

FANTASY, SUPERNATURAL, AND JAPANESE CULTURAL VALUES IN CHILDREN'S STORY *AKAI ROUSOKU TO NINGYO* BY OGAWA MIMEI

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Abstrak

Akai Rousoku to Ningyo karya Ogawa Mimei merupakan salah satu karya sastra anak (*douwa bungaku*) yang menjadi sarana efektif dalam menyampaikan nilai-nilai budaya dan moral kepada pembaca, khususnya bagi anak-anak melalui cerita yang memikat dengan menghadirkan fantasi dan supernatural di dalamnya. Penelitian ini membahas cerita anak *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* untuk menggali bagaimana nilai-nilai budaya dan tradisi di masyarakat Jepang dihadirkan melalui unsur-unsur fantasi dan supranatural yang dialami oleh tokoh-tokoh di dalam cerita. Peristiwa supranatural yang kerap bersinggungan dengan mitos sebagai sesuatu yang dipercaya oleh masyarakat Jepang menjadi aspek penting yang dapat mengungkap nilai-nilai budaya sebagai gagasan yang ingin disampaikan oleh pengarang kepada pembaca. Dalam penelitian ini analisis tekstual *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* dilakukan untuk mengungkap bagaimana unsur fantasi dan supranatural digunakan dalam menghadirkan nilai-nilai budaya masyarakat Jepang dalam *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*. Hasil penelitian memperlihatkan bahwa unsur fantasi dan supranatural hadir di dalam cerita *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* sebagai elemen penting yang digunakan dalam menghadirkan nilai-nilai budaya Jepang kepada pembacanya. Nilai-nilai budaya yang meliputi aspek religiusitas, harmonisasi dan penghargaan terhadap alam, dan nilai moral Jepang, seperti konsep *Giri* dan *On* merupakan nilai-nilai budaya yang diindikasikan sebagai gagasan yang ingin disampaikan oleh Ogawa Mimei di dalam cerita anak *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*.

Kata kunci: *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*, *Fantasi*, *Supernatural*, *Nilai budaya*, *Ogawa Mimei*

Introduction

Children's literature is a genre of literary works that entertains and instills values and morals in readers, especially for children. As defined by Kurniawan (2013), children's literature consists of works or literary products centered on the child's world, employing language that aligns with their intellectual and emotional development. By focusing on children's experiences, children's literature effectively engages readers, drawing them into suspenseful plots that pique curiosity and foster attachment. The immersive experience captivates readers and carries them along the narrative's flow.

Children's literature has many varieties, and among them are fairy tales, fables, and legends. Fairy tales are stories that are told or written as a means of entertainment and do not actually happen in real life. In Japanese literature, children's literature, or *douwa bungaku* (童話文学) is characterized by a wide variety. There are many varieties of children's stories in

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Japanese literature (Ishii, 2017), ranging from picture books (*e-hon*), folktales (*minwa*), fairy tales (*setsuwa*), children's *manga*, to modern children's literature.

In Japan's literary repertoire, there are several well-known authors whose works specialize in modern children's literature. These authors (Heat, 2022) include Eiko Kadono, Genzaburo Yoshino, Nahoko Uehashi, and Ogawa Mimei. Eiko Kadono is a children's story author with the title of her famous work, *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1985). Eiko's work was later adapted into an animation with the same title by Hayao Miyazaki and was widely loved by various groups because the story teaches the value of friendship. Another famous literary author is Genzaburo Yoshino (1899-1981), who wrote a story called *How Do You Live?* Genzaburo Yoshino's work inspired and was adapted by Studio Ghibli into a movie with the same title and directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Another children's story author is Nahoko Uehashi, who wrote the children's story *The Beast Player*. In addition to being a children's story author, Nahoko Uehashi is also a cultural anthropologist, so it is not surprising that many of her works feature elements of fantasy and magical power. Another author who also has a writing style that incorporates fantasy and magical elements is Ogawa Mimei.

Ogawa Mimei (Pengfei, 2023) is one of the leading authors in Japanese children's literature. His works contain moral messages and highlight the lives of children in rural Japan. Ogawa Mimei (18182-1961), who was born in the town of Joetsu in Niigata prefecture (Kosaka, 2019) during the five decades from the late Meiji period (1868-1912), to the middle of the Showa period (1926-19189) wrote more than a thousand children's stories, short stories, and some poems. Some of his works are *Kodomo no Kuni*, *Ryoko Tanteki*, *Gusuko Budori no Denki*, and *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*. Among these works, *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* is considered Owaga Mimei's most unique literary work and one of his most famous.

Akai Rousoku to Ningyo (Ekzemplaro, 2012) was published by Asahi Shinbun, Tokyo, in 1921 and became a successful work that received a lot of attention from its readers. This children's story was allegedly inspired by an urban legend or story that developed in the community regarding the existence of mermaids, which became a myth and was believed by the people in the Gangohama area. This assumption is based on an information board in a park called Ningyo Dentetsu Koen located on the coast of Ganko. The sign says that Ogawa Mimei's *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* is a story inspired by the legend of mermaids in Gangohama, Ogata, Joetsu City, Niigata Prefecture. This statement emphasizes that children's literature often serves as a medium for transmitting local values that are embraced by the people in the region where the story originates. This can also be seen in the children's story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*.

Akai Rousoku to Ningyo tells the story of a mermaid who was raised by an old and poor couple who sold candles for people to go to the shrine to pray. Although the mermaid's physical appearance is different from humans, her presence is considered a gift from God. The mermaid has a special ability to paint on candles and sell them, so the couple's life is prosperous. But the couple became greedy and finally sold the little mermaid to the circus. Ogawa Mimei's portrayal of a mermaid in the human world, who performs miracles through her paintings, underscores the author's interest in supernatural elements. This depiction of a miraculous candle, a supernatural event in the story, also intertwines with local beliefs and Japanese cultural values prevalent in early 20th-century society.

Unlike other children's stories that often feature happy endings and adventurous plots centered around romantic relationships, *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* by Ogawa Mimei presents a simpler narrative of hope and betrayal with a somber and gloomy setting. Regarding the storyline, this children's story is not just a simple tragic story but seems to offer moral values in Japanese culture by engaging fantasy and supernatural elements, which relate to beliefs in Japanese society. Fakihuddin (2015) stated that the supernatural is something that is magical, and difficult to understand by ordinary reason, but is believed and sometimes occurs in the life of a person or community. The existence of supernatural elements and local beliefs in this

children's story is interesting data to be studied further, because through analysis of the text of this story, it can provide an understanding of the Japanese view regarding their moral values portrayed through fantasy and the supernatural. Thus, this paper will discuss the children's story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* to explore how fantasy and supernatural elements are represented in this story. What Japanese cultural values are conveyed through these elements and characters in this story?

Two previous studies that discuss Ogawa Mimei's children's story of *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* are Rukhyana & Saleha (2017) and Kint (2017). Rukhyana & Saleha analyzed this children's story using a reception approach, focusing on how the story presents human imagery and friendship as didactic values for readers. In contrast, Kint (2017) found that Mimei's story serves as a critique of Japan's westernization and modernization, highlighting the societal shifts in social condition, culture, and values that occurred during Japan's modernization in the 20th century. However, none of the previous studies address fantasy and the supernatural as tools for conveying Japanese cultural values. Therefore, this study is important because it can fill in the gaps in research related to the children's story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*.

Method

This article employs a qualitative research methodology to analyze Ogawa Mimei's story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* through a textual analysis approach. According to McKee (2005), textual analysis is a method for gathering information and interpreting the meaning and significance of textual elements, making it well-suited for analyzing literary works such as *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*. The study focuses on textual elements related to the core narrative structure, which consists of plot, setting, and character. A textual analysis was conducted on this story to explore the author's worldviews on various aspects, such as cultural values in Japanese society through supernatural events significantly present in children's literature, *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*. According to Chayani (2017), the supernatural refers to things that do not make sense. Supernatural elements in children's literature are often associated with myth believed by the Japanese people as prose narrative that exists in the society in which they are told and as true reports of what happened in the past (Bascom in Rahwati, 2021). By conducting a textual analysis, this study focuses on fantasy and supernatural elements in the text to explore social and cultural values presented in *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*.

Result and Discussion

The story of *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*

Akai Rousoku to Ningyo is a children's story about a mermaid who has the ability to paint beautiful pictures on candles. The painted candles turn out to have supernatural powers that can bring good luck and protection to whoever carries them while sailing the seas. The supernatural is shown through the stages of events that are built with a chronological flow, which follows the sequence of events. The story begins with the appearance of the Mermaid Mother character, who feels lonely living at the bottom of the dark sea and yearns to live side by side with humans. Because she did not want her child in her womb to live lonely like her, she decided to give birth to her child on a rock by the beach so that it could be found by humans. She believed that her child would be accepted and well cared for by the humans who found him, despite the differences in his figure with humans.

Furthermore, the newborn baby mermaid was found by the *Obaasan* (grandmother) selling candles when she was going to pray at the temple. Feeling sorry for it, she brought the baby mermaid to her hut to show it to *Ojiisan* (grandfather). Although the baby was slightly different from humans, they still wanted to take care of it because they considered it a gift from

the gods. After growing up, the mermaid has an extraordinary ability, which is to paint candles with a beautiful red color, and the candles she paints have a miracle that can save people who go to the sea. Thanks to the mermaid, *Ojiisan* and *Obaasan's* living conditions became prosperous because many people bought their candles. The mermaid's extraordinary abilities spread in the community until a circus owner who was looking for antiques heard about it. Then he came to the couple's house to persuade them to sell the mermaid who became his child. *Ojiisan* and *Obaasan*, who initially refused because they were tempted by money, sold the mermaid. Since then, the red candle, which originally brought safety, has now become a sign of disaster. Based on the story of *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*, it can be seen that fantasy and supernatural elements are the dominant narrative elements presented from the beginning of the story to the end. The supernatural is used in various stages of the story to deepen conflict, increase tension, and show the impact of human actions on nature and supernatural forces.

Fantasy and Supernatural Elements and Japanese Cultural Values in *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*

In the story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*, the elements of fantasy and the supernatural are shown through the depiction of characters, settings, and symbols. The main character in this story is a supernatural creature, the mermaid. 「人魚は、南の方の海にばかり棲んでいるのではありません。北の海にも棲んでいたのです。自分たちは、人間とあまり姿は変わっていない。」 “*Mermaids do not live only in the southern seas. They also lived in the northern seas. We don't look much different from human beings.*” (Mimei, 1921:1). The little mermaid in this story presents fantastical things, as a bridge between the human world and the supernatural. According to Jones (2018), the classic image of the mermaid as a beautiful fish-tailed woman sitting on a rock while combing her long hair with a golden comb is the image that defines mermaids in many people's minds. This image comes from folklore and has been strongly embedded in our perception of mermaids. Mermaids are a form of urban legend and myth that has existed in Japanese society. In this culture, mermaids are often regarded as supernatural beings that have a certain charm and appeal and are usually associated with the sea or water. The little mermaid is depicted in the children's story *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo* as having extraordinary abilities in the art of painting. Her special skill lies in her ability to paint mesmerizing images on the surface of candles.

娘は、赤い絵の具で、白いろうそくに、魚や、貝や、または海草のようなものを、生まれつきで、だれにも習ったのではないが上手に描きました。おじいさんは、それを見るとびっくりいたしました。

With red paint, she painted fish, shells, and sea plants on a white candle, something she had never learned before. When her grandfather saw that, he was astonished (Mimei, 1921: 4).

Red candles in this story present as a symbol of magical properties, which are used as offerings to gods at the shrine. 「海の神さまを祭ったお宮さまだもの、きれいなろうそくをあげれば、神さまもお喜びなさるのにきまっている。」と、その町の人々はいいました。」 “*The shrine is dedicated to the god of the sea, and if you give it a beautiful candle, it will surely please the god. said one of the townspeople.*” (Mimei, 1921: 4). Red candles with magical properties, which are used as offerings to gods at the shrine, are presented as an object of magical events.

だれでも、その絵を見ると、ろうそくがほしくなるように、その絵には、不思議な力と、美しさがこもっていたのであります。すると、ここに不思議な話がありました。この絵を描いたろうそくを山の上のお宮にあげて、その燃えさしを身につけて、海に出ると、どんな大暴風雨の日でも、けっして、船が転覆したり、おぼれて死ぬような災難がないということが、いつからともなく、みんなの口々に、うわさとなって上がりました。

The picture was filled with mysterious power and beauty, so that anyone who saw it would want a candle. Then there was a strange story. It was rumored that if one gave a candle with this picture on it to the shrine on top of the mountain and went out to sea with the candle burning, no matter what kind of stormy day it was, there would never be any disaster such as a ship capsizing or drowning to death. (Mimei, 1921: 4).

Japanese people have a belief that certain objects, like red candles, have the power to be guardians, called *omamori* (お守り). Red candles painted by the little mermaid in this story have magical power that not only brings good fortune, but also curses.

昔は、このお宮にあがった絵の描いたろうそくの燃えさしさえ持っていれば、けっして、海の上では災難にはかからなかったものが、今度は、赤いろうそくを見ただけでも、そのものはきっと災難にかかって、海におぼれて死んだのであります。

In the past, as long as you held the burning candle with the picture on it that went up to the shrine, you would never be in trouble in the sea, but now, even if you see a red candle, you are sure to be in trouble and drown in the sea (Mimei, 1921:7).

In the *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*, the presence of supernatural beings is not only depicted through the mermaid character but also through the entity of God. God in Japanese is called *Kami* (神). According to Pratiwi (2017), gods are forces that are beyond human reach and understanding. *Kami* means the highest, the superior one. *Kami* manifests to the world in the form of the sea (sea gods), rivers (river gods), mountains (mountain gods), and others. This animist belief emphasizes the importance of the sea gods. The story depicts that *Obaasan* and *Ojiisan* believe in the existence of supernatural entities or the spirit world. In Japanese society, animist beliefs are called 未開宗教 (*Mikai Shukyou*). Rahman (2019) mentions that 未開宗教 (*Mikai Shukyou*) is a religion that believes in the existence of spirits. By depicting this worldview through characters, settings, and symbols, *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*'s stories emphasize a close relationship between humans and the supernatural world and reveal the richness and complexity of spiritual beliefs, morals, and cultural values in Japanese society.

The Japanese morals and cultural values are presented through fantasy and supernatural elements. Red candles as magical properties in this story, which are used as offerings to gods at the shrine, are presented as the symbol of religiosity and an object of magical events. The little mermaid as 'sea spirit' is a symbol of nature. The embodiment of a mermaid is conveyed as the mysterious and vulnerable aspect of nature. Her kindness to the old couple (年寄りの夫婦) reflects nature's generosity, bringing prosperity to the old couple's candle shop.

ろうそく屋では、ろうそくが売れるので、おじいさんはいっしょうけんめいに朝から晩まで、ろうそくを造りますと、そばで娘は、手の痛くなるのも我慢して、赤い絵の具で絵を描いたのであります。

The candlestick shop sold candles, so the old man worked hard from morning to night to make candles, while his daughter (the little mermaid) painted pictures with her red hand, even though her hands became hurt (Mimei, 1921: 4).

The relationship between the old couple (年寄りの夫婦) and the little mermaid (人魚) reflects the dynamic of *Giri* (義理) and *On* (恩) as a concept in Japanese culture that emphasizes interpersonal relationships and obligation to maintain harmony within society. *Giri* (from Japan, 2021) is defined as moral obligation or duty, which includes the unwritten social norm that ensures social harmony. Meanwhile, *On* (Ustiningsih, 2015) refers to a debt of gratitude that cannot be fully repaid. *Giri* and *On*. *On* as a debt of gratitude can be seen from the little mermaid, who repays the old couple's kindness with her beautiful painting on candles that bring the couple's life fortune. 「ろうそく屋では、ろうそくが売れるので、おじいさんはいっしょうけんめいに朝から晩まで、ろうそくを造りますと、そばで娘は、手の痛くなるのも我慢して、赤い絵の具で絵を描いたのであります」 “*The candle shop sold candles, so the old man worked hard from morning till night to make candles, while his daughter painted pictures with red paint, even though her hands hurt.*” (Mimei, 1921:3). *Giri* as a moral obligation is presented by the old couple, who have an obligation to take care of the little mermaid as a gift from God. 「きっと神さまが、私たち夫婦に子供のないので知って、お授けになったのだから、帰っておじいさんと相談をして育てましょう。」 “*I'm sure God knew we were childless and gave us children, so let's go home and discuss this with Ojiisan (grandfather) and raise them.*” (Mimei, 1921: 3). However, because the couple was greedy, they failed to fulfill their obligations (*giri*) and thus earned *bachi ni ataru* (karma). *Bachi ni ataru*, which conveys the failure of *giri* by the old couple, is shown through the event of the destruction of the village due to the couple's act of selling the little mermaid.

Conclusion

Based on a textual analysis focusing on narrative structure (plot, setting, character), Ogawa Mimei's children's story, *Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*, portrays fantasy and supernatural elements through the character of the little mermaid, a mythical creature with the ability to paint magical candles. The mermaid acts as a bridge between the human and supernatural realms, introducing an atmosphere of mystery. The red candle, a magical object, embodies the story's fantastical aspect with its power. By incorporating these elements, Mimei's story presents Japanese cultural values and aspects of religiosity. The red candle, traditionally used as an offering at shrines, symbolizes these connections. Furthermore, the little mermaid, as a "sea spirit," represents nature, reflecting its generosity and prosperity. The inclusion of fantasy and supernatural elements serves as a storytelling strategy for Mimei to convey moral values, such as the concepts of *Giri* and *On*, through exploring the relationship between the old couple and the mermaid. The depiction of Japanese cultural values through these fantastical elements underscores the core message Mimei intended to convey in "*Akai Rousoku to Ningyo*."

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