

Mushrooms (Kusabira)

A yamabushi play

Translated by Carolyn Anne Morley

Yamabushi, mountain priests or ascetics, were common figures in medieval Japan in both the natural and the artistic landscape. They roamed the countryside performing austere ascetic practices, their spiritual effectiveness dependent on their ascetic prowess. Among the many powers they were reputed to have were the abilities to exorcise evil spirits, to make themselves invisible, and to pray birds out of the sky—all tasks they attempt in *kyōgen* plays in this anthology. Mountain priests appear as characters in most genres of medieval literature, sometimes as awesome personages and sometimes as figures of fun. In *kyōgen*, they tend to be failures. Of the nine plays featuring yamabushi, they are successful in only two: *The Snail* and *The Lunch Box Thief* (Tsuto yamabushi). *Mushrooms* is a typical example of this failure.

Mushrooms do not usually inhabit the stage, but their lowly nature makes them a perfect foil for the impotent yamabushi, a parody of the powerful figure who appears in the *noh* plays to which this text alludes. In those plays, the yamabushi exorcises avenging ghosts and frightens fierce warriors. Here, however, a proliferation of fungi defeats the priest, as each of his prayers calls forth yet more mushrooms. Although mushrooms are the lowliest of the creatures to defeat the yamabushi, he is also done in by a crab in *The Crab* (Kani yamabushi) and comes under the spell of an owl in *The Owl* (Fukuro yamabushi).

The variety and movements of the mushrooms popping up all over the stage with their conical hats and strange masks provide much of the humor in this piece. In the Izumi school's performance practice, there is a single young woman mushroom among the males, whereas the Ōkura school favors a cast of female mushrooms (played by male actors, of course). Often, one or more of the mushrooms is a child actor, small enough to stand amid all the adult actors who move about in squatting positions. As many as twelve mushrooms may crowd the stage at one time.

Other edibles appear in *kyōgen*: in one play (*Konomi arasoī*), fruits led by a tan-

gerine and vegetables led by an eggplant (or a chestnut) engage in battle; in another (*Tokoro*), the spirit of a field potato sings about its torture and death at the hands of humans. More elegant plants grace the noh stage: the spirit of the cherry blossoms (*Saigyō zakura*), an iris (*Kakitsubata*), and pine trees (*Takasago*).

The text of *Mushrooms* that Carolyn Morley used for her translation was written for actors of the Izumi school in the mid-nineteenth century and contains interesting notes of advice to the actors by the play's editor, Yoshida Koichi. His notes are enclosed in brackets. *Mushrooms* also appears with translations of eight other yamabushi plays in Morley's *Transformation, Miracles, and Mischief* (1993).

CHARACTERS

SHITE: a mountain priest (yamabushi)

ADO: a man from the neighborhood

ADO: up to twelve mushrooms

MUSICIANS

None

The princess mushroom wears an *oto* mask (the comical, round-faced mask of a young girl), and the demon mushroom wears a fierce *buaku* mask and carries an umbrella. The others may wear a *kentoku* mask (pop eyes, prominent teeth), an *usofuki* mask (pop eyes and a whistling mouth), or a *noborihige* mask (flat nose, wrinkles, and beard). They all wear hats of various sizes and shapes.

[Note to the actors:

1. All the mushrooms are masked, but their bodies should be devoid of expression. The expression is in the hats. The mushrooms should pick a spot and crouch there with their backs erect. When they enter and leave the stage, they should maintain this posture, bending only from the knees and walking in a squatting position.

2. When there are more mushrooms than masks, a scarf may be used instead.

3. All the mushrooms tuck their hands into their sleeves and clutch them to their chests or fold them over their chests (the demon mushroom is the exception).]

A Play in One Act

The matsutake mushroom enters¹ and plants himself, crouching at center stage. The man (ado) enters and stands at the shite spot.

MAN: I live in the neighborhood. For some reason, this year for the first time, mushrooms have popped up in my garden. No matter how many times I pull them out, by the next morning they're right back where they were. I've never seen anything like it. There's a powerful mountain priest not far from here. I think I'll ask him to cast a spell for me and see if that gets rid of them. It's a puzzle all right. But if he'd just cast a spell, then we'd know what was going on.

He circles the stage and stops at the shite spot.

Ah! I've only just left home, and here I am already. I'll announce myself.

He goes to the first pine and drops to one knee facing the curtain. The mountain priest enters, lifting his legs high as if climbing a mountain and marches down the bridgeway while reciting in the dynamic mode.²

1. [Note to the actors: The mushrooms should shuffle onstage without wobbling. Crouch, but keep your back erect and clutch your sleeves to your chests.]

2. [Note to the actor: If the bridgeway is short, you may start your recitation from the curtain. Otherwise, use your discretion.]



FIGURE 2.48. A man, kneeling at right, has entreated a yamabushi (mountain priest) to come to his garden and rid it of mushrooms. The round cap (*token*), white pompoms on his chest (*sasakake*), and Buddhist rosary are emblems of a mountain priest. For this performance, a noh-style stage has been laid out on top of a proscenium stage. (Courtesy of the Noh Research Archives of Musashino Women's College.)

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

Before the window of the nine
realms of the senses,
on a pallet of the ten vehicles of
the law,
sprinkled with the holy waters
of yoga

Changes to the spoken style.

cleansed by the moon of three
mysteries,³
who goes there?

MAN (*Leaps forward, lunging at the
priest*): It's me!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Falls on his seat*):

Hey you! I didn't know who it was,
flying up in my face like that.
What do you want?

MAN: It's just that for some reason,
this year for the first time, mush-
rooms have been popping up in my

garden. No matter how many times I pull them up, by the next morning they're right back where they were. I've tried everything, and I still can't get rid of them. It's really weird. I'd be very grateful if you'd come and cast a spell [figure 2.48].

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Well, well, so that's the trouble. I've never heard of anything like that before. Of course, mushrooms do spring up, but it's odd that they should keep coming back after you pull them out.

MAN: Exactly. That's why I felt it was out of the ordinary, and so naturally I came to you.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: I'm engaged in some special austerities at the moment, so I really shouldn't go anywhere. But for you, I'll do it.

MAN: Now that is kind of you. Could you come right away?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Of course, let's go.

MAN: In that case, after you, sir.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: You go first and lead the way.

MAN: Shall I then?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Yes, yes, go on.

MAN: In that case, I'll lead the way. Please follow me.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Of course.

3. Taken from the noh play *Aoi no ue*, in which it is recited by a powerful ascetic. The following meeting of the man and the mountain priest is a parody of the meeting between the aikyōgen messenger from the court and the ascetic (the waki) in the noh play.

[Note to the actor: The copying of the *Aoi no Ue* greeting scene is not a traditional device. It seems to have been a sudden inspiration, although this parody is now an accepted technique. Since it is rather discourteous to the noh waki, the dynamic mode of chanting may be eliminated.]

The man from the neighborhood goes first and circles the stage, stopping at the shite spot. The mountain priest follows, passing the man at the shite spot and stopping on the bridgeway at the first pine.

MAN (*Circling the stage*): I'm so glad you could come right away today.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Following the man*): As I said, I shouldn't go out at all, but for you I've made this exception.

MAN: I really appreciate it. Here we are already.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: This is the place then?

MAN: Please go ahead.

They exchange places. The priest goes to the shite spot, and the man goes to the first pine on the bridgeway. They turn and face each other.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Now, where is this mushroom?

MAN: There it is.

He points out the mushroom crouched at the center stage rear.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Wow! Is that it?

MAN: Yes, sir.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Indeed! I've seen mushrooms in my day, but never one that big.

MAN: It's really creepy.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Not at all. There's nothing creepy about it. This is a matsutake mushroom.

MAN: Excuse me, sir. You say this is a matsutake?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: That's right.

MAN: If you say so. It seems awfully big for a matsutake.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: So, you've never had this happen before?

MAN: Oh no. I've never even heard of anything like it before. I know it looks bad; that's why I'm so uneasy.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Nothing to worry about. I'll get rid of it with one spell.

MAN: Thank you, sir.

Incantation Sung in the noh-style dynamic mode.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

A *token* is a foot-long piece of cloth
dyed black, folded in pleats
and popped on the bean,
therefore it's called a *token*.⁴

MAN: Ah ha.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Resumes chanting*):

Irataka prayer beads, these are not.⁵

4. This is a parody of the mountain priest's incantation recited by Benkei in the noh play *Ataka*, which begins: "A mountain priest is one who follows in the path of the great ascetic En and models himself after the visage of Fudō myōō. A *token* represents the crown of the five wisdoms and is pleated in the twelve karmic ties and worn on the head."

5. *Irataka* beads are a kind of rosary used by the mountain priests when performing incantations or exorcisms. They are made from a collection of animal bones and teeth and the like.

Examines the beads of his rosary.

I string together any old beads and call them irataka.
If I offer a prayer,

Begins to rub his beads and sings in the noh style.

how can a miracle fail to occur?
Boron, boron, boron, boron.⁶

He stops rubbing his beads and turns to the mushroom, which faces forward and begins to quiver.

MAN: Excuse me, sir. It's moving.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: A miracle!

MAN: Yes indeed, sir.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: It will be gone soon.

MAN: Excellent, sir.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Facing the mushroom*): Boron, boron.

MAN (*Watches a second mushroom shuffle in from the little door at back stage left*):

Oh, how awful! Oh sir! Sir!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Well, what is it?

MAN (*Pointing*): Another big one has sprung up over there!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Indeed it has! It looks like a *shiitake* mushroom.

MAN: Quick! Pray it away.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Yes, of course. I'll show you how it's done.

MAN: Please!

Incantation Sung in the noh-style dynamic mode.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

Under the bridge the irises bloom;
who planted the irises,
who planted the irises?⁷

Two more mushrooms pop through the little door at back stage left (kirido).

MAN: Oh, sir! Sir!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: What? What is it?

MAN: Look at that! They're springing up here, there, and everywhere.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: What? More have come up? Oh! This one's a *reishi* mushroom.⁸

MAN: Really? A *reishi*?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Yes, we ought to celebrate!

MAN: Well, whatever it is, they're multiplying!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Oh, that's to be expected. Didn't you say that you've pulled

6. *Boron* often appears in mountain priests' incantations in kyōgen and appears to be a reduction of a mantra to the universal Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai: *On abiraunken bazara datoban*.

7. A Kamakura-period children's song, sometimes followed by a children's counting song. Children's songs are presumably used here to parody the mountain priests.

8. The *reishi* is also known as the "ten-thousand-year mushroom" (*mannen take*) and therefore is probably a symbol of longevity.

them up again and again but they kept coming back? With my extraordinary powers, I'll make them all pop up. There are already so many up, I doubt there could be any more. Now then, since I've prayed them all up, I'll now pray them away. You ought to have more faith.

MAN: Certainly, sir.

Incantation *Sung in the noh-style dynamic mode.*

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

I'll pray that the Fierce Guardian King⁹
lassos them in his holy rope.
How can a miracle fail to occur?
Boron, boron, boron, boron.

As he prays, two or three more mushrooms hop out from the little door at backstage right.

MAN: Excuse me, sir. Another whole crowd has popped up.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Look at that! A bunch of them have sprung up. This must be a *princess* mushroom. (*Wanders around looking at the mushrooms as they shuffle around the stage. He appears concerned [figure 2.49].*) What a sight!

MAN: Uh . . . sir?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Huh?

MAN: What's going on here, anyway?

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Looks hopeless*): Nothing to worry about. Things always multiply before they disappear. Relax.

MAN (*Trembling*): Well, I don't know about that. Just get rid of them.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: You're right.

He prays alternately at one mushroom and then another. The demon mushroom, who has entered silently onto the bridgeway, crouches behind the first pine. The priest keeps on praying without noticing him [figure 2.50].

MAN (*Startled as he notices the demon mushroom*): Sir, sir!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Ignoring him*): Boron, boron.

MAN (*Louder*): Wait a moment, sir!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Well, what now?

MAN: Forget about those. Will you take a look at this one! You prayed up a really big one this time.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Spots it and is discouraged but still tries to keep up a good*



FIGURE 2.49. The more the yamabushi prays, the more mushrooms appear. To the left is the princess mushroom wearing a comical female mask (*oto*) and white cloth to represent hair (*binan*). In this performance on a traditional stage, the exorcist is costumed as a Buddhist priest rather than as a yamabushi. (Courtesy of the Noh Research Archives of Musashino Women's College.)

9. Fudō myōō, the guardian deity of the mountain priests. He is one of the fierce, bright kings who protect the Buddha, Dainichi Nyorai.



FIGURE 2.50. The yamabushi continues with his prayers over the quivering mushrooms as the demon mushroom enters the stage from the bridgeway with an umbrella around his head. (Courtesy of the Noh Research Archives of Musashino Women's College.)

the ocean dry. I can pray a mountain to the ground. But these mushrooms now . . . hmm. Clearing them out is really going to be difficult. I wonder what I can do?

MAN: It's that stupidity of yours that has gotten us into this. I don't care how you do it, but pray them away. Quick!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Humph. Fool! As if babbling away like that is any help.

(Speaking in a determined manner) All right, I'll make the sign of the eggplant this time.¹⁰ In one swoop I'll wipe out all of these mushrooms.

MAN: Do as you like. Just get on with it.

Facing front, the priest makes an eggplant sign, then claps his hands suddenly, and the mushrooms begin to quiver. Only the demon mushroom remains as he was.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: A miracle!

MAN: Hurry up! Pray, pray!

Incantation The mushrooms quiver. Repulsed by the sight of them, the priest faces front and prays but is unable to resist glancing backward at the mushrooms. He sings in the noh-style dynamic mode.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

No matter how many mushrooms there may be,
when I perform the sign of the eggplant,
and offer a prayer,
how can they fail to disappear?
Boron, boron, boron.

front): Oh! Well! This is truly miraculous! That must be a giant demon mushroom. It hasn't opened yet, but when it does, it will really be something to see.

MAN: They keep multiplying. It's driving me crazy. Until now I've always thought of you as a living Fudō. I believed you could solve any problem. But today, when I call on you, your prayers are useless. My entire garden is filled with mushrooms. If I'd never summoned you, things wouldn't be this bad!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: What?! That's simply nonsense. Why, with my extraordinary powers, I can pray

10. [Note to the actor: make up some *mudra* for the eggplant. It's best done very surreptitiously.] *Mudras (ketsujin)* were secret hand signs of esoteric Buddhism and were used by mountain priests in exorcisms.

He glances here and there at the mushrooms. Most of them move in to surround the man from the neighborhood, but one or two head for the mountain priest.

MAN (*Surrounded and scared*): What should I do?

He tries to get away, but they come even closer. The mushrooms that encircled the mountain priest come too.

Sir, sir! The mushrooms are all over me!

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: Stand perfectly still.

Chants intently while turning in one direction and then another.

Boron, boron, boron.

The mushrooms become more tenacious in their pursuit of the frightened man.

MAN: Hurry! Pray them away! Please!

He flees to the bridgeway with the mushrooms quivering around him. At the first pine, the man finally extricates himself.

Help! I'm scared! I'm scared!

He flees down the bridgeway with the mushrooms in hot pursuit.

MOUNTAIN PRIEST (*Facing his fleeing neighbor, he tries to stop him by praying*):

Stand perfectly still!

Follows the man to the shite spot and gazes after him as he exits, pursued by the mushrooms.

Hey, hey! What's this? Hey, hey! This won't do. He's already gone. Now I am in a fix. I'm all on my own. At least I've gotten rid of most of the mushrooms.

(*Spots the demon mushroom*) Oh well, I'm getting out of here, too.

Glancing fearfully behind him, he tries to slip past the demon mushroom along the bridgeway. The demon suddenly opens his umbrella, blocking the way. Surprised, the priest retreats to the main stage, looking alarmed, repulsed, and frightened. He peers at the mushroom from behind the shite pillar.

He's moving! I can't take much more of this. I'll make the sign of the eggplant again and get rid of him.

He turns to the mushroom, makes the eggplant sign, and claps his hands.

Incantation *Sung in a noh-style dynamic chant.*

MOUNTAIN PRIEST:

No matter how evil a demon mushroom you are,
when the mountain priest, the living body of the Buddha,
makes the sign of the eggplant and prays,
how can a miracle fail to occur?

Boron, boron, boron, boron.

During the prayer, the mushroom enters the stage and faces the priest.

I make the sign of the eggplant.

Boron, boron . . .

The priest continues to pray, backing up as he does so. When he reaches the bridge-way, the mushroom tries to close the umbrella over him. The priest falls backward on his seat.

I make the sign of the eggplant,
the sign of the eggplant.

He rises as he prays. The mushroom again attempts to catch him in the umbrella.

Help! Nothing works! Help! Help!

He runs down the bridgeway and exits with the mushroom in pursuit.

[Notes to the actor:

1. This ending is very important and should be carefully timed and acted.
2. Alternative ending: The demon mushroom is not used. When the man is chased offstage, half the mushrooms remain on stage; continue as follows:

MOUNTAIN PRIEST: This won't do. He's fled. My, my! This is terrible. Now, I'll pray the rest of you away. (*They all begin to quiver, and the priest is left standing there. Revolted by them, he makes the sign of the eggplant*) Boron, boron. (*As he prays, the mushrooms surround him. He heads for the shite spot as he makes the eggplant sign*) Boron, boron. (*Again and again he prays, and finally at the first pine on the bridgeway, he stops*) I can't bear it. Leave me alone! (*He flees, followed immediately by the silent mushrooms chasing him offstage.*)

3. In the old days, the play ended with a *shagiri* flute melody, and there were other alternative endings, but that was the old style. I'm not at all sure how they would work today.]