



## ***Yōkai* and the Ethics of Eating: A Folkloric Perspective on the Japanese Food Practices**

Anjali A. R.\*

### **Abstract**

Rooted in Japanese folklore, the term *yōkai* has historically referred to supernatural creatures and strange phenomena, but has since evolved to encompass a more expansive sense that signifies anything eerie and uncanny. Throughout Japanese history, *yōkai* has transformed from its animistic and folkloric origin, which began with the intention to explain the unexplainable things within nature, and transcended to embody the changing culture of Japan through its portrayal in modern means of art, literature, manga, anime, films, and video games. Progressively permeating into the diverse directions of Japanese culture, *yōkai* also made its mark on the food culture of Japan. This paper attempts to capture the powerful and potential intersection of food and folklore in Japanese culture to entertain as well as educate the people involved. From fearful food-related stories of mysterious creatures evoking ethical considerations on the ways of consuming food that include the philosophy of mindful eating to respecting food and avoiding excesses, it has evolved into many artistic presentations in the form of *yōkai*-themed restaurants and various *yōkai* dishes in numerous food festivals. In essence, this paper seeks to unfold a folkloric perspective on Japanese foodways to unearth the deep-rooted significance and multifaceted functions that *yōkai* perform in contemporary Japanese society.

**Keywords:** Folklore, Food ethics, Foodways, Japan, *Yōkai*

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\* Research Scholar, All Saints' College, University of Kerala

## Introduction

Throughout human history, people have occasionally reported strange happenings that defy rational explanation – the reappearance of individuals who have died; the sightings of strange creatures; voices inexplicably heard when no one is around; strange lights or fires adrift in the gloaming. These sorts of encounters inevitably provoke unease and fear. Japanese folklore holds that these strange phenomena are all the doings of *yōkai*.

— Masanobu

The above excerpt unearths the elusive element in defining *yōkai*, where it exists everywhere but beyond human perception, thus, making it indefinable. As Hirota Ryūhei puts it, “*yōkai* is an elusive category,” which is difficult to define, yet it extends its influence to almost every facet of Japanese society, from folklore to popular culture, exercising an extraordinary agency through its interaction with the human world. From the folkloric perspective, Japanese people have attempted to define this incomprehensible category as “malevolent supernatural beings”, but it transcends beyond this translation (321). Being rooted in Japanese culture, finding an English translation of the term is equally difficult. Michael Dylan Foster in his *The Book of Yōkai* (2015), lists a set of English words that define the divergent ideas and nuances of the term *yōkai* – “spirits, goblins, phantoms, specters, sprites, shape-shifters, demons, fantastic beings, numinous occurrences, the supernatural, and perhaps most commonly today, monsters” (14).

Across the world, from time immemorial, unexplainable happenings and supernatural beings have been part of the cultural imagination. In Japan, these weird occurrences and mysterious creatures came to be collectively known as *yōkai*. Humans always exhibited the tendency to explain the unexplainable things around them, and *yōkai* emerged from their efforts to decode the strange phenomena in the natural world or find answers to the unusual occurrences or feelings within them. On that note, Foster wrote that “*yōkai* begin where language ends”, but he later amended it in the same book as – “the creation of *yōkai* is the creation of language”,

where they emerge from “an aporia, a hole in the language”. The creation of *yōkai* begins when there is a need to express something for which there are no words, i.e., *yōkai* are generated by naming and defining their features and behaviour through language, thus, transforming abstract phenomena into concrete creatures (14; 98–99):

One of the most difficult things to define are the boundaries of what constitutes a *yōkai*, and what isn't a *yōkai*... Over the many eras of Japan's history, different words have been used as catch-all terms for the supernatural forces of this world; *bakemono*, *obake*, *mononoke*, *kaii*, *oni*. Depending on who you're talking to, specific creatures may or may not be classified as *yōkai*. Are ghosts *yōkai*? Are *oni* *yōkai*? Can good spirits be *yōkai* or are they only evil spirits? Are *kami* *yōkai*? Does *yōkai* only apply to Japan, or does it apply to all countries? Every rule has an exception, and every answer has a contradiction. (“Introduction to *Yōkai*”)

*Yōkai* is a combination of two Chinese characters (kanji) - 妖 (*yō*) and 怪 (*kai*), where both terms refer to something strange, mysterious, or suspicious (Foster, “The Book” 19). The concept of *yōkai* was reflected through many terms throughout Japanese history until *yōkai* became the word of choice in recent years. The term has its evolutionary history, where it exists in different varieties and abundance, and what constitutes a *yōkai* and what does not was a real question to be addressed, and presently, anything eerie and uncanny can be called a *yōkai*. Interestingly, a single *yōkai* has the potential to adopt divergent forms in different historical epochs, as *yōkai* keeps changing with the imagination of those who create them or tell stories about them, and also experiences constant shift in their roles with the technological innovations of a particular period, like the rising internet, gaming, manga, and anime culture.

The very idea of *yōkai* exists everywhere in the world, and in contemporary Japanese society, it permeates every facet of Japanese culture – folklore, literature, art, manga, anime, films, gaming, and

also Japanese food practices. This paper explores the coming together of food and folklore in Japanese culture as a way of both entertaining and educating the people. On the ethical and educational side, through fearful food-related stories of mysterious creatures evoking ethical considerations on the ways of consuming food that include the philosophy of mindful eating to respecting food and avoiding excesses, it educates people on the ethical and traditional food practices of Japan. On the entertainment side, today, it has evolved into many artistic presentations in the form of *yōkai*-themed restaurants and various *yōkai* dishes in numerous food festivals. In essence, this paper seeks to unfold a folkloric perspective on Japanese foodways to delve into the deep-rooted significance and multifaceted functions that *yōkai* perform in contemporary Japanese society.

### **The Evolutionary History of *Yōkai* in Japan**

Most likely in every part of the globe, human beings have shaped mysterious and fearful phenomena into monsters and spirits as a way of making sense and meaning of their experiences. But the particular shapes such monsters and spirits assume are anything but universal. They are sculpted by the distinct cultures and societies in which they emerge, evolving through specific historical moments and with the changing desires and challenges of the people who tell their tales. (Foster, “The Book” 33)

A *yōkai* is created out of the imaginative brains of a society, where even though the idea of *yōkai* is universal, every society has its *yōkai* narratives specific to that culture. While transforming from its mere folkloric origin to one of the most powerful elements in popular culture, it was flexible enough to accommodate the changing desires and challenges of the people who create them and tell their tales. So, the history of *yōkai* cannot be unfolded without considering the people who were involved in the process of its evolution, not only those who developed and discussed them, but also those who documented them in many ways. Originally, *yōkai* existed as an element of lived experiences, legends, belief systems, folklore, and festivals, and is only a part of cultural records like folklore, art,

literature, films, and games, and not official records. Delving into these cultural records helps uncover the history of how people imagined and understood *yōkai*. Cultural records are equally important as the official records, as they reflect the cultural, social, and intellectual circumstances prevalent at that historical moment. Throughout the history of *yōkai*, there were two tendencies in approaching *yōkai* – one, to preserve it as a cultural heritage, and two, to discard it as a dangerous menace (Foster, “The Book” 33–34).

Yokai are Japanese spirits or creatures – beloved, feared, and an integral part of popular culture for hundreds of years. From the Edo period (1603–1868) scroll paintings, woodblock prints, and books – to today’s video games, movies, and manga. (“Yokai – Spirits”)

Even though *yōkai* as a term was not popular before the Edo period, several texts contained writings on monstrous creatures and about the deeds of people and gods who overpowered and conquered them, like the mytho-historical *Kojiki* (A.D. 712) and *Nihonshoki* (A.D. 720). Simultaneously, there existed regional gazetteers called *fudoki*, which, along with historical and geographical accounts, recorded local legends, folk stories, myths, beliefs, and rituals (Foster, “The Book” 35-36). In the Heian, Kamakura, and Muromachi periods, *setsuwa* was the popular literary genre encompassing the experiences of the people, sharing their perspectives and beliefs (Foster, “The Book” 36). From the latter decades of the fourteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century (Muromachi period to the beginning of the Edo era), *otogizōshi* thrived as a genre containing *yōkai* stories together with tales of people from diverse backgrounds, animal stories, religious narratives, and travel anecdotes (Foster, “The Book” 36-37). At the same time, there were several legends surrounding the two historical figures – Abe no Seimei (sorcerer) and Minamoto no Yoritomo (warrior), who later entered the *yōkai* narratives as *yōkai* hunting heroes, where they performed as the brain (finding the *yōkai*) and the brawn (fighting the *yōkai*) respectively (Foster, “The Book” 41–42).

In the Edo period, there were two different approaches to *yōkai* – encyclopedic and entertaining. With the development of numerous *yōkai* of different shapes and sizes, and intending to categorise and organise everything around them, scholars began to list them down and describe those mysterious creatures along with other animals, making *yōkai* part of the encyclopedias. On the entertainment side, they started appearing in dramatic arts like *kabuki* (classical Japanese theatre) and *ninjyō jōruri* (puppet theatre), along with *emaki* (picture scrolls which gave a visual form to *yōkai*), woodblock prints, inexpensive books, and *kibyōshi* (short manga-like works which were mostly satirical). Combining both the encyclopedic and playful approaches to *yōkai*, an artist named Toriyama Sekien illustrated around two hundred *yōkai* in his catalogues, where his catalogue entries were filled with “plays on words, with all manner of sophisticated symbolism and tricky puzzles embedded in the images”, thus presenting a playful encyclopedia (Foster, “Yōkai: Fantastic”). *Yōkai* turned more playful towards the last hundred years of the Edo era with their entry into *sugoroku* (board games), *misemono* (spectacle shows), *yōkai karuta* (card game), and shooting galleries. On the other side, it continued to remain a fear-evoking creature and a matter of serious investigation (Foster, “The Book” 51).

In parallel with the rise of Western scientific knowledge in the Meiji era, Inoue Enryō attempted to debunk the mysterious creatures to shape Japan as a modern nation, by rationally elucidating the supernatural creations as well as differentiating *shinkai* (true mystery) from *kakai* (false mystery). Though he tried to demystify the mysterious, he developed a novel discipline called *yōkaigaku* (monsterology), and his lectures and articles, which provided valuable information on *yōkai*, earned him the title “Professor Yōkai” (Foster, “The Book” 54). In contrast, simultaneously, there were scholars like Lafcadio Hearn and Ema Tsutomu who celebrated them as part of Japanese culture and valued its documentation, ultimately leading to the founding of *minzokugaku* (folklore studies) by Yanagita Kunio in the early twentieth century (Foster, “The Book” 55-59). During the second half of the twentieth century, after World War II, a period marked by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, *yōkai* became nostalgic icons of an innocent pre-war Japan. In the

hands of the manga artist Mizuki Shigeru, who is famous for his manga series *Gegege no Kitarō* (Spooky Kitarō), they were transformed into popular cultural characters (Foster, “The Book” 61–62). Concurrently, Komatsu Kazuhiko, a folklorist and anthropologist, invented a new *yōkaigaku* with the understanding that *yōkai* studies are simply the study of the people who have generated them out of their imaginations, and it is all about decoding the experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of humans through their study (Foster, “The Book” 66-67). A beautiful union of the literary and *yōkai* world happened through the novels of Kyōgoku Natsuhiko, who wrote his debut *The Summer of the Ubume*, in 1994 (Foster, “The Book” 70–71).

In the 1990s, Japan witnessed a “*yōkai* boom” with its proliferation in popular culture. *Yōkai* turned from fiery and playful things to commercially profitable kinds of stuff by making its mark in the most divergent domains of popular culture – manga, fiction, films (specifically in the films of Studio Ghibli, a Japanese animation company), anime, research, and other *yōkai*-related manifestations and materials.

### **Theorising *Yōkai* in Japanese Cultural Discourse**

The creation of *yōkai* is a process where certain unusual events or experiences are transformed into something concrete to ease the fear of the unknown. Komatsu Kazuhiko presented a structure on the varied realms in which *yōkai* exist: event, presence, and object. First, a strange or weird event that we can perceive with one of our five senses occurred, mostly experienced through sight or hearing, but we cannot find any evidence when searching for it; such odd events turn to take the name of a *yōkai*. Second, we tend to personify these supernatural beings around us by giving them human emotions and feeling their presence through those emotions being expressed, where it can be in the form of an ailment or wild weather when the spirits are angry, and a fruitful season when happy. Third, they attain the property of physicality when transformed into an object, where they are remodelled to different shapes and structures depending upon the trends of a particular period, like the picture scrolls of the Heian period. That change from merely remaining in the imagination of an

individual or being in the realm of collective/cultural/communal intellectual property to the creation of varied images unrolls two results – positively, there is an innovative process in the creation of images, and negatively, imagining a *yōkai* becomes limited to a fixed figure once depicted (Foster, “The Book” 29–30).

Culturally, the influence of *yōkai* is observable in four distinctive domains – local, academic, commercial, and vernacular. Local is the oldest mode of *yōkai* culture that acted as the driving force for the further development of other forms of *yōkai*, where it refers to the multitude of manifestations of *yōkai* that exist locally, specific to certain places. The academic domain deals with the process of collecting, analysing, documenting, and exhibiting the data on *yōkai*, and the people involved will be provided valuable knowledge in the fields of art, literature, history, and culture. The commercial sphere involves the process of converting *yōkai* into commodities with the clear intention of making money out of them, and this turn towards recontextualising and repurposing them to be used in books, anime, manga, films, video games, and toys became popular in the 1970s and 1980s. Vernacular includes a subcultural group of *yōkai* lovers who are highly knowledgeable in folklore and history, and actively participate in the production of *yōkai* items by imaginatively and innovatively engaging with *yōkai* culture. They do not aim at a mass production, but they are intended to be sold in their gatherings where they perform, discuss, and sell things based on *yōkai* (Foster, “The Book” 76–85).

Thus, originally springing up from the efforts to confront the fear of the unknown, *yōkai* has progressively transcended its folkloric roots as a narrative tradition, and travelled into the fields of academic discourse, commercial merchandise, and even developed into a vibrant subculture, thereby attaining considerable socio-cultural significance and playing a multidimensional role in contemporary Japanese society.

### **The Intersection of Foodways and Folklore in Japanese Culture**

Before delving into the nuanced understanding of the relationship between foodways and folklore in Japanese culture, it is necessary to

unpack the meanings and implications of these two individual terms – foodways and folklore. Foodways involves a society’s production, distribution, preparation, consumption, and disposal practices, and embodies the concept of how various cultural, social, economic, political, and environmental factors influence those practices within a society. Based on the complex interaction between these practices and factors, the culinary culture of a society is defined. At a deeper level, foodways play a pivotal role in shaping the identity and determining the type of interactions within a community, as food practices are deeply influenced by communal belief systems, geographical locales, historical traditions, and socio-economic contexts (“Exploring the Interconnection”).

Any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. (Foster, “The Book” 13)

Quoting the American folklorist Alan Dundes, the above excerpt explains the present definition of the word “folk”, where the term has transcended from the earlier idea of folk as a group of uneducated people hailing from rural areas. The term “folklore” was coined by William J Thoms in 1846, referring to “the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs, &c., of the olden time” (Merton 1). Thus, folklore is a collection of endless legends, superstitions, myths, oral traditions, customs, and rituals, passed down from one generation to another in a community, and is a source of cultural knowledge as it reflects the traditional values, social beliefs, and cultural practices of the people of a particular community (“Exploring the Interconnection”):

Mankind’s quest for food has been, and still is in many areas of the world, surrounded with uncertainty and fear. Because man has had to struggle for subsistence, many superstitions and beliefs have developed about foods. For man to feel that he had some control of his

destiny – in this instance, his food supply – he developed magical practices to assure success in planting and preparing food. (Shifflett 347)

In ancient times, without the required tools and technology, the act of procuring food for survival was a task involving fear, risks, and uncertainty. Even today, with the advent of farming using the most modern tools and technology to feed the growing population, hunger is a reality. From this fear of feeding, food folklore sprang up and fed the population with tales relating to the dos and don'ts of food-related practices to mitigate the anxieties. The coming together of food and folklore unravels the intricate relationship between our food practices and the tales we tell about it as a way of understanding ourselves and the world around us. Culinary folklore covers diverse domains – food-related myths and legends regarding the origins of certain foods, oral traditions that convey valuable information on production and preparation methods, stories that communicate the symbolic meanings of various foods, superstitious powers attributed to certain food items that restrict them from being consumed on a specific occasion, ritual and customs followed before and after a meal, food-related festivals and ceremonial meals, and also the traditional recipes and cooking techniques that are passed on from one generation to another. Through the exploration of food folklore, people can deepen their understanding and admiration of the varied culinary traditions and rich cultural heritage (“Exploring the Interconnection”).

In Japanese culture, food folklore has diverged into different trajectories with the integration of the concept of *yōkai*. There exist several *yōkai*-related folklores that define the ethics of eating practices and the consequences of following an unethical way of consuming food. It is through the fear that is evoked out of *yōkai* that people are guided into the proper path of food-consuming practices and traditional lifestyles. This study will discuss some of the *yōkai*-based food folklores that are popularly prevalent in Japan, along with a critical analysis of their context, content, form, and function, thereby unveiling and questioning the way folklore reflects, reinforces, as well as resists various existing socio-cultural norms and power structures.

A man goes out drinking one night and brings home a slender, sexy woman. After a night of passion, they fall asleep exhausted. The next morning the man is shocked to find out that he is not in bed with a beautiful woman, but a giant mound of flesh the size of four women. Somehow, over the night, his bedmate caught the yokai disease *nebutori* – the sleeping fatty. (“When Food Attacks”)

The above-mentioned is the classic story of *nebutori* or “The Sleeping Fatty”, and it is a *yōkai* disease that mainly infects women who sleep too soon after their meals. Those women affected will develop an insatiable appetite that stimulates them to overeat and expand enormously, outgrowing their clothes, and becoming too big to leave the room. Basically, *nebutori* is a warning to women to maintain “thin figures, gentle personalities, and to avoid oversleeping”, drawing inspiration from the popular Japanese superstition that sleeping after eating will transform you into a cow, and also satirising the stereotypic mentality of women to go careless after marriage (“Nebutori”). On the other hand, by policing the female bodies and controlling their behaviour, it reinforces the hidden patriarchal notions that equate a woman’s worth with her physical beauty, domestic diligence, and conformity to the idealised gender roles.

*Oseichu* or “The Mimicking Roundworm” is another story that tells how *yōkai* always need not be monstrous creatures but can also take the form of infectious diseases. This deadly disease begins with stomach pain and high fever, and ends with the formation of a small bump in the stomach, soon enlarging to develop a giant mouth poking out of the stomach that speaks in the voice of the victimised and continuously demands to be fed. This is based on a story from 1703 CE, where Chusaburo, the son of the labourer Shichizaemon, started showing the symptoms of this *yōkai* disease. Shocked by this strange occurrence, Shichizaemon tried numerous medicines and summoned sorcerers and exorcists of various types to help with the misfortune of his son, but failed to decode the disease. Finally, with the aid of the famous doctor, Kan Gensai, it was diagnosed as an *oseichu* infection and was treated with a combination of six special medicines

that eventually pushed out a roundworm of thirty-three centimetres long from his anus. The worm that resembled a giant lizard was beaten to death by the people present there, and slowly, Chusaburo regained his health and recovered completely (“Oseichu – The Mimicking”). This *yōkai* can be read as a warning to carefully consume food and practice good hygiene to avoid getting infected.

There are a handful of folklores reflecting the consequences of gluttonous behaviour in humans, which is a tendency often negatively viewed and stigmatised in Japan. *Shio no Choji*, or “Salty Choji”, presents the story of a wealthy man named Choji who lived in Kaga province. He loved horse meat so much that he owned a herd of three hundred horses to enjoy horse meat every day. He slaughters and pickles it with salt or mixes it with mayo paste, to be consumed every night. Slowly, his stock of horse meat ran out, and he was only left with an old horse incapable of working and being eaten. Choji, failing to control his craving for horse meat, slaughtered the weak horse and ate it gluttonously. Every night from that day, he was haunted by the spirit of the old horse. Rather than a normal possession, the spirit enters his body through the mouth, down his throat, and then to the stomach, making him feel the pain of his body stretching to make way for the spirit to reach the stomach. Choji’s condition was beyond medical help, and he had a miserable experience with a high fever along with hallucinations, babbling and screaming out the sins he had committed in his lifetime, and died with his body bent like an old horse. Today, horse meat has turned into one of the popular cuisines in Japanese food culture, and this *yōkai* story in contemporary times highlights the consequences of overconsumption (“Shio no Choji”; “Shio no Chōjirō”). Another story that deals with the ramifications of overeating is *Suppon on Onryo* or “The Vengeful Ghosts of the Turtles”, and this narrative revolves around a successful *suppon* restaurant owner, Kiroku, who severs hundreds of turtles in his restaurant daily to serve up to his customers. One night, when he was alone, his body began to feel heavy, everything around him dark and cold, and he was caught by a sense of being submerged underwater with turtles all around him. This strange and fearful happening continued every night until he took a vow not to take a life anymore, and from then onwards the ghosts of the turtles stopped haunting him (“Suppon on Onryo”).

Similarly, *Suppon no yūrei* or “The Ghosts of Soft-Shell Turtles” has “gigantic ghosts with long legless bodies, and prominent, pointed lips just like a softshell turtle” who usually take revenge on the humans who feast on them in abundance. The Edo period was a time when the big cities in Japan had numerous shops specialising in soft shell turtle meat, following a popular belief that this meat was medicinal to treat haemorrhoids. There is a famous tale of three friends from Nagoya, who, because of their extreme love for the taste of turtle flesh, moved from one restaurant to another to consume all the turtle meat they could. One day, they visited a new *suppon* restaurant, but they experienced an overwhelming sense of unease – the chef resembled a turtle with scaly and greenish-coloured skin. When he stood, his unnaturally long legs made it evident that they were under the presence of a *suppon yūrei*. Terrified, they fled the place, returned home, and remained at home for several days in a state of extreme fear, and the experience left a lasting impact on them that they never had the confidence to taste turtle meat again (“Suppon no Yūrei – The Turtle”; “Suppon no yūrei”). There is another *yōkai* called *kowai*, the ghost of a person who exhibited gluttonous behaviour during lifetime that his/her insatiable craving for food is carried into the next life by transforming into this *yōkai* after death. Searching for food, it manifests at night near food stalls and restaurants as a “grotesque human with fox-like features, blood-shot eyes, sharp teeth, and a long drooling tongue”. Driven by endless hunger, it scavenges obsessively, rummaging through the garbage piles, overturning stalls, and attacking late-night food vendors for any edible remnants. Its desperation for consumption has no bounds that it even resorts to rotting carrion from the streets, thus, symbolising its cursed existence for practising a life of gluttony during its lifetime (“Kowai”). A critical reading of these folklores reveals their roots in the Japanese philosophy of mindful eating, which is deeply embedded in the culinary practices of Japan like *ichiju-sansai* (a balanced meal structure), *hara hachi bu* (eating until one is 80% full), and the expressions such as *itadakimasu* and *gochisousama*, which are ritualised appreciation of food before and after the meals, all of which underlines a disciplined approach and cultural commitment to balance, seasonal awareness, and respect for food.

Japan is a nation that stresses the concept of minimal food waste, thus, this culinary philosophy is also reflected through the *yōkai* stories prevalent in Japan. One such *yōkai* is *kasukurai*, and the term *kasu* refers to food scraps and leftovers (specifically the byproducts of food production), reflecting Japan's practice of repurposing waste, like *sake kasu* (pressed lees left from the sake brewing process), a white nutritious and fruity paste used in cooking many dishes in Japan. They are eerie *yōkai* with 'pale white skin, a flabby, misshapen head, bloodshot eyes, thin lips, and pointy teeth . . . wear loose robes draped over their shoulders' and materialise when food scraps are discarded rather than eaten or reused, thus serving as a reminder to avoid wasting food ("Kasukurai"). This folklore can be read in connection with the Japanese principles of *mottainai* (a sense of regret over unnecessary excess or waste) and *wabi-sabi* (an appreciation for natural simplicity).

Many *yōkai* interestingly share a direct relation with *sake*, a Japanese alcoholic beverage made by the fermentation of rice. The popular turtle-shelled aquatic *yōkai* called *kappa*, dwells in rivers and ponds, and is famed for its strength, swimming prowess, and love of cucumbers. Once a feared prankster said to drag children into the water, it has now evolved into a playful and friendly figure, and today even appears as a mascot for some *sake* brands. There is a story of a villager named Gorobe in Chigasaki village who rescued a hunted *kappa* from the villagers, and for that, he was rewarded with a never-ending *sake* carafe as a token of thanks. Overjoyed by the gift, he turned alcoholic and lost in indulgence, and only regained his senses and snapped out of it when he saw his starving horse. *Tanuki* or the Japanese raccoon dog, is considered a *yōkai* animal, and it is renowned for its shape shifting skills in Japanese folklore, enabling it to transform into both humans and objects. Even though frequently depicted as a mischievous figure, it is a symbol of prosperity and commercial success and is commonly illustrated with a straw hat, *sake* gourd or *kakurizaru* (a gourd-shaped container used to store and drink *sake*), and a large bulging belly that it uses as a drum. Shigeru Mizuki, one of the pioneers of horror manga, recorded the story of Fukuro-sage, a cunning and evil *tanuki* from the Nagano region that could transform food into *sake* with its elongated stomach. *Shuten-dōji*, a *yōkai* from Kyoto's mountain folklore, was responsible for the

disappearance of several women, so the emperor dispatched his warriors to defeat him. Disguised as priests on divine advice from deities on the way, they were welcomed by *Shuten-dōji* with *sake*, his favourite drink. Tricking the demon into drinking sacred *sake* given by the gods, they secured their victory by pushing him into a deep slumber and beheading him. Other *sake*-related *yōkai* include *ozake no mushi* or the worm of excessive drinkers, *kosho* or the lover of sweet *sake*, and *haradashi* or the belly exposer. After entering the human body, *ozake no mushi* occupies the abdomen part, releases numerous other parasitic worms and transforms the victim into an alcoholic. With a child-like face and snake-like body, *kosho*, as a lover of sweet *sake*, settles in the space between the heart and diaphragm, a hidden spot where neither medicine nor needles can reach. Lively and playful, *haradashi* enjoys bringing joy to people who are melancholic or lonely and particularly manifests near those who sip on *sake* (Bacci).

The intersection of *yōkai* and gastronomy, and Japan's enduring fascination with *yōkai* folklore, is also visible in the growing cafe and restaurant culture as well as in *yōkai* festivals. Kitarō Chaya or Kitarō Cafe, built in 2003 in Chōfu, Tokyo, is a *yōkai*-themed cafe that celebrates the legacy of Mizuki Shigeru's manga *GeGeGe no Kitarō* through its interior design – a tea room with a menu containing Kitarō latte art and *yōkai*-based sweets, a gallery that exhibits his original works, and a small shop with products inspired by the characters of his manga and other *yōkai* figures for sale (“Kitaro Chaya”). Reflecting the interest in Japanese folklore and culture, many foreign nations have cafes with names like *Yōkai Ramen* in the US and *Yōkai Cafe* in France. Additionally, based on the defining feature of *yōkai* to pop up anywhere at any time, *Yo-Kai Express*, an innovative high-tech autonomous vending machine that serves a well-prepared gourmet bowl in ninety seconds anytime by operating 24/7 with a robot chef, offering a variety of dishes including ramen, pasta, rice bowl, dim-sum, udon and even desserts, was launched in 2016 in the US (“AI Powered”). In 2022, it was installed in three key locations in Japan – Haneda Airport Terminal 2, J R East Tokyo Station, and Shibaura Parking Area (Albrecht). In Japan, there are also various *yōkai*-related festivals like *Tokushima Yokai*, *Tachikawa Yokai Bon*

*Odori, Shikoku Yokai Matsuri* and many others, where the food stalls in these festivals serve *yōkai*-themed food items.

## **Conclusion**

In essence, this research study examined the intricate relationship shared between *yōkai* and gastronomy, thereby exploring the potential intersection of food and folklore in Japanese foodways. The study unveiled how this interplay functioned both as a medium for entertainment and as an educational framework for guiding people into the culinary philosophies and ethical dimensions of consuming food in Japanese society. The introductory section attempted to define what *yōkai* refers to as a term in general and in Japanese folklore. Following this, the section “The Evolutionary History of *Yōkai* in Japan” traced the evolution of *yōkai* with the changing human history, from its folkloric origins to contemporary times. “Theorising *Yōkai* in Japanese Cultural Discourse” analysed the different ways and categories by which *yōkai* exist within Japanese culture. The core section “The Intersection of Foodways and Folklore in Japanese Culture” identified numerous *yōkai*-related food folklores through which the ethics of eating and culinary philosophies of Japan are communicated. They highlight the philosophy of mindful eating (eating slowly, feeling the food), and mostly act as a warning against gluttony, overconsumption, food waste, and unhygienic food practices that spread diseases. By identifying various folklores connected to food, which can be collectively termed as “food folklore”, this paper is a result of a critical understanding of such food-related folklores in Japan in which the concept of *yōkai* intersects with gastronomy and it was revealed that the creation of such *yōkai* is a cultural act loaded with dominant political ideologies, where it normalises the patriarchal notions and other societal structures on one side, as well as resists and reacts to the prevailing social tensions on the other. From fearful *yōkai* tales that educate the people through the fear evoked through such stories, this food-folklore intersection has also evolved to meet the entertainment side of contemporary culture, both in Japan and internationally, in the form of *yōkai* cafes and restaurants as well as *yōkai*-themed dishes served at various *yōkai* festivals, thus, making its entry into foreign

culture. Today, *yōkai* in its different variations has travelled to a global level and is not limited to the boundaries of Japanese culture.

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