

# NINGEN

## The generation of media-lore concerning a giant, sub-Antarctic, aquatic humanoid and its relation to Japanese whaling activity

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**ABSTRACT:** The ningen, a giant, sub-Antarctic aquatic humanoid, is a mythical creature created by Japanese Internet users in the mid-2000s. Since its inception it has crossed over into international Internet contexts and has been embellished and inflected in various ways. As such it forms an element within modern media-lore, joining a host of pre-constituted mythic/folkloric creatures and more modern inventions. One of the most notable aspects of ningen media-lore is that the creature was conceived as an inhabitant of sub-Antarctic waters, which have not traditionally been perceived to be rich in crypto-zoological entities. Within this location it has been closely associated with Japan's Southern Ocean whaling fleet and can, in this regard, be understood as a manifestation of a modern aquapelagic imaginary. The article identifies that the original location of the ningen's story is not merely incidental to its circulation and elaboration but is, rather, a key element of its emergence as a Japanese figure and a continuing aspect of its significance in a broader, international arena.

**KEYWORDS:** ningen, media-lore, aquapelagic imaginary, Japanese whaling

### Introduction

While the role of contemporary media in developing new inflections of established folkloric figures and formulating new ones has been recognised for some time (see, for instance, Dégh, 1994), the concept of a modern form of *media-lore* was first explicated by the Russian Laboratory of Theoretical Folkloristics (RLTL) (2014) and has been subsequently developed with regard to specific topics, such as audiovisual representations of the mermaid (Hayward, 2017). RLTL's concept was of an essentially dialogic form where diverse users and serial producers developed media-loric motifs in an unfolding creative partnership. While the RLTL did not identify the Internet as a key platform for the promulgation of media-lore, Hallerton (2016) has asserted that the Internet exemplifies these processes in that its "fragmentary and often inter-generative texts thrive and gain momentum with the slightest (and often most erroneous) of pretexts, generating threads of online mythology that variously intersect with older folkloric and mythological stories or else develop independently" (2016: 112).

One of the many elements that have proliferated in the dialogic space of the Internet is cryptozoology (the search for and/or study of legendary/rumoured creatures). Along with web pages dedicated to particular cryptozoological entities, there are also online sites such as the (text-based) *Encyclopedia of Cryptozoology* and video collation sites such as Disclose.tv's *Cryptozoology News* that host videos about classic and novel crypto-creatures. Such web sites form part of a continuum of pseudo-Science, Science Fiction and Fantasy themed locations that have proliferated across the Internet over the last 15 years. Within this context the ningen was generated as a media-loric figure that both drew on previous aquatic folkloric themes and reflected and refigured these in a distinctly contemporary manner. In this regard, the ningen can be considered to be a contemporary manifestation of the "aquapelagic imaginary" proposed by Hayward (2017: 6-7; 2018a), wherein communities' "engagements with their aquapelagic locales" in folk-/media-loric contexts can be understood to reflect upon and transcend "perceptions of the limits of human presence in and experience of aquatic spaces" (Hayward, 2018a: 1-2). The "aquapelagic imaginary," in turn, can be best regarded as an instantiation and/or subset of a wider "social imaginary". Drawing on Castoriadis (1987), Gaonkar has provided a succinct characterisation of the "social imaginary" as a historically determined "enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents" (2002: 1). Elaborating on this, he has further characterised that the "social imaginary" is premised on "first-person subjectivities" and that their expression – particularly in the modern era – is "carried in modes of address, stories, symbols, and the like" that "are imaginary in a double sense: they exist by virtue of representation or implicit understandings... and they are the means by which individuals understand their identities and their place in the world" in particular eras (ibid: 4).

Our emphasis on specific historical factors and moments and, in particular, on the crucial role industrial-extractive whaling played in the emergence of the ningen, acknowledges Guerin's (2019) critique of tendencies towards over-generalistic ahistoricism in critical writings around aquapelagos and aquapelagic imaginaries. Like Guerin's work on Black maritime cultures in 19th Century New York, this essay attempts to combine industrial and socio-cultural factors in order to assert the importance of "interspecies sea-water entanglements for the social construction of the ocean" (2019: 50) and, on a deeper level, to propose understandings of what it is to be human in such contexts. In order to address these issues, this article attempts an archaeology of the manner in which the ningen emerged as a manifestation of a Japanese aquapelagic imaginary that built on previous folkloric and popular cultural figures in the period 2002-2008 and, subsequently, the manner in which the concept was developed and diversified in anglophone popular cultural media.

## I. The Ningen and its Japanese context

The cryptid ningen is classified in Japan as an UMA (pronounced *yu-ma* or U-M-A) (Unidentified Mysterious Animal). The UMA acronym (patterned after the term 'UFO') dates from 1970s' Japanese SciFi writing and includes both established entities of Japanese origin, such as Isshi, the Kyūshū lake monster and the modern, air-borne supēsu kyatapirā (space caterpillar), as well as non-Japanese cryptids such as Scotland's Loch Ness Monster and the Himalayan yeti. While the ningen may be clearly recognisable as an UMA, several aspects of Japanese language conspire to muddy the waters: Firstly, since Japanese gives

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<sup>1</sup> An abbreviation of the term 'Unidentified Flying Object' first used in the United States in the 1950s.

neither articles nor plurals, it is indeterminate (linguistically as well as zoologically) whether ningen is a single or multiple entity — ‘the Ningen’ or ‘a ningen’. Secondly, the word ‘ningen’ is a homophone that suggests links to other entities. When enunciated, ‘ningen’ (the *g* is hard, as in ‘get’) sounds like the Japanese word for ‘human’. The latter is usually rendered 人間 in a pair of kanji ideographic characters meaning ‘person’ and ‘realm’ respectively. The similarly sounding words are most clearly delineated by the way they are written. The UMA ningen is written as ニンゲン in katakana, a phonetic script used for foreign language terms, loanwords and scientific nomenclature, including animals.<sup>2</sup> The katakana rendering lends an air of the alien/foreign and scientific to a neologism inescapably resonant of, but emphatically other than, the customary understanding of ‘human’. The sound of the word ‘ningen’ also invites association with the Japanese folkloric creature, the ningyo (人魚 – ‘human fish’), which was traditionally represented as having a somewhat grotesque combination of a fish’s body and a human-like face. As Hayward (2018b) has contended, representations of the ningyo in 20th and 21st Century Japanese culture differ from those of previous eras since it has been subjected to a progressive “mermaidisation.” In the latter process, the creature’s appearance and associations have increasingly been redesigned to conform to those of the classic, western mermaid, effectively marginalising the ningyo from both representations of classic Japanese folklore and new imaginings of it. In this regard – and as discussed further below – the ningen might be seen to represent an echo of the ningyo in faraway polar seas. This is particularly pertinent since the liminality of the ningyo, straddling human and piscine realms, was a key element of traditional ningyo folklore.

Rumours of ningen being observed in the sub-Antarctic waters of the South Pacific are significant as they occur in a region that is remote from Japan’s traditional island and maritime territories; far from regions where integrated terrestrial and aquatic livelihood patterns have been sufficiently well-established so as to generate expressions of the aquapelagic imaginary in the form of local folk tales and/or folkloric motifs. Given this remoteness, it is unsurprising that there is no established Japanese folklore concerning the sub-Antarctic ocean and/or strange creatures observed in it. Nevertheless, the region has played a significant role in political and environmental discourse and related aspects of the Japanese social imaginary in the post-World War Two era. This has arisen from Japanese whaling fleets’ operations in the Southern Ocean since the 1930s and, in more recent years, from the opposition to these operations by western environmental activists and from the pressure exerted on Japan by Australia and New Zealand to terminate its “scientific” whaling in the region.

Japanese presence in the southern Pacific dates back to the early 1930s, when Japanese commercial whalers began to visit the region following the severe decimation of north-western Pacific whale stocks through over-harvesting.<sup>3</sup> The latter factor contributed to the first international measure to limit whaling, the Geneva Convention for the Regulation of Whaling (1931), which was implemented in 1934. Japan ignored the convention and equipped a new fleet to harvest sub-Antarctic waters, killing substantial numbers of humpbacks and other species despite international pressure to limit their operations (such as the International Agreement for the Regulation of Whaling of 1938). Although Japan’s whaling operation declined during World War Two (being limited to north-western

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<sup>2</sup> The word is also never expressed using the alternative phonetic script, hiragana.

<sup>3</sup> Modern commercial whaling began in the late 1890s and expanded rapidly in the early 1900s with the advent of so-called ‘factory ships’ capable of the on-board processing of whale carcasses.

Pacific whaling grounds) it revived in the late 1940s with the encouragement of the occupying US administration and with fleets resuming their Southern Ocean operations in 1947. Despite joining the International Whaling Commission (IWC) in 1951, Japan exploited Article VIII 1:1 of the 1946 International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling,<sup>4</sup> which the IWC operated under, by claiming that its commercial whaling was undertaken “for purposes of scientific research,” a position that it has regularly asserted to explain its Southern Ocean whaling. Its persistence in the latter prompted the Australian Government to take action against Japan in the International Court of Justice in the Hague, resulting in the Court ruling in 2014 that Japan’s Southern Ocean whaling did not conform to the intent of Article VIII 1:1. After unsuccessfully appealing the ruling, Japan quit the IWC in 2019 and resumed commercial whaling closer to home and primarily within its EEZ (Exclusive Economic Zone).

The Australian Government’s intervention resulted from mounting pressure from environmental activists, including obstruction of the fleet by groups such as Sea Shepherd Conservation Society that saw activists board Japanese ships and resulted in collisions between whaling and activist vessels in 2010. The activists’ obstruction of the whaling fleet was covered in the US Discovery Channel’s 2008-2016 series *Whale Wars*, filmed by a production crew travelling on Sea Shepherd boats which produced dramatic footage of activists’ attempts to impede the Japanese whalers. Japanese government pronouncements and related media coverage represented the activists quite differently, as eco-terrorists interfering in Japan’s legitimate activities and/or operating as agents of a broader cultural imperialism led by countries such as Australia (Bowett, 2011: 45-47). Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries the region’s peripheral presence in Japanese culture has been represented in terms of the harshness of tumultuous and icy southern seas, and, more latterly, clashes with western ecological activists and governments.<sup>5</sup>

In this manner, we can characterise the sub-Antarctic as a remote aquapelagic zone that the overwhelming majority of Japanese only experience indirectly through media representations that effectively create that space and offer a set of engagements with it. While there may be echoes of traditional Japanese aquapelagic culture and motifs in modern sub-Antarctic media-lore, the latter has been generated by the imagination of the physical and symbolic space of the Southern Ocean, the strategic and political issues that inform Japanese whaling and domestic socio-political support for and/or opposition to it. Equally, recent western representations and elaborations of ningen media-lore are generated and inflected by distinct perspectives on Japanese activities in the South Pacific and by a reading of Japanese media-lore through western lenses that combine aspects of exoticism, seeing the ningen as a displaced orientalist motif, and/or eco-political

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<sup>4</sup> VIII 1: 1. “Notwithstanding anything contained in this Convention any Contracting Government may grant to any of its nationals a special permit authorizing that national to kill, take and treat whales for purposes of scientific research subject to such restrictions as to number and subject to such other conditions as the Contracting Government thinks fit, and the killing, taking, and treating of whales in accordance with the provisions of this Article shall be exempt from the operation of this Convention.”

<sup>5</sup> While far less controversial and lower in public visibility, Japan has also had a presence in the Antarctic in the form of its Syowa research station on Ongul island since 1957 that also constitutes a minor filament in the national imaginary, along with the thwarted Japanese expedition to the South Pole launched from Syowa that inspired the popular 1983 film *Nankyoku Monogatari* (‘South Pole Story’ – English language title *Antarctica*) directed by Koreyoshi Kurahara.

opposition, regarding the ningen as an expression of Japanese indifference to Green sensibilities and/or cetacean rights.

## II. The emergence of the Ningen in Japanese popular culture

The ningen phenomenon appears to date back to a social media post in 2002 on the 2channel online textboard site, which, in its entirety, related that:

*I heard that the research whaling surrounding the Antarctic Sea, conducted by the Japanese government, is not only conducting research on the whales they catch but also researching and recording whales they do not catch. In the last few years of research, it is said that “some objects” that cannot be officially announced have been witnessed. This information is gained directly from a person involved. These are what is called, among people related to research whaling, hitogata buttai [“human-shaped objects”]. There are several types of them, such as one that looks like a human (with four limbs and a head), and one that looks as if two humans’ upper bodies are joined. They emerge from the water just like whales. The whole body is white and the size is a few tens of metres long. I heard that nobody had seen such a thing when they were conducting whaling years ago. They are “really baffled” at it because an official announcement of the object could overturn the credibility of current research whaling. They are just recording them, but that does not mean they are vigorously conducting research on them. (As they have to submit their research schedule to the international committee, they cannot change their schedule flexibly.) The person who told me this story said, “You can tell this story, but please keep me anonymous, though I am pretty sure that other people are telling this story too. That’s all I heard. (Baito-kun, 2002: online – authors’ translation)*

This posting begins by identifying itself as classic hearsay and goes on to identify its source as someone involved with whaling research who wishes to remain anonymous. The post relates the existence of entities described as both whale-like and human-type beings. These entities were reported to be large (“tens of metres” in size) and white-bodied. One type is identified as conventionally human-like, with four limbs and a head, while the second is reported as a somewhat grotesque amalgam of two human upper-bodies. The posting also identifies a cover-up in operation in that the creatures are identified as being new – and “baffling” – phenomena that official agencies are loath to admit the existence of.

The above post appeared on 11th May 2002 at 13:21 pm as the 68th item on a thread entitled ‘Giant Fish, Monster Fish’ in the ‘Occult’ section of 2channel. Almost immediately a respondent advocated setting up a new dedicated thread and this was accomplished at 9pm the same day. As the subject was taken up enthusiastically by contributors, and as 2channel threads are limited to a maximum 1000 postings, five subsequent continuation threads followed, the last of which ran until December 2003. Throughout, the original poster, true to their moniker “Baito-kun” (‘part-timer’), participated infrequently, chiming in with timely tidbits. For example, the statement that due to distance, darkness, whaling research confidentiality, “the Greenpeace issue” and other factors, the creature had proven “difficult to photograph” spurred corroborative responses from other contributors. Photoshop artisans shared images of the creature, and there was speculation about its relationship to known marine life such as the beluga and giant squid, to legendary sea

monsters such as the Kraken, to the Japanese Umi Bōzu (a folkloric sea spirit) and to Japanese animation characters in *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (1995-1996) and *The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya* (2006). Adding weight to this collective co-creation, statistics on Japanese research whaling fleets and a post referencing an “Antarctic Godzilla” reputedly witnessed in 1958 by the crew of the ice-breaker *Sōya-maru* appeared to add credibility.

Baito-kun continued to share more hearsay from “Mr F”, the purported source of the tale, including an explication of the origin of the name of the creature. While 2channel community members were discussing a name for this UMA in the first dedicated thread – with *hitogata* (‘human-shaped’) emerging as a firm favourite – Baito-kun made an interjection. After thanking the community for “fostering the uncertain story to this extent,” she recounted how Mr. F first started his story. As she was driving him to embark on his next sea-voyage, he was singing along to a song on the car stereo entitled ‘Odoru Dame Ningen’<sup>6</sup> by Kinniku Shōjo Tai. The song’s nihilistic refrain repeats the word “ningen” (human) and cued by this, Mr F remarked, “by the way, you didn't know there are “ningen” in Antarctica, did you?” When asked if he meant the winter (research) crew he answered, “No,” and explained, “We don’t know if it’s human or not, but there’s a strange being in Antarctica that we call ‘ningen’”. Later he elaborated further:

*2-3 years ago, an unofficial document went around stating “... it is decided that henceforth it will be called “人型物体 [‘human-shaped object’]”... So we called it jinkei buttai or mistakenly ninyou buttai, but it is actually supposed to be read as hitogata buttai. We just call it “ningen”. (authors’ translation)*

In her last significant contribution, Baito-kun dismissed suggestions of any link between the ningen and characters in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, contending that Mr F had never seen the animation. In the same post she passed on Mr F’s description of the being: it had what looked like two eyes and a mouth-like hole on its face. On 17th May, she announced a “temporary” leave of absence and disappeared from the threads for good. Her involvement had lasted 6 days. However, the topic continued to attract contributions on 2channel until December 2003. After the 2channel threads went quiet, the story appears to have lain dormant until it was revived in 2007 in various other media outlets. While few of the new texts added much to the 2channel original they nevertheless enhanced the story’s distribution and currency.

In Kor Comics’ *Anata no Shiranai Mikakunin Seibutsu* (‘Unconfirmed creatures you don’t know’) the story was interpreted by manga author Tenkyōin (2007), embracing the term ‘ningen’. Incorporating elements of the 2channel story into a broader drama, this manga relates how a freelance writer named Saito visits a specialist UMA researcher, Yamaguchi, in pursuit of information on the “Ningen of Antarctica”. When Yamaguchi proves elusive his female assistant talks to Saito. Weeks later, a package arrives at Yamaguchi’s office containing a video and a letter. The video shows a ningen roaring furiously. The letter, from a freelance cameraman named Endo, recounts that he and Saito had secured the ningen footage but in the process Saito had lost his mind and killed himself. Endo writes that he too will have done the same by the time Yamaguchi reads the letter. According to Endo’s account, although the video is supposed to only contain “meaningless roars”, the

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<sup>6</sup> Recorded and released in 1991, the song’s title translates as ‘Useless Dancing Person’ and the lyrics do not refer to any aquatic themes and/or the UMA ningen.

ningen actually uttered the words “Just unforgiveable.” Yamaguchi concludes that climate change may have resulted in the ningen’s appearance, serving as a warning to humans about global warming.

Later that same year, *Mu* magazine (a publication somewhat akin to the British *Fortean Times*<sup>7</sup> in being dedicated to the paranormal) published an article about a mysterious creature captured on Google Earth, showing a photo of a large, white, limbed figure, purportedly 19m long, swimming off the coast of Namibia (Namiki, 2007a: 19) (see Figure 1). “Taking into account its size,” the article states, “it might be a human-shaped monster called ningen or hitogata.” The same author, Namiki, included a chapter on the same theme in a compendium of urban legends (2007b: 172-174) that acknowledged the 2channel origins of the modern tale and reprised the account of the 1958 sighting by the crew of the *Sōya-maru*.



Figure 1 - Image of a ningen swimming close to the surface (centre of image) purportedly obtained from Google Earth images (*Mu* April 2007).<sup>8</sup>

In the following year *Mu* magazine’s April 2008 issue featured a supplement devoted to the ningen (see cover – Figure 2), setting the story in the *NeoParadigm Aska* manga series and exploring, with accompanying photographic “evidence”, the ningen’s ability to generate “flying plasma” in common with the manga characters Uchu Botaru (Space Firefly), Uchu Kurage (Space Jellyfish) and Space Kuritta (Space Critter). This article also suggests historical corroboration of the modern myth in the form of a story in the Heian period (794-1185 CE) folk tale anthology *Konjaku Monogatari*. Chapter 17 of the anthology relates how the head of Ibaragi prefecture was informed of a “large, white, feminine creature” washed up on the beach. Going against protocol, he opted not to report it to his superiors, for fear of an influx of sightseers, but, ironically, when the creature started to rot, local people began fleeing the stench in droves and the news spread as far as the capital,

<sup>7</sup> Originally entitled *The News*, the publication took its present title in 1976.

<sup>8</sup> This version is identified as 2008 in image data but appeared earlier without this date attribution.

Kyoto. “If there is truth in this historical tale”, says the manga, “it is possible that other legendary sea monsters such as the Umi Bōzu and the ningen are one and the same” (authors’ translation).<sup>9</sup>

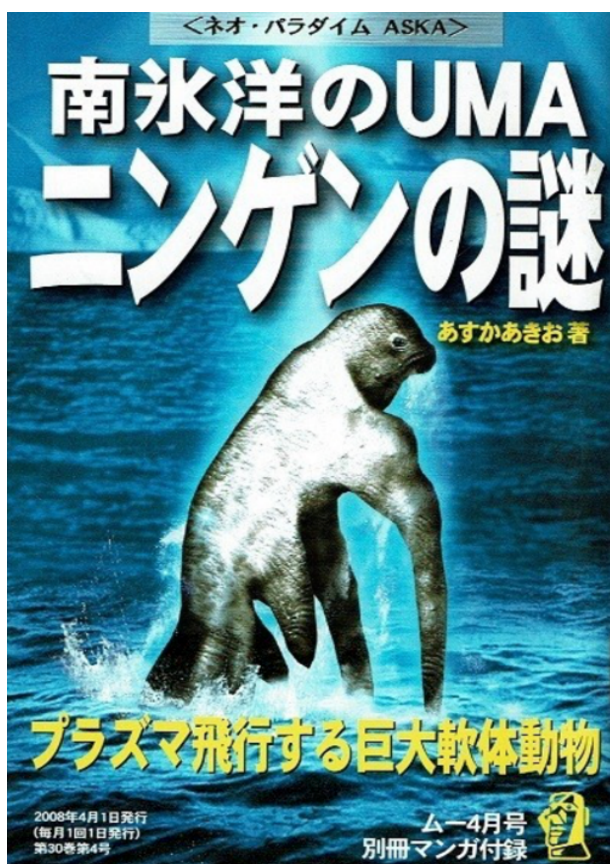


Figure 2 - Cover of *Mu* magazine’s Ningen supplement April 2008.

By 2008 the ningen was a popular enough cryptozoological motif to be the subject of a J-Pop song entitled ‘Nankyoku no Ningen’ (‘Ningen of the Antarctic’) written and produced by KaikoP. The song was voiced by a digital vocaloid product known as Hatsune Miku, which has been personified, for promotional purposes, as a stylised female figure designed by manga artist Kei Garō. The vocaloid system, its “audio persona” and the appearance of Garō’s character have been developed by subsequent users into an endearing virtual entity often referred to as a *moe* anthropomorph.<sup>10</sup> In its online form, the song is accompanied by static images of Hatsune Miku riding underwater on a ningen, over which lyrics, slogans and notebook sketches are superimposed (Figure 3).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, Umi Bōzu had also been referred to in the 2channel threads.

<sup>10</sup> See Galbraith (2009) for discussion of *moe* anthropomorphs.

<sup>11</sup> Online at:

[https://sp.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm2934797?fbclid=IwARiCj\\_C96nTRuMSwFUQHODg9sWQdBHLvm2sgLXpZxVsf8OEFZf-cRM5Bkj2h4](https://sp.nicovideo.jp/watch/sm2934797?fbclid=IwARiCj_C96nTRuMSwFUQHODg9sWQdBHLvm2sgLXpZxVsf8OEFZf-cRM5Bkj2h4) - accessed 21st July 2019.





Figure 3 - "Let's go travelling just the two of us," Hatsune Miku rides a ningen in the audiovisual text of KaikoP's *Nankyoku no Ningen*.

The song's lyrics represent the ningen as benign and culminate in the lyrics' escapist fantasy:

*I want to fly around with you  
Somewhere not here  
Without being disturbed by anybody  
Let's go travelling just the two of us (authors' translation)*

KaikoP has described the anime music video as a conscious commentary on the development of ningen media-lore. After acknowledging the resemblance of her ningen to *Shito* (angel) creatures in the popular anime *Neon Genesis Evangelion* (such as Adam, a primal "seed of life"<sup>12</sup>) she has identified that the images in the video were:

*created to poke fun at the fact that in its early phase the contemporary "Ningen of the Antarctic" legend has always been influenced by the image of the Neon Genesis Evangelion. Similarly, the style of my title logo reflects this 'link'... As for the comment that [the ningen] looks like Triton, from Umi no Triton ['Triton of the Sea'], the manga comic created by Tezuka Osamu: I actually drew a rough sketch of a cosplayed Triton, but I decided not to upload it because I thought it was too much.... As for the comment that it seems like 'Nippon Mukashi Banashi' (a Japanese folk tale animation)... I was about to give the character a Japanese traditional drum, but eventually I gave it up because I thought it was too much. (KaikoP, 2008: online – authors' translation)*

As these comments suggest, the author approached their subject as one located within a subset of folk- and media-loric referents that were recognised and commented on by

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<sup>12</sup> See Fandom (nd: online) for a summary of Adam's role in *Neon Genesis Evangelion*.

viewers. In this regard, there is no sense of any objective existence for the ningen but rather an awareness of its intertextuality with a variety of cultural figures.

### III. The Ningen in Anglophone Popular Culture

Around 2010, images and reports concerning ningen based on previous Japanese material began to feature in anglophone websites and YouTube videos. These often used a small number of low-quality images (such as Figures 1 and 4) to bolster their text and to report the creature's existence with some sense of credibility. The former aspect was even commented on by otherwise supportive sources. The Gaia website for instance, commented that the creature is predominantly documented in "several lacklustre videos and questionable photos" (Gaia Team, nd: online). The story was also picked up by some of the more sensationalist mainstream press outlets. The UK *Daily Mirror's* online edition, for example, ran a story collated from previous Internet sources entitled 'Mysterious "blubbery monster human" caught on camera swimming in icy Antarctic water' (O'Neill, 2016), accompanied by exceptionally blurry video footage purporting to show "a giant shadowy figure with arms and legs floating through the ocean" (ibid).



Figure 4 - Standard, much-reproduced image of a ningen (underwater) purportedly taken from underwater video footage (c2005).

More temperate online commentary has retained considerable scepticism. Jong, for instance, discusses images of the ningen circulated online and comments that:

*Ningen sightings seem to occur most frequently at night, making them all the more difficult to photograph. In still images, the sea cryptids mostly just look like ice, though it is said that their smooth, human-like skin can be seen when the photographs are enlarged. In any case, no convincing photographs have been made public either because they do not exist or because, as some argue, the government does not want to invite undue scrutiny and tarnish the scientific reputation of the whale research program. (2018: online)*

Maintaining a similar scepticism, Nadel gives an overview of the development of ningen media-lore and concludes:

*So what is the Ningen? Well, it could be practically anything. Personally, I tend to fall on the side of it being a natural evolution of old folklore being adapted to modern times.* (2018: online)

Amongst the more diverse online engagements with the ningen are a 2019 podcast produced by the Folklore on The Rocks team (who combine discussion of various cryptozoological creatures with devising theme cocktails for each of them) and a YouTube video produced by a channel named ‘Life’s Biggest Questions’ around the theme ‘What if the Loch Ness Monster fought the Ningen’ (2018). In addition to its visual representation in faux-documentary videos, the ningen has also featured in fantasy art works of the type commonly posted to the online gallery service Deviant Art. Ningen images uploaded there include works that stress the enormity of the creature, such as EerieZombie’s 2015 image Ningen (Figure 5). Other works provide more inventive extensions of ningen legendry, such as The Watcher of Worlds’ ‘Izanami – A Cold Day in Hell’ (Figure 6). The latter depicts a primordial Shinto goddess “chilling” (literally) in a sparse bikini in polar waters in the company of a ningen. This blend of Japanese mythological and media-loric figures exemplifies the cross-fertilisation of the Internet referred to by Hallerton (2016) and is also notable for representing the ningen as a docile giant, as opposed to the more menacing creature presented in early accounts.



Figure 5 - EerieZombie’s ‘Ningen’ (2015)<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Online at: <https://www.deviantart.com/eeriezombie/art/Ningen-535347250> - accessed 7th May 2019.



Figure 6 - The Watcher of Worlds' artwork 'Izanami – A Cold Day in Hell' (2019)<sup>14</sup>

The ningens represented in Figures 5 and 6 are similar to the protagonist of PrincessRiley22's online short story 'Levi and the Ningen' (nd). This narrative's SciFi fantasy scenario features a young female agent who first becomes familiar with ningen after seeing a video of one such "anomalous entity" filmed in Alaska and later reported off Japan:

*It was spotted in Alaska during a run of King Salmon. It was only 30 feet long, and was feeding on bears and porpoises that were eating the fish. It was described as 'a mermaid from hell' it was completely white, with eyes that were nearly on the side of its head, with a jaw that was on the bottom of its head, going from the back of the head to the chin, that opened like an accordion. It had wide arms, with five digit 'fingers' that were wide and stubby. It had a tail akin to a sideways eel, it moved up and down as it ambushed the bears at waterfalls. (nd: 4)*

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<sup>14</sup> Online at: <https://www.deviantart.com/thewatcherofworlds/art/Izanami-A-Cold-Day-in-Hell-780420482> - accessed 7th May 2019.

Pursuing it to the Arctic, the agent encounters another creature in the vicinity of an iceberg marked with the kanji symbol for human – 人 – who is considerably greater in stature, being 100 feet long, with darkish, heavily scarred, white skin, reddish hair on its head, no nose and protruding teeth, carrying a massive harpoon (ibid). The creature, named Levi (as in 'Leviathan'), turns out to be the guardian of the planet's ningen and the story ends with a characterisation of him as the only creature of his kind, blessed with almost infinite longevity. The elaboration of distinct figures in PrincessRiley22's story explores two facets of the ningen previously circulated in Japanese and anglophone popular culture, that of them being a cryptozoological species (the ningen) and of them being alternative denizens of the human realm (Levi).

The most extended fictional representation of the ningen in English language published to date is Paul Rudd's 2018 cyberpunk/fantasy novel *Ningen*,<sup>15</sup> which avoids the clear demarcation of types in PrincessRiley22's story and instead places the ningen in a realm of shifting roles and modes of being. Following a brief account of one of its protagonists' traumatic, youthful encounters with a ningen in the Weddell Sea, the novel includes a lengthy section detailing interactions with the ningen in Antarctic waters facilitated by a high-tech weapons corporation who employ synthetic humans to conduct their work. The novel uses contemporary media-lore around the ningen as its starting point and adds a back-story about the creatures having long avoided contact with humans and, on occasion, having captured vessels that venture too closely to their home areas. Within his complex exploration of multiple identities, transformations and becomings, Rudd represents the creature (which takes various forms and sizes) as a highly evolved type of humanoid with a range of paranormal powers. The novel ends with two human characters evolving into ningen-like forms as "a future us, an evolved version of AI, a synthetic form of life" (2018: 73). In this scenario, the ningen is elaborated as a denizen of a high-tech bio-engineered future in which humanity is evolving beyond its simian origins.

In many of the western representations and re-inflections of Japanese ningen media-lore, the figure is extricated from the aquapelagic imaginary of politically charged Southern Ocean whaling that was key to its emergence and is re-inflected and re-imagined in various ways in a range of locations. As the following section outlines, these fictions have facilitated various reflections on the significance of the ningen.

## Discussion

While the ningen is no longer in the hot developmental phase manifest on zchannel in the early 2000s, it has continued as a strand in Japanese media-lore, largely maintaining and rearticulating the creature within anime texts alongside more readily identifiable manga characters (as represented on the Japanese Wikipedia page dedicated to it).<sup>16</sup> In this context, video items such as the location story produced for the TBS Tokyo Cable television variety program *Makotoshiyaka* in April 2016 are more the exception than the norm. The item, entitled *Nankyoku Ningen ni Chokumen* ('Antarctic Ningen Encounter'), combines an audio interview with an alleged ningen expert who reports sightings of unexplained creatures in 2010 and 2013 with two sequences shot on location in the Amami islands; one in which a fisherman claims to have witnessed something strange in local

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<sup>15</sup> An introductory note to the novel gives a brief background to the ningen as a cryptozoological creature that was first sighted in the 1960s but gives no supporting bibliographic references.

<sup>16</sup> <https://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/南極のニンゲン?action=edit> – accessed 27th October 2019.

waters and another in which two presenters see a whale and hear roaring sounds while out on a boat. The item ends with the presenters evoking Japanese popular cinema by concluding that the ningen must be the “Godzilla of whales”.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, popular You Tuber Naokiman, who specialises in investigating news stories, conspiracy theories and paranormal topics, addressed the creature in an item uploaded in January 2018.<sup>18</sup> After considering the standard footage and images discussed above he concluded that the creature is a purely media-loric entity.

Outside of Japan, the creature has also been represented in a short piece of English language fiction published online and attributed to one Jiro Matsumoto, ostensibly one of the individuals who first encountered the ningen and whose experiences were recorded on the 2channel forum posts discussed above.<sup>19</sup> The text is presented as two emails sent to the *Tychy* website<sup>20</sup> in 2013 recounting on Matsumoto’s experiences onboard the Japanese whaling research vessel *Nisshin Maru* while operating in sub-Antarctic waters. Following a description of him being deserted by his lover, Haruka,<sup>21</sup> the text offers an intriguing scenario that suggests that the gigantic, human-faced ningen is actually a monstrous, manifestation of the author’s state of mind (rather than any real marine creature). Indeed, Matsumoto broadens this interpretation in his comments that:

*The Ningen was not supposed to exist. The creature was an urban legend and one which all too transparently reflected the fantasies of anti-whaling protestors. How convenient that there would be a sentient whale with a human face at the bottom of the sea – a whale just like us!*

The externalisation of Matsumoto’s emotional state is made further explicit in the second email. Resolving to kill and dismember the creature and transport its head back to Japan, the captain sends two divers, Haruka and her new lover, Shigeyoshi, down to the floating humanoid. Shigeyoshi becomes trapped in one of the creature’s hands and is left there while Haruka is propelled back to the surface when the creature flatulates. Abandoning the attempted kill, the ship returns to Japan, where Matsumoto and Haruka are reunited and marry.

The *Tychy* item offers two explanations for the creature’s existence – 1) as an externalisation of personal emotion on the part of the (fictional) storyteller and 2) and as more general fantasy arising from the practice of and opposition to whaling. Both explanations approach it as a materialisation of the (individual or collective) psyche rather than as a more standard cryptozoological creature. Indeed, albeit reductively, the former account might be seen as akin to a Freudian manifestation of the (personal) id whereas the latter represents the ningen as an expression of collective consciousness and sensibility.

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<sup>17</sup> The sequence is online in two parts: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRhr94KUpS4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uzxxpHPYpVI> - accessed 12th August 2019

<sup>18</sup> Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxW8qrQSYwg> - accessed August 2019.

<sup>19</sup> This is, in all likelihood, a fictional conceit on the author’s part.

<sup>20</sup> Subtitled as “Original Fiction and Illustrations – Literary Fiction with Cojones”: <https://tychy.wordpress.com> - accessed 21st July 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Who, in the first email, has been shown to share the protagonists’ zeal for *shokushu goukan* – an erotic genre involving the intimate parts of young females being menaced and probed by the tentacles of sea creatures.

There has been little research undertaken in Japan as to the manner in which popular culture – and/or that more elusive entity “the social imaginary” – has processed debates and controversies over Southern Ocean whaling in any more than a reactive manner (ie in rejection and resentment of foreign interference in what is commonly held as a maritime activity rooted in national traditions and deployed for national benefit – see, for example, Hirata, 2005). Culture is however a complex field in which multiple discourses (dominant, subordinate or simply co-existing) and multiple elaborations of these can proliferate. As Giroux has emphasised, cultural texts can most usefully be understood “not only as objects of struggle in challenging dominant modes of... authority but also as pedagogical resources to rewrite the possibilities for new narratives, identities, and cultural spaces” (2000: 494).

Given that the intelligence of whales and their ability to produce and engage with sophisticated sonic signals has been widely acknowledged internationally (see, for instance, Mann [ed] 2017), it is likely that there is some awareness of this aspect of whales that co-exists alongside Japanese perceptions of their right to engage in whaling. If so, there may be a degree of misalignment between the two perceptions. Similarly, the rise in popularity of whale-*watching* in Japan in recent years (Fobar, 2019) is to some degree at odds with the resumption of commercial whaling in Japanese waters. Viewed from this perspective, the ningen might be seen to represent a set of perceptions about whaling and/or the sentience of whales in social consciousness that is “repressed” by dominant Japanese media discourses around whaling and which “returns” in secondary and/or distorted form. The variability of the types of ningen represented in fiction reflect this. Rather than being a coherent cryptoid – in the form of a fixed species that can be subject to conventional cryptozoological study – the ningen appears rather as a shifting, amorphous entity that combines both human and whale attributes. It can, in some ways, be seen as a negotiation of the sensibilities of both, occupying shifting points along a spectrum of whale-becoming-human and human-becoming-whale. This multi-positionality gives each the ability to communicate their nature to each other and to understand their respective plights as adversaries (within a Japanese universe in which whaling is an entrenched practice). As such, the fictional phenomenon is sophisticated and complex, suggesting a type of “backchannel” dialogue between the species. In the work of writers such as Rudd, the adoption of the ningen in anglophone media has facilitated an exploration what it is to be human, what it is to be whale and what it is to imagine becomings and evolutions that transcend these fixed identities.

In the manners described above, it can be argued that the conceptual exploration of cross-species’ inter-relations and environmental issues is the most significant aspect of ningen fiction to emerge to date. The flexible and unstable elements of the creature show that the concepts and values informing it are in flux and in negotiation. Its shapeshifting represents the conflicting discourses at play and its variety is testament to the complexity of these. As an inter-cultural figure, the ningen is increasingly represented at one remove from the Japanese aquapelagic imaginary of the Southern Ocean whaling space that spawned it. In this regard it resembles other successful folk- and media-lore entities by virtue of having acquired cultural momentum, aggregating meanings from its various articulations and being able to sustain multiple interpretations and deployments.

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