

Shinto for children in Hayao Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro*

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Shinto für Kinder in Hayao Miyazakis *My Neighbour Totoro*

Der Artikel analysiert einige Aspekte im ikonischen Animationsfilm *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) des bekannten japanischen Regisseurs Hayao Miyazaki aus dem Studio Ghibli und erklärt, wie darin Shinto für Kinder beschrieben wird. Hayao Miyazakis Hauptquellen für die Erschaffung seiner Welten sind die fernöstliche Kultur, insbesondere Shinto-Mythologie und -Religion, und seine eigene Erfahrung. In Miyazakis Filmen koexistieren Bäume und die Natur mit den Gottheiten und verfügen über eine heilige Sphäre, die für Japaner*innen von großer Bedeutung ist. Betrachtet man die Geister, den Kampfbaum und die Beziehung zwischen den Familien von Satsuki und Mei und dem Tsukamori-Wald, kann man den großen Einfluss von Shinto auf die Konzeption von *My Neighbour Totoro* erfassen: Der Film porträtiert Shinto für ein Familien- und Kinderpublikum. Shinto ist ein Quell der Freude und demonstriert Einheit mit und Liebe zur Natur und Kritik, Neugier und Interesse, wenn Fantastisches in der kindlichen Wahrnehmung zur Realität wird. Der Film entwickelt eine Vision von Heiligkeit und Segen, gesendet vom Wald an all die, die danach suchen – mit Totoro und seinem Kampfbaum als Hauptelementen. Vermittelt wird pädagogisch entwickeltes Shinto, das dazu motiviert, mehr Kampferbäume zu pflanzen, und zugleich Liebe zum Landleben vermitteln soll, wo Familienleben größte Bedeutung hat.

Schlagwörter: Shinto, Animation, Hayao Miyazaki, Mythologie, Kinder, Japan

The following paper analyses a few aspects of the iconic animated film *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) by Hayao Miyazaki, renowned Japanese director from Studio Ghibli, and explains how these are examples of Shinto for children. Hayao Miyazaki's main influences for creating his worlds are Japanese culture, mainly Shinto mythology and religion. In Miyazaki's films, trees and nature coexist with the gods and have a sacred connotation that reflects traditional Japanese heritage. Taking into consideration the spirits, the camphor tree, and the relationship between Satsuki and Mei's family and the Tsukamori forest, one can appreciate the great influence that Shinto had on *My Neighbour Totoro's* conception. It could be said that this film interprets Shinto for a family and child audience. Shinto in this film is cheerful, talks about union, love for nature and even mischief and curiosity, where everything fantastic can be real to children's eyes. It is a very pure vision of the sacredness that the forest offers to those who seek it, having as its main elements Totoro and his camphor tree. It is also a very pedagogical Shinto, motivating the planting of more camphor

trees, and transmits great love towards life in the countryside, where family life is the most important thing.

Keywords: Shinto, Hayao Miyazaki, animation, mythology, children, Japan

Introduction

Mythology in children's film and its capacity to reinvent mythology for the new generation has always been appealing, however there has always been a preference to portray Greco-Roman mythology in children's media due to its popularity (Murnaghan 2018, 339). However, this has not stopped Studio Ghibli, an animation studio in Koganei, Japan, from turning into a powerhouse for the production of films that have not only become a main part of Japan's identity because of their distinctive marketing planning, respect in the global animation industry and taking the spotlight at the most important film festivals in the world. Studio Ghibli has inspired people around the world to be interested in Japanese culture and its mythology, as well as in their unique approach to creating animation. Hayao Miyazaki, one of the three founders of this studio, comments that because of new technology "children are more and more losing their roots" and reaffirms his duty in rescuing "the richness and uniqueness of our cultural heritage" (Yuen 2012). He is one of the most accomplished filmmakers in the world, winner of two Academy Awards, has directed more than 10 animated movies and acts as a complete director, a *kantoku*, who touches every aspect of his film's production, such as background art, animation, concept art, screenplay, storyboard and directing. *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988) is a nostalgic animated fantasy film. It tells the story of two sisters, Satsuki and Mei, who, at the end of the 1950s, move to the Japanese countryside with their father and befriend a forest spirit called Totoro. Hayao Miyazaki's main influence for creating his fictional worlds is Japanese culture, which includes Shinto religion and mythology, and one can see, particularly in *My Neighbour Totoro*, the direct references to this religion and philosophy. In Miyazaki's films, trees and nature coexist with the *kami* in harmony, which suggests "a greater awareness of Shinto" (Carbullido 2013, 2), which can be also appreciated by people around the world. Through this paper I want to answer the following question: how are different elements in *My Neighbour Totoro* examples of Shinto for children?

This paper fills a research gap in its focus on Japanese mythology for children as manifest in an animated film, which is an area of study not often explored in academia. Hayao Miyazaki's films have moved children and families around the world and have inspired a new generation of researchers to examine them in different fields of study. Nevertheless, Miyazaki's films have been seldom studied in the fields of children's literature and media and comparative mythology. The film is incredibly rich, with complex narratives, sophisticated and deeply crafted symbols which connect to culture, religion, mythology, and literature, not only from Japan but also from Europe. Miyazaki is a magnificent world creator who

is highly influenced by his documented perception of the Western and Eastern worlds. His films inspire, educate and reaffirm the value animation has as an art form. Moreover, it is important to analyse this 1980s film, as it has shaped Studio Ghibli's path as a studio which retells unforgettable stories about gods and myths in a new medium and has become a classic after 30 years. For Miyazaki, childhood is special and timeless, and children can come close to the unbelievable and magical world of spirits (Rathke 2015). *Totoro* has a timeless appeal as a story with no fixed narrative, seen through children's eyes, and is still able to charm children all over the world. It is, in the words of film critic Roger Ebert, "a children's film made for the world we should live in" (Yuen 2012). It is a film that aspires to a better world, "a world that is benign" (Yuen 2012), where one can connect to the natural world easily, without conflict. I believe this film symbolises an ideal childhood in an ideal world, which is why it is so loved by child and adult audiences even today and has recently been made accessible worldwide through Netflix streaming and Disney DVD and Blu-ray distribution (2020).

Theoretical Framework

Shinto

Shinto means "the way of the gods" and this philosophy existed in Japan before the 6th century BCE in its most primitive form. It was practiced by the Jomon people, where all nature elements were considered sacred and represented by a deity called *kami*. Contemporary Shinto has no fixed doctrine, no rules of prayer, nor does it have a founder, but it consists of worship beliefs and veneration rituals to the nature gods and ancestors deeply rooted in Japanese traditional vision of the world and is perceived as the native religion of Japan. Today, more than 70% of Japan's population follows Shinto practices (Central Intelligence Agency 2020). Shinto common daily rituals, gratitude towards the earth and appreciation towards the fragility of life are engraved in Japanese life and have unconsciously shaped its people through time, irrespective of their own personal religious beliefs. For instance, a local Shinto festival "might be so taken for granted among its participants that it is not even considered to be a 'religious' activity" (Nelson 2000, 3), suggesting that Shinto becomes an unconscious practice for many Japanese.

The word Shinto comes from the Chinese terminology *shen tao*, which reflects the influence of Buddhism in Japan later in the 6th century CE. However, it adopted the Japanese definition of *kami-no-michi*, which means "way of the gods" (Wolpin 1993, 364). According to Ivan Pinto, Shinto brings together three cults; cult of the phenomena of the earth, cult of the fertility of the earth and cult of the ancestors (Pinto 2013). The Japanese have sought to reflect their human condition in search of nature's divine identity. The year's seasons become a metaphor for the passing of human life: spring is childhood, summer is youth, autumn is adulthood and winter is death, finally heading to rebirth, where life repeats itself in an endless cycle (Pinto 2013). However, mankind is hierarchically inferior

to nature. The oldest ruling families of Japan claimed to be the children of nature's divinities, thus creating a direct relationship between royalty and nature and making ancestor worship synonymous with nature worship (Buckley 1905, 174). According to William George Aston, Shintoism is "a religion inspired by love and gratitude more than by fear" (Aston 1907, 7). For Nitobe Inazo, Shinto is a religion of suggestion through introspection (Kitazawa 1915, 481), where people search within themselves what to improve and how to live life properly while respecting the world around them.

Kami, yokai and the tree

Kami, *yokai* and the tree are three key elements in Shintoism. *Kami* are superior beings of great power and interlinked with nature: the gods of the old Shinto were all beings of the natural world. However, these gods can be any natural element: trees, rivers, mountains, natural phenomena and even non-animated nature such as stones (Puech 1993, 344). Motoori Norinaga, one of the best-known scholars of Kokugaku,¹ mentions that *kami* can be any natural element "which deserves to be dreaded and revered for the extraordinary and prominent powers which it possesses" (Aston 1907, 6). Norinaga perceives *kami* as supreme deities who reign over their territory and have a double *tama*, a dichotomous character. For instance, the rain *kami* provides life for crops but also destruction through floods, showing the importance of duality in nature and sacred beings (Aston 1907, 6). It is mankind's responsibility to control the powers of *kami* through rituals and channel their *tama* to humans' benefit. Finally, Kitazawa mentions in his text that *kami* can also be spirits of the deceased (Kitazawa 1915, 480). Ancestor worship goes hand in hand with nature worship, implying that when human beings die, they somehow reunite and reconcile with nature. In general, *kami* are difficult to define (Mikiharu 1998) as they do not have a fixed shape, they are considered mysterious and unknown in nature, but are respected and acknowledged through rituals and shrines.

Yokai, on the other hand, refers to demons or monsters. These are supernatural creatures, more powerful than humans and tend to create fear in them. However, it can be said that they are lower in rank to the *kami*. *Yokai* are subjected to *kami*, will be considered to do the *kami*'s bidding, and might be larger in number. They are more concrete and closer to humans, easier to identify and define in myths and tales. Some examples of *yokai* are Kodama, Oni and Jubokko. Some *yokai*, like the vampire tree Jubokko, do not appear in the classical *yokai* retellings written by Kunio Yanagita and Iwao Hino, and are more recent creations by contemporary Japanese storytellers. It is possible that Jubokko is a fictional *yokai* created by *mangaka*² Shigeru Mizuki, famous for recreating Shinto mythology in his work *Gegege no Kitaro*. Mizuki was known to invent *yokai* that "are considered part of authentic folklore" and because of his profound knowledge in

1 An intellectual movement during the Tokugawa government, XVIII century, which studied Japanese classical texts instead of Chinese texts.

2 An artist and storyteller who writes and draws Japanese sequential art, known as *manga*.

yokai folklore he was known as the Yokai Professor (Lombardi 2019). In a similar fashion, Hayao Miyazaki has also recreated *yokai* throughout his filmography.

Finally, the tree is a vital symbol of life and nature. In Shinto a tree can be considered a *kami*, *yorishiro*, or a *shintai*. For Alexander Porteous, specialist in forest folklore, mankind's first ideal was the life of the tree and, therefore, the tree is their first divinity (Hosoi 1976, 104), which supports the idea that a tree can be *kami*. However, according to Nobutaka Inoue, the tree is a *yorishiro*; a means, tentative personification or body for the spirit of the *kami*, who is abstract and does not have a concrete image to be venerated in rituals (Inoue 2000). Once the *kami* occupies the *yorishiro* it acquires the name of *shintai*, the new home and/or body of the *kami*. In spite of these contrasting concepts, it can be inferred that the trees are of sacred origin and, whether they are *kami*, *yorishiro* or *shintai*, they coexist in the Shinto world. The oldest and biggest trees have a special and stronger link with the ancestors, which makes them the most venerated trees. Each type of tree in Japan has a different meaning, reflected in stories and myths, including sakaki, bamboo, sakura, camphor, momiji and camellia. The camphor tree is incorruptible as it has a very intense smell that kills insects that try to penetrate its wood. For the Japanese, this tree is the protector of durability and a symbol of eternity. Before winter, the Japanese send cards to relatives with cranes crafted with camphor wood, implying that they want their loved ones to endure this harsh time (Pinto 2013).

Analysis

Following the definition of some elements regarding Shinto, I will analyse them in context of Miyazaki's film. Hayao Miyazaki has said in interviews that he does not believe in Shintoism but thinks "the animism origin of Shinto is rooted deep within me" (Epstein 2010). He does not practice the traditional rituals as he believes *kami* are not in the shrines but deep in the forests and hidden from the public eye (Miyazaki 2014, 360). According to Lucy Wright he practices Shintoism through his own audio-visual and storytelling lens (Lioi 2010), which acknowledges Shinto as an inherent and sacred element in his fictional universe. Even though Miyazaki is not a Shintoist he, like other Japanese, has grown up with ideas about nature's divinity, as Shintoism transcends religion and has become a primordial element in Japanese culture and heritage.

My Neighbour Totoro features a *kami* that rules the forest: Totoro, guardian and protector of the camphor tree. It is a creature invented by Miyazaki that has aspects of *tanuki*³ and cat, by its facial expressions and pointed ears, and owl, by the ululation it makes at night from the top of its tree. The name "Totoro" seems to come from the pronunciation of Mei, the youngest of the girls, who tries to say "tororu", the word "troll" in Japanese. Mei thinks that Totoro is a fairy tale troll that her mother used to tell her about in *The three mountain goats*, who are chased by a troll. Miyazaki has shown in interviews that Totoro is not a young

3 Japanese raccoon dog.

spirit but is about 3,000 years old and has played with Japanese children through centuries, from the Jomon to the Edo period (Miyazaki 2014, 368), and even now in the film's timeline, the Showa period. Totoro might be a creation tailored by Miyazaki, but he represents his conception of a Shinto *kami*, by being mysterious and magical. Nevertheless, Totoro is presented in a refreshing way as a close companion to children, who can play and enjoy nature and still maintain his distance from the adults, who have a different perspective of what Shinto *kami* are, as age may condition one's view of the world.

Totoro is a *kami* capable of flying and growing camphor trees in seconds, which is understood as a supernatural event. The notion of *kami* is exposed in Totoro as a concept for children and family. The *kami* is a friend of the children and Miyazaki wants to teach them to love and care for nature, especially the trees. This is shown in the film when Totoro plants the seeds with Satsuki and Mei to grow a large camphor and when Totoro helps the sisters to find their mother. In this case, *kami* is not superior to man, represented by the children, but their friend, their partner who helps and cares for them. Totoro cannot be seen by the adults who perceive the temple, the sacred trees and the monuments built to venerate the *kami* in the traditional Shinto way. This is the case of Satsuki and Mei's father, who leads them to pray to the camphor tree. The girls, in particular Mei, who is younger, interact directly with the *kami* and treat him in a playful way, as if they were equals. This is why I think Miyazaki believes that children can relate directly to nature and spirits. They have less prejudice and more imagination than adults, who to some extent are afraid of the *kami*. This symbolizes the double *tama* of the *kami*: it is friendly and close when seen by children, and mysterious, hidden but always present, for adults.

Totoro lives in a camphor tree, which connotes eternity, durability and the incorruptible. It is a huge tree that, although it is next to Satsuki and Mei's house, has a labyrinth of vines as a protected entrance to its interior that is almost impossible to find, except for someone very small like Mei, who slips into it and enters the tree. The sacred nature of the tree is highlighted by the rope around its trunk called *shimenawa*, made of paper and rice straw, a small sanctuary at the foot and a *torii* under the mountain where the tree is located, placed there by Shinto believers. This indicates that this tree is a *shinboku*, a sacred tree, and even Mei and Satsuki's father thanks the tree personally for caring for Mei. This camphor tree is the first element we see in the forest called Tsukamori, which draws attention to itself and is present throughout the film. It is not only where Totoro lives, a *yorishiro*, but represents the *kami* and makes him look like a being that lives in a house, a fun neighbour. This adds to his playful and friendly behaviour, as if he were a *kami* with a child's attitude, who sleeps inside the tree and uses camphor seeds as musical instruments on top of the tree's crown. Tsukamori's *kanji*⁴ means "mound or burial forest", so the name refers to a quiet, old and sacred place. Miyazaki employs shrines in the forests as he says he thinks *kami*

4 It is one of the three Japanese writing systems (the others being *hiragana* and *katakana*). *Kanji* was adopted from the Chinese ideograms and serves to represent concepts but not sounds.

dwell deep inside the forests, hidden from the human eye (Miyazaki 2014, 360).

It is interesting to note that in *My Neighbour Totoro* everything revolves around the theme of home: Mei, Satsuki and her father move to the countryside, Totoro lives in a camphor tree, Mei and Satsuki wait for their father in the rain to go home, Mei goes to look for her mother at the hospital so she can go home and, consequently, Satsuki goes with Totoro to bring her sister back home. The sisters' father tells them that he chose to live precisely in that country house because it was next to a magnificent and large camphor tree. Indirectly, it also refers to the great sense of security the sacred tree gives to the humans, since a tree of such nature may harbour protective spirits. The home symbolizes protection and security, as well as joy and family life. Therefore, it is no coincidence that the tree is a great camphor, which symbolizes eternal life, harbours a kind and playful spirit who provides security and is a good companion for the girls. The film explores this theme without a specific storyline; it is spontaneous and real, showing the curious girls in daily exploration and adventures in the countryside, in the way that Miyazaki perceives children. For Miyazaki it is important that childhood is portrayed with realism, that it is believable, and adults and children alike can identify and connect with it on a personal level (Miyazaki 2014, 373). Portraying childhood realistically has even helped him to understand unresolved issues from his own childhood (Miyazaki 2014, 371). He mentions that he "intentionally didn't show the sisters together with Totoro at the end" (Miyazaki 2014, 373), as the girls need to go back to their normal life, in the real world. This bittersweet element is present in many narratives throughout his filmography, where the magical and sacred universe is not meant to belong with human reality.

In Totoro's forest there are other supernatural beings invented by Hayao Miyazaki. There are two Totoro more besides Oh-Totoro (Grey Totoro); Chu-Totoro (Blue Totoro) and Chibi-Totoro (White Totoro). These smaller versions of the main Totoro imply that the forest has many spirits that protect it and that Oh-Totoro has a family in his Tsukamori forest, adding even more weight to the theme of home. At first these spirits, being smaller, can be considered a lower rank than Oh-Totoro, as if they were younger brothers but of the same family, and they go out to get acorns for the "big brother". These Totoro, like Oh-Totoro, are only seen first by Mei and then by Satsuki, being invisible to adults. The fact that they are sneaking around gives a playful and funny connotation to the little spirits and makes them appear closer to the children. In a pre-production sketch made by Miyazaki himself, many grey Totoro are riding the Catbus, the transportation used by the forest spirits. Although they do not appear in the film, Miyazaki thought of a community of Totoro spirits who live together as a family, reinforcing the importance of the home and family themes in the film, and therefore adding to the film's appeal for children.

The Catbus, although it is designed and created by Miyazaki, is based on the popular belief that cats can change shape, and in this case the cat decides to become a night bus. The Catbus could be considered a *yokai* on the grounds of being in the service of Totoro, the main *kami*, and having the particular role of serving as a means of transportation for the spirits and the human sisters. Finally, the

susuwatari or *makkuro kurosuke* (very dark assistants) are described as black soot and are also Miyazaki's creation. They are clearly *yokai* that infest the houses that are in disuse, live in the dust and like the darkness. They are afraid of humans and tend to hide in the dark, fleeing from them, as they can turn into black powder if they are crushed. They have always lived in the house before Satsuki and Mei move in. Then the *yokai* flee towards the camphor tree, looking for a dark and quiet place to live. This serves as a trigger to indicate that the tree, and in general the forest, is the natural home of the spirits and the sacred, and that there might be other spirits living here. Shinto venerates the forests because they are mysterious and sacred places, which harbour spirits and are avoided by humans. That is why the forest is the natural place to worship them and one can find shrines nearby which seek to revere but not penetrate the sacred area. Since the Edo period, there have been terrifying stories of *yokai* and ghosts, mainly through the literary genre of *kaidan-shu* (Reider 2001, 79), to keep humans away from the hearts of the forests and avoid destruction of the sacred forest. However, interestingly in *My Neighbour Totoro*, the *kami* and *yokai* do not terrify or inspire fear but are sweet, close and fun, which invites them to be friends with children. This way, nature is approached with naivety and with a child perspective in mind.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the spirits, the camphor tree and the relationship between Satsuki and Mei's family and the Tsukamori forest, one can appreciate the great influence that Shinto had on *My Neighbour Totoro's* conception. It could be said that it is Miyazaki's perception of Shinto for a family and child audience. *My Neighbour Totoro's* Shinto is different from the traditional one as the themes of home and family are primordial in the film's treatment. Children can be curious and mischievous when exploring sacred divinities in the forest, and Shinto is perceived as a happy and unified love towards all nature. Miyazaki provides a very pure portrayal of the sacredness and friendliness of the forest, as it becomes accessible for the children who are curious to uncover its secrets. The *kami* Totoro, his camphor tree, which is considered a *shintai*, and the *yokai* in the forest are the main elements that portray a Shintoism for children, as they show a direct relationship with children. Elements such as shrines and altars represent a more traditional Shinto and are present in the film for the realism that adult audiences need to relate to his film more easily. Shinto in *My Neighbour Totoro* is also very pedagogical as Totoro teaches the sisters how to make trees grow magically during the night, moving around the countryside in the Catbus *yokai* and transmitting love and respect towards the natural world and their family life in the countryside. This film is probably the one that transmits his vision of an "ideal" Shinto in the best way as a world where spirits and children can be friends and enjoy nature. Shintoism might sometimes not be recognized as a religion as it is deeply impregnated in Japanese culture, where shrines and rituals all over Japan connote peace and gratitude towards the earth. That is why films like *My*

Neighbour Totoro, which promotes a peaceful and ideal coexistence between mankind and the plant world, can be appealing to children 30 years or more after their production. Japanese children recognize these Shinto values in the film from their everyday life, and I believe children worldwide can also relate to them, as Miyazaki portrays these as values transcending time and space. Definitely *My Neighbour Totoro* is one of the most beloved films by its audience and it is not by chance that the Totoro character is part of the official logo of Studio Ghibli and has become an animation icon all over the world.

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