

Going behind the veil of world-creation. Truth in Fantasy

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You wish to know of the legends of Kamigawa?" The soratami scroll-keeper leans forward, peering at you through silvery rimmed spectacles. "Normally, I'd have turned you away at the door," says the soratami, smiling humorlessly, "but you've made me an offer I can't refuse. I would see this rare flower you claim to possess. As you can see, I am a collector of many things." He gestures to an elegantly carved cherrywood rack standing against the wall behind him upon which sit fabulous trinkets of all descriptions. "Most of my kind have little need for the artifacts of those who dwell beneath the clouds. You might say I'm a rare exception." Reaching down to a long drawer at his feet, he pulls out a dusty scroll and spreads it on the table before you. The yellowed paper is covered in the delicate cursive whorls of an ancient script...

Hello, this is Alex, of the **Magic** creative text writing team, also known as "that guy who wrote [Tallowisp](#) with one 'w'," here to talk a bit about the cultural background that inspired the world of Kamigawa. As Western fairytales and mythology have their Brothers Grimm and Bullfinch, Japan, too, has a long history of recorders who penned down the stories that were being told about the *kami* and the many strange and wondrous creatures who seem to live half in this world and half in the other. In fact, the word for "mythology" in Japanese is *shinwa*--literally "kami stories," and there are a whole lot of them out there, as Anthony Alongi wrote in his [recent article](#) on the topic. Now, **Magic** certainly isn't the first game to dip its [honor-worn shaku](#) into the rich cornucopia of mythology and tradition that Japan has to offer, but it's definitely one of the best, and it dips very, very deep. In fact, there's so much to talk about, I wouldn't be able to fit it all in an article written in a traditional form, so, without further ado, here are some glimpses behind the veil, presented in easily digestible bite-size chunks. Bon appetit!

The Kitsune

- **Messengers of the Gods:** The white kitsune of Kamigawa are based on the "Inari kitsune," the fox spirits that act as messengers and couriers for Inari, the kami of the rice fields. Shrines to Inari are still commonplace in Japan, even in Tokyo where you'll find them wedged in between the high-rise buildings. You can tell an Inari shrine immediately by the stone fox statues on either side of the entrance. Here's an example from an Inari shrine near me:



- The shrines serve as a convenient place to pay respect to the natural world and the *kami* governing things like crops and rain. When a petitioner comes to the shrine to ask Inari for a good harvest, it is the fox who accepts the offering (traditionally a gift of food and money) and takes it to the *kami* on man's behalf.

- **The Many Colors of Kitsune:** Kamigawa's foxes weren't always white. In the initial stages of world development, there were a number of ideas for kitsune of different colors. Shape-changing foxes (*bakegitsune*), who appear in some of the earliest recorded folktales in Japan, would have fit comfortably into a blue role, while the wild fox-spirits (*nogitsune*), known for creating illusory banquets out of garbage in abandoned temples made to look like fabulous palaces could have evolved into a blue illusionist kitsune, or even a malicious black kitsune--though there they would run into competition from fox-mages (*kitsune-tsukai*) who command evil fox-spirits to steal from others, or the dreaded possessing foxes (*tsukimono-gitsune*) who possess people and make them do malicious things like eat other people's rice cakes. Suffice it to say there was a lot to choose from, though I think that the white kitsune rose to the top as they best represent the dilemma of Kamigawa's mortal inhabitants: once servants of the *kami*, they seem closer to the spirit world than their human counterparts, yet tragically they are forced by the war to defend themselves against their former masters or perish.



- **Whence the Tails?:** We already know how [Eight-and-a-Half-Tails got his tails](#), but why should foxes have any business running about with more than one tail, anyway? It turns out that there was a long-standing belief in some circles of the Imperial court that the appearance of a *kyubi-kitsune* (nine-tailed fox) was a good omen for the reign of the current Emperor. Indeed the earliest court documents in Japan mention seeing this strange creature frolicking around on the palace roof at the beginning of a new Emperor's reign in a sort of Imperial publicity stunt. Though

not directly related to the Inari kitsune, the nine-tailed fox is traditionally white in color--tailor-made for inclusion with the kitsune of Kamigawa.

The Soratami

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- **Moonmen attack!:** Although 'soratami' means 'sky-people,' they were originally conceived as the 'moon-men' or 'tsukibito'-a name which didn't pass R&D's rigorous standards of pronounceability.
- **Move over, X-Files:** Believe it or not, there is an actual Japanese mythological precedent for a race of men from the moon, to be found in the *Taketori Monogatari* ("The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter"), written somewhere between 850 and 950 A.D., one of the earliest Japanese folktales and probably the first honest-to-goodness science fiction story in the world. The gist of the story is as follows: an old bamboo cutter chops into a fresh stalk of bamboo one day, and much to his surprise, out jumps a beautiful girl. The old cutter raises her as his own, and plans are made for her to marry, until she reveals that she is from the "palace of the moon" and messengers are coming to take her back. Then in the first alien abduction scene ever, she is whisked away in a beam of light, never to return. Roswell ain't got nothing on ancient Japan!



Soratami concept sketch

- **The Ears:** Many of you have noticed by now those long dangling things hanging down by the sides of the soratami's heads. The soratami owe those ears to...the rabbit that lives in the moon! In Japan, not only is the moon not made of cheese, but instead of a friendly man, they see a rabbit's profile in the moon. Autumn, the time of the year for moon-viewing in Japan, sees a surge in rabbit-themed goods, greeting cards, and special rabbit-shaped cakes for moon-viewing parties. Wacky to us perhaps, but somewhat more comforting than the thought of all that cheese hanging up there.

The Orochi

- **Little Orochi, Big Orochi:** Orochi is an archaic word in Japanese which can mean "serpent" (whence the orochi we know and love) or "wyrn," in the sense of a big dragon-like creature. The many-armed orochi of Kamigawa are a **Magic** original, but the multiple-limb theme probably got its inspiration from...

- **The Biggest Orochi of All:** The most famous orochi of Japan is definitely the "Yamata-no-orochi," an enormous eight-headed beastie that was the inspiration for Godzilla's nemesis "King Ghidrah" and for...



- **O-Kagachi:** This guy is the biggest and the baddest of them all, and the power of the card his picture graces stands as a testament to that. "Kagachi," like orochi, is another Japanese word for serpent, though even most Japanese wouldn't know it as it only shows up in a few little-known poems. O-Kagachi's ancestor-in-spirit, the Yamata-no-orochi, was a **Bad Ass** in his own time, known for flattening villages, devouring maidens, and the like. The tale of his final defeat is actually quite humorous and deserves a brief retelling here. Responding to pleas from the father of the next maiden slated to be sacrificed to ease the great serpent's hunger, *Susa-no-o*, (previously "Susano," the slightly archaic Romanization used in Anthony's article) the wayward brother of the Sun Goddess *Ama-no-terasu*, comes to the rescue. After a few false starts, he defeats the creature by--I kid you not--placing eight barrels of some heady *sake* wine out by the entrance to the place where he knows the creature will come to claim its snack. In what was perhaps the Yamata-no-orochi's Final lack of good Judgment, the conveniently eight-headed creature promptly downed the eight barrels, got really smashed, and then got his heads chopped off by the sly *Susa-no-o* who was hiding nearby, laughing his **Smart Ass** off the whole time.
- **Tree Tribes:** If you're familiar with the [Kamigawa glossary](#) (see also the [Betrayers glossary](#)), you know that the different tribes of orochi are named after tree types, but did you know that each tribe is so-named because it represents a quality of its namesake? For example, the *Matsu* (pine) Tribe are archers. (Pines have needles, get it?) A bit more on the subtle side, we have *kashi* (oak) known for its strength, and *sakura* (cherry), often used as a ceremonial tree, thus the connection to the tribe of shamans.

The Akki

- **Voted most likely to annoy:** The word Akki literally means "evil and vexing," i.e. an "annoying little bugger."

- **Shed a tear for the tengu:** The akki beat out the other contender for the highly coveted red spot in the world of Kamigawa: the tengu. Tengu, the classic bogeyman of Japan, have a many-tiered society. The bottom ranks are long-nosed mountain men that look a bit like akki without shells, while the upper ranks are more birdlike, complete with beaks and wings. Ultimately, the tengu lost their bid for glory in Kamigawa because red humanoids in **Magic** have no business flying all the time, and they lack the akki's natural charm.
- **Kappa out of water: Magic** card and concept artist Ittoku says that he created the akki to look like mountain-dwelling versions of a traditional Japanese creature, the kappa. Kappa are little child-sized humanoids that live in rivers and are said to be partial to sumo-wrestling, and eating people, not necessarily in that order. Their distinguishing characteristic is a bowl atop their head in which they can carry a little water to keep themselves properly moist should they have to leave their abode for any length of time.



The Zuberu

- **Faceless wonders:** The zuberu's name derives from "zunberabo" or "zuberabo" or any countless other variations on that theme from around Japan, all of which mean "smooth-face" i.e. "faceless." The classic zunberabo story goes something like this: It's late at night, and the local constable comes across what appears to be a woman, weeping along the roadside on the outskirts of town. She stands facing away from him, her face concealed by her long hair. There



have been reports of a strange, faceless creature terrorizing the locals, so thinking to warn her, the constable calls out. There is no reply. He walks over to her, putting his hand on her shoulder and says she should come indoors as there's a demon out on the streets, at which point turns around and asks "does it look something like this?" Her face is a perfect white oval, a sight which sends the constable packing, or in some versions, knocks him unconscious on the spot. You can see a reenactment of this story in Studio Ghibli's animated feature "Heisei Tanuki Gassen: Ponpoko," which is a great film that has a lot of scenes from classic Japanese myth, and should be available as an import DVD...

- **Faceless? Then how can the green zuberu have a tongue?:** Don't ask.

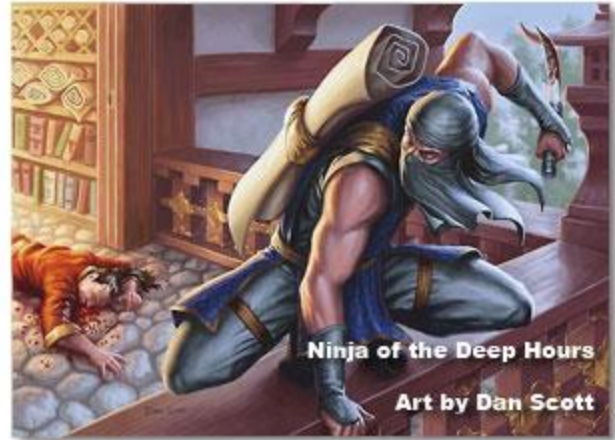


Jukai

- The word "Jukai" literally means a "sea of trees."
- **An unruly garden:** The most famous "jukai" in Japan is the Aokigahara Jukai at the base of Mt. Fuji. Since the day of the samurai, its tangled boughs and winding paths have had a bad reputation for leading travelers to their death. Frighteningly enough, there is more than a bit of truth in these rumors: the area is highly volcanic, and its large quantities of magnetized mineral deposits have been known to throw off compasses. Worse still, depressions in the ground occasionally trap noxious gasses coming out of the ground, forming deadly but invisible pools without breathable air, a fact discovered by a small group of soldiers in Japan's Self Defense Forces that died while training there in the 90's. Aokigahara also continues to be infamous as a suicide spot...an unruly garden, indeed.

The Ninja

- **Spy game:** During the medieval period of Japanese history, starting in the mid-12th Century and peaking with the Sengoku ("Warring States") period (1467-1568) the expansion of conflict across the islands of Japan made clandestine operations, information-gathering, and assassination an indispensable part of warfare. Thus were born the ninja, practitioners of a complex repertoire of artifice, camouflage and killing techniques called ninjutsu.



- **Ninjas go to school, too:** Traditionally, the techniques of ninjutsu were only transmitted by word of mouth to preserve their secrecy. The two main schools of ninjutsu were the Iga school (from modern-day Mie Prefecture) and the Koga school (from modern-day Shiga Prefecture), and sometimes the school names are used as "code" when talking about ninjas, as in "This carnage must have been the work of a Koga." With the coming of relative peace in 1600, the code of ninjutsu was written down in a series of manuals so as not to be lost...thus beginning the countless ninja stories that remain popular to this day both in Japan and overseas.

- **A letter home:** Legend holds that ninja were trained to conceal their own bodies should they be mortally wounded in the line of duty, so as to leave no physical evidence of their existence. In order to keep things straight at headquarters, however, each ninja would carry a special letter identifying them to their school and master. This is all rather dubious, considering that a mortally wounded ninja is going to have a very difficult time passing off the letter to a comrade and then crawling off to die in an out-of-the-way place. I guess that's why they call it a 'legend.'

- **Real ninjas don't eat pizza:** 'nuff said.

The soratami hastily scoops up the scroll from before your eyes, sending up a cloud of dust. "You have lingered here long enough, land-walker, and seen more than I intended to show." He rolls the scroll with long, slender fingers, tying it with a golden cord and returning it to the long drawer at his feet. "Now, before I let you go, show me this exotic bloom you say you have brought for me, for I much desire to see it. Show me this black lotus..."