

# IN SEARCH FOR CHIMERAS: THREE HYBRIDS OF JAPANESE IMAGINATION

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**Abstract:** *In Greek mythology, the chimera was a monstrous creature, composed of the parts of multiple animals. Later, the name has come to be applied to any fantastic or horrible creation of the imagination, and also to a hybrid plant of mixed characteristics. In addition, the Japanese folklore has also produced examples of such an imaginative hybridization, such as Nue, Baku, Raijū. Nue is a legendary creature with the head of a monkey, the body of a raccoon dog, the legs of a tiger, and a snake like tail. It was killed by Minamoto no Yorimasa as the monster was draining the emperor out of energy, causing him a terrible illness. Baku is a spirit who devours dreams and is sometimes depicted as a supernatural being with an elephant's trunk, rhinoceros eyes, an ox tail, and tiger paws. In China it was believed that sleeping on a Baku pelt could protect a person from pestilence and its image was a powerful talisman against the evil. Raijū (lit. "the thunder animal") was a legendary creature whose body looked like a cat, a raccoon dog, monkey or weasel. Raijū appeared whenever a thunder struck, scratching the ground with animal like claws. The above mentioned examples indicate that monsters are not mere just metaphors of beastliness. Their veneration as well as rejection form the very the image of the numinous stark dualism: *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* ("fearful and fascinating mystery") – as coined by Rudolf Otto.*

**Keywords:** *chimera; hybrid; Nue; Baku; Raijū; yōkai; Japanese folklore.*

**Motto:** A thing is not strange in itself;  
it depends on me to make it strange.  
Guo Pu

In **Greek mythology**, the chimera was a monstrous fire-breathing female creature, composed of the parts of different animals: the body of a lioness, the tail ending in a snake's head, the head of a goat arising on her back at the center of her spine. In *Theogony* Hesiod describes chimera as: "a creature fearful, great, swift-footed and strong, who had three heads, one of a grim-eyed lion; in her hinderpart, a dragon; and in her middle, a goat, breathing forth a fearful blast of blazing fire". It is often similarly depicted in art as having an agile, strong body of a lion with a tail that ends in a serpent's head. No one could escape the beast nor defeat it in combat<sup>‡</sup>.

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<sup>‡</sup> Amy T. Peterson, David J. Dunworth, *Mythology in Our Midst: A Guide to Cultural*

The chimera was the daughter of Typhon and Echidna. In another version, she mated with her brother Orthrus and gave birth to the Sphinx and the Nemean lion. When she ravaged the Lycian country, Bellerophon was sent against her, slaying the monster from the back of Pegasus<sup>2</sup>. This fantastical monster inspired the modern meaning of the word “chimera” which refers to an impossible or foolish whim<sup>3</sup>. The name has also come to be applied to any fantastic or horrible creation of the imagination, and also to a hybrid plant of mixed characteristics.

Apart from the Greek mythology, the Oriental imagery has created its own pictures of chimeras. Winged chimeras form one of the most important groups within the domain of the tomb sculpture and hold a key position in early Chinese animal sculpture<sup>4</sup>. In addition, the **Japanese folklore** has also produced examples of such an imaginative hybridization: Nue, Baku, Raijū etc.

Originally, in *Man'yōshū* 万葉集 (*Collection of ten Thousand Leaves*)<sup>5</sup> and *Kojiki* 古事記 (Record of Ancient Matters)<sup>6</sup>, **Nue** 鵺 was the name of a bird who sang in the dead of the night. Even the Chinese character for Nue 鵺 is composed of two parts: “night” 夜 and “bird” 鳥. Nowadays, the bird was identified with *tora-tsugumi*<sup>7</sup> (Engl. White's Thrush; Lat. *Zoothera dauma*). Nue was mentioned in the late Heian period (794-1185), during the reigns of the emperors Toba (1107-1123), Konoe (1142-1155), Go-Shirakawa (1155-1158), Nijō (1158-1165)<sup>8</sup>. In *Heike Monogatari* 平家物語 (*The Tales of the Heike*)<sup>9</sup> the description of Nue suddenly changes; the creature is portrayed as a monster with the head of a monkey, the body of a raccoon dog, the legs of a tiger, and a snake like tail. According to the story, the Emperor Konoe began to have nightmares and fell ill. The source of illness was a dark cloud that appeared at the north-east corner of the palace roof every night. One night, the samurai Minamoto no Yorimasa<sup>10</sup>

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References, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2004, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Barry Till, “Some Observations on the Stone Winged Chimeras at Ancient Chinese Tomb Sites”, in *Artibus Asiae*, vol. 42. No. 4, Artibus Asiae Publishers, 1980, p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> It is the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry, compiled in 759 AD.

<sup>6</sup> It is the oldest chronicle in Japan, dating from 712 AD.

<sup>7</sup> Kenji Murakami, *Kyōto yōkai kikō – Chizu de meguru fushigi/densetsu-chi annai*, Tokyo, Kadokawa, 2007, pp. 12-17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>9</sup> *The Tale of the Heike* is an epic account of the clash between the two clans: Taira and Minamoto for the control of Japan in the Genpei War (1180-1185).

<sup>10</sup> Minamoto no Yorimasa (1106–1180) was a Japanese poet and a warrior who served eight different emperors. He led the Minamoto armies at the beginning of the Genpei War. At the beginning, he tried to stay out of the war between the Minamoto and Taira clans. He participated in the Hogen Rebellion in 1156 and even made friends with Taira no Kiyomori (who belonged to the rival clan). During the Heiji Rebellion of 1160, he leaned just enough in favor of the Taira that it allowed them to overthrow the Minamoto. However, Yorimasa had changed his mind about opposing his own clan by the time he officially retired from military service in Kiyomori's army in 1179 and entered the Buddhist priesthood. Meanwhile Kiyomori placed his grandson Antoku on the throne (although he was only two years old). Yorimasa replaced Antoku by the prince Mochihito, the son of Go-Shirakawa, and secured help from the bonzes of Nara. The plot was discovered by Kiyomori who sent an army to destroy him. The Genpei War began with the Battle of Uji in 1180, where Yorimasa was wounded. Forseeing certain defeat, he committed suicide in the Byōdō-in. (cf.

stood watch when the cloud appeared and shot an arrow into it, killing Nue. This is the episode when Yorimasa slays the monster:

“Once more the lightning flashed in the sky [...] he saw the gleaming eyes of a large animal. Noting the exact position of this strange monster, he pulled at his bow till it became as round as a full moon. In another moment his steel-headed arrow hit its mark. There was an awful roar of anger, and then a heavy thud as the huge monster rolled from the palace roof to the ground. Yorimasa and his retainer ran forward and dispatched the fearful creature they saw before them. This evil monster of the night was as large as a horse. It had the head of an ape, the body and claws were like those of a tiger, with a serpent’s tail, wings of a bird, and the scales of a dragon. It was no wonder that the Emperor gave orders that the skin of this monster should be kept for all time as a curiosity in the Imperial treasure-house”<sup>11</sup>.

According to a folktale version from Aichi Prefecture, a picture depicting Minamoto no Yorimasa killing Nue (Genzanmi Yorimasa) is kept at Kōmyō temple<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, a festival called Nue-barai matsuri is held every year on the 28th of January in Izunokuni (Shizuoka prefecture) and is designed to celebrate the slaying of Nue by dancing the Nue odori (Nue’s dance) and by throwing *mochi* (rice cakes)<sup>13</sup>. In *Nue*, a late Nō masterpiece of Zeami’s<sup>14</sup>, a traveling priest reaches the village of Ashiya on the Yodo River<sup>15</sup> and is directed to a shrine. Deep in the night, a strange boatman appears and starts to talk to the priest. Eventually the bonze learns that the boatman is the tormented ghost of Nue, killed by Minamoto no Yorimasa. The ghost recites in agony:

“How saddened is my body,  
trapped like a caged bird!  
Like the turtle, blind my soul  
seeks out here the drifting wood,  
but deep in the sightless darkness  
the log is buried  
could I be too deep to rise.  
For I cannot rest;  
The draws my straying spirit

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E. Papinot, *Historical and Geographical Dictionary of Japan*, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle, 1992, pp. 379-380).

<sup>11</sup> Hadland Davis, *Myths and Legends of Japan*, New York, Dover Publications, 1992, p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Shō Nakamura “Kōmyō-ji no ema nitsuite”, in *Minami*, no. 74, Minami Chita, Minami Chita Kyōdo Kenkyū-kai, 2008, pp. 38-39.

<sup>13</sup><http://www.city.izunokuni.shizuoka.jp/kankou/kankou/nuebarai.jsp>;  
<http://www.sir.or.jp/english/usefulinfo/pdf/guide11.pdf> (retrieved on the 15<sup>th</sup> of February 2012)

<sup>14</sup> Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443), is the most famous Nō playwright, along with his father, Kan’ami (1333-1384).

<sup>15</sup> Present-day Osaka

Still to linger on?”<sup>16</sup>.

At the boatman’s request, the priest prays for his anguished soul to find its peace<sup>17</sup>. “The plays unique point is that the story of Yorimasa’s victory over the monster has transformed into a warrior-type Nō (*shuramono*). But unlike the warrior Nō, the story is told not by the hero and warrior, but by the loser, the dead monster itself”<sup>18</sup>. The Nō play is thus about the suffering of the spirit of the Nue demon that was killed by Minamoto no Yoshimasa, suggesting that demons are not just evil but have feelings and are part of nature<sup>19</sup>.

A more bizarre hybridization of Nue appears in *Genpei Jōsuiki*源平盛衰記, the extended version of *Heike Monogatari*, where it is portrayed as a strange animal with raccoon dog paws, a tiger like back ending with a fox tail, a chicken’s torso and a cat’s head<sup>20</sup>.

Two folktales from Ehime prefecture associate the story of Nue with Yorimasa’s mother. In the third year of Nippeï era (1154) Minamoto no Yorimasa’s mother fell ill. At the same time, Nue – a monster with the head of a monkey and a serpent’s tail – appeared at the Imperial Palace and Yorimasa was ordered to kill the beast. With the arrow his mother had given him, Yorimasa shot down the monster, but, unfortunately, his mother passed away on that very night. The monster was chopped down into small pieces that were later on thrown into a nearby river. The remains got to the shores of Shikoku, bringing upon people a terrible curse. The head got to Sanuki and became the monkey god and the tail reached Iyo where it became the serpent god; the paws got to Tosa and turned into a dog god<sup>21</sup>. In the second tale, it is Yorimasa’s mother who turns into a Nue-bird. The legend also attempts to explain the origin the thick fog surrounding Fujimine village. Minamoto no Yorimasa lived with his mother in Nakatsu village (Kamiukena district, Ehime prefecture), but Yorimasa was summoned to the capital. His mother went to pray by a pond and there she turned into Nue, a monster with the head of a monkey and the body of a dragon. As Nue flew over village Fujimine, her breath turned into fog. Even today a very thick fog suddenly rises and surrounds the Fujimine village <sup>22</sup>.

As mentioned above, there is a close connection between the monster Nue and the bird (*tora-tsugumi*) it was named after. The bird resembles a pheasant in shape with white wings and yellow legs. It is a slightly bigger than a pigeon and

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<sup>16</sup> Zeami Motokiyo, “Nue”, in Kenneth Yasuda (trans. and editor), *Masterworks of the No Theatre*, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989, p. 419.

<sup>17</sup> Stanca Scholz-Cionca, Samuel L. Leiter (ed.), *Japanese Theatre and the International Stage*, Boston, Brill, 2001, p. 156.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 157.

<sup>19</sup> Monzaemon Chikamatsu, *5 Late Plays*, (C. Andrew Gerstle transl) New York, Columbia University Press, 2001, p. 439.

<sup>20</sup> Shigeru Mizuki, *Nihon yōkai taizai*, Tokyo, Kodansha, 1991, p. 324.

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/YoukaiCard/1232021.shtml> (retrieved on the 25th of February 2012)

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.nichibun.ac.jp/YoukaiCard/1830128.shtml> (retrieved on the 25th of February 2012)

the wings are like those of a black kite (*Milvus migrans*)<sup>23</sup>. The birds living in Miyama (Rakutō) are yellow, as big as a pigeon. They hide during the day but they show up at night, crying “hyū-hi”. The legs and the feathers below the beak are yellow, while the plumage above the beak is black<sup>24</sup>.

It is believed that at the beginning Nue referred to the bird since the monster had no specific name. Afterwards, because both the monster and the bird cried in a similar manner, the fantastic creature was also named Nue, and its popularity has come to outgrow that of *tora-tsugumi*. Nowadays Nue refers primarily to the fantastic creature and secondly to the bird. Nue sings at night and hides during day<sup>25</sup>. Nue’s song resembles to that produced by the flute in Sarugaku music<sup>26</sup>. Nue’s cry is associated with the feelings of hatred<sup>27</sup> or bitterness (*urameshisa*)<sup>28</sup>, being an invocation of the dead. Sometimes her song resembles to the nibbling of a mouse<sup>29</sup>. A folktale originating in Kyoto area provides an accurate account: a Nue sang on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April, the third year of the Kōji era (1142-1144), at the tiger hour (3-5 AM) and on the 18<sup>th</sup> of June, the same year, at the ox hour (1-3 AM)<sup>30</sup>. Since Nue’s song is of ill-omen, the people in Heian period used to pray or perform special ceremonies when they heard the bird singing. In Kyoto area it was reported that a strange bird appeared on the roof of the Imperial Palace. Minamoto no Yorimasa shot an arrow at it and killed the bird-like creature. The place where the bird was killed was called Nue-ike (Nue’s pond). On the shores of Nue-ike there was a strange stone, Nue-ishi (Nue’s rock), surrounded by a stone fence. An evil spell was put upon anyone who dared touch the stone so nobody wanted to buy the land, at least, during Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s reign<sup>31</sup>.

There are a few legendary creatures, such as Baku, that have no animosity towards the human beings. The Japanese **Baku** 貳 is a benevolent creature, patterned after a nocturnal animal of the pachyderm family, the tapir, found in the South America and the Malayan Peninsula<sup>32</sup>. Baku, a spirit who devours dreams, is sometimes depicted as a supernatural being with an elephant’s trunk, rhinoceros eyes, an ox tail, and tiger paws. It is said to be created from the parts of several different animals, the most common description giving it the body of a bear, a trunk like an elephant, the eyes of a rhinoceros, the tail of a cow, strong

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<sup>23</sup> Kanae Asakawa, “Zen’an zuihitsu”, in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei Dai-ikki*, vol. 10, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975, pp. 424-429.

<sup>24</sup> Kanenari Akatsuki, “Unkin zuihitsu”, in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei Dai-ikki*, vol. 3, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1975, pp. 47-48.

<sup>25</sup> Risai Shiga, “Risai zuihitsu”, in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei Dai-sanki*, vol. 1, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1976, pp. 276-279.

<sup>26</sup> Kanae Asakawa, *Art. cit.*, pp. 424-429.

<sup>27</sup> In *Akuryo-To* (Island of the Evil Spirits), a film directed by Masahiro Shinoda and written by Seishi Yokomizo in 1981, the phrase: “the nights when Nue sings are really dreadful” illustrates the idea of bad luck and horror regarding Nue.

<sup>28</sup> Kanae Asakawa, *Art. cit.*, pp. 424-429.

<sup>29</sup> Nobumitsu Kurihara, “Ryūan zuihitsu”, in *Nihon zuihitsu taisei Dai-nikki*, vol. 17, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1974, pp. 479-481.

<sup>30</sup> Kanae Asakawa, *Art. cit.*, pp. 424-429.

<sup>31</sup> Kanenari Akatsuki, *Art. cit.*, pp. 47-48.

<sup>32</sup> Ernst Lehner and Johanna Lehner, *Big Book of Dragons, Monsters and Other Mythical Creatures*, New York, Dover Publication, 2004, p. 136.

legs like a tiger's, and a spotted coat<sup>33</sup>. Sometimes it is mistaken for<sup>34</sup> a Chinese mythical creature called *bai ze* (in Japanese: *hakutaku* 白澤)<sup>35</sup>.

In China it was believed that sleeping on a Baku pelt could protect a person from pestilence and its image was a powerful talisman against evil<sup>36</sup>. In *Tang liudian* 唐六典 (*The six statutes of the Tang Dynasty*) of the Tang era (618-907), it was written about the existence of the god Bakuki (莫奇) who was able to devour dreams. This god might have been accidentally taken for Baku<sup>37</sup>.

An early 17th century Japanese manuscript, the *Sankai Ibutsu* 山海異物 (*Mythical Creatures of the Mountains and Seas*) describes Baku (Chinese: Mo)<sup>38</sup> as follows:

“In the mountains of the south, there lives a beast. It has an elephant's trunk, the eyes of a rhinoceros, an ox's tail, and a tiger's paws. Its body is yellow and black, and is called the Mo [tapir]. By sleeping on its pelt one can ward off pestilence. A man should make a sketch of the Mo in order to be protected from evil. It eats copper and iron but nothing else<sup>39</sup>.”

Therefore Baku protected against pestilence and evil, but *Sankai Ibutsu* mentions nothing about the ability of eating nightmares. In the late Muromachi period (1333-1573), images of Baku (or the character for his name) were used as talismans. Baku's images and talismans were also placed under the pillow to ward off bad dreams and bad luck. For example, the Chinese character for Baku is occasionally written on the sail or hull of the Treasure Boat of Japan's Seven Lucky Gods. Children are told to place a picture of this boat (or of Baku) under their pillows on the evening between January 1st and January 2nd. Local custom says if they have a good dream that night, they will be lucky for the whole year, and the chances of having a good dream are reportedly enhanced by calling upon Baku<sup>40</sup>. Several evil dreams are mentioned in an old Japanese book, such as two snakes twined together, a fox with the voice of a man, blood-stained garments, a talking rice-pot, and so on<sup>41</sup>. In Edo period (1600-1868) wood-blocks with the image of Baku were quite popular<sup>42</sup>. In a 1791 Japanese wood-block illustration, Baku is depicted with an elephant's head, tusks, and trunk, with horns and tiger's

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<sup>33</sup> <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%8D%8F> (retrieved on the 14th of February 2012).

<sup>34</sup> Some researches claim that the statue of Baku in Gohyaku-Rakan temple in Meguro (Tokyo) actually represents the image of *hakutaku*. (cf. Kenji Murakami, *Nihon yōkai daijiten*, Tokyo, Kadogawa Shoten, 2005, pp. 259-261).

<sup>35</sup> Kenji Murakami, *Nihon yōkai daijiten*, pp. 259-261.

<sup>36</sup> Brenda Rosen, *The Mythical Creatures Bible: The Definitive Guide to Legendary Beings*, New York, Sterling Pub Co Inc, 2009, p. 113.

<sup>37</sup> Iwao Hino, *Dōbutsu yōkai tan*, Tokyo, Chūō Kōron Shinsha, 2006, p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Its description is found in the second volume, entry 30.

<sup>39</sup> Masako Nakagawa, “Sankai Ibutsu: An Early Seventeenth-century Japanese Illustrated Manuscript”, in *Sino-Japanese Studies*, no. 11, 1999, pp. 33-34.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/baku.html> (retrieved on the 17th of January 2012).

<sup>41</sup> Hadland Davis, *Op. cit.*, pp. 358-359.

<sup>42</sup> Yoshihiko Sasama, *Zusetsu Nihon mikakunin seibutsu jiten*, Tokyo, Kashiwa Shobō, 1994, p. 135.

claws. The elephant's head, trunk, and tusks are characteristic of Baku portrayed in classical era (pre-Meiji) Japanese wood-block prints and in shrine, temple, and *netsuke* carvings<sup>43</sup>. Sometimes images of Baku are placed under the eaves of Japanese temples and shrines to ward off evil spirits, as are images of the magical *shishi* (lion) and the dragon. All three commonly serve as decorative and protective architectural elements at Buddhist temples and Shintō shrines<sup>44</sup>.

Lafcadio Hearn<sup>45</sup> described a Baku as a composite of different animal parts, that guards dreamers by eating their evil dreams. One hot night Hearn dreamed he saw his own corpse. The atmosphere grew heavy. Female watchers silently departed in fear. Hearn saw his body elongate and its eyes open and stare at him. Seizing a handy axe, he reduced it to “a shapeless, hideous, reeking mass.” He asked Baku to eat the dream. But Baku said that Hearn had used “the Axe of the Excellent Law” to destroy “the monster of Self” in what was therefore a splendid dream. Then Baku flew away over the houses of the city<sup>46</sup>. Baku is said to live in heaven and his duty is to control dreams. If someone has a bad dream, he is supposed not to talk to anyone about it, but face the sun and chant three times: “I cast my last night's dream to Baku”, therefore avoiding the nightmare from happening<sup>47</sup>. A *waka* poem recited three times is also effective against bad dreams:

Mishi yume o/ Baku no ejiki to/ nasu kara ni/ Kokoro hareshi/  
Abebono no sora  
Once you cast your bad dreams before Baku/ you'll feel so free /  
No worries anymore and a brand new day will dawn.

Baku also inspired a Japanese SF writer who even took the pen name Yumemakura Baku<sup>48</sup> (1951-). His best known writing is *Jōgen no Tsuki wo Taberu Shishi* (The Lion that Ate the Crescent Moon).

**Raijū** (雷獣 (lit. “the thunder animal”)) was a legendary creature whose body is composed of either lightning or fire and may be in the shape of a cat, raccoon dog, monkey, or weasel. In *Wakan sansai-zue*<sup>49</sup> 和漢三才図会 (*Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia*) it appears under the form of a fire ball of 5 *sun*<sup>50</sup> that leaves behind claw marks or pieces of fur in very the place the thunder clashes. In

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<sup>43</sup> Rushell Raymond, *The Wonderful World of Netsuke*, Rutland, Vermont, Charles E. Tuttle, 1964, p. 38.

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/baku.html> (retrieved on the 17th of January 2012).

<sup>45</sup> Lafcadio Hearn (Japanese name: Koizumi Yakumo) (1850-1904) was a writer known best for his books about Japan, especially his collections of Japanese legends and ghost stories (such as *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*).

<sup>46</sup> Robert L. Gale, *A Lafcadio Hearn Companion*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 2002, p. 140

<sup>47</sup> Keidō Matsushita, “Warui yume o mita toki”, in *Shōnai Minzoku*, no. 5, Yamagata, Shōnai Minzoku-kai, 1957, p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> Lit. Baku of the Dream Pillow.

<sup>49</sup> It is a Japanese encyclopedia published in 1712, consisting 105 volumes in 81 books on various topics such as activities of daily life, plants, animals and constellations.

<sup>50</sup> One *sun* is 3.03 centimeters.

*Wakun no shiori*<sup>51</sup> 和訓栞 (*Guide to Japanese pronunciation*) it is written that in Meiwa era (1764-1772), “the thunder” that struck in Soshu looked like a weasel – no bigger than a cat – with five claws. Another thunder fell in a well by a teahouse; this time it looked very much like a raccoon dog<sup>52</sup>. Another folktale accounts for Raijū as a strange creature, combining the features of several different animals: the size of a dog, the claws of a bear, the legs with double joints and thick hair at its armpits<sup>53</sup>. Within the same scope of teratology, one account speculates that the strange creature Nue, killed by Minamoto no Yorimasa in *Heike Monogatari* was in fact Raijū<sup>54</sup>. Yet some are skeptics. There is nobody who could have really seen the thunder as one cannot see the fire. Some claim that thunder looks like a cat, or boast that they caught the thunder, but that was, obviously, not the thunder<sup>55</sup>.

Some people believed that Raijū really lived on the Mount Shira (Kaga province) as well as on Mount Asama (Shimano province). Sometimes those fox-like animals were caught, locked up in cages and displayed in Osaka and Kyoto<sup>56</sup>. In captivity, Raijū would neither eat nor drink. They had the ability to feel the rain that was about to fall. In such moments they ruffled their hair and grew restless, so the people had to cover their cages<sup>57</sup>. The *raijūs* in Karasu-yama (Tochigi prefecture) are believed that they could mount on the drifting clouds. The hunting season of Raijū opens in spring<sup>58</sup>. Their natural enemies, besides humans, are *kaminari no tori* (thunder birds). Such birds used to live in large flocks on the peak of Mount Haku<sup>59</sup>.

While the beast is generally harmless and calm, during thunderstorms, it becomes agitated and leaps about in trees, fields. The trees that have been struck by lightning are said to have been scratched by Raijū’s claws. *Tora-neko* (wild cats) are also able to move freely from sky to earth. One day, the clouds gathered very close to the surface of the earth and a *tora-neko* mounted on a cloud and went to the sky under the form of thunder. From up there it tossed several thunder balls that left behind claw marks<sup>60</sup>. In Ibaraki prefecture, whenever the thunder claps, the farmers go to the mountains beating the bamboo trees to drive away the Raijū that might ravage their crops. People used to thrust a stick in the

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<sup>51</sup> The book is written by Kotosuga Tanikawa (1709-1776).

<sup>52</sup> Hiroaki Kasubuchi, *Rakurai ni tsuite*, in „Minzoku Bunka”, Ōtsu, Shiga Minzoku Gakkai, 1987, pp. 3183-3184.

<sup>53</sup> H. Oguri, *Tōryūkō zuihitsu*, in „Zoku Nihon Zuihitsu Taisei”, vol. 9, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1980, pp. 36-37.

<sup>54</sup> *Nihon no nazo to fushugi taizen – Nishi Nihon-hen*, Tokyo, Jinbusha, 2006, p. 35.

<sup>55</sup> Nagayuki Koike, *Kaminari no hanashi*, in „Nihon Minzoku Gakkai-go”, Tokyo, Nihon Minzoku Gakkai, 1960, p. 8.

<sup>56</sup> Naganori Tamada, *Nenjū koji*, in „Zoku Nihon Zuihitsu Taisei”, vol. 12, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1983, p. 372.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>58</sup> Haruki Tachibana, *Hokusōsatan*, in „Nihonzuihitsu Taisei Dainiki”, vol. 15, Tokyo, Yoshikawa Kōbunkan, 1970, p. 247.

<sup>59</sup> Naganori Tamada, *Art. cit.*, p. 372.

<sup>60</sup> *Akita-ken, Yamamoto-gen, Futatsui-chō, Kyū Todoroki-mura*, in „Minzoku saihō”, Tokyo, Kokugaiin Daigaku Minzoku Minzoku Kenkyūkai, 1969, p. 28.

ground on one side of the field so that the thunder might climb on it and return to the sky<sup>61</sup>.

In the *Etymologiae*, Isidore, the Bishop of Seville, defined allegory as “other speaking”<sup>62</sup>. He also stated that “icon is an image, figure, when we attempt to describe the appearance of a thing from a similar kind of thing”<sup>63</sup>. The same might have happened in the description of Nue, Baku or Rajiū, as people tried to approximate the appearance of these mythical beasts by using the images of the animals, or part of the animals they were already familiar with.

Moreover, Isidore distinguishes *fabula* from *historia*. The poets named fables from ‘fando’, ‘speaking’, because they are not things done, but only fashioned with words. Such fictions include the use of animals as an image of the mores of human life<sup>64</sup>. *Fabula* usually involves animals reflecting the human on the tropological level; *historia*, in contrast, is a narration of deeds, and by means of it things which happened in the past are learned”<sup>65</sup>. *Fabula* has produced mythical creatures such as the chimera, a three-form beast: in front a lion, after a snake, in the middle a goat<sup>66</sup>. The lion represents the fierce and bristly adolescence. The mid-point of life is the brightest time, that is, the she-goat, because she has very sharp eye-sight; and then comes old age, bent and twisted like the snake, by misfortunes<sup>67</sup>. The lion, the wild she-goat (*capraea*) and the snake stand for the three stages of human life, adolescence, prime, old age<sup>68</sup>.

Monsters arose from animal and human teratology, and possibly from cross-breeding<sup>69</sup>. Monsters derive from the Latin word *monstrum*, which has evolved from the root *monere* (to warn). To be a monster is to be an omen. Sometimes the monster is a display of divine wrath, a portent of the future, a symbol of moral virtue or vice or an accident of nature. It is a kind of cultural category, employed in domains as diverse as religion, biology, literature or even politics<sup>70</sup>.

Heinz Mode’s bestiary (*Fabulous Beasts and Demons*) has become an important source-book of reference. The useful ‘Glossary of monsters’ serves both as an index and an entertaining source of fabulous information and bizarre names. It groups the fantastic creatures in five categories:

- monsters with a human body or with an animal body in a markedly human posture, with an animal head, or some other features of animal origin (such as the satyr and the minotaur)
- monsters with an animal, or in an unmistakable animal posture, combined

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<sup>61</sup> Jun’ichi, Yamauchi *Kami tachi-oi*, in „Kyōdo kenkyū”, vol. 3, nr. 9, Mito, Kyōdo kenkyū-sha, 1915, p. 57.

<sup>62</sup> Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography: From Roman North Africa to the School of Chartres, A.D. 433-1177*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 1994, p. 153.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 153.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 154.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1081903/pdf/medhisto0108-0100a.pdf> (retrieved on the 20th of January 2012).

<sup>70</sup> Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 13.

with a human head, a human chest or other purely human feature (such as the sphinx, the siren and the centaur)

- monsters made up of parts (body or head) taken from different animal species or with other animal features added (such as the dragon and the griffin)

- monstrous figures and combinations with deliberate reduplication or simplification, one-legged, one-eared (such as the hydra, the unicorn and the Cyclops)

- natural phenomena or man-made objects are given human or animal features and turned into new entities, often with only small, symbolic changes (such as the tree-man or the waterman<sup>71</sup>).

Obviously, Nue, Baku and Raijū can best fit in the third class. In Stith Thompson's *Motif Index*, the largest category referring to the mythical animals is that devoted to "mythical beasts and hybrids"<sup>72</sup> (Motif B10-B19.11), comprising the creatures such as the unicorn, chimera, basilisk etc<sup>73</sup>. Since chimera may stand for the ages of the man, some interpretations credit Nue to be the image of *jikkan jūnishi* (sexagenary cycle of the Chinese zodiac) since it points out to three (secondary) directions symbolized by the tiger (in the north-east), the monkey (in the south-west) and the snake (in the south-east)<sup>74</sup>. The reports of Nue never ceased to exist, but they seem more frequent in the late Heian and Kamakura period. Pre-modern woodblocks by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861) and the drawings<sup>75</sup> of Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788) remain among the best known representations of Nue. As far as Baku is concerned, it is, originally, a mythical creature imported from China, but nowadays it is steeped in Japanese folkloric traditions. Raijū encompasses the features of several animals that, paradoxically, are not explicitly related to fire. Among the three mythical beasts, Nue is an evil creature who can induce illness and even death, so people felt no remorse in killing it. In contrast, Baku is, generally speaking, a benevolent creature, while Raijū is neither good nor evil (neutral).

The *Sankai Ibutsu* 山海異物 (*Mythical Creatures of the Mountains and the Seas*)<sup>76</sup> is a 17th century Japanese illustrated book that introduces 47 mythical creatures from ancient China. It consists of mythical beings, hybrid forms,

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<sup>71</sup> Heinz Mode, *Fabulous Beasts and Demons*, London, Phaidon Press, 1975, p. 18 apud Masako Nakagawa, *Art. cit.*, p. 26

<sup>72</sup> Besides these, the class of "Beast-men" includes centaurs, satyrs, man-dogs, the lamia, and other combinations. Among "Mythical birds" (B30-B39.1), the roc and the phoenix are the most familiar. Counted among "Bird-beasts" (B40-B49.3) are the winged horse, the flying horse, the griffin, and the air-going elephant. Leviathan (B61) is the most famous of the "Mythical fish" (B60-B68). (Not detailed below is a small class of "Fish-beasts" (B70-B73).) "Other mythical animals" (B90-B99.2, also not discussed here). include the plumed serpent, the horned snake, the sea-serpent, and other reptiles and exotic forms. Celebrated examples in the "Bird-men" category (B50-B57) are in fact part women: the sphinx, the harpy, and the siren, as the most popular form of "Fish-men" (B80-B83) is the mermaid (cf. Jane Garry, Hasan M. El-Shamy, *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, New York, M. E. Sharpe Inc. 2005, p. 67).

<sup>73</sup> Jane Garry, Hasan M. El-Shamy, *op.cit.*, p. 67.

<sup>74</sup> <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E9%B5%BA> (retrieved on the 9th of February 2012).

<sup>75</sup> Konjaku Gazu Zoku Hyakki 今昔百鬼 (The Illustrated One Hundred Demons from the Present and the Past), published in 1779.

<sup>76</sup> Two volumes.

strange animals and fish. In China there is a similar book called *Shan Hai Ching* 山海經 (*Guideways through Mountains and Seas*)<sup>77</sup> edited by Kuo P'o (276-324). The first five chapters seem to have been written before 250 AD, the next eight before 20 BC. Traditionally the book was considered the work of Yu, the founder of Hsia dynasty in 2205 BC<sup>78</sup>. Later, the book was used by the travelers visiting the holy mountains and other sites and informing them of the strange creatures, spirits or animals that they might encounter<sup>79</sup>. *Shan Hai Ching*<sup>80</sup> is different from the bestiaries of the late medieval period in Europe because the strange creatures encountered in the pages of the book were almost never allegorically interpreted as vehicles of theological virtues or evils, but rather as actual entities found throughout the landscape. People were supposed to learn how to recognize them and to employ the appropriate strategies for coexisting with them<sup>81</sup>. Its 18 volumes are grouped as: classics of the mountains (south, west, north, east, central), classics of regions beyond the seas (south, west, north, east); classics of the regions within the seas (south, west, north, east), classics of the great wilderness (south, west, north, east) and again, classics of the regions within the seas.

In *The Man and Beast*, Michael Loewe points out two principles in the formation of such hybrids:

- identification of man with the animal world; tribal ancestors were traced to animals; attempts have been made to make contact with the animal spirits of another world by means of physical assimilation

- euhemerisation: man was transforming his image of mighty being from animal into human forms; the myths of gods of an earlier origin were transformed into beings of authentic history<sup>82</sup>.

Such supernatural creatures of weirdness and mystery are part of the Japanese culture. In contemporary discourse they are denoted by the word *yōkai* 妖怪, translated as monster, spirit, goblin, ghost, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower-order diety or any unexplainable experience or numinous occurrence<sup>83</sup>. As a transgressor of categories, questioner of values, turner inside

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<sup>77</sup> Eighteen volumes

<sup>78</sup> Masako Nakagawa, *Art. cit.*, p. 24-25

<sup>79</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>80</sup> It has been called “a legacy of sages and worthies clearly stated in ancient graphs”, “an ancient geography book containing practical help for worldly projects and not just fabulous talk”, “the ancestor of all discussions of the strange”, “the oldest work of fiction”, “a geographic survey and folkloric compendium of the ancient world”, “the garden of Chinese mythology”, “a frightful *mixtum compositum*”, “une sorte d'encyclopédie avant la lettre”, “a catalog of the natural and supernatural fauna and flora”, “a travel guide for the upper classes”, “a voluminous corpus of protoscientific, magico-religious and mythological notions arranged on a cosmological ‘support’ halfway between reality and fancy”, and “an ancient book of the shamans.” (cf. Richard E. Strassberg (ed. and transl.), *A Chinese Bestiary: Strange Creatures from the Guideways through Mountains and Seas*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002, p. 3).

<sup>81</sup> Richard E. Strassberg (ed. and transl.), *Op. cit.*, p. xiii.

<sup>82</sup> Michael Loewe, *Divination, Mythology and Monarchy in Han China*, Cambridge, University of Cambridge, 1994, p. 40

<sup>83</sup> Michael Dylan Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2009, p. 2.

out of standard assumptions, the monster – whether “real” or “imagined” is a potent and persistent icon<sup>84</sup>. In one sense, the creation of *yōkai* is actually a rational process. The translation of vague fears into individuated monsters reveals an imaginative form of ratiocination, similar to the production of the metaphor. Therefore, *yōkai* can be considered a “conceptual metaphor”, a culturally and historically specific embodiment of a vague sense of fear<sup>85</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 23.

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