

# THE AMABIE: A JAPANESE PROPHETIC CHIMERA AND CHRONOTOPE AMID POLITICAL MONSTROSITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** The years 2020-2022 engraved our existence with epidemiological and political monstrosities that will not be forgotten for quite some time. The COVID-19 pandemic dragged us to contemplating the possibilities of a plague that, rather than being confined to the global south's 'invisible' territories of diseases, heavily affected the global north and with the prospect of wiping out a large number of the world's population in a similar manner to that of the 1918 influenza epidemic. Governments were caught between choices to either privilege lives or economies and eugenics reared its head as a spectre from the historical past. A benign marine monster, the Amabie, a prophetic *yōkai* from Japanese folklore, became popular, initially in Japan and, rather rapidly on a global scale, assumed a prominent position, becoming an icon for the COVID-19 pandemic. I interrogate how people resorted to this chimeric creature from marine and historical depths to deal with existential uncertainty and abnormal lives, rendering it a chronotope that connects times and spaces. Such aquapelagic creatures frame the ambiguity of a world where political, environmental and health disasters merge.

**KEYWORDS:** Amabie, chimera, chronotope, *yōkai*, *ningyo*, COVID-19, ecology

Introduction: across territories and through oceans of time

Between the end of 2019 and the first months of 2020, the emergence of a novel severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) in Wuhan province in China signalled the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most notable traits of what, at the moment of writing this article, has turned into a global health emergency that has lasted for over two years, is that international public health authorities were (and acted as if) taken by surprise. Populations around the world, notably in the global north, struggled with the unusual pressure put on healthcare infrastructures that had been progressively slimmed down amid neoliberal reorganisations and dismantling. The sudden demand for hospital places, including those requiring intensive care equipment, isolation, containment measures and rising mortality all seemed to remind us that the spectre of 1918 influenza pandemic was no longer buried in our past. Despite not reaching the level of devastation of the 1918 pandemic, by 28 July 2022 COVID-19 had claimed 6,387,863 lives globally (World Health Organisation, 2022) with a very high case-fatality

ratio among the elderly.<sup>1</sup> The elderly population was rhetorically prioritised in health policy discourses that often implicitly or explicitly flirted with utilitarian eugenic rationales, shielding them away in nursing homes (primarily in the global north) and rescinding their contact with family members. They were, despite the isolation, exposed to the virus via close contact with nursing personnel. In a critical medical anthropological article, Cohen describes several situations in which we can read what he calls “a gerocide”, flanked by “imaginaries of culling” that claimed the resort to nature’s herd mentality as a necessity (Cohen, 2020, p. 547).

Some of the virus’s effects on respiratory functions can induce a fatal impairment of lung capacity, making breathing progressively more difficult, leading to intubation and potential organ failure and death. The early images that surfaced of sedated patients attached to ventilators, bedridden in pronation therapy inside Bergamo hospital in Italy shocked the world (see, for instance, *Sky News*, 2020). They were gasping for air like fish out of water, or like beings for whom air had become both an out-of-reach element and also hostile (due to the presence of an invisible virus). Our “universal right to breathing” had been curtailed (Mbembe, 2020).<sup>2</sup>

Several boundaries have been transgressed during the pandemic. The violation of ecological boundaries determined the conditions that allowed the virus to leap between species and ethical boundaries that were considered firm lost their status. At the same time, other territorial boundaries became fixed and rigid, such as those between states (as in WHO official chronotopes that privileged nation-states - Briggs and Mantini-Briggs 2003, p. 228) and between private and public spaces during lockdown periods and in quarantine measures. I explore how a boundary-crossing creature, the prophesising *yōkai* Amabie from pre-modern Japan has become an apt super-embodiment of a misplaced human condition, of negated bodies, neglected realities, and suffocated identities that have lost a clear sense of belonging – caught between forms, times and spaces, neither fish nor human. Epidemics problematise time, make us fear a return to the past “to the historical stage on the back of imagined unhygienic social, behavioural and cultural ‘remnants’” (Lynteris 2014, p. 30), thus presenting “overlapping epidemic temporalities” (Roth 2020, p. 16), linear and cyclical. In contrast to the temporal separation in official discourse concerning the pre-pandemic, outbreak and post-pandemic periods, the Japanese folkloric figure of the Amabie (Figure 1) evokes a temporal dimension of cyclical returns of epidemics, connecting Edo period Japan to our pandemic’s ‘new’ restricted lives. After briefly describing my methodological approach, this article considers the Amabie as a chronotope, the chimeric imagination (including historical and contemporary elements of the health bureaucracy and political powers at play), and the media-loric diffusion of this pre-modern prophet of epidemics that has become an elaborating symbol.

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<sup>1</sup> Excess mortality estimates tend to suggest that the number is maybe threefold.

<sup>2</sup> The present article departs from my earlier analysis of the Amabie phenomenon (Merli, 2020) published on *Anthropology Today*. Here, I engage more specifically with literature on chimeras and the aquapelagic imaginary. I acknowledge the journal’s kind permission to reuse some sections of the material from the AT article. I intend to extend the experience of suffocating bodies that succumb to a virus to those that die by suffocation at the hands of violent police action, or humans and animals alike choking amid forest fires (see Merli, 2020 for a closer examination).



Figure 1 - An Amabie image taken from a *kawara-ban* (broadsheet) newspaper of the Edo era. Kyoto University Library.

#### A methodological/genealogical reflection

During my self-imposed isolation in early March 2020, and following my last visit to Japan in January of the same year, I came across the Amabie, first via Twitter and then on Instagram. Without specific plans to do much else than just follow my curiosity, I kept updating the information feed, and reading news about it. People shared these images as forms of protection for their loved ones who, they hoped, upon seeing the Amabie would be better equipped against the virus. Then, between April and May, I decided to join the global craze for drawing Amabie, wondering how I would portray 'her' (as it had become clear that the international drawing flurry imagined Amabie to be a female character). In the process of finishing a watercolour image, I posted it on Facebook and shared it via private messages with friends between end of April and 8th May, dedicating it to my friends in Japan (Figure 2). Shortly after, a Swedish colleague suggested that I should write a short piece about it, and by 14th June the complete paper draft was sent to a few colleagues for review before submitting it to *Anthropology Today* in July. In following Amabie's new-found mediatic life, I took inspiration from an "ontographic engagement" that does not assume that spiritual alterities do not exist, and which compares different worlds that signal intersecting webs of relations and causation (Jensen et al., 2016). Some of the tropes that emerged relate to the construction of remoteness (understood as both spatial and temporal), the interconnectedness of our worlds and the experience of uncanny objects (the coronavirus and Amabie seem to share an uncanniness, or invisibility and hypervisibility at the same time) that are perceived as difficult to hold onto or are positioned beyond our grasp.



Figure 2 – Amabie (Claudia Merli, May 2020). Ink and watercolour on paper, 14.8 x 21 cm (copyright by the author).

This first-hand drawing is a “slow” material methodology to approach multimodal anthropological analysis (Hurdley, Biddulph, Backhaus et al., 2017). My artistic exploration unfolded together with a kind of synthesising understanding, translation and ethnographic analysis via images (see Douglas-Jones, 2021) that combined a focused attention on the serendipity of social media feeds and what Pink calls “ethnographic hunch”, which after having found something significant was attentive to “new ethnographic encounters and moments” that supported it (Pink, 2021, p. 39). As I tried to wade through the flow of images online (Waltorp, 2021), there was something about this collective action of drawing and distributing Amabie images that reminded me of the “art of hyperobjects” (Morton, 2013b) and of making visible the presence of another invisible hyperobject, in this case the virus itself that is in our surroundings (see later in this article for the meaning of this projection into absence, typical of the chimera). The art of the time of hyperobjects explores:

*The uncanniness of beings*  
*The uniqueness of beings*  
*The irony of relationships between beings*  
*The ironic secondariness of the intermeshing between beings.*

(Morton, 2013b, p. 44).

When I set off to follow how these images were presented and framed, mostly on Instagram and Twitter, I did not systematically sort or order them, but I certainly

juxtaposed them (Pink, 2021; Waltorp, 2021) with Edo period prints and fragmentary visual information. This pattern of proceeding methodologically matched the ontographic approach described above, intentionally looking for intersections. Some of these crossed paths took me into disciplinary territories and materials that as an anthropologist I perceive as remote: the area between historical documents, literary and folklore studies.

### The Amabie, a beaky, *ningyo*-like creature from Kyūshū

The Amabie (アマビエ) is a Japanese *yōkai* (妖怪)<sup>3</sup> of unspecified gender that originates from the Kyūshū region. The term *yōkai* 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, p. 19; original emphasis). Current popular representations portray the Amabie as a female chimeric creature whose body is an assemblage of human, fish and bird characteristics, with three fish tails/legs and long, flowing hair. ‘She’ reminds us of Western representations of mermaids, with the difference that her whole body is covered in scales and is often depicted as not having arms (although several images produced during 2020–2021 provide them, adding what was missing in the original figure). Similar human-fish creatures are called *ningyo* (人魚),<sup>4</sup> an originally gender-neutral term for mermen and mermaids, whose ambiguous appearance might be associated with prosperous events but also ominous catastrophes – whether that be because they warn about or actually precipitate them (Foster, 2015, p. 154–155; also see Hayward, 2018b, p. 61 for the connection between *ningyo* and tsunamis in the southern islands of Japan)<sup>5</sup>. *Ningyo* underwent a progressive historical redefinition in gendered terms especially after contact with Europeans. We can identify a process of feminisation and increasing cuteness in the *ningyo*-like Amabie mediatic phenomenon, building up on the original print’s cute element.

The Amabie has a human-like face, but with bird-like eyes and a beak. According to local lore and historical records, the Amabie appeared only once – emerging from the sea and illuminated by a halo – to a local officer in the Higo area, Kumamoto prefecture (Figure 3), sent to investigate the phenomenon in 1846.<sup>6</sup> Like other prophesising *yōkai*, she left behind a message that in its composition follows a well-known pattern, essentially that, ‘good harvests will continue for six years from the current year; if an epidemic ever spreads, draw a picture of me and show it to everyone.’ She did not appear again and remained, in that sense, an ‘outsider’ (see Komatsu 1987 for an analysis of spirits as mythical outsiders).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The kanji *kai* (怪) is associated with both terms that would translate as ‘monster’ *yōkai* and ‘strange beast’ *kaijū* (怪獣) but should not be reduced to either (Foster 2015: 22–23).

<sup>4</sup> The two *kanji* mean human being (人) and fish (魚).

<sup>5</sup> Unlike the riverine *kappa* (河童) – another water *yōkai* – the Amabie does not seem to have a mischievous character. The *kappa*’s body is represented as an assemblage of various parts from a frog, a tortoise, and a bird, with claws. Its human-shaped body was partly covered in scales.

<sup>6</sup> Other luminous phenomena were recorded in the same region: “And off the coast of Kyūshū in Japan, multiple fire mirages called *Shiranui* (不知火) (‘unknown fire’), were thought to be the lights of the Dragon God” (Kidder Hodges 2021, p. 124).

<sup>7</sup> In May 2020, another beaky *yōkai* rose to the pandemic stage, recovered from another Japanese museum’s collections: a two-headed bicoloured bird called *yogen no tori* (予言のとおり), a prophecy

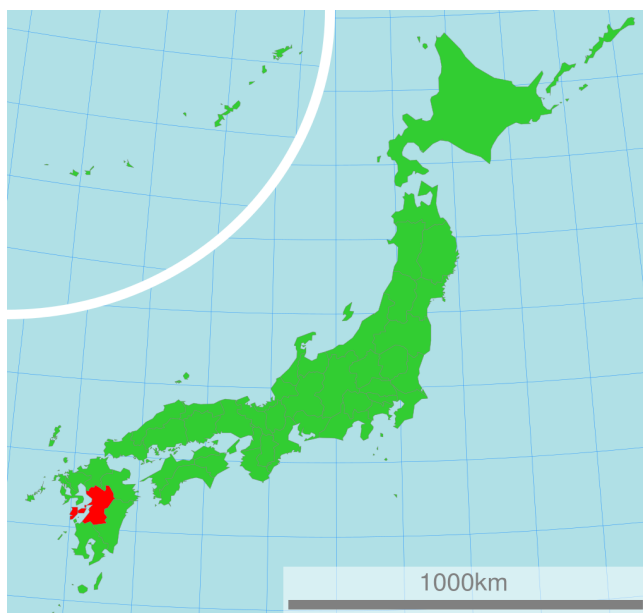


Figure 3 - Map of Japan with highlight on Kumamoto-ken (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism.).

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Japan\\_with\\_highlight\\_on\\_43\\_Kumamoto\\_prefecture.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Japan_with_highlight_on_43_Kumamoto_prefecture.svg) Lincun CC BY-SA 3.0

Like the *ningyo*, which arose from Japan's waters at a time when its "natural order was far from distinct" (Chaiklin, 2010, p. 260), the Amabie indicates that we too live in an epoch in which humans have affected the order of nature to such an extent that it has also become indistinct. An indistinction or invasion prepared the ground for an interspecies jump for a coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan 'unexpectedly', as a spectre to haunt and tip the world back to self-confinement measures that hark back to pre-modern times. The aggregation of meaning into an inter-cultural form of media-lore in relation to ecological concerns also pertains to other aquapelagic creatures (see Greenland & Hayward, 2020). The aquapelago is a socio-cultural-economic entity that is spatially and historically specific and refers to "terrestrial and marine spaces integrated by human livelihood activities" (Hayward, 2019, p. 89) and that facilitates an aquapelagic imaginary in which human experience in that spatial entity is embellished through folklore, art and fiction. In Japan, peripheral regions and outlying islands were historically seen as territories of danger and pollution and as demon-worlds. Complicating matters, the sea was regarded as having a "symbolic capacity... to absorb and purify pestilence-causing pollution" (Alaszewska, 2018, p. 35). This ambivalence was already identified in 13th century literature (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 13), presenting the sea as a place of both renewal and danger.

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bird that protected an area of central Japan from the 1858 cholera epidemic which had started in Nagasaki, Kyūshū (*The Japan Times*, 29 May 2020; also see Gramlich-Oka, 2009 for an analysis of this cholera epidemic).

Folk tales in China and Europe describe creatures that can transform not only in physical form but also from one environment to another. Scientific fabulations (Kidder Hodges, 2021, *pace* Haraway, 2013) and mythical stories “challenge our assumptions about the boundaries between bodies, environments and our own tenuous place in the world” and highlight the “[d]ifficulty of marking clear borders” (Kidder Hodges, 2021, p. 122). These stories remind us that nature is indistinct, as people in Edo Japan experienced. “Sea and land-based monsters also gave a face to the very real threats of a natural world that had yet to be more fully documented, much less understood” (Kidder Hodges, 2021, p. 123). A tension thereby existed between knowledge and imagination.

In the preface to Carlo Severi’s *The Chimera Principle*, David Graeber identifies the main premise of the book to be the relation existing between the ways in which we “store and classify knowledge” and, on the other hand, “evocation, ideation, and poetic imagination” (Graeber, 2015, p. xv):

*The central argument is that imagination is a social phenomenon, dialogic even, but crucially one that typically works itself out through the mediation of objects that are at once paradoxical, startling (in such as [sic] way as to become imagines agentes, “active” in the Yatesian sense), but also—and this is the crucial element others have largely ignored—to some degree unfinished, teasingly schematic in such a way as to, almost perforce, mobilize the imaginative powers of the recipient to fill in the blanks.* (Graeber, 2015, p. xv)

I suggest looking at the Amabie as a collective imaginative production of a startling chimera that is infused with imagined meanings and bodily additions to reach completeness and multiple significances. In this sense, the Amabie proved to be an intangible heritage asset (Greenland & Hayward, 2020; Hayward, 2019) – rather than just a cultural remnant from previous epidemic times – mobilised to deal with uncertainty and a sense of global vulnerability. As had occurred before in the case of the *ningyo*, the Amabie can be transformed and adapted to fit the specific demands of different socio-cultural contexts. Not identified as a chimera in the historical record, the term was, notwithstanding, used on social media in 2020 and 2021 in association with Amabie posts (adding the hashtag in Japanese #キメラ), and other animal elements (often feline) were sometimes added to drawings. Whereas the *ningyo* is a human-fish creature whose hybridity presents a simpler integration, the Amabie, with her three tails and an add-on beak, resembles more closely a chimeric assemblage. The artist Atsuhiko Misawa made an effigy of an Amabie set onto a chimera sculpture’s back, between its two wings, in December 2020,<sup>8</sup> and he produced dry point prints where the two are portrayed together.

Castiglioni (2021) provides a compelling analysis of the historical changes the *ningyo* underwent in the Nara and Heian periods, through Kamakura, and, finally, during the Edo period, via a progressive shedding of negativity and an assumption of benign characteristics, without however completely losing their darker side (2021, p. 38). Whenever a *ningyo* was found, the local governor was required to arrange divination rituals “to ascertain when, where, and against whom the curse will strike again in future”

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<sup>8</sup> Pictures of the peculiar sculpture can be seen on several tweets, for example from the exhibition at Harukas Museum: [https://twitter.com/harukas\\_museum/status/1337300462056341504](https://twitter.com/harukas_museum/status/1337300462056341504). A close-up of the chimera’s dorsal region shows the Amabie as almost winged, thus adding to the avian element of her beak: [https://twitter.com/tetsumama\\_aichi/status/1436533446109581313](https://twitter.com/tetsumama_aichi/status/1436533446109581313)



(Castiglioni, 2021, p. 14). The dreadful political and social implications of the *ningyo* and other supernatural manifestations were, in earlier periods, considered of particular concern and relevance to the ruling classes because they could be read as a celestial admonition or commentary on the political state of the country or on the emperor's government, warning of impending natural disaster (as retribution) and potentially leading to revolts (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 3, 7–11). The *ningyo* and ominous apparitions were used “to dramatise political events” (Suwa, 2018, p. 72). The association between *ningyo* and political unrest and calamities was attested to in the 13th century, when their presence heralded the murders of two *shōguns* (Chaiklin, 2010, p. 243). The ambiguity of being messengers of both abundance and catastrophe rests on the possibility to proffer warnings as well as cause disasters (Foster, 2015, pp. 154–155; Hayward, 2018b, p. 61). But specific socioeconomic status seemed to determine people's modalities of approaching the *ningyo*. In one story, fishermen ate *ningyo* captured in their net and found them delicious whereas a nobleman had refused one of these creatures as a gift, aware of its ominous characteristics (see Castiglioni, 2021, p. 18).

The appearance of the Amabie and its prompt co-option into Japanese public health campaigns (e.g., Figure 4) could also carry political valence and signal a critique of the Japanese government's handling of the pandemic, of its initial turbulent moments and of the ineffective management of the Diamond Princess cruise docked at Yokohama under the watchful eyes of international media. International and local news reported regularly on mounting criticism of the way the Japanese authorities were handling the crisis, hinting at human rights violations over the prevention of passengers from leaving the ship. Critiques also addressed the unsatisfactory measures taken to cordon off the red areas on board (where cases of COVID-19 were confined) from the green areas, facilitating the spread of contagion on the cruise liner.<sup>9</sup> Prime minister Abe Shinzo's resignation followed shortly after.

In the coexistence of different periods of time in the Amabie phenomenon, we can recognise Bakhtin's basic definition of the chronotope, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (Bakhtin 1984, p. 84). In the more specific Japanese context, Figal illustrates how chronotopes were used in Japanese literature in Meiji to question the creeds of reason or the categories of rationality (1999, p. 186).

*The specter of a chronotope – a “time space” – of fushigi (the mysterious, the supernatural, the fantastic) materialized, which questioned creeds of reason and disclosed the nation-state's own imaginary foundations.*  
(Figal, 1999, pp. 6–7).

The uncanny is presented as essential to the “production of Japanese modernity” allowing “the modern to be thought” (Figal 1999, p. 14). By pushing ourselves to re-think the current pandemic condition as a resurgence of the past, the pandemic can also be read as chronotope (Keck 2022; Parui & Simi Raj 2021). The Amabie reminds us to question the scientific categories of the pandemic.

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<sup>9</sup> By the end of February, of the 2,666 passengers (1,281 Japanese nationals) and 1,045 crew members, 705 had been found to be infected. By 1 March, all passengers had disembarked.





Figure 4 – An Amabie health campaign image on a Nishitetsu Bus. (Attribution Indiana jo, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.)

### Mermaids, chimeras and imagination

Pedersen (2018) illustrates how the figure of the mermaid, in both historical representations in early modern England and in contemporary contexts, becomes an epistemic tool, challenging our own understanding of what mermaids are. The mermaid “offers us an opportunity to examine how frameworks for meaning are constructed”, reconfiguring categories we use “to make sense of the world” (Pedersen, 2018, p. 251, 254). They become, in their hybridity, “unstable mirrors” that convey a “sense of displacement” (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 4). In discussing the work *Poly-Olbion*, by Michael Drayton (1622), Pedersen remarks how mermaids in England were used to depict the history of the land, the local context itself (Pedersen, 2018, p. 252).

This process extends also to Japan, where maps did not indicate physical realities but rather imagined relations with the outer world, including “imaginary people” in other places, and their images (Sato, 1996, pp. 119–121). Japan borrowed foreign models, for example, from China, the *Shan-hai ching* (‘The Scriptures of Mountains and Seas’),<sup>10</sup> “in which the world was divided into three sections: ‘within-the-sea,’ ‘beyond-the-sea,’ and the ‘bizarre regions’” (Sato, 1996, p. 121); Japan reproduced imaginations of both foreign countries and peoples, conflating the two categories together until mid-1800s (Sato, 1996, pp. 126, 129–130). Japanese images of the world were produced, such as the *Wakan sansai zue* compiled by Terashima Ryoan in 1712 (Sato, 1996, p. 128).

<sup>10</sup> In his recent version of the work with commentaries, Strassberg prefers to translate the title as ‘Guideways through mountains and seas’ (2002), rather than ‘scriptures’. This translation will be used in the rest of the article when referring to this work.

Richard Strassberg recognises in the assembled parts of the hybrid creatures of China's 'Guideways through mountains and seas' (*Shan-hai ching*) a certain political process of territorial annexation and cultural additions:

*Totalization was thus achieved through sheer multiplicity. Each state was, therefore, composed of a core local culture in a home territory to which additional, somewhat alien territories were added in accretions, like a hybrid creature with a basic bodily form and additional physical characteristics.* (Strassberg, 2002, p. 45).

From a comparative perspective, anthropologist Veronica Strang describes how semi-humanised water beings communicate a higher level of technical control over the environment (Strang, 2022, p. 24). This dual technical and political control can be expressed iconographically as an assemblage that assumes monstrous aspects. Referring to Canguilhem's description of monsters, Sharpe points out that beyond hybridity of the body, the monster is characterised by the transgression of both nature and law (Sharpe, 2010, p. 32 *pace* Canguilhem, 1962). Transgression of the political or normative order with its associated mixing of categories returns in the Chinese cosmology presented in the 'Guideways' where a hybrid creature "particularly exemplified this by the excess as well as by the apparent incommensurability of its multiple features" (Strassberg, 2002, p. 44), and addition of unusual characteristics, such as birds' beaks (for example in the picture of the Huantou People (Strassberg, 2002, figure no. 217, Plate XLI). The Huantoumin (Huantou People) "have human faces, wings, and bird beaks. They are shown in the act of fishing" (Strassberg, 2002, p. 162).

The thearch Lesser-Brilliance (*Shaohao*) is associated with divine bureaucracy and a specific avian imaginary that featured bird nomenclature for functionaries' official titles (Strassberg, 2002, 244 note 150).<sup>11</sup> These celestial, hybrid avian bureaucracies lead me to propose that we look at the encounter between the Amabie and an anonymous bureaucrat of Higo province in a different light. The Amabie was not caught by a fisherman to whom the epidemic prophecy would be communicated, as often happened with *ningyo*. The 1846 nocturnal encounter in Higo waters was very peculiar indeed, being between a human-bird-fish and an administrative officer. Extending the hunch, I suggest the encounter to be between a modern-bureaucrat-in-the-making and an emblematic (avian-looking) bureaucratic being representing an outer realm, another country and its people.

The *Shan-hai ching* mentions several water hybrid beings, and "they are all fish with human characteristics rather than mermen or mermaids" (Strassberg, 2002, p. 204). The Amabie's body is entirely a fish with some human characteristics, the face and hair, rather than a mermaid. The human-fish (*renyu*) 人魚 (the same characters used in the Japanese term *ningyo*) of the 'Guideways' "resemble catfish with four legs and make a sound like a baby" and it is identified that eating it "will cure idiocy" (Strassberg, 2002, figure no. 125, Plate XXIV, pp. 129–130).<sup>12</sup> While *ningyo* and mermaids' bodies have been considered complex forms of "hybridity" (Pedersen, 2018; Castiglioni, 2021; George, 2021), I consider the concept of the chimera to be more apt when examining the Amabie.

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<sup>11</sup> For example, the Garuda is a mythical bird in Hindu mythology, serving as the *vahana* (mount) of the god Vishnu. The Thai government and administration offices use a Garuda emblem on their seals, letterheads and documents.

<sup>12</sup> In other parts of the book it is said that eating human-fish would cure "delusion".

Chimeras can be defined as “images created by schematising and formalising parts of animal or human bodies and recombining them in striking and unexpected ways” and they can be argued to have been products of the first age of mechanical reproduction associated with the first bureaucratic systems of Mesopotamia and Egypt (Graeber, 2017, p. xvi). The principle of chimerical representations contains both assemblage and absence, where the invisible parts of the image prompt their completion and reconstruction (Severi, 2007 [2015], p. 81):

*the association within a single image of heterogeneous if not contradictory characteristics that confer a special intensity upon it and render it memorable... in which the association of heterogeneous features necessarily implies a particular articulation between the visible and the invisible... and implicit parts are deciphered by a process of projection.* (Severi, 2007 [2015], pp. 38, 67, 83)

A chimera is an *imago agens*, a link between memory and perception (Severi, 2007 [2015], p. 202). This explains why the majority of Amabie images circulated portray the *yōkai* with arms (which were absent in the original image printed in the 1846 *kawaraban* - Figure 1). The Amabie lacks several things: the wings of the bird and the human body, it misses the fish’s head (although it sports a pair of gills instead of ears) and is an aquatic, terrestrial and aerial being at the same time. In a chimeral representation, “heterogeneous features are pieced together and implicit parts are deciphered by a process of projection” (Severi, 2007 [2015], p. 83). Or, as Castiglioni maintains, the *ningyo* becomes an “anatomic debunking memory” that reincorporates the animal dimension into the human through what is not said (2021, pp. 6-7). I argue that, as a chimera, the Amabie reintroduces a reflection on the human by appearing at the peak of bureaucratic systematisation of pandemic knowledge via endless statistics, becoming almost its opposite iconographic production. The Amabie reintroduces a reflection on quasi-human and quasi-animal ontological dimensions during a time when human suffering is cast in numbers, effacing human (and animal) bodies from discourse.

Inhabiting our world as a monster, with her hypervisuality, the Amabie hints continuously at the presence of the invisible monster that we know exists: the virus. The virus itself is often represented in many of the existing speculations and health conspiracy plots as an engineered chimera itself that escaped a lab (or was even deliberately released).<sup>13</sup> Viral mutations created in labs can also be considered as technological chimeras (Keck, 2015). The killer virus (not only ‘this’ virus, since we witnessed similar perceptions during the early days of the AIDS epidemic and narratives) cannot easily be considered ‘natural’ because in our imaginary we deal with a threatened, fragile nature. On par with historically earlier rituals dealing with pollution in Japan, the ritual expulsion of COVID-19 has been widespread, with Shinto clergy composing specific prayers to be used (see McLaughlin, 2020, p. 9).

The salience of the Amabie does, as Severi says of chimera images, “promote and preserve meaning” (Severi, 2007 [2015], p. 68). But while the Amabie’s iconography preserves historical memories of epidemics and visual representations beyond Japan, it has been read as essentially manufacturing the past (see Baffelli, Castiglioni and Rambelli 2021, p.

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<sup>13</sup> On 9 June 2022, the Scientific Advisory Group for the Origins of Novel Pathogens (SAGO) released a preliminary report in which they recommend further investigations into the lab leak hypothesis (WHO 2022).

g); used to reflect on time space, it is instead, in my opinion, a chronotope that also critiques the present. Rather than considering the Amabie as just a cute, endearing mascot of the COVID-19 pandemic, I propose examining this Edo-period prophesising *yōkai* as an agent of efficacy in a global ecology comprising emerging “complex webs of *innen*” – networks of relations and causality (Jensen, Ishi & Swift, 2016, pp. 163-164). As a hybrid figure, the Amabie’s body reminds one of another liminal creature that has been closely associated with the coronavirus pandemic: the pangolin – a mammal with a scaly body, and a long beak-like face; an anomalous animal that can be perceived as a remarkable “matter out of place” (Douglas, [1966] 2003, pp. 36-41). The mammal’s association with the contemporary ‘plague’ we live in is not a benign one: its consumption as a Wuhan delicacy (but in a ‘dirty,’ wet market environment) was initially blamed (together with the consumption of bats) for the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (cf. Lynteris, 2016 and 2019 for representations of Chinese wet markets and animals as villains). Considered the height of gastronomic elitism and a source of *materia medica* in the Orient and on the African continent, where its scales and meat are used to ward off evil as well as to treat various diseases, the pangolin and other wild meats are nowadays removed from their ecological context to become marketised items of outsourcing and consumption (Volpato et al., 2020). Like the chimeric beings of Chinese cosmology, they speak of territorial as well as nature-legal transgressions.

The mermaid challenges ideas of appropriate embodiment and, for this reason, the figure has been used in critical disability approaches (Pedersen, 2018, pp. 252–253): But especially in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic, it addressed the perceived inappropriateness of bodies left to suffocate, incapable of breathing, as if they were fish out of water. The ecological intimacy of human and animals becomes the breeding ground of new viruses (Caduff, 2015, p. 11), whereas we have lost the intimacy between humans and ecology that would permeate the premodern vicinity between people and the spirits that inhabit the Japanese waters (see Suwa, 2018 for a discussion of such relations around Lake Biwa). In their preserved state as mummified *ningyo* or *ningyo no miira*, human-fish beings become agents of the body of water and environment they are associated with (Suwa, 2018, p. 68):

*In an aquapelagic assemblage, water is not simply a fluid body that comprises a blank space but is, rather, an agent that animates the territories of works of art. The aquapelagic assemblage is a system in which the animation of magical agents takes place in the vicinity of water, or, otherwise, water attains agency by itself.* (Suwa, 2018, p. 71)

Merfolk are “cryptids - disputed beings, however widely distributed - that are incontrovertibly *not* human” (Davis, 2019, p. 257, original emphasis), despite being imitative of people’s semblances and behaviour (Davis, 2019, p. 270). During the Edo period, uncommon fish or sea mammals, themselves having rather hybrid appearance, were also categorised as *ningyo*. Even earlier in history, a salamander represented with fish body, legs and a human face on a ritual tablet from 13th century was named a *ningyo* (Castiglioni, 2021, pp. 7, 16), so the category was fluid enough to include hybrids beyond the human-fish. The gender of *ningyo* was not marked in earlier sources but starting from the mid 15th and beginning of 16th centuries their bodies assume female or male features as well as avian legs (Castiglioni, 2021, pp. 19–22). They were progressively modified to respond to the influence of European representation, in what Hayward (2018b) calls a

process of *mermaidisation*. Carl Gustav Jung (1969, pp. 56-57) includes visual representations of the Melusine<sup>14</sup> (allegedly one of the foundational figures of European aristocracy) in his 1944 work *Psychology and Alchemy* (2006 [1972]), the first one (Figure 5), carries striking resemblances to the three-tailed Amabie in that it has three legs, a scaly body, and a halo around her face. The second (Figure 6) is a siren carrying a mask with a protruding nose in her raised left hand. These illustrations appeared originally in R. Abraham Eleazar's alchemic work *Uraltes chymisches Werk* from 1760. The first image is described by Eleazar as an alchemic process of transformation of a three-headed bird-dragon into a Python dragon and eventually as "the Metamorphosed Venus clothed with the Luna" (1760, pp. 84-85). In this figure there are three smaller legs and a longer serpent-like tail. The Amabie and the alchemic metamorphosed Venus share an almost archetypal force as aerial-aquatic-terrestrial beings that speak to our collective unconscious.



Figure 5 – R. Abraham Eleazaris (1760).



Figure 6 – R. Abraham Eleazaris (1760).

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of Melusine as machine see Inkol (2018).

Earlier in this article I analysed the Chinese cosmology of human-fish beings whose ingestion could cure idiocy or delusion. The attribution of medicinal properties to *ningyo* in Japanese sources was also the result of encounter with European and more specifically Dutch sources, since the Dutch had monopoly on commercialising *ningyo* as *materia medica* in Japan, especially during the 18th century. In Japanese folklore, eating the flesh of a *ningyo* could bring about an uncomfortable immortality, and mermaid water called *ningyosui* was sold as a medicine in Edo Japan, making *ningyo*'s bodies function also as contact relics (Castiglioni, 2021, pp. 22, 30; Chaiklin, 2010, pp. 247-248).<sup>15</sup> In the contemporary commercial production of Amabie *wagashi* sweets, the confectionary becomes more than simply merchandise – an actualisation, in fact, of eating mermaids.

### Media-lore and circulated images and numbers

The practice of preserving *ningyo no miira* in shrines made them ambiguously proximate yet unavailable to people's visual access because they were usually encased, shielded from view (Suwa, 2018). This invisibility contrasts with the iconographic diffusion and hypervisibility of *ningyo* via the *kawaraban* and prints during the Edo period. The making-visual of *ningyo* took also more material forms, and fishermen in the Edo period (1603-1868) were rumoured to produce mummified "mermaids" (allegedly adding animal parts, papier mâché and other objects to a large fish) and some were traded with Dutch sailors (Foster, 2015, pp. 155-156; Hayward, 2018b, pp. 53-54). The production would have required some serious technical knowledge that could unlikely be accessible to fishermen. The story of a fisherman capturing a mermaid made it into records of encounters between the Dutch and Japanese in Nagasaki Bay, Kyūshū, in the 1820s, predating Amabie's appearance some twenty years later.

*He then gave out that he had caught the creature alive in his net, but that it had died shortly after being taken out of the water ... The exhibition of the sea-monster to Japanese curiosity paid well; but yet more productive was the assertion that the half human fish, having spoken during the few minutes it existed out of its native element, had predicted a certain number of years of wonderful fertility, and a fatal epidemic, the only remedy for which would be, possession of the marine prophet's likeness. The sale of these pictured mermaids was immense. (Busk, 1841, p. 261)*

The presence of these manufactured mermaids has been seen as representing "a question of East-West interactions" (Chaiklin, 2010, p. 242). Discoveries of mermaid mummies are still reported in news, adding to the list of oriental mermaid remains in European collections (see Viscardi et al., 2014). The latest I came across, in February 2022, showcased a specimen that was being investigated via CT scan (Ozawa, 2022; Tolj, 2022). Kozen Kuida, the chief priest of the temple where this specimen is preserved, proposed an association between the mummy and plague defeating Amabie, saying "[w]e have worshipped it, hoping that it would help alleviate the coronavirus pandemic even if only slightly" (Ozawa, 2022).

The international fascination for Amabie in association with the contemporary COVID-19 outbreak can be considered a successful mechanism of chimeric image projection. The

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<sup>15</sup> Another aquatic *yōkai*, the *kappa*, is also associated with medical knowledge, specifically bone-setting and re-attaching severed limbs (Foster, 2015, pp. 161-162).



representation of *ningyo* in Edo period was derived by encounter with Western literature even before the arrival of Europeans and included characteristics of the classic siren such as the presence of bird legs. Bird elements would have been particularly easy to assimilate to the existing Chinese cosmology of human-fish beings with beaks. But was it only ancient Greek chimeric iconography that reached Japan via the Dutch traders or also some modern monsters?

Several drawings that were circulated for the #Amabiechallenge picked up on the beaky features of this *yōkai* as evoking another bird-like icon of Europe's epidemic times from the 17th century, the beaky face of the plague doctor. I take a leap (or flight) in projecting the missing elements of a chimeric body into the specific aquapelagic context and circulation of medical images in southern Kyūshū after the arrival of Europeans in Nagasaki, where portraits of Europe's plague doctors might have been part of the exchange of medical knowledge and anatomical atlases, and might have prompted the adoption of the beak onto the epidemic *ningyo*'s body soon to emerge from Kumamoto waters.<sup>16</sup> As the more human physiognomy of the Amabie's face is reduced or diminished, the beaky features take prominence and allow people belonging to different contexts to readily identify the similarities. I advance here the hypothesis that Amabie is an "elaborating symbol", according to the typology discussed by Sherry Ortner: "symbols valued for their contribution to the sorting out of experience" (Ortner, 1973, p. 1342).

The prominent beak – and sometimes also the ears – of the plague doctor's mask were filled with garlic or fragrant substances like rue to 'clean' and purify the air before inhaling it, according to the miasmatic theory of disease considered valid at the time (Lynteris, 2018, p. 449; Ruisinger, 2020, p. 242-243). However, the plague doctor's iconic appearance was not so much an actual medical practice prevalent in wider Europe at the time, as a mediatic phenomenon of representation circulated in print (Ruisinger, 2020, p. 248) – much like the circulation of *yōkai* images of Amabie in Edo Japan. Both can be considered to be at the centre of their respective "visual culture[s] of the plague" (Lynteris, 2018, p. 451). Apart from wearing a beaky mask, the plague doctor became also a mask in the sense of a costume (as in Venice carnival's Medico della Peste mask) (Figure 7) and Amabie costumes also started being used in Japan.

The beaked doctors looked like monsters or ghosts, wrapped in a waxy body cover with gloved hands, such that most of their human form was dissimulated (Figure 8). In threatening to imperil our very existence as a species (Lynteris, 2018, p. 452), the virus also acts as an hyperobject (Morton, 2013a), limiting global population to a state of temporal and spatial suspension whose "scale is [or rather was] beyond human imagination" (Bradley, 2019, p. 168). German print pages in the 18th century generally portray the beaked doctors as originating from and belonging to southern Europe (the plague always belongs to other imagined realities where medical facilities are deemed inferior or less sophisticated – Ruisinger, 2020, p. 248). Instead of approaching our contemporary world as interconnected in a web of *en* (ties and relations, or karmic relations), the present pandemic witnessed a reproduction of an exclusionary trope of remoteness and exoticism. How do you know a plague doctor when you see one? By the beak. Rediscovering Amabie and the plague doctor has allowed some individuals and communities to make, as Lynteris argues for other historical epidemics and iconography, past pandemics *present* (2020a).

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Hakoiri musume menya ningyo* there is a specific connection between the *ningyo* and the Japanese god of plague (*yakubyōgami* 疫病神) (in Castiglioni, 2021, pp. 30–33).





Figure 7 - Black-and-white copper engraving of Doctor Schnabel [i.e. Dr Beak], a plague doctor in 17th-century Rome, ca. 1656 — Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul\\_F%C3%BCrst,\\_Der\\_Doctor\\_Schnabel\\_von\\_Rom\\_\(Holl%C3%A4nder\\_version\).png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Paul_F%C3%BCrst,_Der_Doctor_Schnabel_von_Rom_(Holl%C3%A4nder_version).png)

The pandemic as global mediatic phenomenon has assuaged us to daily spilling of statistics and diagrams, providing a numerical rationality to an experience of limitation and isolation that we struggle to grasp. Against this number-driven iconography of lines, curves and tangential deaths, Amabie drawings suggested other representations. Between the end of February and the first week of March 2020, several artists were indicated as being the first to draw the Amabie and circulating it (Voon, 2020), but it first appeared on Twitter, in Japanese artists Orochidou's<sup>17</sup> and Shigeoka Hidemitsu's accounts, in February,<sup>18</sup> and Kaori Hamura Long in March, to later become a global social media phenomenon (see Alt, 2020 for an extended comment; *El Pais* 2020 for a review of images; Kosaka, 2020; Kuhn & Kobayashi, 2020; Machemer, 2020; Voon, 2020). Amabie had made

<sup>17</sup> Orochidou とんでもない勢いで某ウイルスが流行ってますが妖怪の中に「流行り病がでたら対策のためにわたしの姿を描いて人々にみせるように」と言ったのがいるんですよ。アマビエって言うんですけど。 <https://twitter.com/orochidou/status/1232956377754001408> 27 February 2020

<sup>18</sup> The original post has now been deleted <https://twitter.com/shigeokahide>

an appearance in *yōkai* and manga popular culture before, as well as in an animation series from 2007, *GeGeGe no Kitarō*.<sup>19</sup> Drawings of Amabie connected the present global COVID-19 pandemic to Japan's history of epidemics. Japanese people made Amabie's story present again: artists, painters and soon others started to create drawings and distribute them as benolent, well-wishing, protective images – or, as Alt (2020) wrote, “a character for solace”. Multiple representations and commercial products such as sweets (*amabie wagashi*, アマビエ和菓), keychains, effigies and manga, became popular in Japan and in global social media, as a form of modern media-lore (see Greenland & Hayward, 2020, p. 134 for discussion of the concept). Her appearance in a Noh theatre performance as well as other forms of play (*asobi*) in Kansai testify to Amabie's communal ludic potential (Tanaka, 2022).



Figure 8 - Plague cover. 17<sup>th</sup> century. Anagoria, CC BY 3.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:17.\\_Jht.\\_Pesthaube\\_anagoria.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:17._Jht._Pesthaube_anagoria.JPG)

The “perpetual semantic proliferations” of the *ningyo* between 8th and 19th centuries (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 2) is present in our contemporary Amabie phenomenon, as well as for other *yōkai* and new monsters, in its wide and rapid circulation. *Ningyo* and mermaids have also been utilised on the Internet to promote tourism in several Japanese localities (Hayward, 2018b, p. 61). A large new oceanic cryptid with human semblances, *ningen* ニンゲン (referred to as *hitogata* 人型) that made its appearance in Antarctica and media-lore, reportedly spoke to humans warning them about global warming and ecological degradation (Greenland & Hayward, 2020). The *ningen* also captured international attention beyond Japan, featuring on anglophone websites and in the press

<sup>19</sup> <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1774213-amabie>

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(Greenland & Hayward, 2020, p. 143). Do we rather prefer monsters to speak to us of impending dangers rather than statistics?

The Amabie went “viral” after 6 March, when the Kyoto University Library posted the original image of the creature from an Edo-period broadsheet on Twitter (also reported in *Kyodo News* 2020). Japan’s Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (MHLW) enlisted Amabie as a symbol of the COVID-19 campaign (see also Johnston, 2020) to raise awareness among young people about the risk of asymptomatic transmission, as stated on the first line of the slogan: “Because I can spread it without knowing” (tweet on the MHLW’s official account, 9 April 2020). Later it was associated with other characters to support vaccinations (Tanaka, 2022, pp. 200–201) and social distancing (Figure 9). Japan’s government successfully co-opted this marginal *yōkai*’s subaltern knowledge and gnomic form of speech to support the authoritative scientific approach and message. The appeal to individual responsibility and care, rather than a top-down public health approach, echoes the self-reliance in controlling the spread of infection that was already present in some of the *hashika-e* of the Edo period in that the “intervention of physicians or deities was not necessarily a requirement, or even beneficial at all, for conquering measles” (Smits, 2009, p. 16).



Figure 9 - Amabie in Atrium Meguro Station (番記者, CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, different ritual and religious services and activities in Japan adapted to digital formats, especially new religions (Cavaliere, 2021, p. 59; McLaughlin, 2020). However, shrines took initiatives on the Amabie phenomenon. A golden Amabie pattern features on a single sheet seal stamp (*kami goshuin*, 紙御朱印) issued by Irugi Shrine (Tokyo) on 10 May, to pray for an early end to the new coronavirus pandemic (Merli, 2020). Amabie’s benevolent images and amulets were available at shrines, as well, as wooden tablets (*ema*) where visitors could write down prayers (Cavaliere, 2021, p. 43; Tanaka, 2022, pp. 207–211).

In the Edo period *kawaraban* prints were used for commercial purposes but were also considered talismans. These prints often presented *ningyo* stories in which these female marine creatures interact with human males, delivered oracles according to a consistent formula alternating prosperity to epidemic (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 33ff). The viewing of, copying and possessing the images on the *kawaraban* were protective, a form of disease prevention (Furukawa & Kansaku, 2020), associated with the bright red colour of the *ningyo*'s scales (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 33).

During the Edo period, the printing of scrolls to be hung for protection was widespread and extended to calamities such as earthquakes. In 1855, woodblock prints with catfish (*namazu-e*) were produced following the Edo earthquake (Smits, 2009). Several epidemics afflicted Japan during the Edo period. Images affixed to houses were used during the 1858 cholera epidemic (Gramlich-Oka, 2009) and the measles outbreak of 1862 (one of the recurring epidemics that swept across Japan in intervals of a dozen years or more) was met with prints called *hashika-e* (麻疹絵 – ‘measles prints’) (Smits, 2009, p. 14). Smallpox received similar iconographic expressions, with *hōsō-e* (放送絵 - smallpox prints) (Rotermund & Tyler, 2001). Chaiklin mentions that in 1816, woodblocks of *ningyo* were available in Edo to counter a severe measles epidemic and could either be affixed on house pillars or worn on the body as protection (2010, p. 248). As later, during the Meiji Era, these measures were considered to appeal to the individual's sense of responsibility and did not correspond with what we would nowadays call “community or public health” (Johnston, 1995, pp. 178-180).

During the Edo period, mass media also played an important role in “the production and popularity” of *yōkai* culture (Foster, 2008, p. 204). Social media during COVID-19 became the digital *kawaraban* for the global audience to visually access and receive protection from the *yōkai* Amabie. Not surprisingly then, in keeping with the historical presence of *yōkai* in contemporary Japanese society (and their revival as manga), social media became a suitable platform for the global circulation of Amabie images during the COVID-19 pandemic. Twitter pages carrying the hashtags #amabie, #amabiechallenge (in Japanese, #アマビエ and #アマビエチャレンジ) started circulating shortly after the initial tweets in January 2020 and especially after the original *kawaraban* image was published by the Kyoto University Library. This was, in a sense, “a superspreader event” reaching up to 20,000 tweets a day (Furukawa & Kansaku, 2020, p. 532). People around the world soon rose to the challenge, circulating the Amabie's image to acquaintances and friends as a form of protection against the new coronavirus infection.<sup>20</sup> The reasons for the popularity of the image include its embodying “prevalent Japanese manga and anime standards of *kimo-kawaii* (both ugly and cute at the same time) and *heta-uma* (poorly made at first glance but captivating)” (Furukawa & Kansaku, 2020, p. 533). The *kimo-kawaii* versions have been adapted in several commercial as well as policy communications, often in the company of city mascots (Merli, 2020; Tanaka, 2022), by significantly shortening Amabie's beak; the shortened “nose” allows also for an easier representation of the *yōkai* “wearing” a facemask.

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<sup>20</sup> Amabie feature in the work of California-based artist Diana Moll, who posted a series of daily ink drawings on Twitter under the moniker Bandit Rabbit. She portrayed an Amabie as donning a long, pointed, dark mask with jutting, round goggle cut-ins. The drawings progressively depict a series of doom-like scenarios, beyond epidemics and into political as well as ecological catastrophes (see Merli, 2020 for an analysis). Revisiting her work during the pandemic, Moll has recently published a book collecting the drawings and reflecting on the process (2021).



### Prophesising, thinking and acting scientifically

Caduff examined the prophetic aspects and discourses that recur cyclically in the work carried out by epidemiologists and other professional sentinels for the next influenza virus pandemic as a 'logic of deferral' (2015, p. 185). One of the effects of this extended preparedness was, as Caduff describes in the concluding pages, to raise concerns among CDC officials of a funding cut, a political lack of attention to the concrete risk of a pandemic (2015, p. 180). This particular prophecy of what the officials and experts were fearing was realised in 2018 when the US Trump administration rescinded funding and dissolved the pandemic preparedness team (the White House's National Security Council Directorate for Global Health Security and Biodefense), which had been established in 2014 by the Obama administration (Cameron, 2020). While "prophets claim to see what others cannot see" (Caduff, 2015, p. 3), what they specifically do is to speak or leave a message that needs to be propagated in order for others to be saved. In times when a popular paradigm characterises public health and global health preparedness and their messages as forms of pandemic prophesising (Caduff, 2015, pp. 5-7, 71-72), and when the public health-prophets and global health preparedness experts fail to correctly determine the timing and could not coordinate a concerted global response to the COVID-19 spread, the return to a different kind of prophet that held a record of appearing to correctly predict epidemics in pre-modern Japan, 'made sense'.

Instead of seeing the microbiologists and virologists as prophets, Keck considers them as more akin to shamans, crossing the boundaries between "animal imaginaries", humanity, and animality, to gain within this imaginary an understanding of the jumps between species (Keck, 2015). Keck recognises a similarity between the virtual simulation of hunting in shamanic societies and the simulations virologists make in laboratories (2015). In a brief commentary during the pandemic, Taussig asked if a shaman, without pretence of substituting virologists, could harness a boundary-crossing capacity into death territory to help "dampen panic, ease social isolation, and promote cohesion" (Taussig, 2020). In historical Japan, local governors required divination rituals whenever a *ningyo* was found, "to ascertain when, where, and against whom the curse will strike again in future" (Castiglioni, 2021, p. 14). Our contemporary epidemiologists do not seem to have divinatory capacities required to reassure people that the present pandemic will be over at a specific calendar date. They are embedded in a bureaucratic system that produces graphs and curves that feel unreal, almost alien, to a layman.

Science can be considered "a predictive art" and it even reserves a place for mermaids in scientific discourse (for instance, NOAA opened a webpage questioning the (in)existence of aquatic humanoids and calling on other disciplines to study them, opening up to 'speculative imagination' - Goggin, 2018, pp. 13-14, 16). The question of reality of mermaids needs to be considered together with the desire for them to be real, since they exist as artefacts, for example in the form of manufactured mummified *ningyo*:

*it didn't matter if Japanese mermaids weren't real; enough people wanted them to be real in Japan and the West that there was an ongoing demand to see them. The manufactured fakes were a physical manifestation of this desire. (Chaiklin, 2010, p. 260).*

Mermaids similarly exist in discourses, artistic and performance production (Davis, 2019; Goggin, 2018). Glancing over the innumerable drawings posted on social media and accompanying commentaries, we witness how the desire for the Amabie's reality is found

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well beyond Japan. Many people now would want the Amabie to be real and defeat the COVID-19 pandemic. The Amabie's iconic presence as the thematic focus selected for the 23rd Scarecrow Competition in Tokyo (from 1 to 23 September 2020) lined Fukagawa Museum Street (e.g., Figure 10) where a large yellow and red sphere with sharp teeth also represented SARS-CoV-2 (Figure 11).



Figure 10 - Scarecrow of Amabi. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Scarecrow Contest on Fukagawa Museum Street, Tokyo 2020 CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 11 - Scarecrow of COVID-19. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Scarecrow Contest on Fukagawa Museum Street, Tokyo 2020 CC BY-SA 4.0 via Wikimedia Commons.

The manner in which the Amabie was co-opted into the Japanese medico-scientific discourse of public health information is not an isolated event. *Yōkai* have also been used to facilitate children's access and retention in disaster education. For example, after the 011 Tohoku earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis, *yōkai* were used as social devices to transmit disaster risk information (Takada & Kondo, 2019). There are also examples of

less successful attempts to use the *yōkai* imaginary to this aim, such as in 1993's Pluto-kun (Little Mr Pluto, a terrestrial bipedal being, wearing a green helmet on which the symbol of plutonium, Pu, is printed). Pluto-kun was devised to aid in making people 'trust' the nuclear industry in matters of safety levels for the presence of plutonium in water (JPRNFDC, 1993; McCurry, 2013) specifically what the slogan named 'unburnable plutonium' whose riskless properties were thus expressed:

*I'm hardly absorbed by your stomach or intestines and I'm expelled by your body, so in fact I can't kill people at all.* (Spike Japan, 2011).

During the wave of Amabie's popularity, another aquatic cryptid figure was introduced on 13 April 2021, Little Mr Tritium (Figure 12), to inform the Japanese public about the safety regarding plans to release Fukushima's treated wastewater into the ocean. Tritium-kun was withdrawn (or "suspended") two days after its release following Fukushima residents' vehement protest, while the Reconstruction Agency defended that this character was not intended to be "a mascot" (Fukushima News, 2021; McCurry, 2021; NHK, 2021). On balance, nuclear energy might not only be regarded as 'bad science' but also turns out to be bad politics in that it truly embodies the monstrousness of transgressing nature and law together. They also embody the negative aspects of our simultaneous coexistence, and of a terrible future that awaits.

*It is necessary to find a new relationship to nature, not to the little nature of one's own corner of the world but to the big nature of the great world, to all the phenomena of the solar system, to the wealth excavated from the earth's core, to a variety of geographical locations and continents.* (Bakhtin 1984, p. 234)



Figure 12 - Tritium character by the Government of Japan.jpg The Reconstruction Agency, The Government of Japan [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](#).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> The Tritium character is an illustration in [web page](#), [posters](#) and [videos](#) published on 13 April 2021 on the official web site of the Reconstruction Agency, the Government of Japan. Because this illustration is not a symbol, logo, or character design that represents an organisation or a specific business, it should be considered as "Content" released under the [Terms of Use](#) on the [Government of Japan Standard Terms and Conditions](#), which are compatible with the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0.



## Conclusions

The uncanny Amabie has been reiterated in different forms. People from different geographical and socio-cultural contexts imbued her with specific meanings, expanding the Kyūshū aquapelagic imaginary of a premodern Japanese *yōkai* and *ningyo* on the global scale. These have acquired unexpected creative and political dimensions that tease our conceptions about medical modernity and scientific rationality vis-à-vis a figure of Japanese folklore that, like other similar characters, emerges in-between moments and spaces. Functioning as a chronotope that conjoins widely different periods of time and spaces, the Amabie has become an effective messenger of public health awareness, a facilitator to creating a virtual community of drawing individuals, as well as a call to recover our relationship with the environment, marked by spiritual, if not supernatural, encounters with nature – when fishermen and local officials could seize swimming or prophesising *ningyo*, be warned of impending calamities and maintain a form of communication with an ecology yet to be disrupted. Less terrifying than a plague doctor, the Amabie also evokes the presence of the virus with her beaky face. She hints at the simultaneous presence of local and alien bureaucratic orders that engage in forms of health and prophetic communication. Her benign, if ambiguous, presence casts a protective charm onto a global audience; whereas similar mechanisms, co-opted by the nuclear energy industry consistently fail to reflect how the Japanese public engage with the local aquapelagic imaginary, questioning trust in their good faith and credibility. The Amabie also reminds us that an aquatic chimera can breathe out of water, recuperate historical knowledge about previous plagues, invite the viewer to fill her with imagined parts or characteristics, and be the soothing shaman or culture hero we and our collective unconscious need.

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