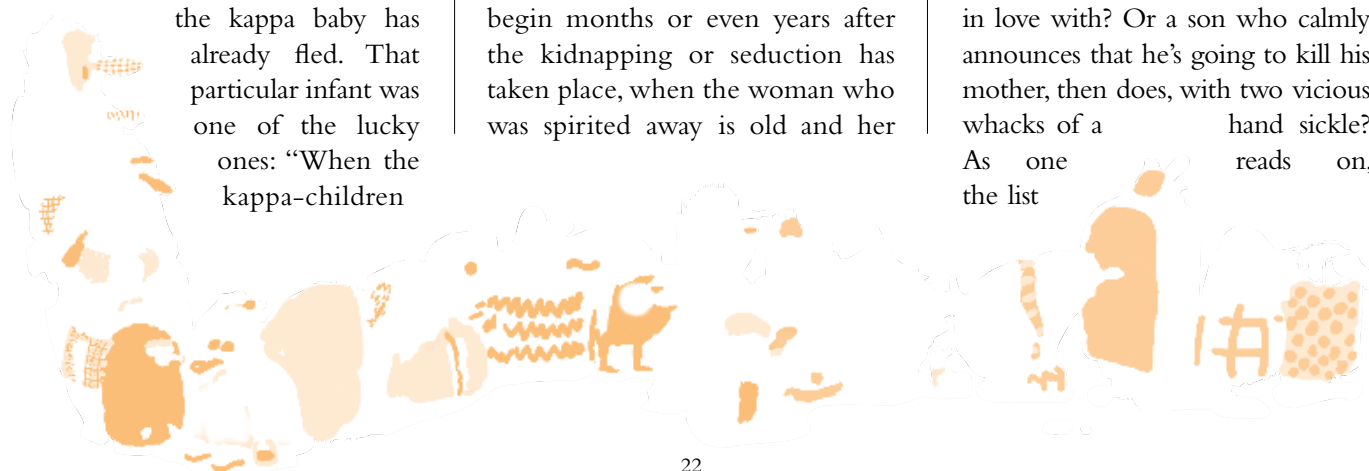
are born," Yanagita wrote, "they are hacked into pieces, put into small wine casks, and buried in the ground. They are grotesque."

As with the yamabito, it's the kappa's habit of seducing the local women that makes them so irksome. This sort of interspecies love-making isn't confined to Tono, of course, or even Japan—many popular European fairy tales feature similar human/animal couplings. These stories often end happily, though, with the animal—often just a cursed human—transforming into a comely human spouse ("Beauty and the Beast," "The Frog Prince," "Hans-my-Hedgehog," "The Pig King"). In Japanese folktales, however, these relationships almost always end badly: a man discovers he married a fish, so the fish leaves; a woman marries a spider, and all their tiny spider kids are killed by the other villagers. One can't help but admire the sheer zoological variety. Japanese men, over the years, have mated with snakes, cats, frogs, fish, cranes, foxes, and clams. Japanese women, for their part, have been wooed by dogs, monkeys, ogres, spiders, horses, octopi, and snails.

In Tono, many of these "tales" begin months or even years after the kidnapping or seduction has taken place, when the woman who was spirited away is old and her

bastard children are grown. Most of them are little more than sightings—somebody sees a kappa boy behind three walnut trees, or spies an unusually tall man (must be yamabito!) sleeping in a thicket of bamboo. Whose child is it, and why is he behind those three walnut trees? How did that tall man come to be sleeping in that thicket of bamboo? No explanations are given. In the best of all possible endings, the yamabito or kappa, or the offspring of these unholy unions, simply slip away. Many, however, meet gruesome ends at the hands of the villagers. Some are shot at, or boiled, or drowned. In the case of kappa babies, they are dismembered.

The Tono-ites' cruelty to outsiders can be explained in a number of ways—xenophobia, a fear of the unknown, a mistrust of freaks and giants—but what of their cruelty to each other? How does one explain a woman who kills her older sister because she thought her sister was giving her the least tasty part of the potato, and saving the best part for herself? Or a father who punishes his daughter for her unsanctioned tryst by killing the horse she's fallen in love with? Or a son who calmly announces that he's going to kill his mother, then does, with two vicious whacks of a hand sickle? As one reads on, the list



of sins grows, one after the other, until it seems there isn't a single decent soul in all of Tono.

Of course, humans the world over can be a pretty nasty bunch. You can find stories of folks killing each other, or stealing from their friends, just about anywhere you look. If Tono seems to have more than its fair share of such tales, it's probably because Yanagita wasn't all that interested in hearing about all the swell things that happened in Tono every day, like that one time Mr. Nakagawa helped an old woman across the street, or about how Mrs. Mizota was really good with kids. *Tono monogatari* brims over with dark stories because that's what Yanagita was looking for—and Sasaki, his indefatigable supplier, knew it.

This quest was made infinitely easier by the fact that, for Yanagita, all "stories" were fair game: ones about ghosts and monsters, certainly, but also tales of arsons and homicides and family squabbles, brushes with vicious animals, or weird things observed after a night of drinking. All were equally worthy of inclusion, because all were, in their own ways, equally true. "Quite contrary to the nine-hundred-year-old tales in *Konjaku monogatari* (*Tales of Long Ago*)," Yanagita wrote in the book's preface, "the legends of Tono reveal facts that exist before our eyes." The stories of kappa and yamabito were every bit as true as the ones told about Tono's human residents, like the local hunter who challenged a bear to a wrestling match, or the village idiot who liked to

rub pieces of wood and then smell his hands. "The legends of Tono are present-day facts," he wrote. "This alone is their *raison d'être*."

Not that Yanagita was an unquestioning cryptozoologist, or a loon, or immune to rumors that he actually believed in such things as kappa, or ghosts. No, these facts he spoke of were the stories themselves. The stories were true because they had a real impact on people's lives: they influenced the behaviors of the people who believed them ("Let's not climb that mountain, because of all the demons that live there"), and they allowed outsiders, whether folklorists like Yanagita, or simply tourists, to understand the inner lives of the Tono-ites. And they had an affective impact: through their telling, whether through oral narratives or Yanagita's own book, local and outsider alike shared in the same feelings of horror and goose-bumpy fear.

It would be these facts, Yanagita hoped, that would help him achieve his true objective: to get at the spiritual core of Japanese culture, the multitude of elements that made up Japan's unique—and, to Yanagita, unchanging—national character. This core, he believed, could only be found through an understanding of the common folk, the "ordinary Japanese" who hadn't yet been tainted by Western capitalism or by customs and cultures imported from other East Asian countries. These people were still in touch with what made Japan Japan, at least in Yanagita's mind: its ghosts and goblins and monsters, the "concealed world" that still existed in remote places

like Tono.

Among the most popular of creatures from Japanese mythology are the *tengu*. Originally depicted as birdlike demons, today's *tengu*, with bright red faces, white beards, fearsome expressions, and enormous noses, most resemble angry, inebriated gnomes. Over the years, *tengu* had been associated with mischief, war, and hubris, but by Yanagita's time, their image had softened, and they were often seen as the protectors—albeit vengeful, fearsome ones—of Japan's mountains and forests.

To contemporary Japanese, *tengu* are considered the stuff of fairy stories, their red masks used to adorn yakitori restaurants and sushi bars. For Yanagita, however, *tengu* were the epitome of the samurai warrior code. "As for their personality," he wrote, "they often possess special characteristics the origins of which, to exaggerate a bit, are in common with that of Bushido and do not exist in other countries."

It's no wonder, then, that in so many of Yanagita's stories, the *yamabito* and kappa, the *tengu* and the ghost ladies, all the assorted things that go bump in the Tono night, are seen as sympathetic. Or that the humans, who encroached on the lands of its infinitely more interesting inhabitants and continue to torment and murder them, are seen as monstrous.

After the publication of *Tono monogatari*, Yanagita continued to write, penning books and articles on rice

farming, Japanese ethnology, European fairy tales, shamanism, and linguistics. He founded a folklore association and, later, an institute of folklore research, which helped solidify his unofficial title as the father of Japanese folklore studies. Around the late 1920s, Yanagita turned his attention away from *tengu* and *yamabito* to focus on the rice-growing peasants of Japan's lowlands—a “great shift” that he never explained, and one that continues to baffle researchers and academics to this day. Perhaps he simply got tired of all the whispers about the guy who believed in *tengu*. Yanagita died on August 9, 1962, at the age of eighty-eight.

Kizen Sasaki kept collecting spooky stories from the old-timers of Tono, and even wrote his own sequel to *Tono monogatari*, which he sent to Yanagita to have a look at. Once again, his former colleague criticized him, this time for his prose, which he considered too flowery for the genre. “To write as curtly as possible—this is an ironclad rule in the collection of old stories,” Yanagita wrote. Sasaki never published the sequel. Instead, he went to work with one of Yanagita's rival folklorists, Motoyama Keisen, writing articles for his journal. After suffering from lung disease for many years, Sasaki died in 1933 at the age of forty-seven.

Sasaki is buried on a hill overlooking his hometown, where his stories are told and retold to the scores of tourists who flock to Tono every year. Some of the professional storytellers have their own tales, ones that they heard as kids, perhaps,

but the tourists don't want to hear those, and complain if the storytellers stray from the now well-known script. No one can say how many of Tono's stories have been lost or forgotten, either because Sasaki became too discouraged to publish his sequel, or because some of the stories were never told to a folklorist, or because tourists simply don't want to hear them, or because the last guy who remembered the stories passed away.

Yanagita acknowledged that a whole passel of stories were lost when Otozo Nitta, “Old Oto,” as he was called, died in the summer of 1909, half a year after the fateful meeting between the two men who would collaborate on *Tono monogatari*. “Since he is old,” Yanagita wrote, “he knows the old tales of the Tono district very well. He always says that he wants to tell the stories to someone so they will not be lost. But nobody wants to go near him to listen to the tales because he smells so bad. He is especially knowledgeable about the biographies of the lords of various smaller fortresses, the rise and fall of households, a variety of traditional songs from the district, legends from deep in the mountains, and tales about people living back in the mountains.”

The account is a vexing one. Yanagita's book, with its open-ended story numbering and free-form structure, seems to forever invite new entries. The reader is left with a teasing glimpse of all the stories that have been lost to time, as well as a haunting image of a lonely

old man, eager to tell at least a few of them to anyone who will listen. “Nobody wants to go near him to listen to the tales,” the book reads, but what's left unsaid is this: *not even Sasaki, or Yanagita.*

It is a confession of sorts, an implied *mea culpa* to both Oto and the reader. For it was not only the old man's friends and family who shunned him, but Sasaki, one of Tono's most famous chroniclers, who was among those unwilling to stomach an old man's smell for the sake of a motherlode of now-lost tales.

Yanagita may have been blameless—Oto died months before the famed folklorist made his first visit to the town—but one wonders if he might have pressed Sasaki a bit harder to get at least a few stories from the wise old guy who might not be long for this world. If he did not, the blame for the lost stories belongs to both men, if not necessarily in equal measure. But if he did, and Sasaki failed to follow his advice, then the wrong is, of course, Sasaki's alone. The damning line, then, becomes something more than just a confession, shared or not—it becomes yet one more of Yanagita's digs at Sasaki, the young, tireless source of his most famous book. *You can't tell a story, your prose is lousy, and, oh—how come you didn't go talk to Old Oto?* In the end, Yanagita may have been the perfect Tono protagonist: mean, aloof at times, supremely self-interested. With humans like him roaming the streets of Tono, it's no wonder the *yamabito* kept to the woods. ★