



### **Oni (鬼) - Japanese Demons**

In the seventh episode of *Dreams* (1990) by Akira Kurosawa, "Weeping Demons," we are transported to a mountain landscape infested with giant dandelion flowers, in which demons, or *oni*, are wailing over the pain coming from their horns. Within Kurosawa's nightmare of a doomed world of mutants surviving a nuclear catastrophe, we can observe a faithful portraiture of the *oni* character popular in Japanese folklore: a gruesome, frightening demon emerging from Hell's abyss. In the movie, *oni* devour each other starting with the lower-ranked *oni* with only one horn, a metaphor depicting a dehumanized society where the strongest rule over the weakest.

Typically, *oni* have either one or several horns protruding from their scalp. Some have a third eye in the center of their forehead, and they often make a hideous grimace from ear to ear and showing their conspicuous teeth. Their skin is usually red, black, blue, or yellow and they wear only a loincloth of tiger skin. Although *oni* are predominantly male, female *oni* can be as terrifying, as we will see.



Netsuke of an *oni* in agony after being showered with soybeans. 19th century.



In Chinese, the ideogram 鬼 (*ki*) designate the soul of a deceased person, a ghost, but in Japanese it is read as *oni*, or demon, but also sometimes as *mono*, an indwelling spirit or *kami*. The Encyclopedia of Shinto published by Kokugakuin University in Tokyo, distinguishes 3 type of *oni*: the wicked spirits or evil *kami*, the *oni* as foreigners or strangers, also considered demons, and the *oni* as good *kami*. The last type is an *oni* invoked to chase away evil spirits. The second type of *oni* typically describes marginalized persons, those from the frontier, foreigners who could have drifted to Japanese shores, or itinerant performers. But the most feared *oni* are the first type, the ones who bring disasters and death, who were initially considered invisible but later became visible. These malicious beings feed on human flesh; some say they can eat a person in one gulp! Such *oni* are believed to be the spirits of the deceased who carried resentment during their lifetime, and the spirits of malicious or jealous women are particularly feared, as in the two act Nô play *Kanawa* (The Iron Tripod). The story goes as follows: in the first act a lady visits the Kibune Shrine (north of Kyoto), asking the *kami* to change her into an *oni* so she can kill her husband, who abandoned her for another woman. Her prayer is answered and she is instructed to dress in red, put an iron tripod on her head and let her fury take her over. In the second act, her husband visits a diviner and finds out his life is in danger. The diviner makes two dolls to which the

woman's fury can be transferred, and prays. The woman-*oni* appears and after exhausting her hatred on the dolls, she loses her power and vanishes.

Many other female *oni* are involved in the *Konjaku monogatari shû* (今昔物語集, lit. *Anthology of Tales from the Past*), a collection of over one thousand tales compiled during the Heian period. Whether male or female, these demons were terribly feared, and people had to find ways of appeasing them. In Tang China, demon exorcists (Fangxiàng, Jp. *hôsôshi*) wore a four-eyed *zhuīnuó* (Jp. *tsuina*) mask. In Japan these rituals were incorporated into the *tsuina* New Year Buddhist rites, evoking the power of Buddhist deities such as Bishamon. *Tsuina* is an exorcism rite in which participants throw peaches at a representation of demon wearing an *oni* mask in order to drive away malicious power. That the famous hero Momotaro, born from a giant peach, was sent to chase the *oni* from *Oni Island*, thus makes sense in this context. The power of peaches to banish demons comes from the Chinese belief that this fruit possesses the power to control noxious spirits.

Another rite, called *mame-maki* or *mame-uchi*, became popular in the Muromachi period (1392-1573) and was performed during the 1st day of winter (*setsubun*): on the night of *setsubun* (February 3 or 4), a male member of a community would disguise himself as an *oni*, wearing a mask, and enter houses where he would be chased away by people throwing beans at him. Another method of chasing *oni* was called *yaikagashi*, which consisted in stacking sardine heads on branches that were hung over doorways.

Today, the ritual of throwing beans on *setsubun* day is still alive, even if less and less people perform it. On that day some people still throw something, usually roasted soybeans, out of the window or the door of the house, while shouting *Oni wa soto! Fuku wa uchi!* (鬼は外! 福は内 "Demons out! Luck in!"). It is also a tradition to eat soybeans, one for each year of one's life, to bring good luck for the rest of the year. This tradition

has become a happy one, just as if nobody was afraid of oni anymore. This because the image of the cannibal *oni* as portrayed in Kurosawa's movie has evolved. This can be seen in the popular TV series of *Onmyôji* (started in 1988), and in the two movies that followed based on the novels or screenplay by Yumemakura Baku (1951-)<sup>1</sup>. The plots, taking place in the Heian period (794-1192) involve two heroes of the time, the legendary Abe no Seimei (921?-1005?), a famous magician/exorcist (*onmyôji*) working for the Bureau of divination (*Onmyô*) of the Imperial court, and Minamoto no Hiromasa (918- ?), a court noble. Together, in a team à la Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, they solve strange mysteries. The Heian being a period during which *oni* were omnipresent in people's imagination, the two heroes are often involved in solving paranormal crimes attributed to *oni*. Such demons are portrayed by Yumemakura as lonely characters, on the margins of society, but almost sympathetic, creating a feeling of empathy with the viewer. Even so, to stay on the safe side, keeps some peaches at home – they might be useful for chasing some malicious *oni* still in the wild!



Minamoto no Yorimitsu (948-1021) chasing the Shuten Dôji *oni* at Mt Oe. By Tôkôsai. Late 18<sup>th</sup> century.



<sup>1</sup> Onmyôji novels, by Yumemakura Baku, also inspired a manga series by Reiko Okano.