

Amabié—A Japanese Symbol of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Amabié (pronounced a-ma-bee-ay), a legendary mermaid-like creature who is said to emerge from the sea to prophesize good harvests and epidemics,¹ is trending in Japan as a popular symbol of the novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic.

The image has been part of Japanese culture since 1846 when in Higo Province (today's Kumamoto Prefecture),¹ according to legend, an unnamed officer went to investigate a strange light that had been appearing at sea. The officer encountered the strange creature who explained, "I live in the

sea. My name is Amabié. Good harvest will continue for six years. At the same time disease will spread. Draw me and show me to the people as soon as possible," before submerging. The official left a [charming sketch](#) and the story was printed and disseminated in *kawaraban* (woodblock-printed bulletins that were a kind of newspaper of the time featuring news, outrageous gossip, and rumors).²

Amabié as a symbol of pandemic disease comes out of a rich cultural history; it is one of many supernatural creatures common in Japanese folklore known as *yōkai*, spirits or demons



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

Translated description: A glowing object appeared every night in the sea of Higo Province [today's Kumamoto prefecture]. When the town's official went there and found something like the drawing, he was told, "I live in the sea. My name is Amabié. Good harvest will continue for six years. At the same time disease will

spread. Draw me and show me to the people as soon as possible." And [she] went into the sea.

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

Photo (shown as cropped image) provided courtesy of the Main Library, Kyoto University, Kyoto, Japan.



Amabié posters at Shimbashi railway station in Tokyo, Japan, May 13, 2020. Translation, top: Now is the time to keep in step with each other. Let's make a conscious effort to refrain [from going outside unnecessarily], and aim for an early end together! JR East Shimbashi Station. Translations, left to right. 1, Stay Home: We are preparing and waiting now for the day when you can travel safely and comfortably on the railways. #Let's start from Shimbashi. 2, Hope to see you again when we are back to normal. Until that time, when we can meet again and laugh, be patient for now. Corona, bye-bye. 3, There are lives that can be protected by each of us taking care of ourselves.

#Cough etiquette. #Two meters apart. #Wash your hands repeatedly. Your patience will save the world! Take action to keep it from transferring to others. 4, Thank you! Medical professionals who have been at the forefront of this crisis and have been fighting day and night, thank you for everything. That's why, we need to make an effort to defend ourselves and not burden them anymore. 5, Thank you for taking care of each other! One for All, All for One. Let's all beat Corona!
Photograph by Yuki Furukawa.

that transform intangible or incomprehensible phenomena into familiar and manageable animal or human forms, some of which claim a talismanic power to prevent illness during infectious disease outbreaks.³⁻⁶ Yōkai characters, stripped of their historical context, are familiar to Western audiences from Japanese manga, anime, and games³ such as Yu-Gi-Oh! and Pokémon, which have been exported in global popular culture. In early modern Japan, some yōkai (now classified as *yogenjū* or prophetic beasts) appeared and predicted the future.^{5,6} In the 19th century, when the spread of information through use of *kawaraban* became popular, the concept of disease prevention by looking at or copying and possessing paintings of prophetic spirits became important.⁵ The earliest recorded case is *jinja-hime* (or shrine princess, a creature with a serpentine fish body and a woman's horned head), who is said to have appeared in Saga Prefecture in 1819 to predict an epidemic after 7 years of good fortune.^{5,6} The proliferation of these images in relation to infectious disease outbreaks could have been related to economic interests. For example, during the cholera epidemics in 1858 and 1882, records show that merchants sold printed pictures of a three-legged ape-like monster, a kind of prophetic beast.^{5,6} Other records show that earlier, in 1693, a rumor circulated about a horse who predicted an epidemic and told people that they would escape the disease if they drank a decoction of berries and pickled plums, which turned out to be a conspiracy aimed at raising the price of berries and plums.⁵ The popularity of

yōkai in relation to infectious disease outbreaks appears to have waned by the 1918-1920 influenza pandemic, as there is no record in newspapers that these creatures reappeared during that period.⁷ Folklorists attribute this absence of yōkai in print to government suppression of sorcery rumors and dissemination of westernized scientific knowledge⁶ or to a change in the mainstream media from *kawaraban* to mass-produced newspapers, which led to a loss of the culture of hand-drawn copying.⁵ Since its 19th-century debut, Amabié (and other yōkai) never went away completely, having appeared periodically in manga, anime, games, and movies. Of note, Amabié was a favored yōkai of renowned manga artist and author Shigeru Mizuki.⁸

A **first tweet** connecting Amabié to the COVID-19 pandemic appeared on January 30, 2020, and on February 27, 2020, yōkai artist Orochidō reignited interest in the character with a **tweet** of a contemporary painting and a **call** to draw and share similar images. The tweet provides a time stamp for the current #Amabié phenomenon (if it didn't start it) and appeared to fuel the #AmabiéChallenge on Twitter, a super-spreader event that had the public drawing Amabié and showing it to others in line with the character's original prophesy. There were 28 tweets with the term *Amabié* (in Japanese) on March 1, 2020; more than 1000 on March 4, 2020; a peak 46 000 on March 15, 2020; 10 000 to 20 000 almost every day in April; and 3000 to 10 000 per day in June 2020.

Amabié's popularity is now nationwide—from the northern islands of Hokkaido to the southern islands of Okinawa. The character appears on train station posters encouraging people to refrain from going outside unnecessarily. There are stand-up Amabié art exhibitions held in many cities, and the character is featured in sculpture, ceramic, glass, and textile arts. Inevitably, there are numerous forms of commemorative memorabilia, including Amabié stuffed dolls,⁹ Amabié-shaped candies, Amabié-print sake bottles, Amabié T-shirts, and more.

Importantly, Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare has leveraged the character's popularity to raise awareness about the importance of *staying home* and physical distancing for prevention of infection, in line with other efforts to recruit manga and anime characters to advance public health messaging, including *Kuaran*, the government's mascot for quarantine.¹⁰ Amabié is also a feature character in the official national coronavirus contact tracing app released June 19, 2020.

The organic popularity of Amabié came from a combination of intense interest in the new-onset pandemic, cultural buy-in for sharing images as an alleged way to ward off disease, and the ease of sharing on social media platforms at a time when many social activities are still limited. The #AmabiéChallenge fueled the phenomenon as a parallel "viral" event. Last but hardly least, Amabié fits into 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), both of which may be why Amabié was never entirely forgotten and was ready for its star turn as a symbol of the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a time when people are feeling isolated and perhaps helpless, the cute 19th-century mercreature provides a comforting, playful, uniquely Japanese means of expression for connecting people with each other and claiming a small sense of protection and control for themselves.

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