

Tradition vs. Innovation and the Creatures in *Spirited Away*

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Hayao Miyazaki's *Spirited Away* is the highest grossing film in the history of Japanese cinema (Rekidai Rankingu). It depicts the experience of a young girl, Chihiro, when she discovers a spirit world and begins to work at a bathhouse where the spirits, or kami, go to relax. There are many different kami that visit and work at the bathhouse in addition to Chihiro, who appears to be the only human. Certain creatures in the film possess monstrous qualities such as grotesque features, supernatural abilities, and potentially threatening agendas. From a Western perspective, and without an understanding of Japanese tradition, the kami appear to simply be monsters, secluded from society, who operate and patronize a bathhouse. Within the context of Japanese mythology and theology, however, the spirits are much more complex. In truth, most of the creatures in *Spirited Away* are not actual kami found within Japanese religion. However, it is evident that Miyazaki was inspired by real kami when he created these creatures. The kami that Miyazaki created for *Spirited Away* help to illuminate the tension between tradition and innovation within modern Japanese society. When Miyazaki created these creatures, he enabled traditions not only to be preserved through film, but to also be made relevant for Japanese youth, who are often perceived to be slipping away from Japanese tradition.

ABSTRACT

Japan is perhaps best known for creating the world-famous film style: anime. Popular with adults and children alike, anime boasts unfamiliar creatures that are sometimes considered strange or disturbing to the Western world. Hayao Miyazaki, perhaps the most well-known anime director, screenwriter, and animator, presents such fantastical creatures in *Spirited Away*. The creatures viewers encounter resemble kami, or spirits, from Japanese folklore. This paper explores how these spirits illuminate the tension between tradition and innovation within modern Japanese society. Traditions are not only preserved through *Spirited Away*, but are made relevant for Japanese youth, who are often perceived to be slipping away from Japanese tradition.




KAMI OVERVIEW

The kami in *Spirited Away* typically embody an element of the natural world—such as a radish, spider, or river—and this manner of depicting natural spirits ties directly to traditional folk beliefs and one of the major Japanese religions—Shinto. In Shinto, different parts of the natural world are thought to possess spirits, which exist in a separate plane but can interact with humans. In the film, the kami also exist in a world separate from humans, but this world is not completely removed, as humans are prone to sometimes discover the secret bathhouse and its inhabitants. Traditionally, as they are divine creatures, some kami can be prayed to for a better harvest, a more plentiful fishing trip, and so forth. Some, however, solely intend destruction, and in these we can see the manifestations of more monstrous qualities. Miyazaki has taken the propensity for destruction in Shinto gods and has applied it to creatures in *Spirited Away*, such as No Face, who consumes people and spirits alike, and the paper spirits, or shikigami, who attack others with their sharp edges.

The intentions of the kami in *Spirited Away* at first appear ambiguous, as we do not hear the sentiments of most of the patrons of the business. However, most of the kami are hostile to Chihiro, who has invaded their realm. Some kami, such as a frog Chihiro encounters, even mention a wish to eat her. The kami are not pleased to have Chihiro in the bathhouse at first because, to kami, humans are the monsters. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, a monster scholar, states in “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” “The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us” (Cohen 7). Ironically, Chihiro and the kami can both be related to this description of the other as a monster, as both parties are unsettled by the distinct differences between each other in terms of manners, appearance, and other traits. Similarly, tradition and innovation provide a stark, observable contrast when they coexist within a culture. As Cohen states, “the monstrous body is pure culture” (4). This implies that monsters represent the attitudes of the culture that created them—in particular, its fears. Kami may function as an embodiment of fear, but they also embody a complex web of traditions and mythology, with which viewers may be unfamiliar. When Chihiro invades the bathhouse, which is filled with creatures based upon Japanese tradition, she represents a dynamic cultural force and insists that those who already live there accept her. Chihiro’s invasion of an established society and the kami’s adverse response to her parallel how innovations can challenge the way things operate, which may also incite society’s fear and discomfort.

The various creatures Chihiro meets in the bathhouse seem to be influenced by characters from traditional folk tales, and *Spirited Away* is “[an] exploration of a




contemporary Japan that is searching for what might be termed cultural recovery, or perhaps cultural rehabilitation” (Napier 289). This cultural recovery includes an emphasis on reestablishing historically important Japanese ideals within the contemporary world (289). Such ideals, according to Susan Napier, include moderation versus gluttony, natural versus artificial, and tranquil versus bustling, among others. However, many of the kami who are supposedly “traditional” defy such idealistic categories, favoring excessive consumption and boisterous mannerisms. In addition, their very existence is artificial, as most of the creatures are not actually found in Japanese mythology but were adapted by Miyazaki’s modern imagination. In this way, *Spirited Away* does not completely warn against modern conduct, but it concedes that Japanese society is much too complex to be categorized.

CHIIHIRO’S PARENTS AS MONSTERS

The first monstrous act in *Spirited Away* is when Chihiro’s parents, upon reaching the spirit world, behave gluttonously and are punished by the kami who live there. Chihiro accidentally stumbles upon this spirit world when her family gets lost as they are moving to a new home. In this fantastical world, the spirits take a corporeal form and can interact with and speak to Chihiro, which was not possible in the “real” world in which she had grown up. In this unfamiliar world, Chihiro’s parents are enticed by delicious foods and are turned into pigs as punishment for their gluttony. One of the modern expectations in Japan is to enjoy things in moderation because resources, especially space, are limited on an island nation. When Chihiro’s parents are turned into unclean, gluttonous animals after indulging in the tempting buffet which they stumbled upon, the movie highlights and emphasizes current acceptable social norms in Japan.

Chihiro’s parents function as monsters in this instance, as they cross an unstated cultural boundary and steal from those of an established and elevated society. In “Monster Culture (Seven Theses),” Cohen states, “the monster of prohibition polices the borders of the possible, interdicting through its grotesque body some behaviors and actions, envaluing others” (13). Yubaba, the witch who runs the bathhouse, states later in the film that the food laid out had been made for the gods to consume. When Chihiro’s parents transform into pigs after eating the food, it is an obvious warning against selfishness and gluttony, in addition to a lack of respect of those of a higher status. The kami view Chihiro’s parents as monsters and treat them as such when the kami turn them into pigs, as they have done to countless other humans who defied them. After her parents are transformed, Chihiro’s goal becomes to save her parents and to return them to their original




human state. Chihiro must redeem her parents' breaking of tradition by ironically further challenging the established norms at the bathhouse. To save her parents, Chihiro must interact with and challenge a variety of kami, the first of whom is Yubaba.

YUBABA

Yubaba is a commanding witch who evokes fear due to her cannibalistic tendencies and imposing manner. She is prone to take advantage of those who enter her bathhouse, and she expresses mercy only when she believes a person might be of use to her. The first time Chihiro sees Yubaba, the witch is flying around the sky with the body of a bird attached to her normal human head. Later, she possesses a giant human body, not unlike the giant baby that she uncharacteristically nurtures in her living quarters. Dr. Noriko T. Reider, a distinguished Japanese professor at Miami University, states in her article "*Spirited Away: Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols*," that Yubaba is often compared to Lewis Carroll's Queen of Hearts (11). Yubaba is elderly and rather grotesquely drawn, and she rules her bathhouse employees using magic. Yubaba also lives at the top of the bathhouse. As she is the most powerful and important figure at the bathhouse, her physical situation at the top reflects this superiority, which is important to distinguish within traditional as well as modern Japanese society.

These characteristics, along with others, prompt Reider to also observe a similarity between Yubaba and the Japanese mountain witch, yamauba (11). She states, "to many contemporary Japanese, a yamauba conjures up the image of a mountain-dwelling hag who devours unsuspecting humans who happen upon her path Yamauba are almost always endowed with supernatural powers" (11). In the film *Spirited Away*, Yubaba transforms humans into animals (such as when she turned Chihiro's parents into pigs), and then she devours them, an act that resembles the yamauba's cannibalism. In this way, Yubaba is a modern reimagination of a traditional folk creature and aids in Miyazaki's task of making such folk creatures relevant to a young audience.

Yubaba's existence also questions a traditional norm in Japanese society— unquestioned obedience to those of a higher social or political status. Yubaba utilizes magic to control her employees by causing them to forget their names, and this is also how she is able to keep Chihiro within her possession. As long as a guest or employee does not recall his or her name, they must remain in the spirit world, under Yubaba's control. This motif of the power of names is not unique to Japanese culture, and it actually spans the globe through various indigenous cultures as well as within almost every ethnic group and belief system (A.W.T. and Clodd




156). Cohen states, “monsters must be examined within the intricate matrix of relations (social, cultural, and literary-historical) that generate them” (5). Yubaba emerges from a combination of Japanese witch folklore, common literary motifs, and the Japanese hierarchical system, among many other aspects. She is prone to bursting into rage, making sly deals, and manipulating those around her, and thus she also represents the danger of unquestioned authority.

KAMAJI

Another creature which Chihiro encounters at the bathhouse is Kamaji, a human-spider hybrid. He is most likely the spirit of a spider, as illustrated in his eight total appendages. Kamaji is elderly, just like Yubaba, and he works under her command in the boiler room with the help of animated soot creatures called *susuwatari*. Reider suggests the similarity of Kamaji to *tsuchigumo*, or earth spiders. She states that “*tsuchigumo* refers to less-cultivated indigenous people who had lived before the Heavenly descendents [emperors] claimed [their] authority. Specifically termed an earth spider, *tsuchigumo* is an appellation used derogatorily in ancient Japanese literature for those who defied imperial (central) authority” (15, emphasis original). Kamaji assumes the lowest status in the bathhouse, and thus he works on the lowest floor: the boiler room. Kamaji’s low social status in relation to his low position in the bathhouse reflects the strict Japanese hierarchy. This hierarchical aspect of *Spirited Away* was most likely not a conscious decision, but a product of the culture from whence it was born. It is an aspect of the culture which has not changed extensively in modern times.

HAKU

Through Chihiro’s main companion, Haku, Miyazaki highlights the tension between nature and civic advancement. When Chihiro first meets him, Haku appears to be human, although he can perform spells and enchantments. However, it is revealed at the conclusion of the film that Haku is indeed the spirit of a certain river which Chihiro crossed on her way to the bathhouse. Haku alludes to this when he tells Chihiro that he already knows her name because they met once a long time ago. Unfortunately, Haku is not able to return to the river to which his spirit belongs once his true form is restored because, after the passage of time, the river is no longer there. Reider states, “that Haku’s river has been reclaimed and he does not have a home to return to leads to Miyazaki’s familiar environmental theme: Modern technology continues to encroach upon nature, destroying natural habitats” (17). This occurrence reflects a concern within modern Japan—that as industry, technology, and population advance, nature tends to diminish. As



Shinto beliefs express a reverence for the Earth, the trend towards greater cities and advancement sometimes conflicts with the spiritual reverence and respect for the natural landscape. As Haku aids the protagonist, Chihiro, the film seems to naturally admonish his adversary, which is the tendency for humans to destroy nature.

In addition to symbolizing the struggle between advancement and environmental preservation, Haku resembles a heavenly deity, Nigihayahi, in ancient Japanese tales (Reider 16). Nigihayahi betrayed the one to whom he was supposed to have allegiance in the same way Haku betrayed Yubaba when he helped Chihiro. Perhaps by tying various characters to traditional Japanese folk tales, Miyazaki might have been invoking an element of familiarity within his otherwise abnormal creatures. In “The Uncanny,” Sigmund Freud says, “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (124). But, as the German literary scholar Wolfgang Kayser explains in *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, the uncanny occurs when “apparently meaningful things are shown to have no meaning, and familiar objects begin to look strange” (qtd. in Hurley 141). This effect plays a large role in the uncanny nature of *Spirited Away*, as these traditional folk characters are warped into completely new characters. When the kami are reimagined, they create an eerie feeling within a Japanese viewer as they are reminiscent of potentially familiar kami but are not anything the viewer could have encountered before in a film or within Japanese mythology. Without any cultural context, the kami still create an uncanny effect. The creatures each have features which remind the viewer of where they originate. For instance, the radish kami vaguely looks like a radish, but it is quite distorted and is combined with human features, such as eyes, arms, and legs. In this way, the kami are reminiscent of familiar objects but begin to look strange as their appearance is warped, and they do not behave in the way which we would expect.

When Miyazaki ties his creatures to Japanese folk tales, he presents them in a fresh way, which keeps viewers interested in traditional Japanese culture. Professors of anthropology, Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, state in their piece, “Tradition, Genuine or Spurious,” “tradition refers to an interpretive process that embodies both continuity and discontinuity tradition fails when those who use it are unable to detach it from the implications of Western common sense, which presumes that an unchanging core of ideas and customs is always handed down to us from the past” (14). This means that tradition is not something static and unchanging but, instead, is interpreted through the time period in which it is viewed and is thus dynamic. Miyazaki’s creatures embody continuity and discontinuity because they stem from unchanging belief, but they are unique creatures in their own right.


NO FACE

Another creature that combines new and old, and is perhaps the most famous of all in *Spirited Away*'s collection of spirits, is No Face. He is described as a creature who, "like Chihiro, came to the world of the bathhouse from a different realm": "He is a pathetic creature who does not have self, and he can only communicate through the voice of someone he has swallowed" (qtd. in Reider 19). The audience is led to, at first, pity this slightly fearful creature, but after he eats his first spirit, feelings become more complicated. No Face appears generous as he gives Chihiro many special bath tags and offers a frog gold, but he appeals to the greed of his victims by luring them with gifts before he consumes them. Chihiro is able to refuse his gifts, and this is why she never is eaten. With the rise of the "salary-man," culture, Japan is shifting from valuing moderation, which is a traditional Japanese virtue, to encouraging consumerism (Gordon 8). No Face provides an obvious message here that it is commendable to resist greediness in favor of a more noble goal, which for Chihiro is saving her parents.

Unlike other creatures in *Spirited Away*, No Face does not specifically represent any figure in Japanese tradition or folk tales. However, his appearance was inspired by the Noh mask. Noh is a form of musical theatre in which the main character wears a mask depicting one unchangeable expression (Rath 25). No Face likewise shows little expression within the film, but Miyazaki allowed him slight facial expression, so he seems almost human, but not quite. The mask No Face wears evokes in viewers an uncanny effect, in which they "doubt as to whether . . . a lifeless object might perhaps be animate" (Jentsch qtd. in Freud 135). It is later revealed in the film that No Face's mouth is not where it appears to be—on the mask. In fact, it is lower, larger, and full of sharp teeth. No Face is the only creature described in the film as a monster, and he frightens the kami in the bathhouse. As a monster, No Face represents the fear of succumbing to a modern capitalist mindset, like that ascribed to the salary-man. Chihiro, however, remains unafraid of him and, eventually, helps him leave the bathhouse, in which his monstrous qualities were able to manifest. Because Chihiro is able to resist the greed that others experienced when in the presence of No Face, Chihiro promotes adherence to the Japanese tradition of favoring family over finances.

CHIHIRO AS A MONSTER


An unexpected monster in *Spirited Away* is Chihiro herself. In order for her to gain entry into the bathhouse, Haku casts a spell upon Chihiro to make her invisible. After she infiltrates the property, her smell pollutes the air, and the kami can recognize her presence without any visual confirmation of her whereabouts.



Napier theorizes, “Chihiro herself is initially signified as a polluting alien marked by her human stench, but gradually she becomes incorporated into the bathhouse collectivity where she grows in agency and maturity” (290). Before Chihiro becomes a part of the collectivity, she forces Yubaba to give her a job by repeating her request until Yubaba can no longer refuse. Mere curiosity leads Chihiro and her family to the mystical bathhouse, and curiosity causes the family to become trapped in the liminal town, as they do not leave before sunset. Napier explains that the world “may be seen as metaphoric of modern Japan, a society that, with its fading grip on historic tradition and an ambivalent attitude toward the future, seems to emblemize Victor Turner’s definition of the liminal as being ‘betwixt and between’” (291). While Napier concludes that *Spirited Away* attempts to reinforce local culture in resistance to globalization, I propose that the film attempts to bridge the divide between tradition and innovation through the liminal spirit world it portrays.

Not only is the town in *Spirited Away* liminal, or between two realities, but so are children (including Chihiro), according to the Japanese author, Yoshiharu Iijima. In his article, “Folk Culture and the Liminality of Children,” he explains that, in the past, children were thought to be closer to the gods and the spirit world and that they “played the part of intermediary between man and gods” (Iijima 41). Children are liminal, perhaps because they exist in the space between adult and baby, but, more specifically, they were not believed to be earthly beings until the age of seven. Therefore, children existed in the plane between the spirit world and the mortal world, just as the world Chihiro discovers exists between the same two planes.

We can see Chihiro taking on this liminal role in *Spirited Away* when she must save her parents in the spirit world, who are not able to survive there for more than perhaps an hour. Iijima continues, “[children] were regarded as incomplete persons. While considered sacred beings different in nature from adults, they were at the same time looked down upon” (41). This cultural attitude is evidenced by the often condescending way Chihiro is treated in the bathhouse, but also in the way that she is able to overcome the challenges of the Spirit World. Iijima also states that children’s very existence is “freakish” (41). Children, according to Iijima’s philosophy, appear to be monsters in their own right. While, at the beginning of the film, Chihiro may be a monster to the inhabitants of the bathhouse, at the end, the kami cheer when Chihiro correctly guesses which pigs are her parents, and she is able to return home. Chihiro, while remaining a modern Japanese girl, represents the ideal blend between respect for traditional kami, the environment, and family. Religion scholar S. Brent Plate states, “Films do not merely appear on a



screen; rather, they only exist in any real sense as far as they are watched, becoming part of the fabric of our lives. Film viewing is thus a social activity that alters our interactions in the world” (qtd in Thomas 78). Chihiro embodies a role model to whom young viewers can aspire, and thus she fulfills Miyazaki’s goal to potentially alter the interactions of young people in the world so that they are more aware of Japanese traditions.


IZANAGI AND IZANAMI

When Chihiro first enters the spirit world, she begins to disappear, and she must eat some food from that world in order to remain there. Luckily, Haku comes to her aid, and provides her with a berry to eat to prevent her from vanishing. Reider states, “The motif of consuming food from the other world in order to stay alive in that realm may remind the audience of a famous Japanese mythological story of Izanagi and Izanami” (5). These two deities are thought to have created Japan and all of the gods who influence it. In their story, Izanami passes away from giving birth to a fire deity, and Izanagi goes to the realm she is in to try and retrieve her. Unfortunately, Izanami has already consumed the food there, so she cannot be taken out of that world.

The magic that food possesses, which can hold a person in a certain realm, bridges the gap between the spirit and the temporal world. In order to remain temporal in a separate realm, Chihiro had to invite a part of that world to physically join with her body (through the act of eating). While in this instance Chihiro does not encounter a creature from the new world she has discovered, the act she must perform in order to stay a part of it brings to mind the mythological tale of these two important deities. By using this food motif, Miyazaki subtly, perhaps unintentionally, acknowledges the Japanese creation story and implements a familiar element into the unfamiliar world Chihiro has discovered. When Chihiro begins to disappear, it also brings to mind a quote by Miyazaki which reads, “in this borderless age . . . a man without history or a people that forgot its past will have no choice but to disappear like a shimmer of light” (qtd in Napier 292). Chihiro disappears in this very same way at the beginning of the movie. However, after she encounters kami and develops a sense of self founded upon an understanding of the workings of the spirit world, she is able to ensure that she will not fade away, as Miyazaki suggests.

SPIRITED AWAY AND GLOBALIZATION

Miyazaki explains that, within *Spirited Away*, he hopes to preserve some of



the Japanese traditions in a world filled with modern technology and materialism (Reider 8). Miyazaki states, “it is a poor idea to push all the traditional things into a small folk-culture world. Surrounded by high technology and its flimsy devices, children are more and more losing their roots” (qtd. in Reider 8). With this statement, it is evident that Miyazaki crafted the film with the intention of reestablishing roots amongst young children. Napier suggests that this may be in opposition to globalization. She states that “one of the casualties of globalization . . . is the nature of ‘authenticity,’ producing what [Arjun] Appadurai [a social-cultural anthropologist] calls the possibility of ‘nostalgia without memory’ in which ‘the past becomes a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios’” (289). *Spirited Away* perhaps encounters this problem when it references various “authentic” stories, spirits, and creatures from folklore, which children may have never encountered. Perhaps the children recognize the reference but see the tales as irrelevant to current Japanese culture. Napier adds that “more recently, however, an alternative view of globalization has begun to take form in which local culture is seen as reconstructing and reaffirming itself in the face of globalization” (289). With this perspective, *Spirited Away* may be functioning to reaffirm traditional Japanese culture, and it may be instilling a sense of nationalism or community within the Japanese children who view it. Napier concludes that *Spirited Away* fails at reconstructing a sense of tradition, but I propose that through a creative, modern interpretation of Japanese mythology, Miyazaki succeeds at connecting viewers with the traditions which make Japan so unique.

For the purpose of comparing tradition with modern Japanese society, it was necessary to establish a dichotomy. However, Handler and Linnekin point out that “designating any part of culture as old or new, traditional or modern, has two problematic implications. First, this approach encourages us to see culture and tradition naturalistically Second, in this atomistic paradigm we treat culture and its constituents as entities having an essence apart from our interpretation of them” (14). This means that, in fact, culture is not static, and traditions are not simply artifacts which are passed down between generations. When we engage with a tradition or story from the past, we are interpreting it with a modern lens. Miyazaki was very aware of this fact in *Spirited Away*, and he used this to his advantage to interpret traditional stories in a new and inventive way. By doing so, Miyazaki combines modernity with tradition and blurs the very lines of the dichotomy between new and old.




CONCLUSION

Handler and Linnekin state, “We would argue that tradition resembles less an artifactual assemblage than a process of thought—an ongoing interpretation of the past” (15). Miyazaki is doing just this within *Spirited Away* when he reimagines classic folktales to engage modern audiences. The creatures in *Spirited Away* perform this work in a way that no other element of the movie can because each creature embodies a different element of Japanese culture or is inspired by a classic folk tale. In his attempt to connect young people with Japanese traditions, Miyazaki creates a new Japanese cornerstone, which is arguably the most famous Japanese movie in history: *Spirited Away*.

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