

Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch

Edited by **Rebecca Copeland** and **Linda C. Ehrlich**. Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 2018. 151pp. \$18.95.

**Reviewed by
Ji Shouse**

This unique collection *Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch* (*Yamamba*, hereafter) purports to introduce the Japanese mountain witch to a new generation of Western readers. The contributors, Japanese and non-Japanese scholars, writers, and artists, seek to focus attention on various aspects of the Japanese folkloric figure in individual interpretations that bring forward a variety of perspectives on the Japanese female enchantress.

This volume focuses more on interpretation (by the contributors) rather than academic argument. As the editors note “[this] collection stretches the parameters of scholarly writing and moves outside of the confines of the empirical essay [...] She [Yamamba] leads us beyond the village, away from the order of academic knowledge. We wander into a landscape as full of possibilities as the yamamba’s” (11). While the different approaches seemingly intend to expand the way in which the Japanese enchantress has been imagined outside Japan, the focus of the collection seems more closely related to the fostering of appreciation or the offering of homage to the folkloric figure, as the editors subsequently assert: “[The works in the volume] are our attempt to reflect her [Yamamba’s] spirit creatively. While already many works have been written about the Yamamba [...], this [volume] is the first work in English to be written *for* the Yamamba” (8).

The volume consists of an editors’ preface, short stories, poetry, interviews, and a commentary. The editors’ preface “Beyond Place, Before Time—Why We Seek the Yamamba” opens the volume by briefly introducing the short story, “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” by Ōba Minako (which is also included in this volume) as an example of “female empowerment,” noting “[The story] reveal[s] the compelling way creative women can take charge of misogynistic tropes, invert them, and use them to tell new stories of female empowerment. This work became our starting point” (9). The editors continue to suggest that the motive of this volume is to offer “a sampling of the awe the Yamamba inspires with her power”

and the Yamamba is introduced as “a figure of immensity” and an omnipresence of female voices.

The introduction, “Locating the Yamamba” by Noriko T. Reider, an expert on Japanese folklore, sets the stage for readers by juxtaposing Yamamba with Western/Eurasian counterparts such as “The witch in the Grimm Brothers’ ‘Hansel and Gretel’ and Baba Yaga of Russian Folklore.” Reider’s introduction provides guidance for the consideration of the emergences and embodiments of Yamamba in Japanese folktales that demonstrate Yamamba’s versatile personae. Accordingly, Reider views Yamamba as possessing a female nature, which Reider relates to “femaleness” and the status of “goddess.” At the same time, Reider also elicits the idea of Yamamba as “gender transcendent,” citing Mizuta Noriko’s viewpoint in which she contrasts the Yamamba with the women of the village or settlement (*sato*) and argues that “that the norm for the village women cannot be applied to the Yamamba, for her essential qualities are so nebulous and polysemous that she nullifies it. She [Yamamba] refuses to be assigned a household role such as mother or daughter and will not be confined” (21).

Two interviews with Yamamba performers are presented by Ann Sherif and Rebecca Copeland. The interview “Yamamba on the Noh Stage: With Noh Actors Uzawa Hisa and Uzawa Hikaru” recounts a conversation between Sherif and a mother and daughter duo who are professional Noh performers, revealing the duo’s interpretations of Noh Yamamba. In this interview the Uzawas argue that Yamamba is a genderless figure, noting “When we perform *Yamamba*, we don’t think of it as performing woman (*onna*)” (38) and instead, they refer to Yamamba as a “Mountain.” While the conversation between Sherif and the Uzawas focuses on traditional Japanese theatre performance, the interview “Dancing the Yamamba: With Yokoshi Yasuko” brings forward the contemporary performance, *shuffleyamamba*, through a dialogue between Copeland and dancer and choreographer Yokoshi, who performs a dance inspired by the fifteenth-century Japanese playwright Zeami’s ode to Yamamba. Interestingly, in contrast to the Uzawas’ viewpoint on the gender of Yamamba, Yokoshi considers Yamamba as a female embodiment since her performance centers on “the idea of shuffling on the stage between the story of Izanami in her world of death ... and the world of my mother’s [Yokoshi’s] family” (129). Although the two extensive interviews demonstrate something of the broad spectrum of Yamamba’s representation in performance, the attempt to further connect the two lacks coherence since one interview is

placed at the beginning of the volume and the other at the end of the volume.

“A Yamamba Shrinebox” by Laura Miller, which is categorized as a commentary in the volume, introduces the process of incarnating Yamamba through “a genre of assemblage folk art with Mexican and South American roots” (69) called “Shrinebox.” Miller’s commentary also begins with Yamamba in Zeami’s Noh play and its derivations, but her collage is the composition of a contemporary imagination of Yamamba (here seen as a younger woman) surrounded by other Japanese folklore figures. A photo of the complete collage is included along with her commentary. Although the author’s interpretations of each object in the collage in relation to the Yamamba are explained at length, the two-dimensional black and white photograph of the collage is not easy to decipher and details cannot be seen. Although Miller’s essay (commentary) focuses on the author’s interpretation of Yamamba’s appearance and its surroundings in a Mexican and South American art form by explaining each Japanese figure in detail, it is unclear why the non-Japanese art form is emphasized in this commentary. Is the purpose of the commentary to inform readers about Japanese folkloric figures that are centered on Yamamba or is the commentary an attempt to incorporate Yamamba into a non-Japanese cultural context, or is something else intended?

Three prose poems and three short stories by contemporary Japanese scholars are also included in this volume. While the prose poetry “Yamamba’s Mountain” by Linda Ehrlich (Japanese translation by Ohmori Kayo) takes on the mountain nature of Yamamba, blurring the distinction between Yamamba and mountains, the prose poetry collection of “Yamamba’s Laughter and Other Poems” by Mizuta Noriko (English translation by Rebecca Copeland and Marianne Tarcov) positions Yamamba as an ambiguous self, although a self which is revealed as possessing an omnipresent female voice of dreams and self-expression. The poetry collection by Ehrlich is presented in both Japanese and English, while the poetry collection by Mizuta Noriko is presented only in English, an inconsistency which is not addressed. Both poetry collections are accompanied by creative art images which are assumed to be by the artist Maria Alilovic mentioned in the “Contributors” section although the artist’s name is not associated with the actual images. Most of the images contain mountain scenes juxtaposed with Yamamba, as the Yamamba in both poetry collections embodies mountains.

The association of mountains and Yamamba continues in the short stories: “The Smile of a Mountain Witch (Yamamba no bishō)” by Ōba Minako (translated by Noriko Mizuta Lippit and assisted by Mariko Ochi) and two contemporary short stories, “Blue Ridge Yamamba” written by Rebecca Copeland, and “An Encounter in Aokigahara” written by the late Japanese scholar David Holloway. While the Yamamba of Ōba Minako’s story inhabits the body of a human female experiencing the vicious cycle of life in a misogynistic patriarchal society, the Yamamba of the Copeland and Holloway stories is corporealized through the narrators’ feelings of agony and despair. Both narrators in “Blue Ridge” and in “An Encounter in Aokigahara” describe an encounter with Yamamba in the Appalachian Mountains in North America and in the Aokigahara forest in Japan, respectively. The stream of consciousness of the first-person narrator in “Blue Ridge” and the third person narrator K in “An Encounter in Aokigahara” shapes the events and the Yamamba of the stories. While the narrators experience a sense of despair in their lives and begin searching for their own selves, the Yamamba comes into being through the sense of anguish and the feeling of loss expressed by the narrators in both stories.

When the narrator in Copeland’s story agonizes about the loss of parents and difficulties in marriage, the Yamamba begins to appear as an uncanny old woman, but when the narrator gains a sense of freedom from her agonies, the Yamamba appears as a beautiful young woman, “her skin [...] free of wrinkles and nearly luminescent” (67). Similarly, the Yamamba begins to appear as a ghostly old woman in Holloway’s story when the narrator K experiences a sense of despair and takes a journey to the “suicide forest” (79), only to hear an eerie old woman in the forest calling to K for help. However, in contrast to the Copeland story, the Yamamba in Holloway’s story retains the embodiment of a vengeful older woman throughout as the sense of hopelessness of the narrator is not resolved. The Yamamba’s crying for help is eventually juxtaposed with the consciousness of K as he recalls “all the times he cried out for help.... Nobody had ever been there for him” (87). The story ends with K thrusting his hand towards the Yamamba whose “mouth mutated into a terrible smile. She lunged at K, jagged teeth shimmering in the moonlight” (87). Both stories formulate slightly different perspectives on the Yamamba trope, but at the same time both stories demonstrate that Yamamba is created by human feelings of agony and despair and thus comes from within us.

This volume offers a nonacademic approach to the Japanese mountain witch Yamamba with English readers as the apparent target audience. The

variety of modes of presentation in this collection range widely and encompass a variety of creative endeavors in literature, poetry, visual art, and essay. This eclectic assemblage raises a number of questions about the Yamamba figure, in particular the extent to which this figure of folklore embodies female empowerment, evinces a female “voice,” or challenges notions of femininity altogether. While no clear answers are provided to such questions, the volume validates such an approach in demonstrating the complexities of a Japanese cultural icon such as Yamamba and the power held by this mythic figure which even today continues to attract considerable attention not only in Japan but globally, inspiring innovative and interdisciplinary responses such as found in this volume.

Disruptions of Daily Life: Japanese Literary Modernism in the World

By **Arthur M. Mitchell**. Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 2020. 276 pp. \$55.00.

Reviewed by
Charles Exley

Arthur M. Mitchell’s *Disruptions of Daily Life: Japanese Literary Modernism in the World* operates from the premise that “modernist works were meant to incite social transformation” (2) and mounts a spirited defense of the power of literary language to change the way we think about daily life and engage with our present moment. It consists of four chapters with an introduction and a coda. The aim of Mitchell’s book is to clarify the relationship of literary techniques used in modernist works to the social ideologies of their time, with which they share a dialectical relationship. Mitchell argues for a more precise and historically determined definition of modernist fiction, a term which he prefers to apply to texts, not to authors.

One of the core arguments about modernist works here is that they are inextricably linked to the social discourses of their time. Mitchell argues that modernist works appropriate and redirect the language of social reform in order to disrupt the very notions they cite, to call them into question. Following Eysteinsson, Mitchell suggests that the literariness of