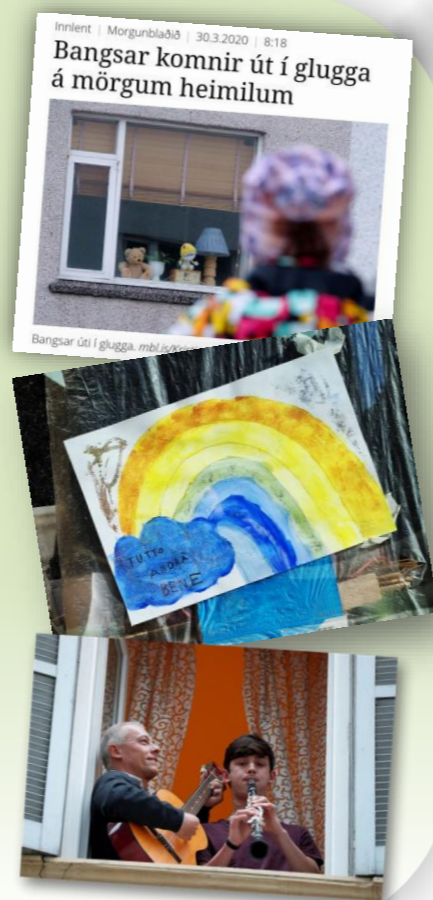


Amabie - アマビエ

How a folkloric being came to the rescue

Covid had a strong impact on daily life all over the world, and consequently there were a number of different coping mechanisms recorded, all of which are of a folkloric value and interest. People played music from their balconies, displayed images of rainbows, posted fairy doors, held communal morning exercises, as well as a wide variety of other expressions. Here in Iceland we had interesting apotropaic meaning applied to teddy bears originally meant as a help with home schooling projects.

Japan however, veered a bit from the universal, opting for the rehashing of a 174 year old legend, of an only once seen monster. A chimeric long haired mermaid like creature, her body covered with scales, with three fins or legs or hands and surprisingly a beak, thus possessing fish, bird and human characteristics.



Other examples of official usage include Akita's local superheroes Beat Fighter Ace (l) and Amabelle (r) telling people they too can be heroes as long as they wash their hands, gargle, and wear a mask!

As well as being the logo of one of the major official covid tracking programs



The image was quickly appropriated by the ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare who made use of it in its official covid awareness campaign. Not an unusual tactic in Japanese culture as cartoon characters and popular figures have often been appropriated due to their affability and ease of acceptance

Monster Under the Sea in Higo Province (Higo no kuni kaichū no ayakashi), 1846.

A glowing object appeared every night in the sea of Higo Province [today's Kumamoto prefecture]. When the town's official went there and found something like the drawing, he was told, "I live in the sea. My name is Amabié. Good harvest will continue for six years. At the same time disease will spread. Draw me and show me to the people as soon as possible." And [she] went into the sea.

This panel shows the official's drawing that was sent to Edo [today's Tokyo] in the middle of the fourth month, in the year Kōka-3 (mid-May, 1846).

This account was then printed in the traditional news service pamphlet of the day and remains the only known sighting of the Amabie.

The period of history is important as at the time the 200 year isolation policy was beginning to crumble, disappearing wholly in 1854 ... leading to the introduction of new diseases as well as the fear of the outside world.



Amabie, this three legged chimeric being, or mermaid, belongs to a group of supernatural beings in Japanese tradition referred to as yokai, a term normally translated as monsters.

They are supernatural creatures that are perceived as existing alongside humans, predate them often enough and have both the power of good and evil depending on the situation. Some are equated with the shinto gods, deities that reside in nature and are to be revered, perhaps feared but mostly honoured.

In modern culture their image is often used for instance to convey deathly warnings ... such as the dangers of playing too close to the water.

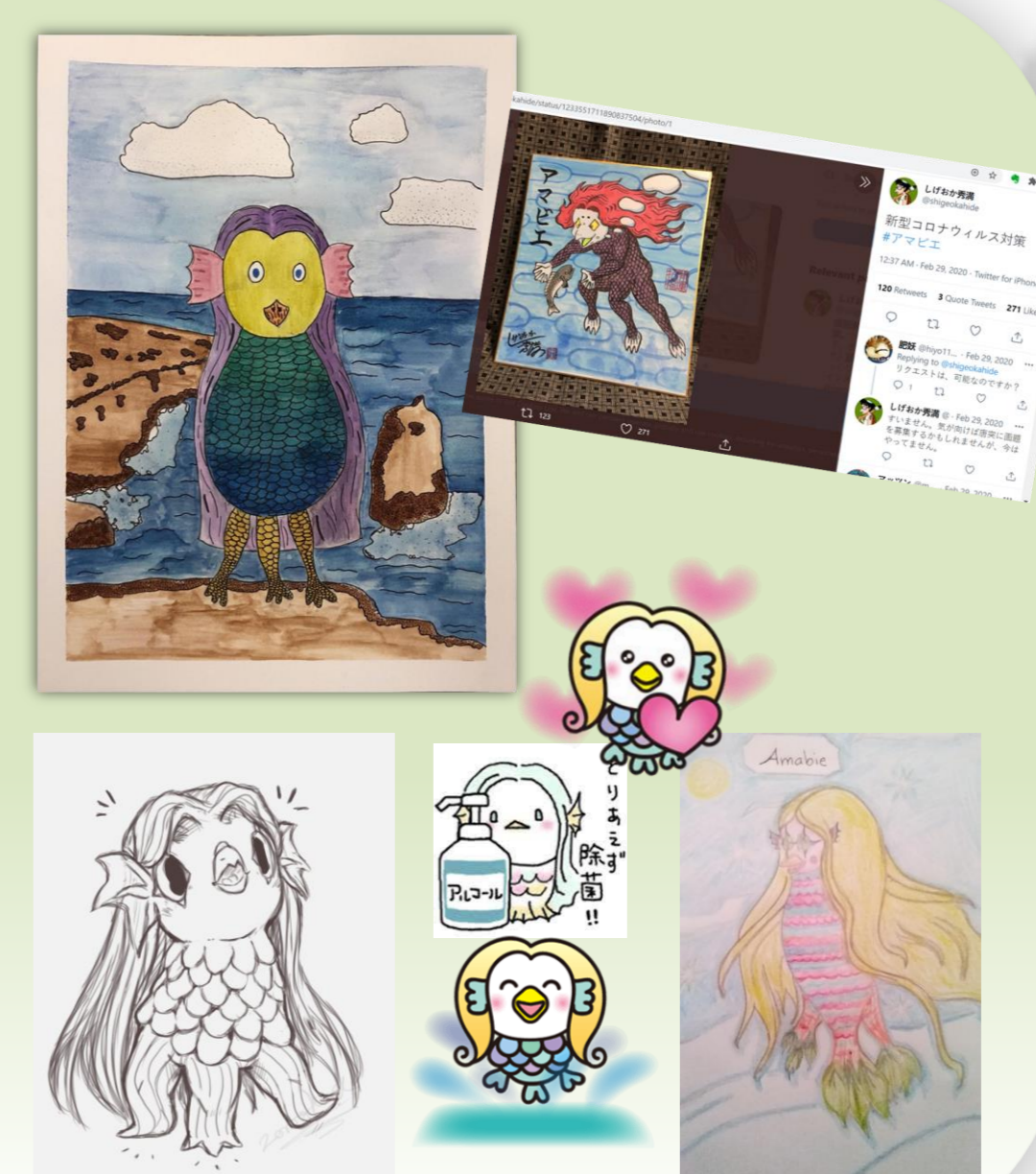
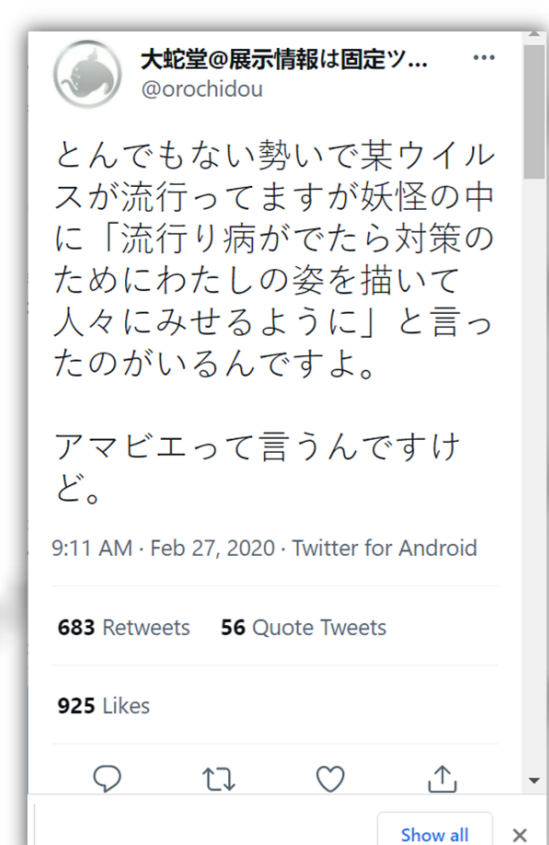
The term yokai has been used to define "all things beyond the realm of explanation ... an umbrella signifier for things we generally translate with terms such as monster, spirit, goblin, demon, phantom, specter, fantastic being, lower order deity, or unexplainable occurrence" (Foster 2015: 19)

#amabiechallenge #アマビエチャレンジ

The first tweet bearing the hashtag the "Amabie Challenge" appeared on January 30, 2020. Then on February 27, 2020, yokai artist Orochidō massively ignited interest in the character with a tweet of a contemporary painting and a call to draw and share similar images. The tweet provides a time stamp for the #Amabie phenomenon and appeared to fuel the #AmabieChallenge on Twitter.

This became a superspreader event that had the public drawing their own versions of Amabie and sharing them with others in line with the character's original prophesy. To gain an overview of the massive participation there were 28 tweets with the term Amabie (in Japanese) on March 1, 2020; more than 1000 on March 4, 2020; and it peaked at 46000 on March 15 2020.

Sharing one's interpretation of Amabie, along with sharing wishes of health became a huge trend upon social media, reaching across continents.



Amabie even became the Japanese trending word of 2020



A large variety of foods, noticeably sweets, became available all sporting the image of the Amabie.

It seemed not only drawing her provided protection but also imbibing her image.



Some of the cakes and traditional wagashi sweets bearing her image



A lunch box bearing her image on the sideflaps guaranteeing isolation whilst eating.



A large variety of alcoholic drinks bearing her likeness became readily available.



A sample of ofuda from Ebetsu shrine in Hokkaido whereupon the image has been stamped with sacred water



A priest displaying protective amulets, omamori



An example of a blessing ceremony as well as the very ofuda like sake label

The predominant belief systems in Japan are Shintoism and Buddhism.

Both shrines and temples readily appropriated the image of Amabie in various forms as a blessing and for her protective capabilities. Her image was printed on talismans (omamori) to be carried on one's person for protection as well as on ofuda and ema, prayer tablets and sheets.

In collaboration with some sake companies, there were even ceremonies specifically blessing the sake as well as the people producing it.



Rather than a foreign image from the outside here was a local image everyone could rally behind. The fact that it was so inherently Japanese with a direct connection with nature and the soul of the culture meant it had a universal appeal and was easily incorporated into both daily technological lives as well as by traditional religious establishments.

In drawing her image and sharing a person could regain some control of an impossible situation, for however brief a moment, during this worldwide suspension of normalcy.



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