

The Mischief and the Praise: A Comparative Study of the Toyol and the Zashiki Warashi

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the supernatural entities Toyol in Malay folklore and Zashiki Warashi in Japanese folklore, evaluating their roles as cultural agents that mirror and govern socio-moral norms regarding wealth, family harmony, and ethical behaviour. Both the Toyol and the Zashiki Warashi are child-like spirits that live in homes, but they have quite different purposes. The Toyol is a mischievous, stolen spirit utilised for illegal gain, while the Zashiki Warashi is a kind guardian that brings good luck to homes that treat it with respect. This paper employs comparative literary analysis and structuralist interpretation to elucidate the binary oppositions of gain against loss, care versus neglect, and transgression versus blessing inherent in these texts. The findings suggest that the Toyol functions as a warning narrative against avarice, ethical degradation, and the abuse of heavenly authority, existing within a syncretic Islamic-animist perspective. On the other hand, the Zashiki Warashi strengthens the Shinto-animist ideas of hospitality, tradition, and domestic purity. Even though they come from different cultures, both individuals help keep society in check by employing supernatural stories to enforce communal rules, ease worries about money and family stability and adjust to the changing media landscape. This study indicates that a comparative investigation of these spirits provides profound insights into the utilisation of folklore as a dynamic instrument for moral education and social control within Malay and Japanese cultures.

Keywords: Toyol, Zashiki Warashi, Malay folklore, Japanese yōkai, comparative folklore, structuralism, social regulation, supernatural ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The Liminality of the Child in the Home

Supernatural stories are not only superstitions; they are intricate systems of signs that embody a culture's moral and economic rules. In the folklore of the Malay and Japanese archipelagos, child-like spirits, namely the Toyol and the Zashiki Warashi, play a vital role in household imagination. Turner (1969) posits that the status of liminality—existing "betwixt and between"—grants such entities a transgressive force capable of either reinforcing or undermining social systems. These spirits appear as children, entering what Ariès (1962) calls the "domesticated" space of the family, transforming the loving environment into a stage for supernatural events. The choice of the "child" as the vessel for these spirits is not accidental. The child represents the ultimate liminal figure: a being that is human but not yet fully socialized, existing on the threshold of the future. In the domestic sphere, the child is a symbol of lineage and the continuity of wealth. By imbuing this figure with supernatural power, these cultures create a "Spectral Regulator" that can police the household from the inside. This study

asserts that these beings symbolise the "Supernatural Policing of the Household," serving as ethereal protectors of community and domestic ethics.

The Toyol, an animating fetus or deceased newborn ensnared by black magic (*ilmu hitam*), epitomises a significant "perversion of the domestic". A child who steals instead of inheriting represents a break in the natural flow of wealth from one generation to the next. In Malaysia's syncretic Islamic-animist worldview, the Toyol is a warning sign of *shirk* (idolatry) and avarice, where making money comes at the cost of spiritual and community integrity.

On the other hand, the Zashiki Warashi embodies the sanctity of the *Ie* (the traditional Japanese house/lineage), serving as a "fortune-bringing" guardian whose presence is associated with the moral and physical maintenance of the home. The Toyol is a tool for individualistic predation, but the Zashiki Warashi is an independent agent of conditional blessing. Foster (2015) says its role is closely tied to Shinto ideas of purity (*hare*) and pollution (*kegare*). Its departure signifies not only a loss of capital but also an indication of "Domestic Decay"—a failure of the household to fulfill its obligations of hospitality and tradition.

To achieve this, the study utilizes comparative literary analysis, selecting canonical ethnographic texts (Skeat, 1900; Yanagita, 1910) and contemporary peer-reviewed research. These narratives are analyzed through a structuralist lens to identify cultural binaries.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The Toyol: Familiar Spirits and the Malay World's Moral Economy

The Toyol is an important figure in Malay supernatural discourse because it connects *ilmu hitam* (occult sciences) and the economy of the home. Skeat (1900) offered the initial ethnographic documentation of the Toyol, classifying it as a "familiar spirit" originating from the reanimation of an aborted fetus or stillborn newborn. This origin tale is very important since it shows that the Toyol is a distortion of the natural reproductive cycle. It represents a "stunted" lineage; instead of growing into a productive member of the *kampung* (village), the child is frozen in a state of eternal, parasitic infancy. Contemporary researchers contend that the Toyol embodies the enduring conflict between pre-Islamic animism and orthodox Islamic theology. From an Islamic viewpoint, the possession of a Toyol is deemed *shirk* (polytheism) and *haram* (forbidden), characterising the creature not merely as a thief but as a catalyst for spiritual and societal corruption. The study by Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (2017) emphasizes that the Toyol is a manifestation of "familiar spirits" that demand blood offerings or spiritual binding, which serves to isolate the master from the *Ummah* (Islamic community).

Recent studies by Md. Zain (2021) and Beng and Balaya (2016) indicate that the Toyol has transitioned from rural rice fields to metropolitan corporate environments. In these modern stories, the Toyol symbolises the "get-rich-quick" schemes common in rapidly growing Southeast Asian economies. It represents what is known as "predatory capital," in which people get rich by exploiting unseen labour and breaking spiritual rules. This evolution shows that the Toyol is not a relic of the past, but a flexible metaphor for the "occult economies" of modern capitalism.

Zashiki Warashi: The Liminal Guardian of Japanese Domesticity

In Japanese *yōkai* studies, the Zashiki Warashi is examined as an embodiment of domestic prosperity (*fuku*). In his important book *Legends of Tono* (1910), Yanagita described the spirit as a resident of the *zashiki* (formal guest room) and said that its existence affected the rise and fall of major merchant houses. The *zashiki* is the most formal room in a Japanese house, used for receiving guests and performing rituals; the spirit's presence there highlights the link between hospitality and wealth. The Zashiki Warashi is an independent agent of conditional grace, while the Toyol is a slave to a master. Foster (2015) and Komatsu (2017) stress its importance in the Shinto system of *Hare* (sacred/pure) and *Kegare* (profane/polluted). The spirit is drawn to a clean, well-kept home, but it stays away from a dirty one. This "cleanliness" is both physical and moral; a house that neglects its ancestral duties or treats its members with cruelty will find its "fortune-child" departing, leading to immediate ruin.

The contemporary version of the Zashiki Warashi signifies a profound nostalgia for the *Ie* system (traditional family structure). As **Spetter (2012)** has shown, the ghost has become a "kawaii" (cute) cultural figure. This change masks a deeper social concern: the traditional family is falling apart in a Japan that is becoming too modern too quickly. The "cute-ification" of the Zashiki Warashi is a defensive psychological mechanism against the "Lost Decades" and the rise of lonely deaths (*kodokushi*). In this context, the Zashiki Warashi represents the "lost child" of tradition within a milieu characterised by urban isolation and an ageing demographic.

Comparative Frameworks: Structuralism and Spectral Capital

Comparative folklore studies have historically aimed to discern cross-cultural archetypes in supernatural enforcement. Ballaster (2005) emphasises that "Eastern" stories employ the supernatural to address economic problems. This work utilises Structuralist Theory, particularly the binary oppositions technique proposed by Freed-Thall (2018), to analyse the moral logic of these two entities. By comparing the Toyol (illicit/zero-sum/active theft) with the Zashiki Warashi (virtuous/generative/passive blessing), we can see how different Asian cultures use the child-spirit to control the "moral economy".

Theoretical Definition: This study introduces the concept of **Spectral Capital**—a form of supernatural credit or debit that shapes a household's status within the broader community.

- **Positive Spectral Capital:** Results from meritocratic domestic upkeep, hospitality, and ritual purity (Zashiki Warashi).
- **Negative Spectral Capital:** Represents spiritual debt incurred through predatory accumulation, illicit magic, and the exploitation of the community (Toyol).

Prior literature has examined both spirits in isolation; however, this comparative analysis elucidates a common function: both serve as "internalised regulators" that leverage the dread of the supernatural to uphold social norms and home stability.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Structuralism and the "Limited Good"

To analyse the socio-cultural significance of these entities, this study utilises Claude Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist framework (1963), which asserts that human culture is structured into systems of binary oppositions. These oppositions function as "mythical tools" employed by a civilisation to reconcile inconsistencies within its social reality. In this context, the child-spirit serves as a liminal signifier to navigate the tension between individual riches and collective equity. We also use George Foster's Theory of the Limited Good (1965) to add to this. Foster contends that in peasant societies, all aspired values—such as land, wealth, and health—are perceived as limited resources. As a result, people see that one individual's gain is another person's direct loss in the community. In this context, the Toyol and Zashiki Warashi serve as "supernatural accounting mechanisms" that elucidate variations in social capital and material resources.

Binary Oppositions in Spectral Governance:

- **Creation vs. Arrival:** The Toyol is "made" by a forbidden rite, which goes against the laws of nature and God (Skeat, 1900). On the other hand, the Zashiki Warashi "arrives" or appears when the host follows purity (hare) and tradition, which is a recompense for being morally just (Foster, 2015).
- **Parasitism vs. Symbiosis:** The Toyol is a parasite that takes resources from the community to make one master richer. The Zashiki Warashi works alongside the household to improve things while also requiring care and respect, which helps maintain order in the home.
- **Static vs. Dynamic Fortune:** Wealth obtained through a Toyol is unstable, cursed, and ultimately results in destruction (Beng & Balaya, 2016). Zashiki Warashi wealth is steady and grows as long as the home keeps its "moral ecology".

Analysis

The Ontological Aspects of Social Control As synthesised in the subsequent research, these spirits operate as "internalised regulators" that utilise the domestic realm as a locus for moral policing.

- Ontological Dimension, Toyol (Malaysia), Zashiki Warashi (Japan)
- Source of Power, "Transgression; ilmu hitam (black magic) (Skeat, 1900).", "Purity; Shinto animism, Kōdō, and respect for ancestors (Komatsu, 2017)."
- Social Function, "Deterrent: Stops people from becoming greedy and making the kampung's wealth gap bigger (Md. Zain, 2021).", "Maintenance: Promotes domestic order, hospitality, and the maintenance of the Ie (Foster, 2015)."
- Economic Model, "Parasitic: A zero-sum model in which wealth is appropriated from the community (Foster, 1965).", "Generative: A meritocratic model in which prosperity results from a household's "'moral ecology'" (Yanagita, 1910)."
- Master/Host Relation, "Ownership/Binding: A coercive relationship including blood offerings and spiritual slavery (USIM, 2017).", "Hospitality/Reverence: A mutually beneficial connection based on respect and the "'guest-spirit'" dynamic (Iwasaka & Toelken, 1994)."
- Consequences of Loss, "Divine Punishment: Results in bala (misfortune), social ostracism, and spiritual devastation.", "Lineage Decay: Causes the family line (kaun) to go extinct and the economy to crash right away."

DISCUSSION

Modernity And The "Cute-ification" Of Terror

The Toyol and Zashiki Warashi have gone from being part of oral tradition to becoming part of international mass media in the modern period. This migration indicates a transformation in society's apprehensions: transitioning from the fear of tangible ghosts to the fear of the unseen, unstable powers of contemporary capitalism.

The Toyol in Urban Horror: A Symbol of Predatory Capital

In contemporary Malaysian cinema, the Toyol has been reconceptualised as an emblem of "Corrupted Modernity". Films illustrate that the entity is no longer limited to rural theft; it has evolved into a metaphor for urban "get-rich-quick" schemes (Skim Cepat Kaya). As Md. Zain (2021) observes, the Toyol in urban narratives represents the "shortcut to success" that bypasses Islamic work ethics and communal merit.

Additionally, Beng and Balaya (2016) posit that the Toyol functions as a critique of neoliberal individualism. In a world where income inequality is growing, the Toyol acts as a "Supernatural Whistleblower," showing how morally bankrupt people are who get rich through "predatory accumulation". The horror comes not from the creature itself, but from the human desperation that makes it—a reflection of what Comaroff and Comaroff (1999) call "Occult Economies," where magical means are sought to achieve material ends in a volatile market. Adnan and Yaacob (2024) further note that folklore remains a vital medium for identifying moral values amidst these modern economic pressures.

The Zashiki Warashi as Nostalgia: The Kawaii Shield Against Social Decay

On the other hand, the Japanese Zashiki Warashi has undergone a process of "Cute-ification" (Kawaii culture), changing from a powerful household god to a sentimental symbol of a fading past. In regional tourism, especially in Iwate Prefecture, the spirit is sold as a symbol of Furusato (hometown) nostalgia (Foster, 2015). This change helps people feel better about the "Lost Decades," marked by falling birth rates and the rise of kodokushi (lonely deaths).

Research by Spetter (2012) has shown that the "cute" Zashiki Warashi symbolises a desire for the stable Ie structure in a time when society is falling apart. The state seeks to use the spirit for regional revitalisation, aiming

to restore the "generative grace" of the spirit to combat rural depopulation. But as Komatsu (2017) says, this "cute-ification" cleans up the spirit's original purpose as a "conditional" presence; it takes away the fear of "Spectral Bankruptcy" and turns it into a product that can be sold. The Zashiki Warashi has evolved from a custodian of family morality into a nostalgic fetish for a bygone social order (Iwasaka & Toelken, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Spectral Governance

A comparative investigation of the Toyol and the Zashiki Warashi demonstrates that, despite their childlike forms and domestic habitats, they function as antithetical moral agents within their respective cultural contexts. This research has revealed that the Toyol serves as a representation of the "Limited Good" (Foster, 1965), encapsulating the dangers of moral violation and zero-sum accumulation. By portraying wealth acquisition as a source of cautionary terror, the Toyol tale actively upholds Malay socio-religious norms, functioning as a "Social Levelling Mechanism" that condemns individualistic greed in favour of social and spiritual integrity (Md. Zain, 2021; USIM, 2017).

On the other hand, the Zashiki Warashi is a personification of "Domestic Ecology," and it rewards people who keep traditions, stay pure, and are hospitable. In the context of Japanese Shinto-animism, it operates through a logic of conditional blessing, in which the spirit's presence serves as a "Moral Barometer" for the ethical well-being of the home (Foster, 2015; Komatsu, 2017). Its presence in folklore and contemporary media underscores its role as a versatile instrument of social regulation, addressing Japanese concerns about the deterioration of the *Ie* (home) system and the fragmentation of modern society (Yanagita, 1910; Iwasaka & Toelken, 1994). The presence of these spirits in modern media, ranging from Malaysia's urban terror to Japan's cutesy nostalgia, demonstrates that folklore is not a static remnant of the pre-modern era.

This study posits that it is a dynamic semiotic system that adapts to answer the "spectral anxieties" of the neoliberal era. Using structuralist deconstruction and comparative synthesis, we have shown how these "ghosts of the economy" continue to affect and be affected by the moral landscapes of Malaysia and Japan. By perceiving these beings not solely as "ghost stories" but as instruments of Spectral Governance—internalised regulators of capital, domestic obligations, and social conduct—we acquire profound insights into the persistent influence of the supernatural in delineating human behaviour within an increasingly secular society.

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