

Island Life: Yokai and Talismans

Amami Oshima is home to a *yokai*, one of the mythical creatures that have appeared throughout centuries of Japanese folk tales and folk art, so visitors might want to keep their eyes peeled.

The *kenmun* is about the height of a child, with red eyes and elongated legs and arms. It shares many similarities with the *kappa* water sprite, one of the most famous Japanese *yokai*, and the *kijimuna*, its Okinawan tree-spirit equivalent. It is covered in reddish fur and is said to smell like a yam, though it can apparently change its appearance, disguise itself as a plant, or disappear. Like the *kappa*, the *kenmun* has a depression on its head that holds a liquid that gives it power. It also is said to love sumo, and tends to challenge people it encounters to a wrestling match.

How to Respond to a Sighting

The *kenmun*'s spirit resides in large banyan trees or sea fig trees, and some believe cutting the tree will call down a curse. It goes to the beach at night to feed on fish and shellfish, and is usually not dangerous to humans; in fact, there are stories of *kenmun* helping people carry firewood from the forest. It can, however, be a prankster and cause mischief, stealing food or posing as a human and giving wrong directions to people who are lost. Sightings of this *yokai* have decreased over time, most likely because there are few banyan and sea fig trees still standing. Perhaps the best thing to do if you see one is just walk away—better to play it safe than have to wrestle the legendary creature.

Spider Conch Talismans

Ancient beliefs run deep on Amami Oshima. Visitors to the island villages may notice spider conch (*Lambis chiragra*) shells placed at the gate, on the corners of walls, or at the entrance of houses. The shells of this large sea snail are about 20 centimeters long, and are called *suijigai* (water character shells) in Japanese because their shape resembles the kanji character for water. They are traditionally believed to ward off evil spirits and protect dwellings from fire.