

## “THE NIGHT PARADE”. EXPERIENCING THE FOLKLORE-BASED JAPANESE IMAGINARY BETWEEN *WABISABI* AND THE UNCANNY

CĂLIN LUPIȚU\*

**ABSTRACT.** Unlike the relatively uncomplicated aesthetics permeating the cultural history of the western world, tied up since Greek Antiquity and the advent of Christianity with such ethical categories as the good and the pure, Japanese aesthetics are intricately distinct, as both the lifeblood and the reflection of the various cultural ripples to have swept across the Land of the Rising Sun. The author sets out on a foray into a most central category of Japanese aesthetics, the elusive *wabisabi*, which he argues is not too removed, particularly in some of its aspects captured in folkloric and folkloric-derived modern works, from the more western category of the uncanny. After certain theoretical considerations connecting the main lines of western and eastern art philosophy to compare and contrast *wabisabi* and the uncanny, the paper focuses on specific iconic examples of uncanny characters in Japanese mythology, e.g. such liminal creatures as the mischievous and bizarre *youkai*. This is to point out the elements rendering them *wabisabi* and just what cognitive and artistic effects their twinned aesthetics instills into the collective consciousness. Last but not least, the author investigates the productivity of such characters into modern media, particularly in the pop culture phenomena of *manga* and *anime*, where indeed Japanese folklore continues to not only survive but thrive by reinventing itself for each coming age and medium, so as to thrill and inspire new generations with flights of fancy concealing truths fundamental to the human experience.

**KEY WORDS:** aesthetics, alterity, anime/manga, Japanese folklore, liminality, uncanny, *wabisabi*, *youkai*

In his 2001 book on traditional Japanese aesthetics and art, Antanas Andrijauskas makes the apt claim that:

The evolution of aesthetic thought in the Land of the Rising Sun gave birth to a world of unique categories, to distinctive principles of aesthetic understanding and art appreciation. In no other country on earth have aesthetic feeling and artistic values been able to take such firm root in everyday life. [...] One of the most distinctive features of Japanese culture and aesthetic consciousness is that those areas of human creative expression which remain marginal in other cul-

\* CĂLIN LUPIȚU (PhD) holds his degree in Intercultural Humanities from Jacobs University in Bremen, Germany. His research interests include: world mythology and its reinvention in postmodern media; spirituality, liminality and alterity; the monstrous and the uncanny; labyrinthine spaces, proper and of the mind; layers of (intertextual) symbolism. E-mail: calin.d.lupitu@gmail.com.

tures acquire extreme importance in Japan and become the focus of intense aesthetic reflection and artistic creation (Andrijauskas, 2001: 9.1).

Indeed, isolated for much of its history via its geopolitical circumstances, Japan has developed its unique culture, often paradoxical in many of its aesthetic and cognitive aspects to the untrained eye of an outsider—even after, or perhaps also due to, the eventual absorption of foreign influences beginning with the Meiji Reformation in the nineteenth century.

A historical melting pot of primarily such religions as Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and local tribal animism (e.g. of the Ainu people), Japanese culture blends order and chaos in its spirituality and aesthetics, none too surprising in a human society having flourished on a precarious volcanic archipelago continually swept by earthquakes, typhoons and tsunamis. As such, the major concepts of Japanese aesthetics revolve around harmony and natural simplicity, of which perhaps the best-known is the *wabisabi*.

Broadly speaking, *wabisabi* may be related to finding beauty in what is apparently flawed or incomplete and certainly perishable and fleeting. Yet, unlike the more Western concept of the grotesque, *wabisabi*, believed to have been developed in correlation with the tenets of Zen Buddhism and closely related to the ritualised practice of the tea ceremony, focuses on the “direct, intuitive insight into transcendental truth beyond all intellectual conception” (Leonard Koren, 2008: 76). It may thus also be said to be the beauty found in most things humble or unconventional. It is the enlightening realisation and reminder of everything being ultimately impermanent and imperfect, introduced through harmonious displays of natural patterns punctuated with flight-of-fancy syncopes and/or through intimate, unpretentious designs (e.g. *katashi*, meaning “art”, but also “form” and “design”) pointing to a purposeful sense of living (Andrijauskas, 2001: 9.5).

While Japanese aesthetics does not natively (or indeed, *naively*) incorporate such a strict binary division as between “beautiful” and “ugly”, it employs multiple overlapping categories, cognitive as well as semantic, to describe the transcendental experience of the artistic and natural sublime. *Wabisabi* itself originates as a combination of two such categories, namely *wabi* (restrained or hidden beauty) and *sabi* (patina, or the feel of ancient or classical artifacts). Many others also closely relate to it: *makoto* (genuineness), *aware* (enchantment), *okashi* (quaint or playful charm, or childlike humour), *yugen* (the mystery of beauty), *shibui* (aristocratic distinction through simplicity, or unassuming elegance), *miyabi* (tranquility), *hosomi* (fragility, subtleness), *karumi* (lightness), *sobi* (grandeur, presence commanding respect), *mei* (purity, noble spirit), etc. (Andrijauskas, 2001: 9.11).

The above categories are never far from the dialectical outlook of Taoism, and their interplay of nuances bespeaks the traditional belief in their underlying *bi*, the most abstract and transcendent concept of beauty other-

wise very similar to Western aestheticism ideals. It is understood as “the eternal essence hidden in all the phenomena of existence”, and, as Ueda concludes, “beauty preserves its universal meaning as a principle of life and art” (Ueda, 1967: 53). *Bi* permeates the very fabric of the Cosmos, from the most unnoticed to the most captivating of circumstances, and is said to be embedded in all natural and human phenomena—a universal constant of sorts, whose constancy is reflected by its very tendency to acquire new forms with each age or generation.

It then becomes self-evident why the traditions of Japanese aesthetics do not conceptualise art and artists as change crafters or re-creators of the world, but merely as reflectors of the *bi* already in place since the beginning of time: “Thus, man cannot create that which already exists, he can only discern” (Andrijauskas, 2001: 9.3). Nevertheless, despite certain similarities of the ineffable and primordial character of cosmic beauty, the Japanese *bi* is different from the regulated hierarchical vision of the Cosmos entertained by medieval and Renaissance Europeans especially because the *bi* is seen as in constant flux, cloaked by material reality. Furthermore, traditional Japanese aesthetes rather reject any external attempts to systemise and rigidly categorise that concept of primeval beauty, as they “distrust the power of analytic reason”, as the same Andrijauskas (2001: 9.4) notes, stating their belief that the instruments of reason are limited for dealing with such profoundly subjective and intuitive matters as the impact of art and beauty.

Firmly rooted in the nation’s cultural identity, Japanese aesthetics always pays tribute, despite its kaleidoscope of renewed imagery, to traditional values. Changes may come and go, but the Japanese collective consciousness continues to remain in awe of nature, enthralled by its multifaceted and ever-shifting beauty. Accordingly, there have been two main orientations of depicting that beauty competing and alternating, but also inspiring one another, throughout the history of Japanese art and aesthetics, namely the Confucian-derived tendency towards ornate and colourful realism, as seen, for instance, in the socially documenting *ukiyo-e*; and the Zen-leaning tendency for minimalism and stylization, wherein the crafted backdrop serves as a guide for the meditating mind, as typically seen in calligraphy (*zenga*) and intellectual painting (*bunjinga*).

The above elements of Japanese aesthetics are organically bound with the collective creativity of the archipelago nation, manifested especially in their folk beliefs and mythology, whether ancient or of more recent fabrication. Ever since Lafcadio Hearn’s turn-of-the-twentieth-century popularisation of Japanese mythology and aesthetics through the *Kwaidan* story collection, the Western public started seeing that the “unfamiliar Japan” was also in fact the *uncanny* Japan, its unique olden aesthetics feeling particularly

avant-garde in a cultural space that was only beginning to come to terms with its own rich legacy of the uncanny.

In the Western world, the experience of the uncanny, while as primeval and as intuitive as anywhere else in its basic social-psychological forms, only found its artistic voice in the past two centuries, in close connection with the rise of the Gothic, horror, science-fiction and fantasy genres of literature and cinema. In previous works, the author has pursued various aspects of human liminality, alterity and the experience of the uncanny (most often related to the cognitive and aesthetic categories of the grotesque and the monstrous) to argue that, particularly during times of shifting socio-economic paradigms, fictional explorations of the uncanny help societies negotiate and even exorcise their fears regarding those shifts in paradigm, while discovering underlying truths about the set-up of their own cultural and geopolitical identity.

Japanese folklore is certainly no exception, as its troubled history—especially the Warring States (*Sengoku*) period taking up much of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries—provides myriads of cultural and geopolitical opportunities for the accumulation of a wealth of uncanny myths and superstitions often involving deception and cruelty, but also various moments of fleeting bittersweet beauty. Such myths are rife with various types of supernatural beings ranging from the more mischievous animal shapeshifters (especially foxes, cats and raccoon dogs) to the benevolent, neutral or even human-hostile nature-guarding deities of variable forms and abilities. In between the two lies an ever-growing plethora of bizarre creatures generally assimilated in the West to “ghosts” or “goblins”, the *youkai*, mysterious supernatural entities whose name bears such connotations as “attraction”, “suspicious” and “mystery” and whose most representative ability is shapeshifting (especially in order to blend in with humans). They are not to be mistaken with the *yuurei*, the Japanese ghosts of the dead, especially when restless, nor with the *mononoke*, vindictive spirits held responsible for various calamities, especially wars and diseases (the original phrase they are named after, *mono no ke*, literally points to a disease or an affliction, *ke*, caused by a certain, usually unknown or unknowable, “thing”, the *mono*).

Most of such creatures readily lend themselves to metaphorical use by authors past and present, while their encapsulated sense of the uncanny attests to the intricate mix of their ideological (including artistic) and socio-political circumstances. One of the most unique categories of such *youkai* are the *tsukumogami* (the deities, *kami*, of various tools), usually held to signify various household items that, on their one hundredth anniversary, gain sentient life and may often play pranks on their (previous) owners, also depending on the state of abuse and neglect the specific item had incurred

in its previous existence as a mere tool. It was thus common for various propitiation ceremonies to be held for such items as pre-emptive measures.

The example of the *tsukumogami* is excellent for illustrating both the uncanny underpinning most Japanese mythical characters and the idiosyncratic roots of their *wabisabi* appeal. To begin with, such creatures appear harmlessly inanimate, while always bearing the ominous potential for an ill-defined much more, and, most unnervingly, the potential for inanimate-turned-animate (semi-)sentience, which, from golems to zombies, has plagued mankind across most ages and cultures. Worse, this is coupled with the looming threat of privacy violation (life-threatening given the repressive nature of socialising in feudal Japan), particularly because many such items are, or used to be, everyday items very close to their human owner’s living space and body, from sandals and umbrellas to *futon* cushions and musical instruments. This threat, while weakened by the shorter life span of the average Japanese at the time, is nevertheless compounded by its transcending character, becoming a multi-generational curse if the potentially exposed secrets were of such nature as to still hold meaning after the old-age death of those involved. On the other hand, while the one hundred years required for the supernatural upgrade of the *tsukumogami* (paralleled by the same requirement for the various animal shapeshifters, or *obake*) would have been a number too magically remote as to inspire genuine terror by itself, it reveals the deep-seated belief of the Japanese in both the unbroken continuity with the past (*i.e.*, things may change, even radically, in appearance, but their essence remains interconnected) and the Shinto-Confucian *mélange* of the universe being both perfectly harmonised and teleologically individualised, with a certain kind of “soul”, *tama*, alternatively viewed as a life seed or an egg, given to all things.

Much of the history of Japan took place in a feudal setting, wherein, with the notable exception of forging high-quality steel weapons (restricted to the samurai class), citizens existed in a liminal space and a liminal state, in which, also encouraged by religious and ideological beliefs, they sought to live in harmony with nature. As such, most of them, especially the agrarian class, would have been keenly aware of the sublime aspects of nature, (somewhat) bountiful and fearful, to be revered and reckoned with. It comes as no surprise, then, that they would fear the “natural wiles” of certain animals, from spiders and snakes to cats and foxes, which they would exaggerate, in both fear and respect, to trickster and godly proportions. Unlike man and his short life span, nature—especially the large trees of the thick forests—was perceived as enduring (an impression shared with the household items, particularly in an age long before planned commercial obsolescence, where tools and even clothes would be passed down to one’s offspring for as long as they still served their purpose), and very likely also

as family in the grand design of things. They would leave offerings of food and the occasional incense to shrines dedicated to the woodland guardians as gratitude for their crops or alternatively attempt to appease their (capricious) wrath. Given the geographical circumstances of the Japanese islands and the arbitrary cruelty of many feudal lords not above claiming a serf's life for any perceived offence, *especially* to their honour, most of the agrarian population, uneducated in the stoic ways of the Buddha nor sharing the Confucian views of the bureaucratic scholars, only perceived as having recourse to their non-human neighbours of the fields and forests. This is why, while many trickster animals are seen as naturally mischievous, they are often depicted in a sympathetic way, as older siblings to whom largely everything is permitted or forgiven, with the tacit understanding of their not having been driven, even to mortal injury of humans, by malice (although “rogue” nature guardians were not unheard of) but only sport and circumstance—and why myths of humans befriending and even marrying such shapeshifters were also upliftingly commonplace.

Hardly surprisingly, *youkai* also appear as moralising allegories in multiple stories sharing the Western fairy tales' cautionary messages. Paradoxically for a culture so self-professedly in awe of balance and harmony, Japanese life was, for the most part of the population, as previously stated, very rough and arbitrary, hence a likely high number of psycho-somatic afflictions that would have required hardly a long stretch of the imagination to be considered acts of “possessed” humans. But *youkai* were not considered ghosts proper, and many had corporeal or semi-corporeal presences, many of the former considered as having originated as humans. Men and (especially) women animated by unnaturally high intensities of envy, rage, bloodlust, greed, gluttony, etc., were thought to be liable of actual body warping by that specific negative passion, which effectively turned them into variously bizarre humanoids—either missing body elements (e.g. faces or mouths), having extra ones (e.g. limbs, eyes, tails) or having ones with unnatural physiology (e.g. cleft tongues, living hair, insatiable mouths)—and drove home the Buddhist monks' message of temperance and self-restraint.

There are many aquatic types of *youkai*, as well as aerial types, both relatable, as in many other cultures, to the “alien and/or hostile ecosystem yields alien creatures” impression intuitive to the majority of the population, agrarian and landlocked, or otherwise very familiar to the drowning or infectious potential of various water bodies (perhaps how the link between water and ghostly portals first appeared) to which the more vulnerable-perceived social categories of children and women were most liable. On the other hand, danger was plenty on land just as well, with some of the most notorious *youkai*, the *Oni* and the *Tengu*, prowling it as their habitats, not unlike the rogues and bandits their mythical depictions may well echo. The

traditional figure of the *Oni* is similar to other brutish giants in folklores around the world, e.g. cyclopes or trolls, except for its distinctive tiger-skin loincloth, likely depicted as an indication of the Japanese club-wielding cyclops' ferocity outperforming even that of the feline man-eater. But while the *Oni* have largely stayed a two-dimensional hulking menace, the *Tengu* have undergone extensive diversification and moral reconversion. Thought to have originated (as *Tiangou*) in China in the form of an eclipse-time moon-eating meteoric dog, the *Tengu* entered Japanese folklore in the form of a kite, hawk, crow or similar rapacious birds and evolved to increasingly anthropomorphic forms (even though full-crow *Tengu* are still known), the zenith of its evolution seeing only its iconic long nose (phallic within rural settings) kept as a reminder of its previous avian forms, although they are said to still be able to fly and use various wind-and-feather attacks. Moreover, while they were initially thought of as mere petty demons of war “patroning” mountain bandits, they rose to prominence due to their association with various orders of martial monks, to the point where medieval scrolls end up exclusively depicting them in the traditional full garb of such monks and propelling them to Buddhism-upholding fame, which is how *Tengu* are now perceived as rather protective (if still fairly dangerous) minor deities and even misconstrued as founders of several ninja clans.

After the social and technological reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century, many previously unchanged aspects of Japanese society had to be replaced almost overnight, which also impacted folklore, as for instance not all of the next generation, no longer dwelling in the countryside, could still relate, or certainly not in the same way, to the agrarian terrors and worshipped hopes of their ancestors. Living in harmony with a world of beings they could not see, nor truly understand or accept as reasonable, from animal shapeshifters to animated tools, simply faded out of city life for the better part of the following century. Meanwhile, the raging World Wars were devastatingly more scarring than any folkloric *youkai*. And yet, when prosperity started returning to Japan and it struggled to forge a new (international) identity for itself, the appeal of the “old world” and its values also made its comeback, complete with its unique aesthetics and its enchanting tales of freakish critters.

Proving once more that their connection to the values of their past is precious to them, the Japanese audience did not let the traditional appeal of ghost and *youkai* stories fade away even in modern settings, where they have regained prominence in literature and cinema, especially the genres catering to teenagers and young adults. In fact, one may surmise that Japanese folklore would be virtually unknown in the West outside of specific East-Asian folklorists' research groups were it not for Japan's arguably most

popular cultural export nowadays, its iconic comics and animation films and series, best known as, respectively, *manga* and *anime*.

Naturally, not all *manga* and *anime* are based on *youkai* tales, but those that continue the trend of blending the old *youkai* with new ones of their creators' imagination, pioneered in the post-*Sengoku* stories of the Edo period, when artists had finally risen to individual fame and, depending on their success, had moved into the Capital to enjoy some degree of freedom to illustrate concepts as their imagination warranted, including with what-if *youkai*. Perhaps the most influential early post-war *manga* series making *youkai* dark comedies available again to children was Shigeru Mizuki's *GeGeGe no Kitarou*, adapted after the early twentieth-century folk story *Hakaba no Kitarou* ("Kitarou of the Graveyard"). Remade into several *anime* series of varyingly lighter tones, it chronicles the adventures of eponymous *youkai* boy Kitarou, (re)born in a grave, as he struggles to maintain a tentative balance between his *youkai* entourage and the human friends he tries to make. The series, in both media, has a distinctive rough animation style, befitting its parodic-dark tone, and features several recurrent characters. Most of them are classical-inspired *youkai*, such as the protagonist's anthropomorphised eyeball for a father, a female friend based on trickster cats of folklore, and several others based on more obscure legends from the entire country (the sand-throwing hag, the toddler able to increase his body mass to crush those around, the living wall blocking and confusing travellers, etc.), and the on/off antagonist Ratman, well over the age of three hundred and loosely based on animal shapeshifters but not directly connected to any particular legend but rather invented as a base-humour foil for the main character, given his stench attributes.

Nurarihyon is another character making occasional appearances in the Kitarou *manga*, where he is only a minor character, although post-medieval folklore introduces the original character of the same name as the head of the legendary "Hundred-Demon Nightly Parade", itself a legend developed after a painting of the same name. A seemingly very powerful and rather benign *youkai*, though a consummate master of deception, it receives a more central role, which thus contributes to expanding his mythology in the new media, in the 2007 *manga* (and 2010 *anime*) by Hiroshi Shiibashi, *Nurarihyon no Mago* (literally "Nurarihyon's Grandson", distributed as "Nura: Rise of the Youkai Clan"), where the old *youkai* plays grandfather mentor to a three-quarter human, one-quarter *youkai* young man, in charge of leading their clan of *youkai*, not unlike a Yakuza alliance of Families, towards a future of prosperity. The series again places great stock on the dual nature of *youkai* not being exclusive, but circumstantial, villains, i.e. capable of greatness when under proper leadership, as Nura, the young protagonist (Nurarihyon III), seeks to achieve. The series is also relevant to our investigation

due to the interesting relationship between beauty (charm), power and fear: in a world of spectres, fear is the main capital and rebuilding energy, and thus, any would-be leader of the *youkai* must learn to first gain an imposing presence over all of his retinue, so they may bow to him in awe (afraid and charmed, the aesthetics of the sublime uncanny!) and trust and swear (around the ceremonial bowl of sake) to be his vassal. Young Nura, while hardly imposing in his human identity as a feeble teenager, nevertheless gradually strives to better himself and earn the trust of those around him, effectively subverting the “charm by power” protocols with his own “charm by trust” approach, allowing him to use a new set of abilities, only usable by part-human entities, which work not on the beauty of fear but on the beauty of empathy and camaraderie.

Another iconic series that connects the aesthetics of the uncanny and of the *wabisabi* based on Japanese folklore is Rumiko Takahashi’s cult favourite of the late 1990s (the *manga*) and early 2000s (the *anime*), *Inuyasha* (*Sengoku Otogizoushi Inuyasha*, “Inuyasha: A Feudal Fairy Tale”). With great detail paid to traditions, social organisation, scenery and garments, this self-proclaimed fairy tale skillfully rekindles modern interest in the Japanese medieval atmosphere in a profound interplay of action, romance and comedy. Protagonists Kagome and Inuyasha reconcile the future and the past, respectively, as well as modern objective thought with the parallel/time-displaced dimension that is Inuyasha’s reality, i.e. Kagome’s ancient past (via her shrine-sacerdotal lineage represented by her grandfather), a mythical past for most of her contemporaries but which she incredulously sees realised when she takes the plot-starting accidental journey back into the *Sengoku* era. Beyond the visually obvious, the aesthetics of the series is constructed on the same folkloric principle of staying in a harmonious flux of rhythms and contraries. Inuyasha himself is a *hanyou*, a half-*youkai*, with teenage-specific issues of (not) belonging anywhere between the two worlds, of the *youkai*, who spurn him, and of the humans, who fear him, and further struggling with reconciling the two aspects of himself into a fully functioning “halfing”, a slave neither to the rabid bloodlust of his canine heritage, nor to the (comparative) helplessness of being a mere human on full moons. His physical prowess (he carries the greatest sword of all characters, made of a gigantic fang) but weakness of spirit (impulsive, prone to depression, jealous and insecure with women, especially after the staged betrayal in his past) are balanced by Kagome’s strong heart. The undersung but very inspirational female protagonist of the series, Kagome has great determination, by which she pursues him and accepts to be by his side in patience and support, though knowing his heart cannot fully choose her yet, but also a great capacity for empathy and self-sacrifice in continuing the fight against archvillain Naraku in the past, away from her entire world up to that point,

and as the only member of their team to be lacking any physical superhuman abilities—yet deeply empowered by the light of her kindness. The villains of the series are also highly intricate beings based on *wabisabi* aesthetics. For instance, Inuyasha’s eternal rival, the aristocratic full-*youkai* Sesshomaru, intent on claiming his father’s legacy for himself alone, is cold-hearted and sociopathically honourable, characterised by most he encounters as having “an imposing presence” and cold aloof elegance and beauty. An excellent swordfighter even after losing his arm in combat with Inuyasha, Sesshomaru has to “bear the shame” of having inherited a non-lethal blade (a reviving sword), one which he learns was given to him by his father specifically so he may learn to forgive and to heal, not just destroy, a journey he very slowly embarks on after saving the human child Rin, who becomes his travel companion and occasional liaison with Inuyasha. The archvillain of the series, a minor thief who, jealous of Inuyasha’s happiness and frustrated with his own weakness, sacrifices himself to become the future demon Naraku (literally “hell[-hole]”), a master manipulator literally made up of a multitude of minor *youkai*, whose personal quest is to remove the very last shreds of humanity in him (his heart) and reach absolute power via the sacred diamond all of them are looking for. For all his wickedness, he is thoroughly explained and believable, as well as necessary for the development of all the other characters, being both a (Buddhist-consistent, and thus folklore-consistent) cautionary symbol against the dehumanising pitfalls of jealousy and greed, but also embodying the *wabisabi* aspects of multilayered realities, of having to check underneath the illusions of the flesh in order to reach the truth.

The above are merely three examples of a vast array of human creativity lending itself to further academic insight upon further investigation, at the fertile crossroads between the aesthetic and cognitive dimensions of the uncanny and the *wabisabi*. Researching the creative trove of supernatural creatures dreamt up by Japanese folklore once more confirms the author’s argument that the multilayered aesthetics evidenced by such apparitions, in the East as well as in the West, bear witness to both the fantasies and the fears of the given historical periods of their conception. While some are little more than whimsical, many others provide mirrors—albeit twisted—for our own reflections on our flaws and weaknesses, being thus both cautionary and inspiring on our progress for self- and community-oriented improvement.

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