This chapter aims to document the development of yōkai-related visual art from the prehistoric period to the first half of the twentieth century in Japan. In the process, the main visual genres yōkai appear in are identified, while the role visual representation of yōkai plays within the context of popular visual culture of each art historical period is presented. In order to achieve this, the chapter will first offer definitions of yōkai, an introduction to the different types of yōkai while also addressing the question of representation of change, the essence of yōkai entities, in essentially fixed visual forms.

Yōkai is a compound word where both Chinese characters mean uncanny or eerie. The term yōkai can refer to eerie phenomena, feelings, sounds as well as animal or human characters. As Foster points out (Foster 2003: 7) the term has been commonly used since its establishment in Meiji period scholar Inoue Enryō’s (井上 春了, 1858–1919) vernacular to describe all supernatural phenomena recorded in Japan. Other words to describe the phenomena are bakemono (化物) and henge (変化) in the Edo period; and mononoke (物の怪) in Heian period literature. Bakemono, obake and henge refer to and emphasize the shape-shifting attribute of the supernatural creatures whereas mononoke is a more complex term.

Based on the lecture series ‘Yōkai Bunkaron’ (妖怪文化論, Yōkai Cultural Theory) delivered at Kyushu University, 10–13 January 2006, cultural anthropologist Komatsu Kazuhiko (小松和彦, 1947-) claims the concept of yōkai and mononoke can be most easily perceived when approached from the theoretical framework of Onmyō-dō (陰陽道) philosophy. To summarize Komatsu’s postulation, when analysing the cultural phenomenon of mononoke and yōkai we need to distance ourselves from a value system that is based on the belief that there are distinctly good and evil entities. Onmyō-dō was introduced to the Japanese court from China in the Heian period and its philosophy had an important impact on fortune-telling, divination, astrology and consequently religious beliefs.1 The basic principle of Onmyō-dō – derived from Taoist philosophy – is based on the idea of 氣 (ki, chi), the energy flowing, fluctuating and changing in every aspect of the Universe be it physical forms, words, thoughts or intangible and invisible entities. The well-know symbol of the taikyoku (太極, tai-chi) image summarizes this belief in its ultimate

---

1 Abeno Seimei 安倍晴明 (921–1005) is the most well-known priest of Onmyō-dō, whose life was romanticized in the 2001 film Onmyōdō (陰陽道, dir. Takita Yojiro, 2001).
conciseness. The taikyoku image symbolizes a constant flow of energy (気, ki, chi) and change in all aspects of the universe. On this bipolar scale the two polarities of the change are the two opposite aspects of the energy pulsation, 陰 (in, yin) and 陽 (yō, yang). While this bipolarity can give two opposite faces to the same entity, yin and yang are not to be interpreted as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or by assigning any other moral values to them.

According to Taoist philosophy, the same entity, be it a god or a human, can have two faces, a yin and a yang, according to its current energy status. When this principle is applied in a Shinto context, the corollary is that there are neither absolutely peaceful nor absolutely angry gods, but all supernatural beings have a positive (明, nigi) as well as a negative (荒, arami) aspect. Because of this, the matsuri (祭り, celebration) is a central concept in Shinto, where the positive energy created by the annual festivities aims to ensure that the celebrated god will retain its nigi, or positive aspect for the given year. The energy (ki) that abides in the gods when left unnoticed or uncelebrated, hold the danger of mutating into a negative (荒, arami) aspect with equal force, bringing misfortune to the people residing around the god’s abode, the shrine.2

For this reason, all gods have the potential to morph, mutate, turn into yōkai unless they are cautiously respected and fully celebrated to keep their positive face. This aspect of Shinto beliefs is closely portrayed in Miyazaki Hayao’s animated epic, Mononoke Hime, where the tatarigami (祟神, vengeful god) of a wild boar attacks a village and is consequently killed by the local hero. However, after its death, the god is treated with respect and an offering is made to him by the village elder.

This opening sequence of the animated film is the detailed visual rendering of the mukashi banashi (昔話, folk tale) of the Obagaminono Ipponashi (伯母峰の一本足, The One-legged God of Obagamine) or Inosasaō (筍笹王, Boar Bamboo King) yōkai forest deity (Hikakuminwa Kenkyukai 1991: 155). In the original narration, a giant boar cruising through a bamboo forest is wounded by gunshot and its spirit returns as the angered One-legged forest deity. A travelling monk later celebrates (祭る, matsuru) and lulls his spirit, upon which he promises to only return once a year (Iwai 2000/1: 46). The warrior who wounds the giant boar first sees an approaching wave in the bamboo similarly to the hero of Mononoke Hime (Kano 1997: 26).

The central idea behind yōkai is the transmutability of all beings. A human can become a vengeful spirit (怨霊, onryō) and then transform into a sacred spirit (御霊, goryō) once revered, as in the case of Heian period scholar Sugawarano Michizane (菅原道真, 845–903) and utensils can become humans, demons (鬼, oni) and then achieve Buddhahood as depicted on the Muromachi period picture scroll Tsukumogami Emaki (付喪神絵巻).

The other fundamental principle to consider regarding yōkai and mononoke besides the principle of transmutability of all things, is the concept of ki (気). The term ‘mono no ke’ incorporates two extremely general concepts: mono and ke. Mono is all things without distinction, while ke is originally another reading

---

2 A more detailed discussion of Onmyō-dō is presented in Komatsu (1994)