

New Additions to the ARAS Permanent Collection
Three in an ongoing series of Archetypal Commentaries
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YAMAUBA (Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754-1799); Edo Period)

Archetypal Commentary

Kunio Yanagita, a Japanese folklorist, collected Japanese folk tales and studied the *Yama-bito* (mountain people) who are traditionally described as living in deep

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mountains and occasionally interacting with village people. In his study of the *Yama-bito*, Yanagita portrays *Yama-uba* (also called *Yamanba*; literally translated as Mountain Old Lady) as paradoxically both a terrifying ‘*kijo*’ (devil woman) and a benevolent figure worshipped for bringing prosperity to villages.

In her manifestation as a figure that evokes fear, *Yamanba* is portrayed as kidnapping and devouring children and travelers wandering in the mountains. She mirrors the hag or the witch in the Western fairy tales such as "Hansel and Gretel." On the other hand, as a benevolent figure, she frequently appears as the mother of a superhuman child (as seen in our image). She is also seen as a pregnant woman seeking aid, rewarding those who help with inexhaustible wealth by imparting such things as the magical silk thread (*otsukune*). The silk thread is magical because it never runs out, which speaks directly to the significance of her benevolence: it implies *Yamanba*’s potent and limitless productivity and generative power, strongly hinted at by the image of the pregnant woman (See: Yoshida, 1990). In the folktale of *Nukafuku-Komefuku*, which is popular in the northern part of the Japanese main island, and similar to “Cinderella”, she even acts as a fairy godmother for an abused sister, also highlighting her benevolent side.

Most *Yamanba* narratives depict either her terrifying or benevolent aspect, but some portray her transformational nature. For example, one of the typical types of folktales spreading all around Japan about *Yamanba* is the “Non-Eating Wife” (*Kuwazu-Nyobo*). This tale depicts *Yamanba* initially as a hardworking young woman who does not eat at all. However, the husband later witnesses her secretly eating a huge amount of food with a hidden mouth located in the back of her head. Being discovered and having her true self known, she transforms into a spider and attempts to kill her husband, but is

ultimately defeated. This type of folktale reflects *Yamanba*'s transformative nature, while also hinting at her bottomless energy. The devouring nature present in *Yamanba* echoes the Buddhist deity *Kishimojin* (Hariti), who consumed the children of others to feed hundreds of her own children, while also being regarded as a goddess of childbirth and fertility.

The mountain where *Yamanba* resides is a place of uncultivated nature and is traditionally considered sacred by the Japanese. *Yamanba*'s association with the untamed mountain landscape suggests a connection to the raw power of Mother Nature. It is also worth noting that, as previously mentioned, *Yamanba* is associated with the spider and thread. The common implication of these symbols is associated with capturing, connecting, and devouring aspects of femininity. Beneath *Yamanba*'s contradictory images of terror and benevolence lies the unifying theme of femininity and maternity, reflecting the powerful archetypal forces of the Great Mother.

Keywords

Great Mother archetype, Mother Nature, fearful and nourishing

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Kintaro zukushi – Sumo no zu (The Complete Kintaro – Sumo Bout)

Archetypal Commentary

Kintaro is known as the son of a mountain witch named *Yamanba*, and he is renowned for his superhuman strength. In Japan today, there is a tradition where families with

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children decorate a Kintaro doll to wish them healthy growth. Here is the outline of *Kintaro's* folk tale:

Kintaro is a boy of enormous strength who lives on a mountain with his mother, *Yamanba*. Being stronger than the adults around him, he often plays alone in the forest, cutting down huge trees with the broadaxe his mother *Yamanba* gave him. One day, *Kintaro* encounters a bear, the guardian of the forest whom he defeats in *sumo* wrestling. Upon seeing the bear surrender to *Kintaro*, all the other animals in the forest become his followers. One day, when he and his companions walk through the forest, they come to a wide, swiftly-flowing river. *Kintaro* pushes down a nearby tree with his hands to use it as a bridge. A man witnesses this and asks *Yamanba* to let her son accompany him. The man, serving the most prestigious master in the country and seeking a strong soldier, sees this as a unique opportunity. *Yamanba* is very honored and accepts the invitation, saying that *Kintaro* deserves it because his father is also a famous soldier who served a distinguished family. *Kintaro* leaves home with the man and becomes a renowned soldier.

Kintaro embodies the characteristics of the Child-Hero archetype, being the son of *Yamanba*, a monstrous old woman, and having a human father (“semi-divine”, *CW* 9-i, para.281) demonstrates supernatural strength. The red color of his skin may indicate his fierce, fighting nature; he became a soldier when he grew up. A boy of enormous strength is a popular image in various myths. We are reminded, for example, of Heracles in Greek mythology, who was assigned the task of conquering animals. Regarding the semi-divine nature, Perseus in Greek mythology could also be named. As Jung says, hinting at Heracles, “the heroes are usually wanderers” (*CW* 5, para. 299). Kintaro also

wanders in the forest and shows his strength over wild animals and nature. He represents the possibility of growth.

The axe, gifted by his mother *Yamanba*, is associated with thunder, rain, and fertility (Chevalier and Gheerbrant, 1969), which may be related to the motherhood contained in the *Yamanba* symbolism. However, Kintaro's actions demonstrate a clear move toward autonomy. The fact that Kintaro defeats the bear in *sumo* wrestling means that he used only his own innate physical strength and not his mother's protection, the axe.

Furthermore, the detail that he cuts down the tree with his bare hands is a potent image: it is implied that he has fully outgrown the need for his mother's direct, symbolic aid and is becoming his own man.

Shinichi Nakazawa, a Japanese anthropologist, argues that while the bear was initially worshipped as a god by hunter-gatherer societies where nature reigned supreme, the rise of nations shifted this reverence to human kings, effectively dethroning the bear (Nakazawa, 2002). The story of Kintaro interestingly overlaps with the historical transition from bear to king. Initially depicted as a son of Mother Nature, nurtured by the forest and the mountain witch *Yamanba*, he proves his strength to conquer nature by beating a bear and building a bridge over a river. Ultimately, he becomes a soldier, serving a human lord. The narrative may symbolize the ego's development from perceived innate omnipotence, protected by the Mother, to adaptation within a hierarchical society ruled by masculinity.

Keywords

Child-Hero, coming out of nature and entering the world of masculinity, ego development

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ARAS No.: [7Nm.025](#)



The Ghost of Oiwa

Archetypal Commentary

In *Yotsuya Kaidan*, one of the most famous ghost stories in Japan, written by Tsuruya Nanboku in 1825, *Oiwa*, a fragile, sickly, but beautiful woman, is betrayed by her

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husband and poisoned to die. Because of the poison, her face is inflamed, and she dies in agony. After the death, she becomes an *onryo*, ghostly vengeful spirit after a physical death, exhibiting a furious rage that curses men to death.

In the Western context, *Medea*, a tragedy written by Euripides in ancient Greece, also describes women's intense feelings of vengeance. While *Medea's* story is superficially similar to *Yotsuya Kaidan*, a critical distinction lies in the nature of their revenge.

Medea is an agent of her revenge while alive, deliberately poisoning her ex-husband, his new bride, and his children before departing on a divine chariot. *Oiwa*, in sharp contrast, is a victim of betrayal and poisoning, and her revenge is taken only after she becomes an ugly ghost. In the case of *Oiwa*, a clear separation is made between her life in the present and that after death. She is depicted as modest, passive, and innocent while alive, before turning into a hideous, cruel ghost with a furious rage that curses men to death.

A female ghost and her grudge have long been a theme in Japanese literature. *Rokujo-no-Miyasudokoro* (Lady Rokujo) in *Genji-Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji), written in the mid-Heian period (11th century) and still well-known to this day, must be mentioned. She loved the beautiful, noble protagonist, *Hikaru Genji*, so much that she was furiously jealous of the other women with whom *Hikaru* flirted. She attacked them as *ikiryo* (an obsessed spirit departed from a living body) and also, after her death, as *onryo*. Although this is regarded as jealousy rather than revenge, yet, we can see the distinct separation between the modest consciousness and the unconscious psychic process. When Lady Rokujo notices that she harms other women as *ikiryo*, she feels terror about herself.

In Jungian terminology, the shadow may give an account of such a ghost or a spirit. “The shadow personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about themselves and yet is always pushing for consciousness directly or indirectly” (CW 9i, para. 513). While the assimilation of the shadow is regarded as important for the development of the psyche, especially in the framework of the individuation process, narratives like *Oiwa* and Lady Rokujo do not emphasize this. Instead, these stories focus on the enduring separation between the living body and the life of the spirit. This persistent separation, rather than shadow integration, can be understood as a potential origin of contemporary Japanese postmodern consciousness, which often involves living with dissociation rather than overcoming it (Kawai, 2021).

We can also examine the narrative about *Oiwa* from a different perspective. Let me introduce *Sugawara no Michizane*, a well-known male *onryo* in Japan. He was a prominent scholar and politician, who was betrayed by another powerful politician and exiled from Kyoto, the political capital of the time, to a remote area. He harbored deep resentment and is said to have become a vengeful spirit after his death, returning to Kyoto and wreaking havoc. Similarly, tales of male ghosts are typically related to political resentment. The clear contrast between female and male ghosts can be understood through the lens of Jungian psychology: the female ghosts’ concern with relationship and emotion mirrors the anima as the producer of moods and feelings. Conversely, the male ghosts’ concern with status and collective order reflects the animus as the producer of opinions and judgments. In this context, figures like *Oiwa* and *Sugawara-no-Michizane* embody the archetypal depth of these two ruling powers (cf. CW 7, para.331). Moreover, the very image of the ghost—personification of the dead—

itself is “the vision of soul given by anima” (Hillman, 1989, p.87), suggesting that the appearance of these vengeful spirits, regardless of gender, discloses a fundamental wounding of the soul-figure.

The *Yotsuya Kaidan* gained broad readership in Japan around the first half of the 19th century, a period when European literature was shifting away from naturalistic themes toward the Romantic movement’s pursuit of personal reflection and subjective experience. This cultural timing highlights a key difference: while Western culture was internalizing the emotional and imaginative life, Japanese culture, by contrast, retained a close, externalized relationship with the animistic perspective, allowing spiritual and archetypal forces to remain potent, visible entities that actively intervene in the human world.

Keywords

female ghost, spirit, dissociation, externalization, animistic perspective

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