

An Analysis of Magical Ninjutsu in Poplar Publishing's Picture Book Series *Rakudai Ninja Rantarō*
Senku KAZUKI

The *Rantarō* series by manga artist Soubee Amako consists of three main formats: the manga *Rakudai Ninja Rantarō*, the anime *Nintama Rantarō*, and the picture book series *Rakudai Ninja Rantarō* published by Poplar Publishing. The three works are hereafter referred to as *Rakuran*, *Nintama*, and *Popuran*, respectively.

This study examines the use of magical ninjutsu in the *Popuran* picture book series, with particular attention to its relationship with traditional ninjutsu manuals, historical sources, and its narrative function. *Popuran*, published from 1991 to 2009 in a total of 27 volumes, is a fantasy-style picture book series aimed at children aged six to early elementary school.

Unlike *Rakuran* and *Nintama*, *Popuran* presents a distinctly different world. In *Rakuran* and *Nintama*, Amako deliberately avoids fictional techniques, selecting ninjutsu based on historical records and prioritizing techniques that can realistically be performed—especially by children. As a result, these works exhibit a strong sense of realism. In contrast, *Popuran* frequently features magical ninjutsu that invoke supernatural phenomena, as well as the appearance of yōkai (monsters) and ghosts, creating a much more fantastical tone.

Among both magical and realistic techniques in *Popuran*, genjutsu (illusion techniques) appear most frequently, with a total of 32 instances across the series. Amako identifies renowned illusionists such as Kashin Koji and Zuo Ci in supplementary materials, including *Amako Soubee Sakuhinshū* (2021) and *Nintama, Gentama Jutsu Kurabe!?* (2002). The illusion of live fish performed by Kashin Kōji, as described in Ryūtarō Koyama's *Kore ga Ninjutsu da! Sono Rekishi to Gihō* (1963)—a book Amako cites as a reference—also appears in *Popuran*. Other depictions, such as shuriken turning into dancing dolls or illusionists using the “swallowing-an-ox” technique, suggest that Amako also drew inspiration from Edo-period tales like *Otogibōko* featuring Tobi Katō, and *Ehon Hyaku Monogatari* featuring Shioya Chōjirō.

The kuji-in (nine hand seals), often associated with ninja spells and involving the chant *Rin, Pyō, Tō, Sha, Kai, Jin, Retsu, Zai, Zen*, appear eight times. In the stories, they function as ninja incantations used to calm the mind, see through yōkai illusions, or break mysterious spells. These uses are similar to the effects described in texts such as *Kirikami Kuji no Daiji*. The mantra of Marici (*On Anichi Marishi Eiso Waka*) also appears seven times, used as a spell for invisibility. However, the spell never works properly—only parts of the body disappear, or the user turns into a hazy form. A similar failure appears in Taruhi Furuta's *Ninjutsu Rakudai-sei* (1968), a likely influence on Amako, where chanting a spell results in only the user's feet

remaining visible. The Marici mantra is also found in historical sources such as *Bansenshūkai* and the *Watanabe Toshinobu-ke Monjo – Owari Han Kōkamono Kankei Shiryō* (2017), which include many records from Shugendō (Japanese mountain asceticism).

As demonstrated above, the magical ninjutsu in *Popuran* are reimagined for children, drawing upon a combination of historical ninjutsu manuals, modern ninja scholarship, and post-early-modern fiction. These magical elements not only support the fantastical world of *Popuran* but also contribute to expanding the imagined image of the ninja and illustrating the diversity of ninjutsu representation.