# Spendemic: Japan's Marketing of Mythical Creatures and the Business of Selling Hope

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## Abstract

With their roots in animism and Shintōism, Japan's mythical creatures known as *yōkai* have been feared, revered, and used to explain calamities or inexplicable phenomena. Needless to say, in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak and even now to some extent, very little was known about the origins of the virus, its potency, and how it could be prevented or treated effectively. Naturally, this threw most countries in the world into a state of confusion and Japan was no exception. However, as opposed to seeking answers from conspiracy theories to make sense of the unknown, Japan turned to アマビエ(Amabié) – a mermaid-like *yōkai* known for prophesizing either an impending epidemic or an abundant harvest. While Amabié offers no explanation, advice or immediate help, it is believed that by recreating manifestations of its image, people can defend themselves against illness. Whether it was wishful thinking or simply a trend is debatable, but countless artists, city councils, product manufacturers, and shrines around the country all jumped onto the bandwagon of producing and promoting products with images of Amabié in 2020. Although their motives varied and a sense of hope certainly inspired the production and consumption of Amabié, in this article I argue that the profit factor was a major incentive for shrines and businesses who invested in the trend. I will demonstrate this by drawing upon previous research on the commodification of religion while providing examples of the commodification of Amabié by local, corporate, and secular entities.


*Keywords*: animism, Japan, polytheism, *yōkai*

## Introduction

Japan's mythical creatures known as *yōkai* have been feared, revered, and used to explain calamities or inexplicable phenomena. Since *yōkai* have roots in animism and Shintōism, we may regard them as unique deities of Japan. If, for example, a child drowned in a river for reasons known or unknown, those who believed in *yōkai* would say that it was the doing of *kappa*, the mischievous water god. Essentially, when facing unfamiliar, tragic or inexplicable phenomena, *yōkai* myths were used as didactic tales or as a means to ease the minds of those experiencing fear and confusion. Needless to say, in the early stages of the COVID-19 outbreak and even now to some extent, the origins of the virus were shrouded in mystery, we knew very little about its potency, and how it could be prevented or treated effectively. Consequently, this threw most countries in the world into a state of confusion and Japan was no exception. However, as opposed to seeking answers from outrageous disinformation campaigns or conspiracy theories to make sense of the unknown, Japan turned to アマビエ(Amabié) – a mermaid-like *yōkai* known for prophesising either an impending epidemic or an abundant harvest. While Amabié offers no explanation, advice or immediate help regarding the nature of the disease, it is believed that by recreating its image and distributing it, people can somehow defend themselves against illness. Perhaps it was wishful thinking or simply a trend, but from early 2020 through to at least early 2022, countless artists, city councils, product manufacturers, and shrines across Japan all jumped onto the bandwagon of creating and promoting products with images of Amabié. Although their motives varied and a sense of hope certainly inspired the production and consumption of Amabié, I argue that the profit factor, achieved through the commodification of religion, was a major incentive for shrines, businesses, and public entities who invested in the Amabié boom. I will demonstrate this by drawing upon notions of the commodification of religion while providing examples of the commodification of Amabié by secular, corporate, and public entities in 2020 through to late 2021.

## Historical Background – Who or what is Amabié?

Prior to discussing of the commodification of religion, I will briefly introduce and clarify some essential points about Japanese *yōkai*, Amabié, animism and Shintōism. As noted earlier, *yōkai* are Japanese mythical creatures which have roots in animism and Shintōism. They are feared, revered, and have been used to explain calamities or inexplicable phenomena such as mysterious drownings, earthquakes, or severe contagious diseases. Animism, although a complex idea, basically refers to "a range of different phenomena, entities, representations, beliefs, and practices, ranging from ideas of an animated nature […] to accounts of different types of 'spirits' (*tama* 霊 or *tamashii* 魂) – often not clearly distinguished from gods (kami 神 ), ancestors (*senzo* 先祖), ghosts (*yūrei* 幽霊 ), and monsters (*yōka*i 妖怪)" (Rambelli, 2020, p.3). According to professor of Japanese religion and cultural history Fabio Rambelli, "these intangible entities belong to different, but partially overlapping, cultural spheres (religion, folklore, customs, the arts) and have different origins and cultural genealogies" (2020, p.3). Simply put, animism is the belief that there is a spirit within all material and immaterial phenomena. That is, anything from the toilet you sit on to the words printed in a conference booklet essentially has a spirit. As noted, *yōkai* are just one of the manifestations of these spirits. This belief of spirits in the natural world is also deeply rooted in Shintōism. Shintō, which literally translates to "The Way of the Gods," is an indigenous religion of Japan with an "intense and comprehensive relationship with nature" (Kobayashi, 2001, p.94). What is more significant, in regards to Amabié and contagious diseases, is that "the awe and reverence that

Japanese feel towards nature come from that fact that the elements of nature have two aspects: destructive and protective" (Kobayashi, 2001, p.89).

COVID-19, with its devastating effects and the dismal reports of deaths and daily new cases, illustrates the "destructive" element of nature. When little is known about destructive new phenomena, it is natural to search for answers, means to explain or handle them – and that is how the usage of the *yōkai* Amabié came to fruition. According to Kashiwagi Kyōsuke, a specialist on Japanese folklore, there are four kinds of rituals related to contagious diseases or epidemics that either ward off, prevent, treat, or isolate the epidemic in case (Kashiwagi, 2021). Rituals or beliefs surrounding Amabié, for instance, lean more towards warding off or preventing the illness than treatment or total containment.

Amabié was first documented in May 1846 in an early form of newspaper known as a 瓦版 (*kawaraban*). Accompanied by an account of an officer who spotted it, the image and story of Amabié describes a mermaid-like creature emerging from the sea and prophesying a good harvest; yet, at the same time, it added, "Should an epidemic come, draw me and show me to the people" (Alt, 2020). This simply suggested or implied that by replicating and reproducing images of Amabié, one can somehow avoid or prevent an illness at hand. While its efficacy is certainly something to speculate about, it is not unlike the Shintō custom of carrying around domino tile-sized お守り (protection charms) a custom still practised to this day. Much like this practice, the cultural resurgence of Amabié images from 2020 onwards became a modern reappropriation of the original Edo period custom.

**Figure 1**
*Kawaraban featuring Amabié, May, 1846*

Note: Image courtesy of Kyoto University Library Archives, Japan.

## Theory – On the Commodification of Religion and Polytheism's Role

While it is difficult to gauge whether purchasing and displaying protection charms or images of Amabié guarantees any protection, I argue that notions of hope, faith, and belief (or not refuting the existence of otherworldly creatures) are central to our understanding of the cultural appropriation of Amabié. This was acknowledged by the chief priest of Kyoto's Byōdō-in temple who replicated 800 copies of an image of Amabié which he had found at the temple.

When asked why, he stated, "I want to alleviate people's anxiety, even just a little" (Edo jidai no kawaraban, 2021). From this statement, it is clear that even the chief priest acknowledges that the efficacy of the practice is dubious, but giving hope and having faith is the least we can do. Although acts like this can be considered well-intended offerings, I argue that the majority of places of worship, as well as businesses and local governments, exploited what they perceived was a trend and more or less capitalised on people's anxieties or need for any manifestation of hope. This process is what is generally considered to be "the commodification of religion." The commodification of religion simply refers to religious symbols becoming commodities. In greater detail, it can be understood as

> a process of recontextualisation of religious symbols, language, and ideas from their original religious context to the media and consumer culture. In this process, religious symbols become commodities, objects of consumption readily available in the supermarket of religion and the media landscape. The commodification of religion works on several levels. The two most obvious are the (often commercial) offers of blessings, prayers and so on through the purchase of religious artifacts, books and other material products. The second important – and obvious – level is the attachment of religious values through a religious aesthetic to consumer products.
>
> (Ornella, 2013)

In regards to images or products bearing images of Amabié, through my research I have observed both levels of commodification. For instance, while some purchased protection charms at certain shrines, others bought a refreshing IPA or cider with Amabié-inspired logos. There exists an immense variety of examples of the commodification of Amabié that I will discuss in the following section. However, the commodification of religious rituals and customs is nothing new in Japan. Indeed, the evolution of Christmas and Easter celebrations in Japan have often been a subject of intrigue for Western critics. Anthropologist Brian J. McVeigh, for example, described Christmas in Japan as a perfect example of a much-repeated cultural cliché:

> [T]he Japanese tendency of adopting foreign forms while dispensing with content, of appropriating appearances while ignoring cultural meaning. It is also a good example of the commercialisation of tradition. Shoppers and passers-by have their senses bombarded by a dizzying array or green and red store displays.
>
> (McVeigh 2013, p.136)

Furthermore, Malaysian academic and politician Syed Hussein Alatas also observed that in the south-east Asian context in general, "in the case of the great world religions such as Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism […] one can suggest that in some places they are neutral, in some places they encourage, but nowhere do they hinder modernisation and economic development" (Alatas 1970, p.270). Needless to say, as a G7 member and one of the top economies of the world, Japan is no stranger to modernisation and economic development. In a sense, one could argue that Japan is a breeding ground for the commodification of religion and especially religious rituals. Owing also to polytheism, the commodification of religion is perhaps less of an issue in Japan than in monotheistic cultures. Polytheism can loosely be described as "believing in multiple gods, often from distinct religious traditions" (Gries, Su, & Schak, 2012, p.623). In Japan's case, it is said that its polytheist traditions are rooted in Shintōism as well as Ainu culture and its respective belief in myriads of deities (*kamui*) rather than a single divine power (Eto, 2015, p.229). The significance of this factor is that it allows for the worship of multiple and multitudes of deities, and therefore fosters an environment in which one can freely

pray to whichever god one chooses. I argue that due to this lack of exclusive devotion to only one god, when a spirit or divine creature is culturally appropriated or commodified, one is less likely to be offended. I will exemplify how this has been done with the commodification of Amabié in the following section.

## Findings: The Commodification of Amabié

To discuss the various manifestations of the commodification of Amabié, I divided the nature of commodification into three types: secular-based (related to religious institutions), corporate-based (related to businesses), and municipal-based (related to local towns, prefectures or councils). While some images of Amabié like rice paddy art were not available for purchase, since they inadvertently encouraged tourism and social media hype (in terms of access counts, clicks and likes), they can also be considered "profitable" ventures.

### Corporate-Based Commodification

If you type 'アマビエ' into Amazon Japan's search bar, you will find that there are at least over 2000 different Amabié items available for purchase. The most commonly searched terms in my search bar in January 2022 included Amabié, Amabié-candy, -sweets/snacks, -stickers, -merchandise, -labels, -ornaments, -T-shirts, -stamps, -protection charms. Naturally, this varies based one's search history, but as well as images, it is clear that there are a range of consumable items too. Folklorist Akihiro Hatanaka also observed that the In February 2020, the Twitter hashtag #アマビエチャレンジ (Amabié challenge) elicited an onslaught of different commercial products such as Japanese sweets, steamed buns, *dorayaki*, rice crackers, donuts, cookies, various types of alcohol, labels for soft drinks, key holders, straps, and masks. Hatanaka suggests, that this is proof that Amabié invaded and penetrated the lives of Japanese people in the 21st century (Hatanaka, 2021). Aside from these consumables and everyday items, some companies went to great lengths to produce life-sized gold leaf statues of Amabié or a giant Amabié bouncy castle (see Figures 2 and 3). Much like being offered protection by seeing and distributing images of Amabié (and implying that the major incentive of producing the golden statue was to increase profit), one PR officer suggested that, "[o]ne could reap profit just by looking at the statue's golden glittering, and luxuriously powerful appearance" (PR Times, 2021a). From comfort food to accessories to giant inflatable castles or to shimmering golden statues, it is evident that most companies had their own benefit, rather than benevolence, in mind when exploiting the Amabié boom.

**Figure 2**
*SGC Co,.Ltd's Golden Amabié* (PR Times, March 1, 2021)

**Figure 3**
*Yamaguchi Taiki's Co,. Ltd's Amabié Bouncy Castle*


## Secular-Based Commodificiation

In contrast to the corporate sector, at shrines, temples and other places of worship, anything from the coins tossed into the *saisen-bako* (donation box) to protection charms (as objects of worship) are considered "donations" and are therefore untaxed. Since Japanese corporate tax law classifies religious corporations as "public interest corporations," they are regarded as organisations that benefit the public. Basically, a public interest corporation is established exclusively for the purpose of public interest and not for profit, and even if they reap profit from their activities, it does not belong to any particular individual (Miki, 2019). In legal discourse, it is difficult to argue that the secular-based commodification of Amabié is profitable. However, it cannot be denied that both benevolence and benefits are factors in the production and sale of Amabié-related religious paraphernalia. From avid shrine-hoppers to lifestyle bloggers to major travel websites in Japan, they all have published countless posts about shrines and temples where Amabié-related amulets, seals or protection charms could be found (Jalan, 2020; Joy of Living, 2021; Myjinja, 2021). While some shrines' amulets and seals were even featured on television (such as those from the Tomita-Wakamiya shrine in Figure 4), other shrines went to even greater lengths to produce original non-purchasable items. For instance, the Gosenhachimangu shrine in Niigata was decorated with Amabié wind chimes which, as a result, attracted both locals and tourists (Niigata Nippō, 2021). Other shrines decorated their traditional festival floats such as Fukuoka's *hakata gion yamakasa* float which was displayed in the local shopping arcade (Yomiuri Shimbun, 2021); or Niigata's Sasanomiya shrine's festival float, which was carted around town to pray for an end to the pandemic (Jōetsu Myoko Town Jōhō, 2021a). Although these activities do not explicitly involve monetary transactions, given that the location of the floats were around town or in shopping arcades, they have the potential to stimulate economic activity in the local community. One of the more ambitious ventures was Enoshima shrine and Space BD Co.'s "Space Delivery Project," which essentially launched a blessed Amabié aluminum plate into space (PR Times, 2021b). Not only did this project attract media attention, but the collaboration between corporate and secular entities arguably reflects the openness of secular entities in Japan to promotional and even profitable activities.

**Figure 4**
*Tomita-Wakamiya shrine's Seal, Ito*


**Figure 5**
*Kikukawa City's Rice Paddy Artwork*, (NHK, June 13, 2021)

## Municipal-Based Commodification

Although the allure of Amabié-related religious paraphernalia may have encouraged the commodification of religious tourism by drawing visitors to a limited number or shrines which offered unique Amabié items, municipalities also invested in attractions that were likely to attract media attention and tourists. Perhaps banking on the idea that attractions outdoors would be more Covid-safe, many towns decided to produce large-scale artwork in parks, rice paddies (see Figure 5), and snowy mountains. For instance, Tomioka city in Hyōgo prefecture arranged one million tulips to create a visual depiction of Amabié (Hyōgo Shimbun, 2021); Oota city in Gunma invested in LED winter illuminations which featured Amabié (47News, 2021); Nagaoka city in Niigata created a three-metre tall ice sculpture of Amabié (Niigata Nippō, 2021b); Niigata city created massive straw art sculptures of Amabié (Midorikawa, 2021); and Shizuoka's Kikukawa city similarly created rice paddy artwork featuring Amabié (NHK, 2021). Smaller-scale projects such as Hyōgo's Fukuzaki city's Amabié bench (Itō, 2021) and Shiga prefecture's "Biwaichi Amabié Cycling Plan 2021" (Cycle Sports, 2021) both encouraged local citizens to get out and get some fresh air or purchase hotel and cycling tour packages which included limited edition Amabié-motif rice crackers and amulets. The significant point here is that the monetary transactions or revenue gained from such events or promotions is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, in terms of public relations and putting one's town on the map, such activities undoubtedly drew media attention and possibly tourists or

locals who inevitably spent money around town. For instance, when in 2019 Zenkōji temple in Nagano City invested in winter illuminations, the economic ripple effect was estimated to be around 1.4 billion yen (Nikkei, 2019). This included those who visited Nagano City for a day and also those who stayed overnight. Evidently, by creating a spectacle, albeit commodifying religious deities in the process, local governments can stimulate economic activity both on-site on online. Furthermore, since such projects are not explicitly marketed as what we could consider "religious tourism," organising committees can arguably avoid criticism or complaints about exploiting religious figures for their benefit.

## Conclusion

If we accept Ornella's idea that the commodification of religion involves the "recontextualisation of religious symbols, language, and ideas from their original religious context to the media and consumer culture" (Ornella, 2013), then it is obvious that not only secular, but private and public entities appropriated the symbol of Amabié as well as the flexibility and openness associated with such polytheism. Through this process, I argue that Amabié has been treated in a similar fashion to ゆるキャラ (mascot characters) – that is, it is dispensable and ephemeral and yet proves indispensable for creating media hype, stimulating economic activity and revitalising local communities. It is doubtful whether replicating and distributing images of Amabié prohibited the devastating impact of the pandemic, but as both a product of hope and a source for it, perhaps this hope is its greatest benefit to Japan when trying to ride out the storm of turmoil and uncertainty.

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