

Yamamba as Muse: Three Poems by Noriko Mizuta

Poetry by Noriko Mizuta, translated by Marianne Tarcov and introduced by Rebecca Copeland

Abstract: Japan's beguiling mountain witch, the yamamba, has inspired artists from medieval Noh actors to contemporary poets. She offers a fertile metaphor for a creative energy that exceeds boundaries and threatens disruption. For female artists in particular, the yamamba epitomizes the freedom of refusing gendered expectations as well as the consequences that befall those who do. Renowned scholar and poet, Noriko Mizuta, has long found a muse in the yamamba. This article is excerpted and adapted from the book *Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch*, co-edited by Rebecca Copeland and Linda C. Ehrlich, which presents the surprising ways artists and scholars from North America and Japan have encountered the yamamba. [Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch](#) is available June 22nd from Stone Bridge Press.



The artist is **Kayo Ohmori**, a music therapist and reciter of poetry who lives in Chiba, Japan.

Introduction

The yamamba is an enigma. The embodiment of fear, she often appears as a wicked old woman who feeds (sometimes literally) on those who stray into her mountain fastness. Her voracious appetite is all the more horrifying for its female

origin. At the same time, the yamamba has been described as a nurturing entity who helps the weaver with her loom and the farmer with his fields. The inconsistency of her image tantalizes but also amplifies the terror she evokes. Those who encounter the yamamba can never be certain which version they might meet. This complexity has been represented in stage performances, *setsuwa*, and other stories over the centuries, each trading on the manifold manifestations of the yamamba to induce both wonder and horror.

The yamamba represents all that lies outside the social norm, beyond the boundaries of the civilized. She is a woman without a family, a woman who does not conform. Cast out from the security of social sanctuary—she runs through the mountain. Her freedom figured as terror. She turns the world upside down, inverting expectations and the comfort of the assumed. In various versions of the tale day becomes night in the yamamba world. The nurturer becomes the murderer. The woman who eats nothing becomes the woman who eats all (Copeland 23).

For twentieth-century Japanese women writers, such as Ōba Minako, Takahashi Takako, Tsushima Yūko and others, it was the freedom of the yamamba figure, her refusal to conform, that proved to be enticing. She entered their stories and poems as a sympathetic character. She was someone who, like they, had been ostracized for her perspicacity and power, who was renegade. Inspired by the yamamba, they refused to limit themselves to respectable roles of wife and mother. Rather, they allowed their imaginations to roam across the mountains, to eat lustily, to chase down their would-be tormenters. These writers not only humanized the yamamba (King 12) but assumed the mantle of her protégé, the rightful inheritor of her

voice. Julia Bullock, in exploring the way these writers reclaimed “negative depictions of women in folklore for feminist purposes,” observes “such writers saw the *yamamba* as a model of femininity unfractured by the intervention of society—a ‘whole’ or ‘natural’ version of female existence.” She continues by quoting Noriko Mizuta, the foremost scholar on the yamamba as feminist icon¹:

Perhaps the reason why the *yamamba* became an archetype of modern women’s search for self was because rather than a solution to the difficult problem of the antinomy between motherhood and independence, home and work, the *yamamba* offered a fertile metaphor for an existence that made these questions irrelevant. The *yamamba*’s freedom from fixed sex roles, the variety of her lifestyle, a mobility that defied attachment—all this suggested liberation and freedom from feminine norms, a feminine existence and possibility outside of and surpassing the gender system, and liberated from the resentment of village women subject to this system (Bullock 233).

In *Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch*, Linda C. Ehrlich and I explore the way the yamamba has inspired artistic works. We see this inspiration emerging as early as the fifteenth-century in the Noh play attributed to Zeami Motokiyo. Here the power of the yamamba—austere and awesome—speaks for the performer-playwright who, despite his own prodigious talent, is socially marginalized and vulnerable to the aesthetic whims of the Ashikaga rulers. In our collection we include an interview with two Noh actors, Uzawa Hisa and Uzawa Hikaru, a mother and daughter pair, who perpetuate both Zeami’s legacy and the performed power of the yamamba. Contemporary dancer and

choreographer, Yokoshi Yasuko, draws on this inheritance in her own piece “shuffleyamamba,” which highlights the potency of performance to cross boundaries and articulate powerful truths in the language of the body. Other artists in our collection channel the yamamba into their short stories, poetry, art work, and essays. In sum, the works in this volume speak to the complexity and allure of the yamamba herself.

Excerpt from *Yamamba: In Search of the Japanese Mountain Witch*

The yamamba has been a constant companion to Noriko Mizuta.² Her fascination emerged in the early 1980s with her translation of Ōba Minako’s short story “The Smile of a Mountain Witch” and was amplified in her 1995 dialogue with Ōba on the yamamba in Japanese culture. Mizuta has contributed to our understanding of the yamamba through her many published translations and essays as well as in her poetry.



From [the wiki commons](#): A wild mountain woman in a cloak of leaves seated by a rushing stream, behind her the head of a great axe, which belongs to her son Kintoki, the "child Heracles" of Japanese legend. Color woodcut by Hokkei, 1820s.

Originally written in Japanese, the three poems excerpted here are translated into English by Japanese literature scholar Marianne Tarcov. As with any work of translation, these come with challenges. The evocative suggestiveness of Noriko Mizuta’s poetic language is easily marred by a translation that is too precise. And yet English—even at its most poetic—generally prefers adherence to grammatical conventions. These demands are particularly fraught when translating from a language like Japanese that survives without precise subjects. Verbs are free to act, to speak, to move without a named protagonist. This indistinctness is essential to Mizuta. Her poems celebrate the yamamba, but they do not necessarily speak in her voice. As Mizuta explains, “I prefer leaving the subject

ambiguous, impersonal, or even in the passive mode as if someone or something else, like nature, has taken the actions." For Mizuta, the yamamba is not contained in a single identity or persona. She sees her poems, rather, as a "series of prayers for, or homage to, Yamamba" by those whose lived experiences have overlapped hers somewhere along the way, those who have stepped beyond the confines of "the village" (or *sato*) to make their rounds of the mountains.

As the poet explains, key to understanding the yamamba is appreciating all that is represented in "village" and "mountain." The former stands for the patriarchal family system with its chauvinistic codes of conduct and the self-denying demands placed on the women contained within. Those who cannot abide the demands of the village are forced into the mountains, either leaving of their own accord or being chased out by the village gatekeepers. Mountains stand for freedom and self-expression, but also isolation and otherness. For the sensitive village woman, for the perceptive poet, the yamamba becomes both a pitiable figure and a powerful symbol of independence. As Noriko Mizuta's poems unfurl, the yamamba grows beyond the limiting vision of witch or hag and merges into nature itself: untamed, unnamed, unimaginable.

Yamamba's Silence 1

She birthed them
 like oleaster seeds
 one after another
 And fed them
 their whole bodies
 swelling,
 vomiting.
 She nursed them
 brimming with
 falling
 pomegranate seeds
 gathering them
 one by one
 wiping away the
 oozing liquid
 sheltering them in
 her palm.

Abandoned
 memories
 in the alder's
 shade
 Waves of
 mountains, layer
 upon layers
 Left-over dreams
 Picking through
 pebbles

She birthed them
 one after another
 She fed them
 breath by breath
 She nursed them
 Until her breasts
 wrinkled,
 one by one.

Within the torn
 wing
 A hollow left by
 eaten grass
 The repair of the
 birthing hut
 can wait until
 tomorrow

山姥の沈黙 1

産んだ
 ぐみの実のように
 あとから あとか
 ら
 食べさせた
 身体中ほうばり
 一滴残らず吐き出
 し
 看取った
 溢れ落ちる柘榴の
 実
 一つ一つ拾い上げ
 滲み出す汁を拭き
 手のひらに囲って

棄てられた記憶
 榛の陰に
 幾重にも連なる山
 波
 生き残った夢
 小石を啄んで

産んだ
 あとから あとか
 ら
 食べさせた
 一息 一息
 看取った
 皺の一筋まで
 一本 一本

むしりとった羽の
 中
 食べた 草むらの
 窪み
 産屋の繕いは
 明日にでもしよう

Yamamba's Silence 2

She left
home 山姥の沈黙 2
crossed
the border 家を
and walked 出た
mountain after 里を
mountain 国境を
of linked dreams 出た
strode over and 歩いた
over the dateline 連なる記憶の
山また山
日付線をまたぎ
またぎ

She ran
like the falcon
like the wildcat 走った
like speed itself 隼のごとく
She ate ヤマネコのごとく
like a coyote 脱兎のごとく
consuming 食べた
like a deer コヨーテのように
tearing, chewing 襲い 貪り
like a cow 鹿のように
lying stretched 剥ぎ 噛み
She ruminated 牛のように
and slept 寝そべり
curling her body 反芻し
into a small 眠った
shrine 祠に身を丸め
entrusting her 土に手足を任せ
limbs to the 髪は虫の寝ぐら
earth 細い菌を編む
her hair a 腐葉土の
dwelling place 産み床
for insects もろもろの
braided with slim
fungi
A birthing bed
for humus
for all things

Yamamba's Silence 3

Sleeping
Yamamba

Bodies in a row
Sleeping giants 山姥の沈黙 □
women who read
dreams 眠る山姥
women who draw
silence 連なる身体
women 眠る巨女
who try to grasp その夢を
their limbs 読む女たち
with a grip so その沈黙を
strong 描く女たち
it does not stop その手足を
time 掴もうとする
sightlines 女たち
unobscured by 時を無化しない
mist 握力
The women 霧に隠されぬ
who try to return 視線
the sleeping 眠る山姥の
yamamba's 変容する
transforming 不可視の目つきを
uncanny gaze 見返そうとする
The watching 女たち
woman dozes too 見る女も微睡む
Her breath 風に消されぬ
Not erased by the 息使い
wind 聴く女の昼寝
The listening どれもみな
woman naps 腹 膨らませ
All 身体をほぐし
their bellies swell 眠る大女が
their bodies 誘う
relax, 山の彼方へ
the sleeping big 眠れない女たち
women 醒めていく女たち
beckon
beyond the
mountains
the women who
do not sleep,
the women who
wake

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Rebecca Copeland is Professor of Japanese literature at Washington University in St. Louis. A writer of fiction and literary criticism and a translator of Japanese literature, her stories travel between Japan and the American South and touch on questions of identity, belonging, and self-discovery. Co-editor of *Yamamba: In Search of the Mountain Witch*, along with Linda C. Ehrlich, she is also the author of the novel *The Kimono Tattoo* (Brother Mockingbird Publishers, 2021).

Noriko Mizuta is a poet, translator, comparative literature scholar, former professor at the University of Southern California, former president of Jōsai International University, chancellor of Jōsai Educational Corporation, and current chancellor and director of the International Institute for Media and Women's Studies. Along with Kyoko Selden, Dr. Mizuta was a pioneer in the translation of works by modern Japanese women writers, beginning with the anthology *Japanese Women Writers: Twentieth Century Short Fiction* (1991). She also forged the field of feminist literary criticism in Japan, as represented by her 1981 study *Hiroin kara hiirō e: josei no jiga to hyōgen* (From Heroine to Hero: Female Self and Expression), and she was among the first to explore the metaphorical power of the yamamba.

Marianne Tarcov is an Assistant Professor of Japanese Studies at McGill University in Montreal, Canada. She is at work on a book project titled *Screening Open Secrets of War, Mass Culture, and Hometown in Twentieth-Century Japanese Poetry*. Her translations of modern Japanese poetry have appeared in *Asymptote*, *Poetry Kanto*, *Octopus*, and elsewhere, and her translations have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.