



## The Japanese Demon

Sometimes a face comes with a story, and sometimes a story comes with a face.  
This is a tale set in a classic period of Japanese history, about one thousand years ago.

### The Demon on Omi Bridge

The Governor's soldiers are hanging out together talking, and one is bragging on and on about how brave he is. Having heard enough, a fellow soldier says, "Oh yeah? Well I bet that you aren't brave enough to cross Omi Bridge." For many years no one had dared to cross the bridge in Omi province because of the stories of a terrible demon that lived in the middle of it. No one had ever actually seen the demon or, perhaps, no one had lived to tell what they'd seen.

"I'd cross that bridge," said the braggart, "if I had a fast enough horse." "You're on," said the others, "take any of ours."

"I'd need the Governor's own horse to ride across that bridge," said the braggart, thinking this would get him out of the bet, for the Governor's horse was the fastest of all and not one meant for a common soldier. What he didn't know was that the Governor had been listening from the adjacent room, and he came in saying the soldier could use his horse, for a man must live up to his boasts, however foolish they are.

The Governor and his men went the long way around the river to wait for the soldier on the other side of the bridge. Meanwhile, the soldier went down to get the horse from the stables, but first he smeared grease over the horse's back end—just in case it wasn't fast enough. He rode to the bridge and started across it as fast as that horse could go. His confidence rose as it sped across the bridge so quickly that he felt like he was flying.

Then, in the middle of the bridge, he saw a beautiful woman walking towards him. Perhaps she didn't know about the demon, he thought, and he

pulled up the horse to rescue her. As he bent down to grab hold of the woman, he saw a glint of yellow in her eyes. Fearing it was the demon in disguise, he spurred the horse on and rode past. Looking back the soldier saw the demon transforming into its true form, its long arms reaching after him. The furious demon grabbed for the horse with knife-like claws—but they slid off the grease. "I'll get you next time!" yelled the demon.

When he made it across the bridge, the Governor greeted the man as a hero and offered him the position of captain of the guards, but the soldier refused. Only he had seen the demon and it was a sight he could not forget: nine feet tall, arms seven feet long, with three claws on each hand, a blood red face with two sets of fangs and one glowing yellow eye.

He resigned his post and locked himself in his house, afraid that the demon would come after him. Whenever he closed his eyes he saw the glowing eye of the demon staring back.

The soldier was right. You should never mess with a Japanese demon. One year later, on the anniversary of his ride, his brother came to his door with news that their mother had fallen ill. His wife let the brother in and went to get them tea. Soon she heard her husband scream and call for his sword. But when she came, it was too late, for it was in truth the demon. As she watched, it bit her husband's head off. The wife raised the sword, afraid the demon would come for her, but it did not. "That is the end of that," said the Demon of Omi Bridge, and it was never seen again.



There are great examples of Japanese demon faces in prints, tattoo designs and masks such as the Namahage mask on the left, which became this face-paint design below.



The mask is a contemporary example from the Akita Prefecture, and it is worn for a traditional Lunar New Year celebration which sounds like Halloween in reverse, as young men wear the masks and visit people's houses to scare their children and admonish them to listen to their parents—or the demons will come

back! The parents reward the young men with sake and food. Although frightening, Namahage are said to be gods who bring good fortune, an example of the beliefs connected to spirit worship traditions in which powerful demonic spirits can become protective when they are appeased.

The prevalence of such beliefs within the medieval Japanese culture allowed for the growth in Edo province of "Aragato," the style of Kabuki theater which produced the famous makeup for its samurai hero. The origin of Kabuki and other Japanese theater in shamanic ritual and spirit worship is evident in the hero's ability to do the impossible because they have allowed themselves to be possessed by a powerful *kami* ("supernatural deity") and thus have become *hitokami* ("man-gods").



In folktales, Japanese demons come with various descriptions. Some may be red or blue faced, with fangs, horns and one, two or three eyes. In the tale of the famous samurai Raiko and his battle with the Goblin Spider, he is attacked by an army that drops out of the storm clouds, including animals that walk like men, beings with three claws and three eyes—one with eyes in its hands—and long serpents with human heads. There's a few ideas for facepainting.

The *Demon of Omi Bridge* is a tale I tell while transforming a volunteer from the audience. The tale as I found it said that the soldier "saw a red face with one amber-yellow eye as huge and round as a cushion." A folktale with its own special face included is like finding gold for a storytelling facepainter.