

21 The war metaphors underpinning Mizuki Shigeru yōkai tourism

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Mizuki Shigeru (1922–2015) is one of Japan’s most celebrated manga artists for his works set in the fantasy world of yōkai (monsters or ghosts in Japanese folklore). His most famous character is Kitarō, the protagonist of works such as *Gegege no Kitarō*, and many of Mizuki’s works have been translated into English. As part of an economic revitalization project in his hometown of Sakaiminato, Tottori prefecture, the Mizuki Shigeru Road opened in 1993. In 2021, 177 bronze yōkai statues lined the 800 metres from Sakaiminato Station to the Mizuki Shigeru Museum, which was opened in 2003 (Mizuki Shigeru Museum n.d.). Its success as a tourist site made Mizuki Shigeru Road an important early case study within contents tourism research (Masubuchi 2010: 91–110; Yamamura 2011: 11–19) and helped popularize the more general phenomenon of yōkai tourism (Myoki 2020: 99–100). In 2010, NHK’s morning drama was based on an autobiography penned by Mizuki’s wife, Mura Nunoe. *Gegege no nyōbō* (Gegege’s Wife) also triggered considerable contents tourism as part of the widely recognized phenomenon of *asadora* (‘morning drama’) tourism (Scherer and Thelen 2020; Chōfu-shi Kankō Kyōkai 2017). Much of this tourism was to Chōfu, the city in western Tokyo where he lived from 1959 to his death, and which is the other main ‘sacred site’ of Mizuki Shigeru contents tourism. Mizuki died in 2015, but his popularity has not waned. Tourism numbers in Sakaiminato spiked in 2018 when the sixth television anime series based on Kitarō was broadcast (a project that marked the fiftieth anniversary of the first series). Other events are planned for 2022, which is the centenary of Mizuki’s birth. Tottori prefecture statistics (Tottori Prefecture 2021) indicate that the Mizuki Shigeru Road is Tottori’s single most visited attraction, making Mizuki’s works arguably Tottori prefecture’s most important tourism resource ahead of the famous Tottori Sand Dunes.

The success of Mizuki’s works both as transmedia entertainment and tourism driver has encouraged scholars to investigate more the

original stories behind his *yōkai* stories. Takoshima Sunao (2018: 189) has described the great influence of NonNonBa, an old woman in Tottori who told a young Mizuki the *yōkai* tales that sparked his interest. In addition to this childhood interest, the grotesque and violent scenes in his first work *Hakaba Kitarō* (Kitarō of the Graveyard) suggest that Mizuki's wartime experiences also influenced his *yōkai* works. In other words, what underpins the success of the Mizuki Shigeru Road and other sites associated with Shigeru is not only folklore and childhood stories but also wartime experiences. In this view, Mizuki tried to talk about his youth and the friends he lost during the war and to pass on these experiences to later generations metaphorically via his *yōkai* stories.

It is important, therefore, to summarize briefly Mizuki's wartime experiences. In 1942, as a 20-year-old he was studying art and design in Osaka when he was drafted into the military (Mizuki 2007: 63–65). In the autumn of 1943 Mizuki entered his home prefecture regiment, the Tottori Regiment, as a bugler. However, he was not good at playing the bugle and was sent to Rabaul on the island of New Britain as a recruit. Rabaul was a site of intense fighting. When Mizuki boarded his transport in 1943, most ships to Rabaul were being sunk by the Allies. In fact, after his ship arrived not a single Japanese ship reached Rabaul safely thereafter (Mizuki 2002: 83–85). After his miraculous journey to Rabaul, he experienced heavy fighting. In April 1944, Mizuki was sent as part of a unit of around a dozen people to Baien, but they were attacked by enemy troops. On sentry duty at a distance from the main group, he was the only survivor (NHK 2010). He later caught malaria and lost his left arm in an air raid. When he returned to Japan in 1946, he was one of only 80 soldiers to make it home from Rabaul (Mizuki 2007: 98–110; Mizuki 2011: 368).

After the war, Mizuki returned to his youthful interest in art. For years he struggled in poverty as a *kami shibai* ('paper theatre') storyteller and manga artist before his big break came at the age of 43 with *Gegege no Kitarō* (Adachi 2010). Kitarō is the last surviving child of the ghost tribe (*yūrei-zoku*) and emerged from a grave that represents the world of the dead. This mirrors reality. Mizuki was the last surviving member of his unit, he lost his arm in an enemy attack, and returned home to Japan from the battlefield of death. As Suzuki Shige has argued, 'It is not difficult to see a reflection of Mizuki himself (who had lost one arm in the war) in the figuration of one-eyed, marginalized Kitarō' (Suzuki 2019: 2210). In an interview, Mizuki gave his reasons for creating the character of Kitarō as follows:

The real reason that I wrote Kitarō is that when I was writing it I was searching for something like a *yorishiro* [in Shinto belief, a physical

object which gives *kami*, “spirits”, a place to exist] for my soul. For that reason I did Kitarō. He was a place where my soul could exist.
(Hirabayashi 2007: 26)

Reflecting on his war experiences, he also wrote that ‘war turns people into devils’ (Mizuki 2010: 51). In this context of Mizuki’s treatment of humans during war as devils, ‘yōkai are a manifestation of the desires of ordinary people’ (Mizuki 2016: 153). Via both clues gained from reading his works and also Mizuki’s own words in postwar interviews, it can be concluded, therefore, that his yōkai manga were a significant means via which Mizuki attempted to work through and come to terms with his wartime experiences, particularly as the sole survivor of the fateful mission to Baien.

Mizuki as a manga artist left two main bodies of work: his fictional yōkai manga and non-fictional historical manga, including a manga history of the Showa era and his wartime recollections (the most famous of which is *Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths*). The connections are evident on a visual level in the similarities between Mizuki’s yōkai manga and his war manga. One arresting commonality, noted by Mizuki biographer Adachi Noriyuki (2010), is the loss of an eye (Figure 21.1). The eyeball motif extends to Mizuki’s famous character, Kitarō, who loses his eye after being thrown as a baby at a gravestone by a human.

On the level of imagery, metaphor, and content, therefore, the worlds of yōkai and war can be connected as follows. Mizuki’s early childhood interests in yōkai and art were interrupted by the war, but when he started drawing yōkai professionally after the war it was a means of expressing what he wanted to say about war. Through careful reading, therefore, his yōkai manga offers insights into his war experiences. In short, Mizuki Shigeru’s yōkai world echoes the themes raised in many of the works of culture described by Igarashi Yoshikuni in *Bodies of Memory*. Igarashi’s book is ‘an attempt to read the absent presence of the country’s war memories’ (Igarashi 2000: 3) in a range of popular cultural production from art to Godzilla films (see also Chapter 22) to professional wrestling. During the first few decades after the war (Igarashi’s study covers the years 1945–1970) the lingering presence of war memories and discourses could be read into much popular culture that, on the surface, was not about the war at all. In the story of Godzilla was the ‘absent presence’ of nuclear issues; in professional wrestling bouts between American and Japanese wrestlers (especially Korean–Japanese wrestler Rikidōzan) there were subtexts of recovering national pride lost during the war through victory in wrestling. Similarly, the ‘absent presence’ of war memories is evident in Mizuki’s yōkai manga – from the common grotesque imagery,



Figure 21.1 Private Maruyama dies in *Onwards Towards Our Noble Deaths*. Source: Mizuki (2018: 462). ©水木プロ.

the liminal space occupied by the protagonists between life and death, and even the characteristics (whether physical or psychological) between Mizuki and his creation Kitarō. If Mizuki's manga is understood in this way, then all contents tourism relating to Mizuki likewise exhibits the absent presence of war memories and therefore constitutes an important example within the range of activities that may be categorized as war-related contents tourism.

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