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Pandemics and Monsters: The Historical Origins and Modern Manifestations of the Amabie Legend

During the initial weeks and months of the COVID-19 pandemic, amid the gloom and doom of a global health crisis, one of the more whimsical hashtags that began trending on Japanese Twitter was [#amabie](#). A hashtag for a beaked, mermaid-like creature with long hair, a scaly body and three legs, Japanese folklore has it that the Amabie can ward off epidemics if one shows her picture to other people. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Japanese Twitter users began sharing various images and illustrations of this 19th century “yokai” monster, ranging from the “kawaii” to the erotic. By spring, the Amabie had even captured the imagination of people outside Japan: both the *Guardian* newspaper and the *New Yorker* magazine ran stories on this creature.

What went unremarked, however, is the eerie resemblance the beaked Amabie has to the beak-like masks so-called “plague doctors” in Europe wore in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. Hired by local municipalities to treat patients who had come down with plague-like symptoms, plague doctors were medical professionals tasked with the unenviable task of combating bubonic outbreaks. Their hazmat-like protective gear, first invented in Naples around 1620, consisted of a head-to-toe waxed fabric overcoat, a mask with crystal eye openings and a beak shaped nose, typically stuffed with herbs and spices.

Is it mere coincidence that the Amabie also has a beaked, avian visage? I don’t think so. Her appearance in mid-19th century Japan (rising from the ocean to ward off epidemics) more or less coincides with the growing presence of European traders in Japan, many eager to share their “advanced” Western medical knowledge. My paper will examine the historical origins of the Amabie legend and trace its pop-cultural manifestations in contemporary Japan.