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Article

Onryō and the Construction of the Japanese Spiritual Landscape

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Abstract: This paper comprehensively examines Japan's distinctive *onryō* (vengeful spirit) culture to deeply explore the underlying national psyche and the unique worldview it reflects. It first traces the historical and cultural origins of *Goryō Shinko*, highlighting how this complex belief system is rooted not only in the island nation's specific geographical vulnerabilities and indigenous animistic traditions, but also in the profound social crises following ancient political conflicts. By contextualizing these early spiritual practices, the study then investigates the multifaceted evolution of vengeance narratives throughout Japanese history. Furthermore, it analyzes the aesthetic transformation of horror imagery through the traditional literary and philosophical concept of *mono no aware* (the pathos of things), demonstrating how visceral fear is sublimated into a profound appreciation for transience and impermanence. The research also addresses the psychological function of these beliefs, specifically focusing on the alleviation of existential anxiety within a highly collectivist society, and the moral ambiguity inherent in Japanese religious ethics, where the boundaries between good and evil are frequently blurred. Ultimately, the paper argues that *onryō* culture serves as a vital cognitive and mediating framework. This enduring cultural mechanism allows the Japanese people to interpret natural and man-made disasters, resolve collective resentment, and effectively restore social harmony in the aftermath of profound trauma.

Keywords: *onryō*; national psyche; *goryō shinko*; japanese folklore; vengeance narratives; religious ethics

1. Introduction

Within the cultural landscape of Japan, few figures have maintained such a persistent presence in the collective imagination as the *onryō*. These vengeful spirits, deeply rooted in Japanese folklore, have transcended the boundaries of mere ghost stories to become enduring cultural symbols [1]. For instance, the tale of Kiyohime, who transforms into a giant serpent to exact revenge on her beloved, and the legend of Taira no Masakado, whose severed head is said to have flown across the Kanto region, are emblematic of this phenomenon. These narratives, rich in emotional and symbolic depth, continue to resonate in modern literature, animation, and film. Their sustained vitality raises important questions about the cultural foundations and worldviews that have nurtured such a distinctive spiritual product. By examining these stories, we can uncover the underlying psychological and societal factors that have allowed these figures to persist as powerful symbols of unresolved emotions and moral complexities.

In contrast to Western horror traditions, which often seek to rationalize or explain supernatural phenomena, Japanese culture tends to integrate such occurrences into its worldview as natural extensions of reality. This cultural acceptance reflects a fundamentally different mode of cognition, one that does not demand disruption, interrogation, or skepticism when encountering the supernatural [2]. Instead, these

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phenomena are seamlessly woven into the fabric of daily life and collective understanding. This approach highlights a unique perspective on the coexistence of the spiritual and the material, where the boundaries between the two realms are fluid rather than rigidly defined. Such a worldview not only shapes the narrative structure of Japanese ghost stories but also reflects broader cultural attitudes toward mystery, ambiguity, and the unknown.

Before delving into a detailed discussion, it is essential to clarify and distinguish the relevant concepts within the Japanese cultural context. The terms *mononoke* and *onryō*, while often used interchangeably, possess subtle yet significant differences [2]. *Mononoke* is a broad term encompassing various supernatural phenomena or entities that cause harm, including objects imbued with spirits, vengeful ghosts, and even nature deities. On the other hand, *onryō* refers specifically to anthropomorphic spirits of individuals who died harboring intense resentment or unfulfilled desires. These spirits are believed to cause disasters or seek revenge against specific targets, often following a discernible causal logic rooted in their tragic experiences or unnatural deaths. This distinction underscores the complexity and nuance of Japanese spiritual beliefs, where different categories of supernatural entities serve distinct narrative and symbolic purposes.

This article posits that Japanese *onryō* culture transcends the realm of ghost tales or residual superstition, functioning instead as a profound psychological and cultural mechanism. *Onryō* narratives serve as a means for individuals and communities to process historical trauma, confront social injustices, and navigate complex emotional landscapes. These stories act as a "container" for collective anxieties, providing a symbolic framework through which fear, grief, and unresolved tensions can be expressed and understood. Furthermore, they offer a unique "language" for articulating resistance, seeking justice, and fostering empathy. By examining the cultural phenomenon of *onryō*, we gain valuable insights into the Japanese worldview, particularly regarding concepts of justice, the interplay between life and death, and the intricate relationship between humans and nature. Additionally, these narratives reveal the psychological processes through which balance is maintained between repression and release, as well as between fear and compassion, highlighting the enduring relevance of *onryō* in both historical and contemporary contexts [2].

2. Tracing the Origins: Geographical Conditions, Religious Foundations, and Political Struggles

The emergence of Japanese *onryō* culture was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a product of intricate interactions between environmental, religious, and historical factors. Japan's unique geographical features, such as its mountainous terrain, frequent seismic activity, and dense forests, have profoundly influenced its cultural narratives, fostering a deep connection to the supernatural [3]. Additionally, religious traditions, including Shinto and Buddhism, provided frameworks for understanding spirits and their roles in human affairs. Historical and political dynamics, such as feudal conflicts and societal upheavals, further shaped the evolution of *onryō* beliefs, embedding them within the collective consciousness of Japanese society.

2.1. Natural Geographical Environment and Primordial Fear

The Japanese archipelago, surrounded by seas and characterized by extensive mountainous terrain, lies along the Pacific Ring of Fire, a region known for its intense geological activity. This unique geographical environment has historically subjected the area to frequent and unpredictable natural disasters, including earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. In ancient times, when scientific knowledge was rudimentary, such catastrophic events were beyond human comprehension, instilling profound fear and anxiety among the population. The overwhelming power of nature, coupled with the isolation inherent to life on an island nation, fostered a deep sense of mystery and awe. As a result, people often attributed these phenomena to unseen spirits or deities, believing that such forces governed the natural world. Over time, this perspective evolved into a

cultural tendency to both venerate and fear nature, recognizing it as a source of both blessings and calamities. This duality led to the sacralization of natural elements, as individuals sought to appease the invisible forces they believed were responsible for both prosperity and destruction [1].

2.2. *The Religious Foundations*

This form of primordial animism, rooted in the fear of nature, was further deepened and consolidated through the evolution of various religious traditions in Japan. Shinto, as a spiritual framework, does not propose the existence of a singular, personified creator deity. Instead, it emphasizes the spontaneous emergence of all entities within the universe, with *kami* being regarded as manifestations of nature itself. This perspective aligns with the later Buddhist notion in Japan that "mountains, rivers, grasses, and trees can all attain Buddhahood," which represents a synthesis of continental Buddhist philosophy and indigenous Shinto beliefs. This integration reflects a uniquely Japanese approach to sacralization, forming an early narrative of animism that encompasses a broad spectrum of sacred entities. Within this worldview, the scope of deities is notably expansive, including elements of nature, ancestral spirits, historically significant figures, and even abstract concepts, all of which are venerated as objects of worship [4]. Such inclusivity underscores the dynamic and adaptive nature of religious thought in Japan, allowing for the coexistence and blending of diverse spiritual traditions.

Even more significant is Shinto's conceptualization of the soul, which is often interpreted as comprising two distinct aspects: *nigi-mitama*, or the gentle spirit, and *ara-mitama*, or the wild spirit. The gentle spirit embodies harmony, benevolence, and protective qualities, while the wild spirit represents valor, roughness, and destructive forces. Importantly, the state of the soul is not static; its harmonious and violent dimensions can shift dynamically in response to external circumstances or internal emotional changes. This fluidity provides a conceptual foundation for the later development of *Goryō Shinko*, a belief system centered on appeasing vengeful spirits [5]. The duality of the soul in Shinto reflects a nuanced understanding of human nature and the interplay between internal and external forces, offering a framework for interpreting the complexities of spiritual and emotional experiences. This dynamic perspective on the soul also highlights the adaptability of Shinto beliefs, allowing them to evolve in response to societal and cultural changes over time.

2.3. *Governance Crises and the Emergence of Goryō Shinko*

Building upon an explanatory framework shaped by the natural environment and religious thought, the intense and brutal political struggles of the Nara to Heian periods further acted as a catalyst for the formation of *onryō* culture. During this transformative era, Japan gradually established its *ritsuryō* system, a centralized legal and administrative framework that sought to consolidate imperial authority [6]. However, this system also became a battleground for power struggles between the imperial court and the aristocracy, which grew exceptionally fierce over time. Political purges became a common occurrence, with exile and forced suicide frequently employed as tools to eliminate rivals. The deaths of these high-ranking political figures often coincided with periods of local political instability, escalating conflicts, and widespread disasters such as epidemics and natural calamities. These events led people to instinctively associate such misfortunes with the malevolent *ara-mitama*, or vengeful spirits, of the deceased. This cultural interpretation reflected a deep-seated belief in the interconnectedness of human actions, spiritual forces, and natural phenomena, further embedding *onryō* culture into the societal consciousness.

In response to the pervasive social anxiety caused by these events, *Goryō Shinko* emerged as a significant cultural and religious practice. This belief system functioned as a crisis-management mechanism, wherein those in power shifted their approach from attempting to eradicate *onryō* to seeking to appease them. This was achieved through various means, such as the restoration of titles and honors to the deceased and the construction of Shinto shrines dedicated to their spirits [7]. These actions aimed to transform the malevolent *ara-mitama* into protective *nigi-mitama*, benevolent spirits that

were believed to safeguard the state and its people. This strategic shift not only addressed immediate social unrest but also reinforced the role of spiritual practices in maintaining political stability and public order. By integrating these rituals into the broader framework of governance, *Goryō Shinko* became a vital tool for mitigating crises and fostering a sense of collective security.

The case of Sugawara no Michizane serves as the most emblematic example of this phenomenon. A highly talented court noble, Michizane was falsely accused of treason, leading to his exile in Kyushu, where he ultimately died in despair. Following his death, a series of catastrophic events, including earthquakes, torrential rains, droughts, and fires, plagued Heian-kyō. Additionally, several of his political adversaries and members of the imperial family died in rapid succession. These occurrences fueled widespread public fear, as many believed they were acts of vengeance by Michizane's *onryō*. To pacify his spirit, the court took significant measures, including restoring his official rank and deifying him as "Tenjin," a deity of learning and scholarship. Shrines were constructed in his honor, and his worship gradually evolved into a widespread faith among the Japanese populace. Over time, the Tenjin faith shed its associations with *onryō* worship, becoming a symbol of cultural and spiritual significance. This transformation illustrates how a once-feared vengeful spirit was successfully integrated into the state ritual system, ultimately serving as a unifying and protective cultural force.

The practice of *Goryō Shinko* not only acknowledged the legitimacy of the suffering endured by political victims but also sought to address the broader societal implications of their deaths. Through carefully orchestrated ritual performances, the accumulated negative energies associated with these individuals were symbolically transformed, enabling the restoration of social order and stability. This process reflected a profound understanding of the psychological and cultural dimensions of governance, as it sought to reconcile historical grievances while reinforcing the authority of the state. Over time, *Goryō Shinko* evolved from a grassroots expression of folk awe into an official ideology deeply intertwined with statecraft and crisis management. Its enduring influence highlights the intricate relationship between spiritual beliefs, political power, and societal resilience, underscoring its significance as a cornerstone of Japanese cultural and historical development.

3. The Shaping and Identification of the *Onryō* Image

The enduring appeal of Japanese *onryō* culture in modern and contemporary literature and the arts can be attributed to its profound embodiment of core Japanese ethical principles, aesthetic sensibilities, and collective social psychology. This cultural phenomenon resonates deeply with the Japanese audience, as it reflects their intrinsic values and artistic preferences. Furthermore, the *onryō* image serves as a symbolic representation of unresolved emotional conflicts and societal tensions, offering a unique lens through which to explore themes of morality, justice, and human vulnerability in creative expression [3].

3.1. *The Esteem for and Transformation of Revenge Culture*

Revenge serves as the central driving force that permeates *onryō* narratives, acting as the core mechanism through which these supernatural entities interact with the living world. This thematic focus underscores the enduring cultural fascination with vengeance as a means of addressing unresolved grievances and injustices.

Under the ethos of classical bushidō, revenge was often perceived as an essential act to restore honor and demonstrate loyalty, embodying a socially recognized form of justice. This cultural framework deeply influenced public consciousness, fostering the widely accepted belief that "a soul burdened with resentment must inevitably seek revenge." Early *onryō* narratives adhered to the principle of direct retribution, wherein the vengeful spirits targeted their immediate wrongdoers while sparing unrelated individuals. This adherence to targeted revenge imbued their actions with a distinct sense of justice, resonating with audiences as morally justified acts of posthumous resistance. For example,

in Yotsuya Kaidan, Oiwa's transformation into an *onryō* is driven by her betrayal and poisoning at the hands of her husband, Tamiya Iemon. Her vengeance, directed solely at her betrayer, symbolizes a form of justice granted to those powerless in life, eliciting profound public sympathy and moral satisfaction.

As Japan transitioned into modernity, the logic underpinning *onryō* revenge underwent significant transformation. Modern representations, such as Sadako in Ringu and Kayako in Ju-on, abandon the principle of targeting specific perpetrators. Instead, their curses spread indiscriminately, resembling a viral contagion that renders even innocent individuals susceptible to harm. This shift dissolves the moral legitimacy of revenge, transforming the *onryō* from a victim seeking justice into an embodiment of "absolute evil" that disrupts human order for its own sake. The indiscriminate nature of modern *onryō* reflects a departure from traditional notions of justice, emphasizing their role as agents of chaos rather than instruments of retribution.

This evolution mirrors the profound alienation characteristic of interpersonal relationships in modern society [8]. In urban environments, individual suffering often stems from invisible, structural forces rather than identifiable perpetrators. When resentment lacks a concrete outlet, it becomes distorted, manifesting as irrational hatred directed toward humanity as a whole. This phenomenon highlights the psychological impact of societal fragmentation, where unresolved grievances evolve into indiscriminate hostility.

Correspondingly, the audience's psychological response to *onryō* narratives has shifted. While traditional *onryō* elicited understanding and sympathy due to their morally justified actions, modern *onryō* evoke a complex mixture of fear and reverence. Audiences are simultaneously terrified by their indiscriminate power and subconsciously drawn to their ability to transcend societal norms and exert absolute control. This duality underscores the enduring fascination with *onryō* as symbols of both terror and unrestrained power [9].

3.2. *Mono No Aware as an Aesthetic Principle in Japanese Literature and the Arts*

Although *onryō* are frightening, they are often imbued with a tragic beauty that aligns with the principles of Japanese classical aesthetics [10]. This connection is deeply rooted in the core aesthetic concept of *mono no aware*. The term *mono no aware* combines *mono*, representing all things in existence, with *aware*, signifying the emotions of being moved and saddened by these things. It emphasizes the subject's heightened perception of the object and emotional responsiveness, reflecting an insight into the essence of existence and an awareness of life's fleeting nature. Within this aesthetic framework, resentment is often understood as a distortion of love, arising when love is obstructed or unfulfilled.

The character of Lady Rokujō in *The Tale of Genji* exemplifies the integration of *mono no aware* aesthetics with the narrative of *onryō*. Born into nobility and possessing extraordinary talent and beauty, she becomes consumed by jealousy toward Hikaru Genji's other lovers. This jealousy manifests as her *ikiryō*, or wandering spirit, which inadvertently causes the deaths of Yūgao and Aoi no Ue. However, the author Murasaki Shikibu does not portray her as a malevolent demon. Instead, significant narrative attention is given to her feelings of remorse and shame upon regaining awareness of her actions. Lady Rokujō's confession that "pent-up sorrow prevents my soul from remaining within the body" underscores the idea that her tragedy originates from emotions that lack an outlet, highlighting the profound emotional conflict within her character.

Through the lens of *mono no aware*, Lady Rokujō is primarily seen as an embodiment of poignant sorrow rather than merely a fearsome apparition. Her terror stems from the purity and intensity of her emotions, which exceed the boundaries of societal norms. Consequently, readers or viewers are encouraged to move beyond the initial fear she evokes and develop a sense of compassion and empathy for her plight. This perspective transcends simple moral judgment, allowing for a deeper understanding of her emotional struggles as a woman constrained by the rigid social structures of her time.

The aesthetic experience of "knowing *mono no aware*" significantly diminishes the negative connotations traditionally associated with the image of *onryō*. In contemporary horror cinema, *onryō* are often depicted within narratives that emphasize their former selves as helpless, marginalized, and victimized individuals. This portrayal encourages audiences to approach the origins of their resentment with empathetic understanding [11]. As a result, ethical judgment is often suspended, and even when their actions lead to cruel consequences, the perpetrator may be partially understood or forgiven due to the suffering they endured. This nuanced approach reflects a cultural tendency to view such figures through a lens of compassion rather than condemnation.

3.3. *Repressed Emotions under Collectivism*

One of the most prominent characteristics of Japanese culture is its collectivist nature, which is deeply rooted in the Confucian principle of harmony and the bushidō code emphasizing loyalty. Collectivism necessitates that individuals adhere strictly to group norms and collective decisions, often requiring the suppression of personal emotions to ensure their behavior aligns with established social roles. This cultural framework, with its strong focus on conformity and order, fosters efficient cooperation and societal stability. However, it also leads to the accumulation of significant amounts of unexpressed negative emotions within individuals, as personal grievances and frustrations are often subordinated to collective interests. The psychological impact of this suppression can manifest in various ways, including heightened internal tension and emotional strain, which may influence interpersonal dynamics and mental well-being over time.

Resentment that remains unexpressed in daily life finds a symbolic outlet in the literary and artistic representation of the *onryō*. These figures are portrayed as disregarding all societal norms and conventions, appearing disheveled and engaging in violent acts of revenge and destruction. This depiction serves as a vivid embodiment of the repressed "id," representing the raw and unrestrained emotions that individuals in a collectivist society often suppress. For those accustomed to navigating social expectations with caution and sensitivity, engaging with *onryō* narratives provides a form of psychological relief. The unrestrained actions of the *onryō*, characterized by their defiance and vengeance, offer a distorted sense of "heroism," allowing individuals to imaginatively break free from societal constraints and vent suppressed discontent. In this way, the cultural shaping of *onryō* serves as a mechanism for alleviating internal tensions within a collectivist framework, indirectly contributing to the preservation of social order and stability by providing an outlet for emotional catharsis.

3.4. *Religious Ethics with Blurred Distinctions between Good and Evil*

The complexity of the *onryō* figure is deeply intertwined with the Japanese people's unique perspectives on the interconnectedness of death and life, as well as their nuanced understanding of good and evil [12]. This cultural framework provides a rich context for interpreting the *onryō* as more than mere vengeful spirits, instead positioning them as entities that reflect broader existential and moral questions.

Within the syncretic traditions of Shinto and Buddhism, the Japanese perspective on death takes on a distinctive character. The term "view of death and life (*shiseikan*)" is often used, prioritizing death as the starting point for philosophical reflection [3, 11]. This ordering suggests a dialectical relationship, where the acceptance of death becomes a pathway to understanding life, and life itself is imbued with an awareness of mortality. Early Shinto teachings initially regarded death as impure and undesirable, but over time, this perspective evolved into a philosophy that embraces death as a natural phase leading to renewal and transformation. This shift underscores a broader cultural tendency to view life and death not as opposites but as interconnected stages within a continuous cycle.

This philosophical approach to death and life profoundly influences moral judgments regarding good and evil. In the context of *shinbutsu shūgō*, the syncretism of Shinto and Buddhism, the concept of absolute and eternal evil is notably absent. Instead, moral evaluations are fluid and context-dependent. For instance, the belief that the afterlife is not rigidly divided into heaven and hell reflects a more inclusive view of

spiritual existence, where all individuals, regardless of their earthly deeds, may enter the other world. Furthermore, Shinran, the founder of Jōdo Shinshū, introduced the doctrine of *akunin shōki*, which posits that those who acknowledge their own karmic burdens and recognize their inability to achieve salvation through self-powered efforts are more likely to receive the grace of Amida Buddha. This doctrine challenges conventional moral hierarchies by emphasizing humility and self-awareness as pathways to spiritual redemption.

The fluid boundary between good and evil within this cultural and religious framework allows the *onryō* to transcend simplistic categorizations as malevolent entities that must be eradicated. Instead, they are understood as objective presences that embody complex moral and existential dilemmas [2]. This perspective invites a more nuanced interpretation of the *onryō*, encouraging engagement with their narratives as reflections of broader human concerns rather than mere supernatural threats.

4. Conclusion

Japanese *onryō* culture represents a profound spiritual synthesis shaped by the unique geo-environment of the island nation, its deeply rooted religious traditions, and the historical evolution of societal values. This cultural phenomenon reflects the Japanese reverence for the transient and impermanent nature of existence, intertwined with collective memories of historical trauma and the need for emotional catharsis. It has evolved from traditional revenge narratives, which often emphasized personal vendettas, to modern expressions of indiscriminate violence that mirror broader societal anxieties. Furthermore, the cultural practices associated with *Goryō Shinko*, a form of crisis mediation, have historically provided avenues for addressing unresolved grievances, fostering communal harmony, and mitigating societal disruptions. The aesthetics of *mono no aware*, which emphasize empathy and the beauty of ephemeral moments, further enrich this cultural framework, offering a compassionate lens through which suppressed emotions are acknowledged and transformed. This enduring resonance highlights the adaptability of *onryō* culture in meeting the psychological and spiritual needs of successive generations, underscoring its relevance in both historical and contemporary contexts.

Rather than seeking to suppress or eliminate negative emotions, Japanese cultural practices have historically embraced these feelings, channeling them through ritualistic and artistic expressions to restore social equilibrium and achieve spiritual reconciliation. By legitimizing resentment and acknowledging its role within the human experience, these practices have fostered a unique approach to emotional and societal healing. This cultural wisdom, which transforms fear into veneration and seeks coexistence within chaos, offers profound insights into the spiritual ethos of the Japanese people. It underscores the importance of embracing emotional complexity as a pathway to harmony, rather than viewing it as a disruptive force. Future research could explore the broader implications of this approach, examining how similar frameworks might be applied in other cultural contexts to address societal tensions and emotional discord. Additionally, interdisciplinary studies could investigate the psychological mechanisms underlying these practices, shedding light on their efficacy in promoting resilience and collective well-being in the face of adversity.

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