

## “Woman” as an Image of Fear : A Comparison of ‘Vagina Dentata’ and ‘Female Monster’ Folktales

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## “Woman” as an Image of Fear: A Comparison of ‘Vagina Dentata’ and ‘Female Monster’ Folktales

KAZUHIKO KOMATSU  
*Osaka University*

When I came upon the tale of the man-eating female monster having a vagina with sharp and strong teeth like iron in Ulithi Atoll, Caroline Islands, what came to my mind was not only other ‘vagina dentata’ tales but also a type of folktale popular in Japan which characteristically features the “three brothers and the female monster”. In fact, the “iron teeth” tale and the “three brothers” tale are similar in morphological structure.

My interest in this paper lies in the symbolic meaning of the man-eating female monsters in these tales, more specifically, of the female monsters called ‘*yamauba*’ in Japanese folk society. According to Jungian psychological interpretation, the ‘vagina dentata’ monsters symbolize the ‘devouring’ mother and by killing her, independent selfhood is achieved. The mythical image of ‘vagina dentata’ is a metaphor for the act of devouring and destroying the animus. However, in this paper, I attempt to interpret the ‘vagina dentata’ monsters or *yamauba* as the fearful creatures or the latent ‘strangers’ from the standpoint of symbolic anthropology. To interpret these mythical creatures it would be necessary to analyze the cosmological and mythical topology of women in human society.

**Keywords:** Ulithi Atoll, vagina dentata, *yamauba*, man-eating monster, female symbolism.

### THE TALE OF THE MONSTER WITH “IRON TEETH”

During my field work on Mogmog Island in the Ulithi Atoll near Yap Island in the summer of 1977, I came upon the following tale:

Once upon a time, there were three brothers who lived on Mogmog Island. One day, the eldest brother went fishing. However by sunset, he still had not caught even one little fish and so decided to go to an uninhabited island near Mogmog. That island was feared by everyone because monsters or evil spirits were said to appear there. When the eldest brother reached the island, his luck changed and he landed a great many fish. Then, however, as he disembarked to take a rest onshore, an old woman appeared from out of nowhere and warned him, ‘There are monsters on this island, so go home immediately.’

Then she disappeared. Frightened, the man quickly arose to return home. But just as he was leaving, the most beautiful young woman he had ever seen appeared before him and spoke to him, 'I live on this island with my mother. You are a truly fine man. I saw all the fish you have in your canoe. Where did you come from?' Apprehensive, the man thought, 'This woman is very beautiful but I'm sure she is the monster the old woman talked about.' However, after chatting with her for a while, he became completely enchanted with the woman. Then the young woman said to him, 'I will introduce you to my mother. Please come to my house,' and, before he knew it, the man found himself on the way to her house. When they reached her place, a kind-looking old woman welcomed him warmly and said, 'I am going to cook for you now. Both of you please enjoy yourselves on the second floor until the food is ready.' While relaxing on the second floor, the man grew desirous for the girl's body. She also said, 'I would be happy to become your wife. Would you like to see my tattoo?' (In olden times, women were tattooed from the thighs up to the private parts but these were usually hidden under the waistcloth.) She actively began to seduce him. He embraced her and penetrated her vagina with his erect penis. At that moment he let out a terrible scream and died. After a while, his body was cut into pieces and thrown into the cooking pot. Even his penis was removed from the girl's vagina and added to the pot.

After a few days, the second brother came to the island looking for his brother. The same strange old woman appeared and warned him, 'There are monsters on this island, you had better go home now.' The man said, 'My brother has disappeared. I've come to look for him.' The old woman told him that the man must surely have been eaten by the monsters. Upon hearing this, the younger brother became angry and said, 'Then I shall take revenge my brother.' The old woman remarked again, 'That would be very dangerous. Forget about it and go home.' The brother, however, remained intent. 'Well, I guess I can't convince you. But, if you do meet the monster, be sure never to look at her tattoo,' said the old woman and went away. The man began looking around the island for his brother. Before long, a beautiful woman appeared and asked him to go home with her. Like his brother, he was at first apprehensive, thinking that the girl must be a monster. But, as he sat chatting with her on the second floor of her house, he was overwhelmed by desire for her and forgot about the warning the old woman had given him. He had intercourse with the girl. A scream was heard and his body was also dismembered and thrown into the cooking pot.

A few days later, the youngest of the brothers came to the island to look for the other two. The same old woman appeared as before. The youngest brother explained the purpose of his visit, saying, 'If my brothers have been eaten by the monsters, I want to kill the monsters.' The old woman warned him not to be fooled by the appearance of the monster and not to look at the tattoo. More clever than the other two, he was able to size up the situation on the basis of what the old woman had said and tried hard to devise a way to kill the monsters. Eventually, a beautiful girl appeared and invited him to her house. As before, while talking together on the second floor the two became intimate and the girl repeatedly tried to seduce him. The young man

thought, 'I see. This was how my brothers were tricked,' and pretended to go along with the girl's game. After a while, the girl seemed to become impatient and became very insistent, saying, 'Hurry, hurry!' The young man now used his erect penis to stroke and thrash at her vagina and, apparently acceding to her request, penetrated her vagina. A terrible scream was again heard but it was not the scream of the youngest brother. It was the woman's. The corpse of the woman, now turned into an ugly monster, was thrown from the second floor. Seeing this, the old woman let out a piercing scream and tried to escape, but was caught by the young man, who then killed her with his sword. Upstairs, he had penetrated the young woman's vagina not with his penis but with his sword. This monster was a female specter called *ngi parang*.

What is the *ngi parang* featured in the above folktale? From the name of the monster, we see that she is a disembodied spirit having a fear-inspiring, weapon-like vagina which can bite off the male organ. In Ulithian (a dialect of Trukic), *ngi* means "teeth" and *parang* means "iron." *Ngi parang* thus has the literal meaning of "iron teeth." The *ngi parang* thus appears to be a man-eating female monster having a "vagina with sharp, strong teeth like iron," who seduces men and then bites off their penis and kills them with her teeth.<sup>1)</sup>

Clearly, this tale is a variant from the time after the people of Ulithi had gained knowledge of iron. I have collected another variant of this type which contains the image of "shark teeth" rather than "iron teeth." Nevertheless, it is an interesting tale useful in the examination of the various cultures of the Pacific.

## THE VAGINA DENTATA FOLKTALES

The above folktale presents the anthropologist with various questions of interest.

First, this folktale can be evaluated from the viewpoint of cultural history. This folktale belongs to the category known as "vagina dentata" (vagina with teeth) (Stith Thompson's Motif Index F547.1.1). The motif of "vagina dentata" is common in Asia and the American Continent. According to Taryo Ohbayashi [OHAYASHI 1976], Hatt of Denmark traced the origin of this motif to the American Continent. He claimed that it was carried across the Bering Strait to East Asia. Another cultural historical view, however, as seen in studies such as Ho Ting-jui's comparative study of myths and legends in Taiwan, place the origin of this motif in East Asia [Ho 1971]. Whichever may be the case, this "vagina dentata" folktale collected in Ulithi, when subjected to simple cultural historical analysis, appears to have come from the coastal region of Southeast Asia centering around Taiwan, which is rich in folktales of this type. This folktale specimen from Ulithi appears to provide important evidence of the spread of the "vagina dentata" motif in Micronesia. No other folktales of this category have been uncovered in Micronesia.

1) In William Lessa's field research on folktales in the area after World War II, several tales of man-eating monsters were collected [LESSA 1962]. The folktale presented here is one of them.

Takeo Kanazeki focused on the “vagina dentata” tales common among the Takasago people of Taiwan, and is known for his hypothesis that they are related to the custom of tooth extraction.

The following is an example of the many folktales cited by Kanazeki.

#### Teeth of the Vagina

Once upon a time, the eldest daughter of a certain family got married. During intercourse, her husband’s penis was bitten off by her vagina and the man died. She was married to five different men, all of them dying in the same way. Her mother finally asked, ‘Why did your husbands die like that? What is wrong with you? Let me look at your vagina.’ The mother examined her daughter and found that her vagina had teeth. The mother extracted the teeth. She passed a string through one of the teeth and made it into a hair ornament. It is said that even today, such hair ornaments can still be found [KANAZEKI 1976: 248–249].

Kanazeki introduced more than 20 tales of this type, extracting three elements common to them all. First, in each story, there is a girl whose vagina has teeth. Secondly, this abnormality brings misfortune to her husband. Thirdly, after removing the cause of misfortune, the story has a happy ending. Among many tribes in Taiwan, there are tales about “husbands becoming victims of misfortune because their wives possess the Vagina Dentata, but when the cause is somehow eliminated it is possible for them to have a normal marital relationship.” [KANAZEKI 1976: 252–253]

This interpretation is surely worthy of consideration. However, my field investigations have not led me to any clues suggesting any type of tooth extraction custom as part of any past Ulithian initiation rituals. Furthermore, when the two folktales are compared, it is clear that the Taiwanese story ended with a happy marriage, whereas the Ulithian tale ended with the killing of the monsters—outcomes which are quite different. Thus the explanation that the tale of the “iron teeth” is a “vagina dentata” folktale originating in the tooth extraction customs of East Asia which was transmitted to Ulithi is not satisfactory.

#### THE LEGEND OF “THE THREE BROTHERS AND THE MONSTER”

When I came upon the legend of the “iron teeth” in Ulithi, what came to my mind was not other “vagina dentata” tales but a type of folktale popular in Japan which characteristically features “three brothers and a monster.” In fact, the “iron teeth” tale and the “three brothers and the monster” type of folktale are strikingly similar in morphological structure.

A typical example of the “three brothers slaying the monster” type of folktale is contained in *Nihon Mukashibanashi Taisei* [SEKI 1978]. The story is summarized below.

Once, there were three young brothers. All three had heard that there was

a monster deep in the mountains. The eldest brother, Taro, said, 'I am going to slay that monster,' and went off. When he reached the foot of the mountain, he saw a small hut inhabited by a white-haired old woman. He asked for directions, but the old woman said, 'You had best forget this idea of yours and go home.' However, seeing that Taro was determined to go on, the old woman gave him some advice, 'Well then, if you must go, listen to the sound of the mountain stream. It will tell you what to do. Do the same on your return.' When Taro reached the mountain stream, he saw a large waterfall, and the water thundered: 'Go back, *ton, ton....* Go home, *ton, ton....*' 'Nonsense!' thought Taro and he continued.

Then he came upon a bamboo grove. Swaying in the wind, the bamboo made a noise which to Taro sounded like 'Go back, *gasa, gasa....* Go home, *gasa, gasa....*' But he paid no attention to the voice of the bamboo. Then he came to a bridge spanning a river. Beneath the bridge he noticed a gourd floating up and down. It seemed to make the sound 'Go back, *shipukapuka....* Go home, *shipukapuka....*' Heedless, Taro proceeded farther into the mountains. Finally, he came to a deep valley filled with big trees and where the atmosphere was sinister. Suddenly, he saw a beautiful woman walking toward him from the opposite direction. She approached him and smiled, asking, 'Where are you going?' When he told her that he had come to slay the monster who lived in these mountains, she said, 'That is still a long way off. It will be better for you to rest a bit before going any farther.' Taro stopped and remained standing where he was. Then the woman said, 'No, you can not rest standing up. Why don't you sit down?' Taro obliged her. But then she said, 'You cannot rest sitting like that. Why don't you lie down?' Then when Taro lay down, the woman turned into a serpent, wound her body around him and strangled him.

When Taro did not return, the second brother, named Jiro, decided to go into the mountains to look for him. At the foot of the mountains he also met the old woman, who gave him the same advice. Jiro, too, disregarded her advice and travelled deep into the mountains. As he went on, he came upon the waterfall, the bamboo and the gourd just as Taro did, each making noises that sounded like 'Go home; go back.' He ignored these warnings. Deep in the mountains, he met the same serpent in the shape of a beautiful woman and was killed just as Taro was.

Now the third brother, Saburo, started out for the mountains in search of the other two. Like Taro, he stopped to ask for directions from the old woman living in the small hut at the foot of the mountains. This time, however, the old woman did not try to stop him, saying, 'I am not worried for you.' As he travelled deeper into the mountains, he came upon the waterfall which made the sound, 'Go ahead; go ahead.' Then he came to the bamboo grove where the leaves resulting in the wind made the sound, 'Go ahead; go ahead.' He saw the gourd, too, floating under the bridge, which seemed to say, 'Go ahead; go ahead.' When he reached the dark forest, the beautiful woman came walking up to Saburo and asked him where he was going. When he said, 'I am going to kill the monster to revenge my brothers.' The woman said, 'The place where the monster lives is still a long way off. You had better rest here before going on.' Just like his two brothers before him, Saburo

lay down to rest at her urging. However, he kept his left eye open whenever his right eye was closed, and his right eye open whenever his left eye was closed, keeping a careful watch on the woman. When he saw the woman turn into a serpent and come toward him, he drew out his knife and killed it. After slaying the serpent, he looked under the trees and saw a pile of human bones. There he found the short swords of his brothers, which he brought some with him. Upon hearing of Saburo's exploits, the lord of that region summoned him and bestowed honors upon him. Eventually, Saburo rose to a high position [SEKI 1978: 44-47].

This type of folktale is widespread in many areas of Japan. This motif is seen not only in folktales of the "three brothers and the monster" type, but also in various folktales of the "three brothers and the Nara pear" type or the "three brothers and the treasure" type. If we include folktales in which there are two instead of three main characters, we can find an enormous number of stories employing this motif.

Keigo Seki studied various tales involving two or three brothers and the slaying of a dragon (serpent) [SEKI 1968]. By conducting comparative analysis of similar motifs in various parts of the world, he formulated the theory that this type of folktale came to Japan from the ancient Orient, via Southeast Asia.

If the Ulithian legend of the "iron teeth" can be structurally classified as being of the "three brothers and the monster" type, and if the "vagina dentata" motif is well represented in Taiwan and neighboring regions; then on the basis of Seki's theory this tale in all probability originated in the ancient Orient and then passed through Taiwan, Southeast Asia and on to Micronesia.

However, my interest lies not in the route along which such folktales were transmitted but in the symbolic meaning of the "iron teeth" monster, and what meaning the beautiful woman (or serpent) has in societies that have adopted such folktales. These questions cannot be answered by cultural historical analysis. What does the man-eating female monster or the mythical serpent symbolize, and why have these stories been told repeatedly in many parts of the world? In other words, I am primarily interested in finding a synchronic explanation for this phenomenon. As a preliminary deciphering of the tale of the "iron teeth," I shall first present my observations concerning the monster-killing stories introduced above.

### **THE FOLKLORE OF YAMAUBA (MYTHICAL MOUNTAIN FEMALE CREATURES)**

A careful scrutiny of Japanese folktales similar to the story of the three brothers cited above reveals that there is quite a variety of monsters that appear in these stories. These include serpents, demons, hags, giant raccoons, giant gadflies and water deities. However, hags, their daughters (often appearing as beautiful women) and serpents are present in an overwhelming number of these tales. Furthermore, the characters who offer advice to the protagonists on their journey are almost

always old men or old women. There are also tales in which the man-eating monster is disguised as the one who gives advice to the main character.

This examination also leads us to the conclusion that the "serpent" which swallows human beings serves as a metaphor for the man-eating female monsters who live in the mountains, such as "*yamauba*," "*yamahime*" and "*oniuba*." "*Yamahime*" can be considered to be a youthful version of the "*yamauba*," while the "*oniuba*" is roughly equivalent to "*yamauba*." In some folktales, the *yamauba* "mountain hag" and the *yamahime* appear together as mother and daughter.<sup>2)</sup>

According to Japanese folk belief, *yamauba* live in the mountains. Different theories have been put forward by scholars of folklore to explain the origin of this type of legend. Two dominant theories are those proposed by Shinobu Orikuchi and Kunio Yanagita. Orikuchi [1965] believes that this type of story is the corruption of the image of the female shaman who mediates for *yama-no-kami*, or mountain deities. Yanagita [1968] proposes that they originated from legends concerning the womenfolk of mountain people, who led a much different life than those in the flat lands, or of insane women who hid in the mountains, or of women abducted by mountain people and who eventually became their wives.

In order to better understand the views taken by scholars of folklore concerning *yamauba*, we shall first cite the definition of "*yamauba*" from the *Nihon Minzoku Jiten* (*Encyclopedia of Japanese Folklore*).

A woman thought to be a monster who lives in the mountains. In legends, she is often describes as being old and tall and as having long hair. In some accounts, her mouth is exceptionally large and is slit to the ears, her eyes shining, her skin exceptionally fair. She at times wishes to become intimate with people she has met only once. She is sometimes said to visit mountain cottages and warm herself at the fireplace. The *yamauba* sometimes appears among crowds during year-end fairs. The money she pays for goods is said to bring good luck and people vie with each other to sell her things. She has the characteristics of a deity of good fortune. On the basis of legends about the *yamauba*, they are thought to have originally been shamans who mediated for the mountain deities. Since female shamans are known for their longevity, she is thought of as an old woman. Shaman usually live in the mountains far away from ordinary people, and come to the villages only during the winter and spring festivals. The days of the festivals are also the days when the fairs are held [KAMEYAMA 1972: 760].

In other words, in folkloric studies, it is considered that the legends surrounding the *yamauba* derived from the image of women who lived in the mountains. This theory is impossible to refute in fact there is considerable supporting evidence for it. Nevertheless, it is also true that the significance of mountain witches in folk

2) *Yamauba* literally means "old woman living in the mountain, *yamahime* "young woman living in the mountain," and *yamanokami* "deity living in the mountain," and *oniuba* "oldfemale demon."

societies having such legends cannot be fully explained by such historical observation alone.

Elsewhere, I have attempted to interpret the role of the monster called *yamauba* or *yamajoro* in Japanese folk society by analyzing the *yamauba* legends in a mountain village in Kochi Prefecture. The analysis was conducted in the context of the cultural environment of that society [KOMATSU 1984]. To briefly restate my findings, *yamauba* are some of the spirits thought to exist by the people of that society. They maintain certain relationships with other spirits and perform specific social functions. Their main role is to embody the spatial separation of the mountain areas and the villages and yet, at the same time, to signify the fact that these two realms are closely related. That is, the order of things in the village (the moral state of the villagers) is reflected in the form of happenings and events which occur in the mountain areas (*i.e.*, the appearance of *yamauba*: which end in rewards for good people and in misfortune for the bad).

However, when conducting this field work and analysis, I was confronted with several perplexing questions. For instance, the fact that the *yamauba* and the *yama-no-kami* are sometimes regarded as one and the same by the villagers; the fact that the *yama-no-kami* or *yamauba* dislikes childbirth but is pleased by the death of a villager; and the belief that, since the *yama-no-kami* or *yamauba* are female, they find displays of the male sexual organ pleasing. These are difficult to understand in terms of the village's ethical order. Most likely the meaning of such beliefs is not to be found in the realm of traditional folk culture but in a more profound realm common to all human culture. I did not, however, discuss this subject in my previous analysis.

What, then, are the common features of human culture at the deepest level? One fundamental element is the male/female dichotomy; *i.e.*, the phenomenological or existential question concerning the difference between the sexes. To grapple with this problem cultural anthropologists have formulated the "study of woman," while in psychology, especially among scholars of the Jungian School, the concept of the "great mother" ("terrible mother" and "good mother") was developed.

### YAMAUBA IN TERMS OF DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

According to Jungian theory, to achieve full psychological maturity, denoted by the term "individuation," the "ego," which represents the totality of our conscious self, must gain freedom from the archetypal "self" embedded in the collective unconscious. This independence of self must be preserved, yet the links with the unconscious "self" must not be severed [Kawai 1977]. This is achieved by overcoming the threat of what Jung termed the "devouring mother," and Neumann the "terrible mother." The "great mother" symbolizes chaos, disorder and the anima principle. Man must overcome these if he is to embody the principle of animus and give order to the world. Myths and legends which can be interpreted in terms of achieving independence of the self abound in various parts of the world. In many

cases, these stories are closely related to initiation rituals. Using such a model, Jungian psychologists have analyzed folktales, rituals and literature from around the world. Jungian psychologists in Japan have also found a mythical image corresponding to this "great mother" in Japanese myths and legends, the most representative form being the *yamauba*. For example, Hayao Kawai [1982] looked at *yamauba* in light of the mythical image of the "devouring mother." He analyzed numerous folktales in which *oniuba* appear, such as "The Woman Who Did Not Eat," "The *Yamauba's* Spinning Wheel" and "The *Yamauba* and the Stone Cake," and compared them with positive and negative aspects of the great mother, in an attempt to shed light on the dual character of *yamauba*. In other words, he viewed stories of slaying *yamauba* as embodying the theme of overcoming the great mother in her negative manifestation, stories of *yamauba* bringing good fortune as embodying the theme of the great mother in her positive manifestation.

Both in the positive or the negative sense the symbolism of the *yamauba* transcends the normal mother-child experience in human relationships. It is true that a mother has infinite kindness for her child, and yet, since the mother is also human, there are practical limits to her compassion. However, there exists in our minds the universal archetype which transcends the limitations of personal experience of what we may call the "mother image," an image that is mirrored in consciousness in the form of the great mother. The great mother is the source to which all living things return upon death, that is, the wellspring of the cycles of death and rebirth. This great mother is of particular significance to agricultural people and it is natural that she would be the object of religious worship [KAWAI 1982: 50].

Jung also proposed that when the "self" is personified it appears in supernatural form, taking the shape of the "wise old man" or "initiator." Such personification often appears in folktale, characters whose role is to give advice to the main character or to leave behind a valuable object. After performing their function, these characters disappear from the story.

Although I am not fully conversant in Jungian psychology, I would like to try to decipher the symbolism of the "three brothers and the monster" type of folktale and the Ulithian tale of the "iron teeth," in the light of the Jungian concept of the "great mother."

First, let's consider the legend of the "three brothers and the monster." In this story, two elder brothers go to slay the "devouring mother" or "terrible mother" symbolized by the beautiful woman or serpent living in the mountains. In a Jungian framework, this is a conquest by which they hope to establish their independent selves. Both fail at the task. The youngest brother, however, succeeds in killing the "great mother," thus achieving independent selfhood, *i.e.*, "individuation." Clearly, the old woman who appears to give advice is the equivalent of Jung's "wise old man." In some cases, it is possible that this helpful person is one and the same with either the "good mother" or the "terrible mother."

The Ulithian folktale of the "iron teeth" can be similarly interpreted. Only the youngest of the three brothers followed the advice of the old woman who represents the "wise old man." Consequently, only he was able to subdue the "vagina dentata" monsters which symbolize the "devouring mother" and gain independent selfhood. This would appear to be the essence of this folktale. The mythical image of "vagina dentata" is a metaphor for the act of devouring and destroying the animus.

Hideo Ohashi [1982] raised a noteworthy idea relevant to *yamauba* from the viewpoint of psychiatry. Although Ohashi did not make use of Jung-Neumann depth psychology or the works of Masao Yamaguchi on the theory of "others," he presented an interesting interpretation which could apply to *yamauba*. Ohashi focused on the close bonds that exist between mother and infant and forwarded an explanation of folktales concerning *yamauba* and other monsters in relation to the infant's "experience of shyness with strangers" (us-other consciousness). He proposed that *oni* or demons are the proto-image of the experience of the unknown and of "others." This is a fear response inculcated into infants through contact with strangers. Furthermore, he stated that "the mother and infant consider themselves as a single entity. As the infant is subject to physical and psychological separation from this nondifferentiated state of 'mother-infant,' the notion that he is still essentially the same as his mother, or, that it is possible to be reunited once again with her, remains." In other words, Ohashi believes that the infant overcomes his shyness of strangers when he first meets "others," initially the "father" with the help of the "mother." In this way he or she is initiated into the world of relationships with "others." In short, by continuously contrasting the "mother" who is one of "us" with the "father" who is one of "them," the child gives birth to the proto-image of the monster from the image of "father" as "other" [OHASHI 1982].

Ohashi thus conceives of the *yamauba* as being the image of the mother who has ceased to be "mother." No longer one of "us," she cannot assuage the fears and anxieties the infant has about "others." In other words, she has lost her motherliness. This concept is adoptable to the dual nature of the *yamauba*. One can interpret the fearful manifestation as the mother who has lost her motherliness and become one of the "others," whereas the positive manifestations, such as the god of fortune, as being the embodiment of the "mother" who is still one of "us."

Ohashi's observations are certainly meaningful in the clarification of the process of cognition of "others" at the level of *personal history*. However, the concept of mountain hags also has permutations on social and cultural levels. The mythic image of the "great mother" is an issue intimately connected to the higher realm of human culture that transcends personal history; this realm is an embedded substratum which sustains the individual. The cognition of "others" changes in accordance with the different forms of consciousness (multi-directivity). It is incorrect to ignore this fact and claim that the male monster is simply the "father" and that the *yamauba* the "mother" lacking in motherliness. It is not necessarily true that everyone apart from "I," or "mother and I," is seen as "other" or as

a "monster." Such perceptions come forth from relationships with people other than "I" and through the experience of such relationships comes the concept of "insider,—us" and "outsider,—them."

## THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF YAMAUBA

Up to now we have interpreted folktales concerning *yamauba* from the viewpoint of Jungian psychology. Let us now look at the folktales of "*yamauba*" and other female monsters, specifically, those of the "vagina dentata" variation, from the standpoint of cultural anthropology. Unfortunately, there have not yet been any anthropological studies on "*yamauba*."

However, several clues are provided by studies on the symbolism of women by Yamaguchi [1975, 1982], Ardener [1971], Ortner [1974], Rosaldo [1974] and others. The dual character of women in human culture that becomes apparent when we investigate the relationship between women and social systems, their essential differences from men and their different ways of interacting with nature and culture, provide us with a key to understanding the "*yamauba*" and the "iron teeth" monster.

Female anthropologists Rosaldo and Lamphere [1974] once lamented that "all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated," and that "sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life." As they have noted, the results of anthropological field research in various parts of the world have demonstrated that men have always been at the core of social systems and the creation of history, whereas women have been excluded from the center of culture and society. Of course, both men and women are simultaneously social, biological entities, and both actively participate in their culture. However, in most societies, part of the conceptual framework of the culture maintains that women are closer to "nature" than men.

Ortner [1974] gave three reasons for this type of conceptualization. First, at the physiological level, women are fundamentally distinguished from men by menstruation and the capacity to bear children. Furthermore, women are more strongly affected by biological conditions. Second, at the social level, women are entrusted with the responsibilities of childbirth, breast-feeding and childrearing, which are both social roles and biological roles. Furthermore, women are more often tied to household chores and thus excluded from public affairs. Third, at the psychological level, women tend to be much more specific, subjective, and emotional in orientation. This is partially a result of the differing socialization processes men and women undergo and of purely biological facts such as menstruation. Thus, their objective and subjective capabilities, in terms of maintaining and developing the social system is inferior to that of men.

For the above reasons, in the dualistic classification by men, although women participate in the "culture," they are regarded as being closer to "nature." This makes them suitable for the role of mediating between the society, or "culture,"

dominated by men on the one hand and "nature" on the other. In other words, women are conceived of as having a dual nature.

Ravenhill [1978], who did field work among the Wan in the Ivory Coast, employed the views of Ortner in his analysis of female initiation rituals among this tribe. He accurately described the correspondence between men and women on the one hand and "culture" and "nature" on the other in the following terms: "Women create men, men in ritually transcending death create not objects but society and culture" [RAVENHILL 1978: 77].

Making use of the abovefindings of anthropology and effectively utilizing the principles of symbolism and phenomenology, Yamaguchi [1982] engaged in an in-depth examination of the cosmological topology of women, that is, the cosmological roles of women who are continuously being excluded from society, yet are always being depended upon.

The gist of Yamaguchi's theory is the center-periphery theory, or what may also be called phenomenological theory of "others."

Men, who live in the midst of the praxis of culture and who do not doubt this culture, have to various degrees a world view in which the culture is seen as the center of several concentric circles. Naturally, the circumference of the circle is regarded as the boundary of this world view. In the center of this series of circles is the "I." This "I" pictures the world in the form of circles or their relevant sections in terms of "he" and "us" as opposed to "them"; i.e., the "inside world" as opposed to the "outside world." The "them" which appears as part of the circles provides the proto-image of "others." Nevertheless, these circles are permanently in flux and sometimes contract. The concepts of "us" and "them" are never permanent. [YAMAGUCHI 1975: 81].

Yamaguchi hypothesized the phenomenological proto-image of "others" in the above manner. Using many examples, he analyzed the concept of "others" as an entity represented by the manifestations of the above perception at different levels and as symbolism of such. As one of the "others," the concept of "women" was also discussed.

The ideas of Yamaguchi are too complex and large in scale to summarize here. We shall attempt to condense only those ideas relevant to the present discussion. His discussion of the cosmological topology of women, based on field work among the Jukun, in Africa, and the Lio, in Indonesia, and on reports of other anthropologists, emphasized the point that women are excluded from and discriminated against in daily life and the social order. They play the symbolic role or the latent "stranger." Women occupy a marginal position in "culture" and are considered part of the "others" in human society. Moreover, they are regarded as a metaphor for "chaos" and the embodiment of polysemy and dualism. "In brief, female things are interchangeable with that which is uncontrollable in daily life."

The theory of dualism which is founded on this opposition between men and

women, basically links men to the social system and political power, and women to natural phenomena and the spiritual world. Men know that women are in possession of "nature" which is not under the control of men. The ultimate manifestation of this is that only women are capable of creating human beings, the fountain-head of all culture. As Ravenhill [1978] pointed out, men can create culture but culture cannot create man. What creates human beings is not the "culture" of man, but the "nature" of women. This fundamental power of women which is deeply rooted in nature and is denied to men drives them to fear. Thus they exclude women from the center of daily life and establish social and political power in order to control the power of women. Yamaguchi analyzed this in the following way: "Deep in their hearts, men fear the fact that women preside over that which is most valuable to society, possessing power that men cannot control. Thus, to control their fear of this power and to eliminate those beings close to this power, they created institutions designed to exclude those beings close to this power. This, precisely, is the origin of political power" [YAMAGUCHI 1982: 148].

This image of "women" as the phenomenological or existential "other" is demonstrated in many ways through the behavior of men. Men know that without women, the culture and society they control cannot exist. That is, they know they are dependent on the power of women. On the other hand, they fear this power which they cannot control. Such contradictory feelings appear in rituals, myths and legends. Men either utilized or opposed the power of women in building society and creating culture.

Comparing the above anthropological theory of women with the Jungian concept of women, we see that there is certainly no great discrepancy between the two. In other words, the mythic images of the *yamauba*, or "serpent" (—beautiful woman), and the "iron teeth" monster under discussion here are, in the ultimate sense, the manifestation of the image of "women" who are part of the "others" and who are closer to "nature," or of women who possess basic and uncontrollable powers which are feared by men. Men, in all societies, must possess the power to overcome the power of women or they would not be able to create and preserve culture.

*Yamauba*, the "big mouths of serpents," "vagina dentata"—all these refer to the female sex organ which devours culture (order) or plunges the world into chaos. Although men are born out of the womb the only way to get back is to revert to the pre-cultural natural condition. A cursory look at ritualized homosexual practices (including the ritual of childbirth through sexual intercourse between males) in various parts of the world (*e.g.*, Herdt 1984) and the recurring motif of prohibition of secret viewing of childbirth in myths and folktales gives us more than sufficient evidence of man's desire to know the mystery of childbirth—the greatest sexual secret women possess— and of his desire to have such capability himself. What the man (husband) who secretly watches the scene of childbirth affirms in his act is clearly the fact that woman (wife) belongs not to the realm of "culture" but to the realm of "nature." This point has been established in my previous paper concerning "Tales of Love Affairs with the Dead" [KOMATSU 1978].

In the deepest stratum of culture, men have always feared women. With the aggravation of such fear came the fear of the vagina, and even the illusion of "vagina dentata" [BETTELHEIM 1954]. Thus, the Ulithian folktale of the "iron teeth" quite likely arose from the largely unconscious fear of women by Ulithian men and of their fear of sexual intercourse with women.

Here, I have inadvertently made my conclusion. The truth is that, in the attempt to find a basis for interpreting the Ulithian folktale of the "iron teeth," I merely presented various possible viewpoints. The question of whether the folktale of "iron teeth" in Ulithi is equivalent to the Jungian "devouring mother" or to the anthropological "image of woman as a fearful creature" would be the subject of another study. To resolve this problem, it would be necessary to analyze the cosmological and mythical topology of women on the basis of further field work in Ulithi, or better still, in the Central Carolines which is a part of the same cultural region. This question touches not only the folktale of the "iron teeth" but also applies to Japanese folktales of the "three brothers and the monster" type and the series of stories and legends surrounding "yamauba." The symbolic and cosmological position of women in Japanese folk society has been studied in the past by Yanagita and Origuchi. Recently, the groundwork for analysis in the context of the conceptual framework of the folk culture has been laid out by Noboru Miyata [1983] and others.

However, it is a fact that the analysis of the mythical and cosmological topology of women in terms of the conceptual framework of the culture of the Central Carolines is still insufficient.<sup>3)</sup> Although my period of field research in this area is still short and research work still insufficient, my feeling is that, despite superficial differences, further studies on the position of women here will parallel the conclusions drawn by various anthropologists to date.

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- 3) The tale of the "iron teeth," aside from being interpreted in the light of cosmological topology of women in Ulithian society, must also be understood as an erotic story. Here, we will limit our discussion to comparison with similar tales in the Western Pacific region.

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# Chapter V

## Christianity: Problems of Acculturation



Ponapean Women Attending Church Service

