A Mind-Reading *Yamauba* in "The Smile of a Mountain Witch"[*]

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Abstract
A *yamauba* is an enigmatic woman living in the mountains. The Japanese narrative often equates a *yamauba* to a female *oni* (ogre/demon), sometimes devouring humans who unwittingly cross her path. A portrayal of *yamauba* in the medieval period is predominantly a witch-like white-haired hag. She is, however, not entirely negative or harmful as she is also credited with some nurturing aspects. By the end of the seventeenth century, *yamauba* came to be considered the mother of Kintarō, a legendary child with Herculean strength raised in the mountains. While *yamauba* have many attributes, the article will primarily discuss *yamauba*'s less-known attribute of mindreading with a focus on "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" and how the mindreading trait may have come about.

Key words
yamauba, mindreading, Ōba Minako, *satori*

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A *yamauba* 山姥 (*yamanba* or *yamamba*) is an enigmatic woman living in the mountains. To many contemporary Japanese, the appellation *yamauba* conjures up an image of a mountain-dwelling hag who devours unsuspecting human beings who happen upon her path. She is commonly described as tall, with long hair, piercing eyes, and a large mouth that slits from ear to ear.[2] As Monica Bethe and Karen Brazell write, *yamauba* appear in various Japanese texts as "a god, a demon, an entertainer, a mother, enlightened, tormented, helpful, and harmful."[3] In recent years *yamauba* have attracted much attention among scholars of women's literature as a woman not constrained by conformative norms or social expectations.[4]

Yamauba's anthropophagous trait is well-known. She possesses duality of good and evil, and transformation power manifesting herself as an ugly crone or young beauty. Less known attributes include mind-reading. This article primarily examines the attribute of mind-reading with a focus on Ōba Minako's 大庭みな子 (1930–2007) modern fiction titled "Yamauba no bishō" 山姥の微笑 (The Smile of a Mountain Witch) and how the idea or inspiration for the mind-reading *yamauba* character may have come to Ōba Minako.

Anthropophagous and Shape-Shifting *Yamauba*

Rebecca Copeland writes, "Perhaps no image signifies the danger of the uncontainable, ravenous female as readily as the *yamamba.*"[5] As she says, *yamauba*'s voracious appetite, especially her man-eating trait, is most famous or notorious. An exemplary story, "Kuwazu nyōbō" 食わず女房 (The Wife Who Doesn't Eat), tells of a man who wants a wife who does not eat. Soon after he utters his wishful thinking, a beautiful young woman appears at his house and declares that since she does not eat, she would like to be his wife. The man takes her in, and she becomes his wife. But this seemingly ideal woman turns out to be a monstrous woman who has a second mouth at the back of her head. While she does not eat anything when the man is at home, as soon as he goes out, she prepares food for herself and eats with the mouth on the back of her head with a ravenous appetite. When the man finds out the truth, she reveals her true *yamauba* look. She throws him into a tub, carries the tub on her head and runs toward the mountains. As she is running on a mountain path, the man grabs a branch of a tree and narrowly escapes from the *yamauba*. He then climbs down the tree and hides himself in mugworts and irises. The *yamauba* comes back to look for the man and finds him. But she cannot reach him, saying that mugworts and irises are poisonous to her. The man then throws *mugworts* and irises at the *yamauba*, whereupon she dies. This story also reveals the *yamauba*'s shape-shifting power, for she first appears in front of the man as a beautiful young woman.

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[2] Komatsu, "Kaisetsu," p. 428.
[3] Bethe and Brazell, *Nō as Performance,* p. 8.
[4] Kobayashi, "Nichibei josei sakka ni okeru 'yamaubateki sōzōryoku' to ekorojī," p. 2. Rebecca Copeland says at the annual conference of Association for Asian Studies at Seattle in April 2016 that writers of a recent generation such as Kurahashi Yumiko (1935–2005), Ōba Minako (1930–2007), and Tsushima Yūko (b. 1947), have availed themselves of the female demonic, drawing a new and positive power from the formerly abject image of the *yamamba*. Itō Hiromi (1955–), poet, also describes *yamauba* as a liberating being in her "Watashi wa Anjuhimeko de aru" (I am Anjuhimeko). Copeland, "Demonizing the City."
[5] Copeland, "Mythical Bad Girls," p. 21.

In *Kokon hyakumonogatari hyōban* 古今百物語評判 (An Evaluation of One Hundred Strange and Weird Tales of Past and Present, 1686) written by Yamaoka Genrin 山岡元隣 (1631–1672), a widely recognized intellectual of his day, his student asks, "people say, 'a *yamauba* takes human life, and there are stories about a *yamauba* transforming herself into a wife.' Is she a real woman?"[6] It is understood that *yamauba*'s anthropophagy and shape-shifting ability were widely known by the early modern period.

Mind-Reading *Yamauba*

My interest in *yamauba*'s attributes was triggered while I was reading Ōba Minako's short story entitled "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" (1976). In her work Ōba introduces *yamauba* as a mind-reader—telepathic ability is presented as one of *yamauba*'s well acknowledged traits. I was not aware at that time that *yamauba* could see through people's minds, so I was surprised. Although it's a little long, I will quote the opening of the story:

> I would like to tell you about a legendary witch who lives in the mountains. Her straggly grey hair tied with string, she waits there for a man from the village to lose his way, meaning to devour him. When an unknowing young man asks to be put up for the night, the owner of the house grins, a comb with teeth missing here and there clutched between her teeth. As he feels a cold chill run up and down his spine beholding this eerie hag of a woman, her yellowed teeth shining under the flickering lamp, she says, "You just thought 'What an uncanny woman she is! Like an old, monster cat!' didn't you?"
>
> Startled, the young man thinks to himself, "Don't tell me she's planning to devour me in the middle of the night!"
>
> Stealing a glance at her from under his brows, the man gulps down a bowl of millet porridge. Without a moment's hesitation she tells him, "You just thought in your mind, 'Don't tell me she's planning to devour me the middle of the night!' didn't you!" … he thinks to himself, "what a spooky old hag! This monster cat of a woman must be one of those old witches who live up in the mountains I hear so much about. Or else she wouldn't read my mind so well!" …
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> In any case, these old mountain witches are able to read a person's mind every time, and in the end the victim runs for his life away from her abode. The old witch pursues him, and the man just keeps running for his life. At least this is the form the classic mountain-witch tales assume.[7]

Thus, Ōba Minako spends two pages on the *yamauba*'s ability to read one's mind. She then introduces her protagonist, a mind-reading *yamauba* who lives in the flatland of modern times—Showa period (1926–1989) to be precise. Mizuta Noriko comments on Ōba's work, "while reflecting the image of *yamauba* orally transmitted in folktales, the story describes a wife and mother of a nuclear family in contemporary Japan. The work is simultaneously double-structured to portray the psychological depiction of women serving their husbands and children in the

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[6] Yamaoka, "Kokin hyakumonogatari hyōban," p. 46.

[7] This translation is by Noriko Mizuta Lippit. See Ōba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," pp. 194–95. For the original Japanese text, see Ōba, "Yamanba no bishō," pp. 461–62;

patriarchal family system in the past."[8] I am in complete agreement with Mizuta's description but was wondering whether "the image of *yamauba* orally transmitted in folktales" included mind-reading.

When one considers *yamauba*'s major attribute of anthropophagy and their usual demise at the end of a story, *yamauba*'s mind reading ability poses a question. As Kelly Hansen writes, "the fact that *yamanba* are frequently overcome through trickery also works against the notion of mind reading as a common trait of the *yamanba.*"[9] The *yamauba* in the aforementioned "Kuwazu nyōbō" would have survived if she had the mind-reading ability.

But then, there it was; a mindreading *yamauba* did exist. It turns out that there is a group of tales named "Yamauba to okeya" 山姥と桶屋 (Yamauba and the Cooper), classified by Seki Keigo as number 265 under "Stupid Animals."[10] Among this group, however, only two stories have the *yamauba* character reading the human mind; the rest of the stories have other characters as the mind-reader.

Origin of Mind-reader From *Satori* to *Yamauba*

In many cases, the mind reader is a *satori* さとり, a mind-reading *yōkai* 妖怪 or mysterious creature that lives in the mountain, other times it is a *tengu* (flying goblin), *tanuki* (raccoon dog), mountain father, mountain man, mountain deity, or a one-leg and one-eyed *yōkai*. Toriyama Sekien 鳥山石燕 (1712–1788) writes in his "Konjaku gazu zoku hyakki" 今昔画図続百鬼 (Pictures of Demons Now Past Continued, 1779), "In the deep mountains of Hida and Mino, there are *kaku*. People in the mountain call it *satori*. It has dark skin with long hair. It speaks human language and can read people's minds. It does not purposefully harm people. If a man tries to kill it, *satori* knows it beforehand and is said to flee."[11] Indeed, Yanagita Kunio, who named the story-type, "Yamauba and the Cooper," comments on the *yamauba*'s mind-reading tale:

> The folktale is also included in *Zokuzoku Kyūō dōwa* 続々鳩翁道話 (Exemplum by Kyūō, Further Continued, 1838) and is known as *satori* man in Kantō and Chūbu regions. … An example of a woman [reading man's mind] exists like this tale. But because it is hard to give a name for this type instantaneously, I will temporarily call it "Yamauba and the Cooper."[12]

In other words, Yanagita is surprised to find a female counterpart of the *satori* man and expediently gave the name "*yamauba*" to this group type.

Actually an account of the story-type "Yamauba to okeya"—although the mind reading

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[8] Mizuta, "Yamauba no yume," p. 28. Similarly, Adrienne Hurley writes, "In classical *yamamba* tales, for example, mind-reading was coded as demonic. Old women would recite their victim's thoughts before attacking" (Hurley, "Demons, Transnational Subjects, and the Fiction of Ohba Minako," p. 96).

[9] Hansen, "Deviance and Decay in the Body of a Modern Mountain Witch," p. 169.

[10] See Seki, *Nihon mukashibanashi taisei*, pp. 101–7.

[11] Toriyama, "Konjaku gazu zoku hyakki," p. 114. The illustration shows that *satori* is a furry creature. Inada Atsunobu, the editor of Toriyama Sekien's book, explains on the same page (p. 114) that *kaku* are large monkeys, and they were called *satori* (sensing; perceiving) because they could sense, *satoru*, people's minds.

[12] Yanagita, *Mukashibanashi saishū no shiori*, p. 36.

character is a boy, not a *yamauba*—is found in a medieval commentary in the *Lotus Sutra* titled *Ichijō shūgyokushō* 一乗拾玉抄 (Annotation on jewel of one vehicle, written by a Buddhist monk Eikai 叡海 [dates unknown], 1488). A story in the third chapter goes: "A woodworker was making buckets, when a demon (*mamin* 魔民) disguised as a boy (*dōji* 童子) appeared and said what the cooper was thinking. The cooper [tried to] concentrate on his work but missed, bending the cane over the fire. The cane sprang off and hit the boy's forehead. The boy ran away."[13] This boy or *dōji* perhaps later became a *satori* or a *tengu.*

According to Gorai Shigeru, *mukashibanashi* 昔話 (ancient folktales) are made from sources such as mythologies, legends, and religious writings by replacing religiosity with humanity or materialistic reason, and changing stores of gratitude to interesting tales. This change appears to have happened during the Muromachi period and flourished in the Edo period.[14]

In 1585, almost one hundred years after the completion of *Ichijō shūgyokushō* 一乗拾玉抄, Tenkai 天海 (dates unknown), a Buddhist monk of the Tendai sect, wrote a similar story in *Jikidan innenshū* 直談因縁集 (Collection of Direct Sermons on Cause and Effect, 1585). A notable difference is, however, that the mind reading character is an old woman, not a boy. Tenkai explains the *Lotus Sutra*'s teaching of serendipity by citing what he calls a "usual old tale."[15] It goes, "one night a woodworker living in a mountain hut was making wooden circular boxes. There came an old nun (*rōni* 老尼). The woodworker thought she was a demon and tried to shoot her. But she said what he was thinking out loud. Then he thought to kill her with a sickle, but again she guessed what he was thinking. Suddenly the wood that had been over the fire sprang off arbitrarily and hit the old woman. Surprised, the old woman (*rōjo* 老女) ran away."[16] Surmising from Tenkai calling this mind reading story a "usual old tale," I believe this type of story must have been widely known by this time. Later in some tales of the Edo period, this mind reading character is named a *yamauba*.

In the early Edo period, a mind reading story with the term *yamauba* written in the Chinese characters meaning "gentle crone in the mountains" (山優婆) emerges in the sixteenth story of volume one of *Fusō saigin* 扶桑再吟 (Fusō's Re-explanations of Zen Kōan, 1654).[17] The author, Fusō Daiton 扶桑大暾 (d.1645), cites the mind reading tale as an emblematic story to explain the training of what his school calls "Buddha's subjugating evils." That tale goes as follows: "A cooper lived in a mountain hut in Kiso, Shinano province. There came a *yamauba* and said what he was thinking out loud. Frightened, perhaps, the cooper missed when bending the cane over the fire, and the cane sprang up and hit the *yamauba*. Neither cooper or *yamauba* knew what happened."[18]

As Yanagita notes, the telepathic ability was more associated with other characters than *yamauba* and it does not seem a major trait of *yamauba*. Further, the way Ōba describes it in her

[13] quoted in Tokuda, "Nō to setsuwa, denshō *Yamanba* o megutte," p. 45.
[14] Gorai, *Oni mukashi*, pp. 9–10, 31–32.
[15] Tenkai, *Nikkō Tenkai zō Jikidan innenshū: honkoku to sakuin*, p. 99.
[16] Tenkai, *Nikkō Tenkai zō Jikidan innenshū: honkoku to sakuin*, p. 99 (This is the sixty-fifth story of volume one); Tokuda, "Nō to setsuwa, denshō *Yamanba* o megutte," p. 45.
[17] *Fusō saigin* is Fusō Daiton's work, which was compiled by his disciples.
[18] Fusō, *Fusō saigin*, p. 35; Tokuda, "Nō to setsuwa, denshō *Yamanba* o megutte," p. 45.

story is not how the mind-reading *yamauba* is remembered in folktales. In the folktales, a man's encounter with a mind-reading character is always followed by the mind-reader running away from the man saying "Humans do things they don't think." The *yamauba* Ōba introduced in the opening of her story, however, does not flee from humans but rather chases after the man (which is concordant with *yamauba*'s known behavior. But it does not go along with the mind-reading folktales). Surprisingly, Ōba's modern *yamauba*, the *yamauba* who lives in the flatland of modern Japan, uses her ability to please those whom she likes until the very end; she dies content, entirely misunderstood by those whom she loved. Of course, one would say that is exactly where Ōba's imagination and creativity shine.

Star Eye and "The Smile of a Mountain Witch"

I speculate an inspiration for narrating the mind-reading character also came from Ōba's reading old stories. Michiko Wilson writes, "As a young schoolgirl, Ōba Minako (1930–2007) was totally absorbed by *mukashibanashi*, *otogizōshi* お伽草子 (classical Japanese fairy tales), and *otogibanashi* おとぎ話 (fairy tales in modern Japanese) as well as classical Western fairy tales by Hans Christian Andersen and the Grimm brothers."[19] Ōba must have been familiar with fairy tales of various countries including "Hoshi no hitomi" 星のひとみ (Star Eye) written by Zacharias Topelius (1818–1898), a Finnish author often called Andersen of Finland. Star Eye, the protagonist of the eponymous title, can read people's minds. She can look through doors and walls. Translated by Manzawa Maki 万沢まき (1910–2009), the book titled *Star Eye*, which contains the eponymous short story, has been enormously popular in Japan since its first appearance in mid twentieth century as children's literature.[20]

It is the action of Star Eye who repeats what her foster mother says that bears a remarkable resemblance to the protagonist of Ōba's fiction. When Star Eye was about three years old, her foster mother was sitting at her spinning wheel. She was thinking of her husband's horse that had lost the shoe of the left hind foot. Star Eye then said to her toy horse, "Mother is thinking that you have lost your shoe on your left hind foot."[21] In "The Smile of a Mountain Witch," when Ōba's modern *yamauba* was small, she repeats what her mother is thinking out loud. For example, "When she was still at a tender age and had not yet quite learned to use the bathroom, she would be so engrossed in play that she often had accidents. She would say to her mother who came running, 'Oh you naughty girl. You've got to tell Mommy on time before it's too late,'" the narrator goes, "As her mother burst out laughing, she would go on, saying, 'Really I'm no match for this child!—What can I say!',"[22] and so forth.

Ōba's *yamauba* story reveals how a *yamauba* is continuously re-created by re-applying *yamauba*'s attribute(s). Ōba's "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" should be credited as a work

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[19] Wilson, "Ōba Minako the Raconteur: Refashioning a Yamauba Tale," p. 218.
[20] The book was published in 1946 from Sankyūsha, and has been published from Iwanami Shoten since 1953 as part of *Iwanami Library for Young Children Series*. An English translation of this book is titled *Canute Whistlewinks and Other Stories,* translated from the Swedish by C.W. Foss.
[21] Topelius 151.
[22] Ōba, "Yamanba no bishō" 464; Ōba, "The Smile of a Mountain Witch" 196.

which emphasized *yamauba*'s mind-reading ability. As more people read her story, more people would believe a mind-reading *yamauba*, and thus a new type of *yamauba* is established. Each story has its own perspective, adding, deleting, or emphasizing specific aspects of *yamauba*, and passes on a re-imagined *yamauba* image to the next generation.

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