
Original Article

Less than Gods?
Gods and Yokai in the Ushioni of Kikuma, Ehime Prefecture

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This study reconsiders the distinction between gods (kami 神) and demonic beings (yokai 妖怪) with reference to a case study of the ushioni (牛鬼: cattle demon) of Kikuma, Ehime Prefecture, Japan. As officially stated, the ushioni is not an object of worship, but an outrider of the procession of the portable shrine during the festival. However, in practice, it would be difficult to explain the role of the ushioni in the festival in terms of the outrider function, because the ushioni leads the portable shrine in processions on quite a few occasions. Indeed, it is attributed a god-like function on a few occasions during the festival, and the ushioni itself behaves as if it were a god. Additionally, the real motivation for locals to bring the ushioni to the festival site is their fear of a disaster if the ushioni procession stops, rather than its outrider function.
Introduction

What is religion? Our classic answer to this question refers to Tylor’s (1920) definition of religion as “belief in spiritual beings,” which invokes another question. In discussing “spiritual beings,” we make conventional distinctions between gods, objects of worship, and other forms of spiritual beings without enshrinement. What, then, is a god, and what is a non-god spirit? I argue that findings from Japanese yokai studies can provide insight into this question. According to Komatsu (1994: 283-291), the relationship between god and yokai is determined by two dynamics of enshrinement of spiritual beings with a positive value as gods, and disenshrinement of those with negative value as yokai. Of course, these two extremes lie in transitional categories. Based on a case study of Kikuma’s ushioni, this study considers the importance of this transitional nature of in-between spirits.

Ushioni Studies: An Overview

According to Omoto (1999), the concept of ushioni consists of three separate categories: 1) yokai or demonic beings discussed in folk traditions, 2) parade floats of Shinto shrine festivals, and 3) local handicrafts. Among them, 1) and 2) are closely connected to folk beliefs. Ushioni as demonic beings have been widely documented in many parts of Western Japan, while ushioni as parade floats are found almost exclusively in Ehime, especially in the Southwestern part of the prefecture (Nan’yo 南予). In the Nan’yo region, the origins of ushioni processions in local shrine festivals come from the legends in the Sengoku period, when a large model beast was made to threaten enemies on the battlefield or fierce animals. Modeled after these legends, today’s ushioni in festival processions are expected to lead portable shrines and drive evil things away, and no relationship with
yokai-like beings is mentioned.

According to local traditions, the origin of ushioni in Kikuma is described as follows (Ikeuchi 1973: 5):

1) In the Muromachi period (1336–1573), a large number of cattle and horses were killed by a malicious beast. One day, the abbot of the local temple passed by and came across the beast and preached the Dharma. Since then, local people have never suffered from attacks by the beast.
2) In former days when pandemic prevailed in the community, villagers made a model of ushioni in the hope of dispelling the pandemic. Later, the pandemic prevailed again in the year when the ushioni procession was stopped. Since then, people have continued the procession until today.
3) One day a cattle demon appeared and severely damaged the villagers’ crops. They made a model of ushioni to appease ghosts and thereafter, the villagers were saved from the disaster.

In contrast to Nan’yo, the uniqueness of Kikuma’s ushioni lies in the fact that it is a parade float with its origin in yokai traditions, that is, it has elements of both 1) and 2) in Omoto’s classification.

Kikuma Festival

To understand the function the ushioni plays in the festival, we need to examine the structure of the annual festival (Kikuma-matsuri 菊間祭) closely. Kikuma-matsuri is an annual event, which takes place every October, centered on the Kamo Shrine 加茂神社 and its subordinate shrines and involves the entire town of Kikuma. Although the main event is the procession of the portable shrine, by which its main deity makes its annual visit to all the households of
the town, other parade floats such as *ushioni*, *shishimai* (獅子舞: lion dance), and *otomo-uma* (お供馬: dressed boys on horses to accompany the procession) also take part.

The main festival day is the third Sunday of October, when the procession of the Kamo Shrine’s portable shrine takes place, while each subordinate shrine and its supporters organize separate ceremonies on the day before (Saturday). The *ushioni* belongs to the supporter group (*ujiko* 氏子) of the Itsukushima Shrine, one of Kamo’s subordinate shrines. On the eve of Kikuma-matsuri, the spirit (*otamashin*) of the main deity of the Itsukushima Shrine is transferred to its portable shrine and is taken for an annual visit (*sakamukai*) to its supporters. In the afternoon, *sakamukai*, *ushioni*, and other floats parade the main streets of the town (this parade is called *kaomise*).

On the day of Kikuma-matsuri, the portable shrine of Itsukushima leaves its host house¹ for the Kamo Shrine. After all the portable shrines of the subordinate shrines have gathered at Kamo, the *ushioni* proceeds to the Kamo shrine compound before the festival procession starts. The procession parade consists of the portable shrines of Kamo and its subordinates, as well as other floats, in which the *ushioni* takes the outrider. After the procession, the *ushioni* is taken back to the shrine (Itsukushima) to be dismantled, while the portable shrines continue on to visit their respective supporters.

¹ Upon the annual festival, one household among the *ujiko* group is appointed to be the *oyado* 大宿, which is assigned to host the portable shrine of the shrine deity throughout the festival including the preparatory period prior to the actual procession.
Ushioni as a Half-enshrined Object

In previous works in the field of ushioni studies, its outrider function has been repeatedly stressed. However, at least for the Kikuma case, the actual ritual process reveals that the ushioni never leads the portable shrine of Itsukushima. The ushioni and portable shrine leave for the procession separately. As for the portable shrine of Kamo, the ushioni leads the parade. However, some records reveal that the ushioni has not always been in the leading position in the parade (Watanabe 1928: 58, Ikeuchi 1973: 7). In 1976, the main parade was canceled due to the imminent danger of typhoons and floods at the time. Despite the absence of the portable shrine procession, the ushioni independently participated in the festival to have an audience with the main god of Kamo.

The fact that the ushioni belongs to the supporter’s group (not the shrine itself) means that it is not officially regarded as an object of worship. Throughout the festival, the ushioni is treated differently from the portable shrines, the vehicles for the gods. Nevertheless, the ushioni bestows blessings upon the town residents who take part in the procession, just as the god on the portable shrine does. Furthermore, the ushioni’s head is made of paper amulets of the shrine (kito-fuda 祈祷札) in which the otamashin is expected to reside. The use of paper amulets is a typical way to sanctify something, as seen in cases of the sub-portable shrines for children for whom the ritual of otamashin transfer is not performed. In this regard, it is difficult to assert that the ushioni shares nothing with the deity.

Komatsu’s argument on yokai, in which the positive and negative values are allocated to domains of god and yokai (Komatsu 1984), respectively, states that the transformation of the state of negative to zero is regarded as a positive value effect. According to the local traditions, as previously mentioned, cancelation of the ushioni
procession is expected to cause pandemics or other kinds of misfortune, and it is for this reason that the *ushioni* procession can never be discontinued, even during a disaster. In this context, the *ushioni* clearly plays the role of a provider of positive value to detoxify potential disasters. Even though the *ushioni* is not officially enshrined for worship, it sometimes behaves like a god.

Conclusion

The *ushioni* is a participant in the Shinto shrine’s annual festival but is not enshrined as an object of worship. Nevertheless, it is difficult to assert that the *ushioni* is by no means a god. If we employ the Komatsu model, Kikuma’s *ushioni* has no place for classification because it does not meet the criteria of *yokai* in terms of providing positive value, and, at the same time, it does not satisfy the definition of god as an enshrined object of worship. As far as ethnographic findings regarding other places are concerned, it is quite likely that this kind of being placed in a “betwixt and between” position in our conventional classification of god and demon, is not confined to the *ushioni*. Similar beings to provide positive value without official apotheosis will be found in other fields as well and will expand our scope of understanding of religion from a comparative perspective.

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