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Japanese Animation

From Sengoku to Sexy: How Japanese Culture is Preserved in Anime

There is no avoiding the fact that cultures increasingly cross beyond diplomacy lines. It is an inexorable part of developing a global community. While this cross-cultural contact creates an amalgamated culture influenced by more than one country, it can sometimes result in the deterioration of those countries' native heritages. In a country like Japan, this phenomenon is particularly relevant. Japan boasts an incredibly rich background, especially when it comes to folktales and cultural beliefs. Because the Japanese have a long-standing tradition of telling stories through art and writing, many of the famous remnants of ancient culture have been preserved. Thanks to the Internet, these texts and images are readily available. However, they can be intimidating or cryptic to those who do not know anything about the religion of Japan, or who are unfamiliar with the culture in the first place.

By merging Japan's two most popular modern media, manga and anime, with the old stories of the past, contemporary directors and authors are able to preserve Japanese heritage in a media vastly more accessible and appealing to mass audiences. Often these tributes to the past are not very obvious: perhaps an anime character will make a passing reference to a popular folktale, or share the same name as a historical figure. While these may be small pieces of much larger plots, they are nevertheless important for viewers to see so that they gain an understanding of Japanese culture beyond the scope of the show. Just as mothers sneakily put vegetables into their children's food, so too are viewers of anime being fed pieces of cultural history. Directors

insert aspects of the more traditional Japanese society into anime in order to make the culture seem more fun and alluring to the new generation, as well as to combat the threat of an expanding world in which the Japanese forget the customs of their once-isolated nation.

It was only relatively recently that Japan became part of the global exchange. Of course they had established contact with other peoples and nations, but unlike these other peoples, they never developed a major relationship with any one country. For a culture that dates back as far as 10,000 BCE, the estimated date of the oldest pottery shards,¹ it is incredible that Japan maintained its culture for so long. And while there were visitors to Japan throughout ancient history, such as the Chinese and the Koreans, who were said to have brought Buddhism with them,² it is thought that many aspects of the culture have been preserved as they were. In time, there were attempts by various emperors to invade neighboring countries, with varying degrees of success, and these small trails both out of and into Japan left trade routes in their wake, which the Japanese began to benefit from.

But when Commodore Matthew Perry first arrived in Japan in 1853, the game changed drastically. Perry's expedition was only a way of testing the waters, and a year later he returned with a larger fleet and signed the Convention of Kanagawa, a document designed to make Japan open to trade from major world powers. Because the convention proved to be relatively ineffectual, a full treaty was signed in 1858,³ and Japan reluctantly adopted a more open trade policy. This sudden shift from a completely closed country to an open one resulted in a worldwide fascination with Japan. And as goods moved in and out of Japan, aspects of Japanese culture inevitably went with them. The impressionist artists in particular found the Japanese culture appealing, as it was so different from their western culture. Since that time, many peoples have looked to Japan as an ally, a trade partner, and a source of inspiration.

With this new cultural exchange in mind, it is easy to imagine the potential for the decline of a culture so isolated at first, and then so quickly saturated by a multitude of outside influences. Thus far, Japan has managed to remain remarkably resilient through periods of intense change, but with the advent of the Internet, a true melting pot, such a rich culture seems under threat of invasion by foreign influences yet again. This is not to say that the west will suddenly take over Japan, but with such a free flow of ideas from place to place, as well as a generation increasingly enamored both by technological advance and by the west, who is to say what will happen?

There is little doubt that the older generation of directors is conscious of these threats to Japanese culture, and judging by some of the more famous works, that many are concerned by modern developments that seem to leave Japanese heritage behind. This explains why directors attempt to utilize traditional motifs in their anime. Perhaps their culture cannot remain exactly as it had been, but as long as something is preserved, then that is a victory. In order to do this most effectively, however, they must change the seemingly severe parts of culture to make them palatable to a modern audience. Though this can come in many forms, there are a few main ways that directors make culture more appealing. First, they can make it beautiful. They can take the past and create an idealized Japan from pieces of history. On the opposite end of the spectrum, directors can make culture more modern by breathing new life into old stories and folktales. If they would rather expose the creepier sides of folk stories, directors can use monsters and demons to make their shows and movies scary. On the other hand, directors can cast traditional culture to be light, enjoyable, and fun. Finally, and perhaps this is the most radical of the bunch, directors can transform characters into sexier versions of their textual or cultural counterparts. By casting what might seem as stuffy and proper in a new light, audiences

can appreciate and begin to learn about the culture of Japan beyond the setting of the show or movie.

Inuyasha (Rumiko Takahashi, 1996) is just one example of a fantasy anime that idealizes the past and makes it beautiful. Set in the Sengoku period of Japan, *Inuyasha* immortalizes Japan before it became a nation dominated by mechanical exports. The plot is centered around a dog demon, Inuyasha (Takahashi got creative with his name), a girl from modern day Tokyo, Kagome, and a magical portal that allows the two to travel between the different worlds. Interestingly enough, the portal is located at the bottom of a well in the Shinto shrine that Kagome's family cares for. This literally makes Shintoism the link between the Japan of the past and Japan of the present. When Kagome falls through, she climbs out of the well into a Japan five hundred years younger than the one she knows.

Everything about this time period is beautiful: the animation is smooth, the colors are vibrant, and the characters are dynamic. The backgrounds and landscapes are rendered in a style that recalls those from traditional art, and though the characters themselves are drawn in a modern style, they wear traditional Japanese kimonos in demure blues, greens, blacks, and reds. In fact, many of the scenes include traditional motifs—much of the action in the modern day takes place at Kagome's family shrine, and in one opening theme, Inuyasha walks through a grove of cherry trees as the blossoms fall around him. The land seems a world apart from the bustling Japan that the viewers are familiar with, and indeed perhaps this older world, populated by supernatural beings, is farther than it seems.

In a show as long running (it spans over a hundred and fifty episodes) and as centered around demons as *Inuyasha* is, there are obviously many places in which the directors were able to insert characters and monsters from traditional Japanese folklore. In this show, the world of

the past is filled with all sorts of demons, monsters, and renegade spirits, including a kitsune (fox demon), a bakeneko (cat demon), a kappa (water spirit), and a tanuki (a badger-raccoon hybrid).⁴ These characters from popular Japanese legends and folktales may be presented to the viewer out of their original context, but they nonetheless make an appearance.

In one scene, Sango, a demon slayer, returns to her village with a piece of the yokai (demon) she has just killed, and she tells them to make armor with it, suggesting that the yokai she has defeated has a special exoskeleton. This yokai happens to be an enormous centipede, perhaps based off of the one in the story *Towara Toda* (My Lord Bag of Rice) named Mukade.⁵ In that story, a ronin named Hidesato defeats Mukade, an oversized centipede that threatens lake Biwa. According to the legend, it had “eyes like two flaming moons... and wrapped seven times around [Mount Mikamiyama].” Eventually, Hidesato kills Mukade by putting his saliva on an arrow and shooting the beast.⁶ In our story, however, there is no poison arrow—just the giant boomerang Sango uses. A few minutes after Sango returns, her sister, Kohaku, asks her if "...demons really spit out toxins and fire," to which Sango replies "sometimes." Here, Sango keeps with Japanese folklore, as the depiction of a yokai is not consistent throughout different times and places. She then goes on to explain how "the demons to fear most are ones pretending to be human." This correlates with many traditional stories about yokai that take on the guise of humans in order to terrorize the people.⁷ Through these demons, the directors were able to preserve the idea that Japan was once a land inhabited by the supernatural, and create a sort of bestiary of Japanese folklore.

Much like *Inuyasha*, *Rurouni Kenshin* (Nobuhiro Watsuki, 1994) also uses a historical setting, albeit a more recent and realistic one. Set during the Meiji era, *Kenshin* focuses on a former assassin turned wandering samurai, called a *ronin* in Japanese, who is committed to

killing bandits and ridding the land of evil. Despite the fact that the plot revolves around violence, *Kenshin* is a piece overflowing with gorgeous images of Japanese culture. As with *Inuyasha*, the characters wear traditional outfits in brilliant colors, and the central group lives in a dojo built in the Japanese style, effectively creating a window into another time period. Of course, the show has its fair share of idealized imagery, such as cherry blossoms (again in the opening theme), shrines, and samurai swords. But it also possesses its own type of beauty, revolving not so much around the use of motifs and symbols, but around the history and traditions it depicts.

Rurouni Kenshin offers an inside look at the samurai culture, and especially at the manners and ways of one particular warrior who seems to be exceptionally polite—Himura Kenshin. Kenshin is always kind and helpful to those he cares for, and as Professor Napier pointed out, he speaks in a beautiful and proper form of Japanese. Kenshin himself was supposed to have been based off of a real Hikitori assassin, and throughout the show, our protagonists meet other characters with connections to actual events in Japanese history. There is no doubt that the directors took creative liberties in order to make the show more understandable and appealing to audiences, but they also took pains to make the show a relatively accurate depiction of what actually took place.

Early on in the series, the female lead, Kaede, is captured by a bandit and is rendered helpless by a spell that restricts her movement. Without a moment's hesitation, Kenshin goes off to rescue her, illustrating the idea that the samurai is honorable. In his essay on Chikamatsu, the famous Japanese dramatist, C. A. Gerstle says that the samurai as a trope, had “a fearless readiness to die for honor.”⁸ Though Chikamatsu wrote many years before anime was born, the idea of an honorable samurai is still a popular motif in many shows. To further demonstrate this

honor, Kenshin decides not to kill the man, but instead tears the tendon in his right shoulder so that he cannot hold a sword or weapon in that hand and thus cannot hurt anybody ever again. In doing this, he also keeps the promise to himself that he will never become a manslayer again.

Period shows, even fantastic ones like *Inuyasha*, are a way of memorializing the past. Whether the vision of the past is a rural world centered around spirits in nature, as in Hayao Miyazaki's *Princess Mononoke* (1997), or closer to real life as in Yoshiaki Kawajiri's series *Ninja Scroll* (1993), these shows act as windows into the past, fiction and non-fiction. Like a BBC period drama, these shows make life in another time period enticing and desirable, often portraying these eras as more beautiful and sophisticated than they actually were. This is definitely the case in "Mademoiselle Butterfly" (Akane Ogura, 2002), a manga notable for romanticizing geishas and the social circles in which they moved. Whether the series is set in the Sengoku period, the Meiji era, or 1935, the overall effect is one of nostalgia for the times that have passed. It calls the viewers to imagine themselves transported back in time with the protagonists, away from a Japan dominated by technology and wracked by economic unrest.

But Japanese culture is not always preserved in its original setting. While this may sound counterintuitive at first, we are actually familiar with this phenomenon in our own culture. For example, Disney's "Lion King" is a rough interpretation of Hamlet, and there are a slew of chick flicks (*She's the Man*, *Easy A*, *Clueless*, *Ten Things I Hate About You*) that use the plots from famous novels and plays (*Twelfth Night*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Emma*, *Taming of the Shrew*). Movies like these must disguise the plot well enough so that they are interesting to an audience who knows and recognizes the original, and at the same time they must be coherent to an audience who is completely unfamiliar with the adapted text. The most effective movies of this type offer something extra that the original does not. Audiences may be initially attracted by the

thrill of seeing a favorite story retold, but in order for the movie to stand on its own, the director must re-imagine his source material in a way that sparks the viewers attention once again.

Asian culture abounds with folktales, and Japan in particular has a huge number of popular stories that have been passed through generations. Some directors, such as Gisaburo Sugii, whose 1987 animated version of “The Tale of Genji” is absolutely beautiful, have taken it upon themselves to do accurate film adaptations of popular stories. These stories are sometimes taken from other cultures, such as the popular epic "Journey to the West," originally a Chinese story that is now immortalized in the popular Dragon Ball series. Other directors change the plot or setting, such as the famous show *Gankutsuou: The Count of Monte Cristo* (Mahiro Maeda, 2004), which takes the plot of Alexandre Dumas’ novel and moves it thousands of years into the future. These shows use pre-written stories as the entire plot of the show, but there are also countless anime that use myths as the basis for subplots, or even single episodes. The final episode of *Urusei Yatsura* (Rumiko Takahashi, 1978) is just one example: it uses the general plot of the story of the sky-goddess Amaterasu and her retreat from the world.

After the girl playing Amaterasu in a class skit falls sick, the goddess Amaterasu herself, who is headed to Izumo for an annual party with the gods, is immediately picked up to play the part because she is so beautiful. Unfortunately, Ataru, the male lead, goes after her, continuing the running gag of the show. Lum, the female lead, gets upset and insults the goddess, so Amaterasu retreats into her portable and inflatable cave. However, this time she does not come out to join the festivities that are going on outside, but she is taken back to the sky on a flying motorcycle belonging to one of the supporting characters, also a modernization of a goddess.

Of course this does not adhere to the actual story, and many of the peripheral characters have been removed, but the plot is immediately recognizable to anybody who has even a vague

knowledge of Japanese mythology. In keeping with the plot of the show, Amaterasu is in traditional clothing, and so she is not significantly changed from her appearance in wall hangings and other pieces of art. Also, the belief in the Shinto tradition is that Amaterasu's grandson, Ninigi, became the first emperor and started the Imperial line of Japan.⁹ So in these final moments, the goddess appears one last time, perhaps to remind the viewers that Amaterasu is the true source of this line.

Just as there are beautiful representations of fantastic creatures and goddesses, so too are there scary ones. These visions tend to take monsters from Japanese folktales and legends and bring them into anime as creepy characters. These revised monsters can be both main characters and villains—there is no rule against taking a creature and making it good—and directors use their creative license to create versions of these monsters that may differ drastically from their ancient counterparts. Regardless, the animated medium brings to life characters that had previously only been drawn on scrolls or constructed in the imaginations of those who told their stories. As mentioned previously, *Inuyasha* is a fantastic visual repository for depictions of *yokai* and *oni*. However, these particular ones are not nearly as scary as some of the creatures contemporary directors have created from the past. And just because Japan has become modern does not mean that the monsters from these tales are any less frightening now.

One story in particular, *GeGeGe no Kitaro* (manga by Shigeru Mizuki, 1959), is not one to read or watch before bedtime. This manga-turned-anime/videogame/film revolves around a young *yokai*, the last of his kind, who tries to bridge the gap between the spirit world and the human world. Most of the characters in *Kitaro* are *yokai*, and more often than not, they are somewhat gruesome. The style of the manga (titled *Hakaba no Kitaro*) is almost like a simplistic version of an old woodcut or etching, which suggests that it has a strong base in the

traditional arts and culture of Japan. Like most manga, it is done in black and white, and while this is presumably to cut the cost of production, it also serves to make the visuals scarier. Kitaro is an unusual character—most notably he is missing his left eyeball, which is instead his father reincarnated. His friends are all various spirits that were said to roam around Japan, and they are named accordingly. Throughout the series, we are introduced to versions of a Sunakake Babaa, “sand throwing woman,” a Konaki Jiji, “old man crybaby,” and a Nurikabe, “plaster wall.”¹⁰

The amazing thing about *Kitaro* is that the show has been redone five times, each basically following the same arc as the ones before it.¹¹ There are even fifteen videogame versions for those who want to interact with Kitaro’s world of spirits and demons, and ten animated movies, as well as one full length live action film. In terms of the animation itself, the visuals have advanced enormously, but the theme song remains the same as the 1968 original, and the general look and feel of the shows is almost always similar. From the 1968 version to the 2007 version, one can definitely see a clear resemblance in the cast of characters, regardless of how much more vivid the newer remakes make them.

This proves that there is a continuing interest in preserving and modernizing the anime, as well as in keeping the yokai present in modern culture. Watching various episodes from each of the five anime remakes, the way the yokai are presented remains constant. Not only are they depicted almost exactly as they were in the original series, but they retain the same character traits. They run the gamut from creepy to mischief loving to scary to sometimes even endearing. These spirits fill all the roles that humans might fill in other “normal” anime, but they are from another world. This makes them accessible to viewers despite their odd appearance and unusual habits.

To somebody unfamiliar with the religious aspect of Japanese culture, it can seem rather

formal and forbidding. To combat that idea, some directors attempt to make it for fun and digestible both for Japanese and for those outside Japan. One example of a fun anime is *Azumanga Daioh*. Created by Kiyohiko Azuma in 1999, this whimsical slice-of-life show focuses on a group of girls as they move through high school together. The group has all the tropes you would expect from a show of this type—the athlete, the brainiac, the skeptic, the class president, the dumb one, etc. Throughout the course of the show, the girls go through a long series of small adventures and passing conversations with each other, and often end up exploring various pieces of Japanese tradition. They discuss topics as frivolous as testing out hypotheses about how to cure hiccups, or as traditional as arguing over what symbols are the best to dream of on New Year's (according to the show, one will have good luck if the first dream of the year, called a *hatsuyume*, includes a hawk, an eggplant, or Mount Fuji). In another episode, they are trying to set up a themed café for a school festival. They finally come up with the idea of having a haunted house with the waitresses dressed as different monsters from Japanese folklore. Together, they imagine what it would like if one of the girls dressed up as a *nurikabe*, which is an invisible wall that prevents travelers from reaching their destination (it's all fun and games until she falls and is unable to get up) or a *kasa obake*, a one legged umbrella that can move on its own.¹² The overall impression is that of some modern teenagers attempting to connect more deeply with their history through imagining comedic situations.

Anime can also make traditional religions appealing to younger audiences. In one episode of *Card Captor Sakura* (CLAMP 1996), Sakura and her best friend Tomoyo put on beautifully patterned kimonos and visit the fictitious Tsukimine shrine so that they can get good luck charms and fortunes for the New Year. Once they arrive, they ring the bell, clap to get the attention of the spirit that lives there, and then pray for well wishes. A little later, they go to a

stand outside the main shrine and pick fortunes for the new year. The whole scene is awash in colors and traditional motifs, and the girls seem excited to be dressing up for the occasion. Tomoyo even comments on how happy she is to be wearing traditional clothing and picking a new fortune for the new year.

In a place where girls get dressed up only a few times a year, it is easy to see how this portrayal of a celebration would help to excite any child. Interestingly enough, this episode is completely violence free. The show is not violent to begin with, but Sakura and her friend Shaoran have to fight the spirits of the Clow Cards in order to subdue them. In this episode, the card is the Dream, personified as a beautiful woman. Dream gives an underwhelming fight and appears to go willingly, unlike some of the more powerful elemental cards that Sakura has to fight. Sakura exerts almost no effort, and indeed captures it while she herself is dreaming. The lack of action means that our heroine is never put in any danger, so the thrill of going to a shrine for the traditional new year's celebrations remains free from contamination from another world.

Another example of a whimsical representation of tradition comes in the guise of miko, or shrine maidens. While they range from an elegant grown woman, as Kaho Mizuki, in *Card Captor Sakura*, to young girls like Rei Hino from *Sailor Moon* (Naoko Takeuchi, 1991), there is no avoiding their presence in anime. The tradition of a miko is thought to have descended from the shamanesses of pre-Shinto cultures. One old Chinese source says that the tradition descended from Himiko, a female ruler in the late second century. She remained unmarried with a thousand serving girls, and only one man, who acted as her mouthpiece. She was described as being a shamaness and “bewitching the people.”¹³ But with Japanese religion as adaptable as it was, there was no one type of miko. In his extensive essay, William Fairchild notes that the role and practices of miko varied greatly. He begins to list the differences between miko: some

traveled, while others stayed at a single shrine. Some danced, some used dolls or boxes, some miko were even blind, the idea being that loss of vision in this world means gaining sight into another one.¹⁴

In anime, miko are often gifted with supernatural powers that allow them to fight and vanquish evil spirits—their presence as scared figures in old religious traditions is so strong and time-worn that they translate effortlessly in hero figures and guiding presences in modern animation. One example of this is in *Asagiri No Miko* (Hiroki Ugawa, 2000), which is translated into English as “Shrine of the Morning Mist.” This manga/anime revolves around Yuzu Hieda, the middle of three sisters, all of whom are very powerful miko. When her childhood friend returns to her town, he brings all sorts of spirits with him. To combat the growing evil, she starts a miko council of five girls. After a bit of training, each girl receives a talisman, which is a traditional object that a miko might use in a ceremony—Yuzu has a dagger, while another girl has a set of ofuda, or prayer scrolls, and yet another has a set of ceremonial bells. Though they are lampooning the “magical girl” genre of anime, the girls are still portrayed as self sufficient and strong characters worthy of being miko

But while there are demon-fighting miko, there are also miko who do ordinary work around the shrine, such as cleaning and selling religious trinkets and souvenirs. These girls are usually high school girls with no connection to the occult, but who want to make some money working a part time job. At least, this is the case for perhaps the most infamous miko: the two Hiiragi sisters from *Lucky Star* (Kagami Yoshimizu, 2004). Recently, pictures have circulated around the Internet that show the *Lucky Star* cast, among other anime characters, on wooden offerings called ema. Originally meant to have pictures of horses on them (thus the name, which literally means “horse pictures”), they supposedly started including representations of other

deities around the eighth century. In her essay “Ema-gined Community: Votive Tablets (ema) and Strategic Ambivalence in Wartime Japan,” Jennifer Robertson writes about how the history of ema and how this votives are indicators of popular culture of the time at which they were placed in the shrine.¹⁵ This certainly seems to be the case with these ema that depict figures from popular anime instead of traditional motifs. These cute and simplistic characters have taken the place of the elegant Shinto deities and beautiful calligraphy that used to be represented on the ema. It seems that just as religion has influenced anime, anime has influenced religion as well—because there are ema with all sorts of anime characters on them, it seems that anime has been relatively successful in preserving and adding to the Japanese culture.

In many instances, traditional culture, both religious and otherwise, is portrayed in a respectful and calculated manner. But sometimes, directors revert to the most basic method to make something appealing—make it sexy. This is definitely the case in *Urusei Yatsura*. The female protagonist of the show, Lum, is from a race of aliens conveniently called “oni,” which is translated into english as “demon.” However, she is not the type of oni that one can find on a woodblock print. Shockingly, Lum’s normal attire is nothing but a tiger striped bikini and gogo boots. However modernized, this outfit indicates that Takahashi had some knowledge of traditional folklore, which she utilized when she did the character design for Lum. According to Noriko Reider, “the oni were often depicted with one or more horns atop their heads, wearing only a loincloth of tiger skin, and a toothy grimace that stretched from ear to ear.”¹⁶ This explains the otherwise arbitrary tiger stripes on the bikini. Lum can also fly and call lightning bolts, which are both powers taken from various descriptions of oni.

But Lum is not the only borrowed character in *Urusei*. She is friends with a wide range of mythological figures. Her childhood friends come down to earth at various points in the

series, and as they appear one by one, it becomes clear that they are all modern adaptations of ancient characters. All of the other aliens are based on oni as well, though they have been subjected to many of the same changes as Lum. In his book, Mark West says that “many of the outer-space aliens were blatant copies of well known Japanese mythological figures, such as the warrior-goddess Benten who appeared as a hell-raising, alien, teen biker babe.”¹⁷

In the show, Benten is quite the sight. She makes her first appearance a few episodes into the first season, when she calls down the rest of her biker gang, who are all daughters of the seven lucky gods. However, she is not the depiction that one would expect to see of a Shinto goddess. While West gives a good description of her, what he doesn't say is that Benten has an attitude, curses like a sailor, and like Lum, she too is wearing next to nothing—that is to say a bright red bikini. In the traditional Shinto pantheon, Benten, or Benzaiten, is the same as the Hindu deity, Sarasvati. She was “a personification of wisdom” and “a deity of love [and] life affirmation.”¹⁸ However, like many of Takahata's mythological characters, Benten is highly sexualized. Some of the characters are simply transposed into the wild world of *Urusei*, but others are transformed almost beyond recognition, and were it not for her name, one might not realize that Benten was based on a goddess.

While it is important to preserve the characters from famous cultural stories of Japan, it is just as important to keep the traditional artistic style alive. This does not mean simply putting old prints and scrolls and screens in museums, but it means modifying and modernizing the traditional calligraphic style to make it visually striking and captivating to a wide audience. While it would be difficult to animate characters in exactly this style due to the sharp lines and hyper-realism present in many animation techniques, it is not at all hard to animate them using computer graphics. This is exactly what Clover Studios did with their landmark adventure game

“Okami,” released in 2006 for PlayStation 2.

In this game, the player plays as Amaterasu, the sun goddess, who has been incarnated in the body of a white wolf. The object of the game is to defeat the eight-headed and eight-tailed dragon Orochi, a mythical serpent to which people of the Idzumo region had to sacrifice their young women. According to legend, Susanoo, god of storms and of the ocean, defeated the dragon by tricking it into drinking itself to sleep.¹⁹ However in this world it is up to the player. Orochi returns in this game as the manifestation of evil who has cursed the land, while Amaterasu, affectionately called Ammy, has to defeat him and undo the curse.

There are many other cameos made by traditional characters. Issun-Boshi, known as the “Inch High Samurai” in some English translations, is Amaterasu’s main guide and companion. Above her back floats a green disc that we later found out is the mirror that figured prominently in the legend of the cave. Along the way, she encounters Himiko (discussed earlier), though Himiko is portrayed in a much more positive light. She also has to fight a *kyubi*, a nine tailed fox that, according to the game, is said to have ultimate wisdom and power.

Another aspect of the game is its stunning visuals. The November 2006 issue of gaming magazine *GameAxis Unwired* gives “Okami” the award for Best Playstation Game of 2006, and says that “All film, comics, and games owe a huge debt to painting, the first visual art, but only in games is it possible to make a painting come to life as a place you can explore and interact with...THIS is what it’s like to be inside a painting.”²⁰ But “Okami” not only places the player inside a painting, but lets the player do some painting as well. Throughout the game, the player is able to draw solutions to different problems using a giant paint and ink brush when the gameplay is paused. This is made possible by the classic, woodblock-type style used for the artwork in game. Unlike most games, all the characters in “Okami” have distinct and uneven

outlines that look almost hand-drawn. This is especially true of the backgrounds, many of which are landscapes that are obviously influenced by pieces of traditional art.

But the game takes the idea of a fusion of old art and modern technology one step further: just like old scrolls and wall hangings, the game combines text and art. At many points in the game, there are Japanese characters floating around the periphery of the game window. Even the cutscenes are done to mimic traditional art. They are rendered in the style of older “graphic novels” that existed in the form of scrolls. While many other videogames have elaborate cutscenes with impressive 3D graphics, “Okami” takes a different route. It uses static images done in a digital media so that they resemble traditional style and media and a voiceover to explain what the player is to do next. These images are richly textured, colorful, and dynamic just as older pieces of art are. The music too is unmistakably Asian, using traditional melodies and instruments with modern drumming to make it more dramatic.

“Okami” also has a unique simplicity to it. In a western world where the best game is the best looking and most complex, “Okami” seems out of the loop of other popular western games with smoother animation and more realistic looking characters. However, it is this simplicity that makes the title so fresh and appealing. The characters are not visually overwhelming, and though one can spend hours roaming the lands, the scenery is not too intricate. While the plot is relatively complex in terms of characters, the idea is simple: help Nippon return to normal. There are no long side quests or other arcs. The entire plot revolves around helping Japanese villagers to restore their land.

This game, like many other Japanese products, has a wide appeal outside Japan. Since Japan opened its borders, the west has devoured everything Japanese: anime, manga, and countless videogames, including “Okami” and the famous “Final Fantasy,” (Square Enix, 1987),

another game with an extensive bestiary undoubtedly influenced by older monsters. Of course, Japan does have real exports that help bolster its economy, but sometimes it seems that the cultural exports are vastly more important to pop culture than the actual goods. Amongst all of the technology and cars, there seem to be some stow-aways that are sent to other countries: the ghosts and ghouls of Japanese folklore. In an era where there is so much cross-cultural movement and action, this adoption of Japanese culture by America may actually result in the preservation of these monsters and the tales from which they sprung.

There are a few reasons why these traditional characters and motifs flourish seem to flourish even outside the Japanese market. In the case of the monsters and ghosts, it seems that they are incredibly multi-dimensional when compared to American stories of hauntings. While we have types, such as the overused “dead children” trope, they do not have names or appear in multiple stories. Their remarkable depth makes Japanese characters perfect for serial movies, and indeed many movie buffs consider Japanese horror to be vastly scarier than western movies of the same type. The Japanese method of making horror movies does not rely on cheap thrills like American slasher films, but they build suspense and create a certain atmosphere in order to make viewers legitimately afraid. The Japanese also have such a wide range of monsters from which to choose that there is one for any situation. One of the more popular ones, an onryo, appears in such classic j-horror films as “Ju-On,” (Takashi Shimizu, 2002) and arguably “Ringu,” (Hideo Nakata) both re-made into American films. An onryo is a “vengeful spirit of the dead,”²¹ usually a woman, that comes back to haunt the living. The use of the onryo in these two internationally acclaimed films has helped to bring the ghost into the western world.

Even in more benign settings, Japanese culture has become relatively mainstream. West says that *Urusei Yatsura* “provided many Americans with their introductions to cat- and fox-

eared and –tailed girls and boys, tanuki tricksters, horned oni-demons, long-nosed Tengu, and the like.”²² However, these are far from the only Japanese spirits to wander in the Western imagination. Many of the shows broadcast on popular networks include references to traditional culture. For example, Tite Kubo’s *Bleach* (2001) makes use of the Japanese idea of a *shinigami*, or death god. Though they are portrayed rather unconventionally and translated as “soul reaper,” simply the use of the motif of a death god has permeated popular anime. Other ideas, such as *kami*, or nature spirits, have come to us through Hayao Miyazaki’s films, many of which focus on the way in which people interact with the land around them. While this comes from Miyazaki’s own set of beliefs that places should be kept “as pure and holy as possible,”²³ it is not at all a far stretch to say that it could be considered representative of the idea that the Japanese have more reverence for the land itself because of their ancient values and folklore.

On the first day of class, Professor Napier told us about how people would scoff when she told them that she studied anime. Considering the stigmas about animation as a medium for children, it is easy to see how that would be a first response for many. However, if we view anime as a legitimate art form, the response makes no sense at all. Nobody would dare laugh at somebody who was studying Leonardo da Vinci, so why anime? For starters, it has always been perceived as a frivolous medium—one that is solely for entertainment, and with more specifically, entertainment of children.

But that is not the case. In many ways, it seems that anime is simply the next step in artistic progression in the east: though the style is vastly different and influenced by the west, many of the old characters are recycled. The basic point of art is to preserve or memorialize something. Art was created so that people could remember events, deities, people, and places. Of course, that definition of art has changed drastically with the advent of modern art, but the

idea still holds true. However odd it may seem, anime does a wonderful job of this. Whether the show is about a group of high schoolers or a demon-fighting miko, the show holds some cultural value. Perhaps it only serves to demonstrate what Tokyo looked like at the time the show was created, or as a record of what the Japanese language sounded like, but more often than not, anime holds some remnant of the past.

Despite this, we cannot allow ourselves to forget that anime is still a form of entertainment—it is meant to amuse people and keep them watching. So while directors may be able to use pieces of traditional Japanese culture and history, they must make it appealing. It is their job to find a way to create a new face for an old and respected culture so that it can keep a place within mainstream culture. If we understand anime as both an entertainment and a vessel for carrying traditional Japanese culture, however morphed it may be, into the future, then anime becomes a true art form with a distinct past, present, and future.

¹ Varley, H. Paul. *Japanese Culture*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i, 2000. Pages 1-2.

² Ibid. Pages 20-22

³ Reischauer, Edwin O., and Marius B. Jansen. *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard UP, 1995. Page 78.

⁴ Yoda, Hiroko, and Matt Alt. *Yokai Attack!: the Japanese Monster Survival Guide*. Tokyo: Kodansha International, 2008.

⁵ Joly, Henri L. *Legend in Japanese Art. A Description of Historical Episodes, Legendary Characters, Folk-lore Myths, Religious Symbolism, Ill. in the Arts of Old Japan*. Rutland Vt.: Tuttle, 1968. Page 361.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Foster, Michael Dylan. *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*. Berkeley: University of California, 2009. Page 42.

⁸ Gerstle, C. A. "Heroic Honor: Chikamatsu and The Samurai Ideal." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 57.2 (1997): 307-81. Page 314.

⁹ Breen, John. "Resurrecting the Sacred Land of Japan The State of Shinto in the Twenty-First Century." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 2nd ser. 37 (2010): 295-315. Pages 298-299

¹⁰ *The Obakemono Project*. S. H. Morgan. Web. 12 Dec. 2011. <<http://www.obakemono.com/>>.

¹¹ Op cit Foster. Page 168.

¹² Op cit Okabemono.

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- ¹³ Tsunoda, Ryūsaku, Theodore DeBary, and Donald Keene. *Sources of Japanese Tradition*. New York: Columbia UP, 1958. Page 8.
- ¹⁴ Fairchild, William P. "Shamanism in Japan." *Folklore Studies* 21 (1962): 1-122. Page 58.
- ¹⁵ Robertson, Jennifer. "Ema-gined Community: Votive Tablets (ema) and Strategic Ambivalence in Wartime Japan." *Asian Ethnology* 62.1 (2008): 43-77. Page 47
- ¹⁶ Reider, Noriko T. "Transformation of the Oni: From the Frightening and Diabolical to the Cute and Sexy." *Asian Folklore Studies* 62.1 (2003): 133-57. Page 133.
- ¹⁷ West, Mark I. *The Japanification of Children's Popular Culture: from Godzilla to Miyazaki*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2009. Page 48.
- ¹⁸ MacWilliams, Mark C. "Temple Myths and the Popularization of Kannon Pilgrimage in Japan: A Case Study of Ōya-ji on the Bandō Route." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 24.3/4 (1997): 375-411. Page 397.
- ¹⁹ Pfoundes, C. "Susa No and the Orochi." *The Folk-Lore Record* 1 (1878): 122-123.
- ²⁰ Santos, Wayne. "Okami." *GameAxis Unwired* 39 (2006): 46-47.
- ²¹ Antoni, Klaus. "Yasukuni-Jinja and Folk Religion: The Problem of Vengeful Spirits." *Asian Folklore Studies* 47.1 (1988): 123-36. Page 127.
- ²² Op cit West.
- ²³ Thomas, Jolyon B. "Shukyo Asobi and Miyazaki Hayao's Anime." *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 10.3 (2007): 73-95. Page 85.