

Social, Cultural, and Religious Aspects of Japan  
As Reflected Through Anime

Alex Craig  
JAPN 313  
Dr. Takahashi  
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## INTRODUCTION

Japan's past is one of very interesting and historical backgrounds. It continues to be the research subject of many scholars as it remains a strong part of Japanese culture even today with its emphasis on supernatural beings known as "kami" and "yokai" along with many other types of otherworldly monstrosities. Japan's strong belief in the supernatural has shaped a very interesting and unique history for its people as well as a unique subculture in the world of anime and manga, popular mediums of entertainment in Japan, that center around those beliefs. The belief in supernatural creatures and spirits known as "yokai" and "kami" is something that is exclusive to Japan and its past culture through the religion known as Shinto (Picken, 1994, p. xvii). While they hold similar aspects and ideals they have their differences, as well as difficulty in trying to translate their meanings into English. In my paper I will examine how Japan's past created, shaped, and influenced manga and anime over the course of time through the examples of *Hi no Tori*, *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind*, *A Letter to Momo*, and *Time of Eve*. Each work will be used to compare and explain how they either were created by or reflect ancient and modern Japanese cultural, social, and religious aspects and identities. The films *Hi no Tori* and *A Letter to Momo* will be used to analyze how the religions of Buddhism and Shinto, respectively, have influenced the creation of these works while *Nausicaa* and *Time of Eve* will focus on cultural and social aspects of Japan, respectively. First, though, I would like to give some background information about the history of cultural and religious aspects of Japan and its people.

## JAPAN'S CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS PAST

In order to understand the meaning and importance behind the various aspects and ideas of Shinto and Buddhism as practiced in Japan, a bit of background context is required. Religion is something that's strongly reflected in their culture and the various activities and practices that

Japanese people do on a day to day basis, even though they might not recognize this for themselves. The idea of spirits inhabiting non-living objects or some unlucky occurrence being the result of a ghoulish monster is not so strange to their culture. In fact it has become so ingrained in their normal ways of thinking that it is hard to not find an example of it in some form of cultural belief or medium of entertainment. With its rich, historical background it's easy to see how religion has worked its way into nooks and crannies of Japanese lifestyle.

### **Shinto and Buddhism in Japanese Culture**

Shinto has been something that has been with Japan since its beginnings as early as the Jomon and Yayoi periods; well before it was declared as the national religion of Japan. Many scholars believe the origins of the practice of Shinto are tied to the early practices of Animism, Nature Worship, Ancestral Reverence, Shamanism, Agricultural Rites, and Lustration (Picken, 1994, p.9) as seen in these early periods. These practices usually focused on the sacredness of an object, living or nonliving, that was believed to be inhabited by a spirit. The belief in “kami”, or god-like spirits, is a very prevalent belief to the people of Japan and one of the main structures of Shinto, which can also be seen in its origins with the island of Japan having been created by Izanagi-no-Okami and Izanami-no-kami (Picken, 1994, p. 61). Another main aspect is the belief in “yokai” which in concept are similar to kami in the sense that they're both a type of supernatural god-like spirit. However yokai do not always hold the same status as that of kami for yokai tend to be lesser spiritual forms. Yokai can range from the cunning, shape-shifting kitsune, or fox spirit, to the simple tsukumogami, or possessed household object such as umbrellas or tea cups. It was around the Asuka and Nara periods that aristocrats began to normalize the idea of unexplainable phenomena being the result of yokai. Also around this period was the introduction of Buddhism from Korea, officially dated as 552 (Picken, 1994, p. 14). As time passed the ideals and practices of both Shinto and Buddhism became interwoven

with one another. Since Shinto at the time had not become a fully developed religion elements of Buddhism were borrowed in order to fully shape Shinto into what it is today. For example, the use of shrines in Buddhism where a Buddha statue is placed as an object of worship was taken by the Japanese and used with their own gods and kami. For the most part, Japanese Buddhism followed its Indian predecessor with the focus of karma and reincarnation and managed to become just as important and popular with the Japanese people as Shinto is.

### **Social and Cultural Behaviors in Japan**

As one might be able to guess the social and cultural structures of Japan are most likely very different from their own in a variety of ways. Most important is the influence of Shinto in the day to day life of the Japanese people. The ways and practices involved in the official religion of Japan have become so ingrained into their lifestyle that it causes some to argue whether Shinto should actually be considered a religion or not. For most Japanese it is simply apart of their lifestyle to pay respect towards nature and other things that are considered sacred, such as shrines that house kami. The act of “harae” is one that pays respect to the enshrined kami or spirits through the act of leaving offerings of food or drink. Though many claim to not be religious, these practices are still partaken in, sometimes even on a daily basis. There is also a strong sense of the importance of community versus the individual. Family takes precedents in their society which focuses much more on the importance of the welfare of the community as a whole rather than the flourishing of the individual (Caudill, 1973, p. 349). There are its darker sides to the idea of the community as being almighty, however, and that is reflected through this strong sense of pride and nationalism. Japanese have a very strong sense of “we” whether that refers to this idea of superiority they have over other countries and ethnicities when compared to their own (Caudill, 1973, p. 350). Racial prejudice and discrimination is still, sadly, very much

apart of their society and can be clearly seen through the way other ethnicities are presented through Japanese media.

### **JAPAN'S RELIGION AS REFLECTED THROUGH ANIME**

The use of religion as the premise for anime and manga can honestly make for very interesting and compelling plot lines and characters, especially with the exaggerated ideas of kami and yokai possessing stunning powers and abilities while having to fight off evil, lesser spirits. One of the most popular examples of this genre, *Gegege No Kitaro*, represents the Japanese people's strong interest and infatuation with the supernatural. The idea of invisible ghosts, goblins, and ghouls existing alongside humans is the subject of many different anime and manga and continues to be popular even today with shows such as *Yokai Watch* and *Bleach*.

#### ***Hi No Tori* and Japanese Buddhism**

The work of *Hi no Tori* by Osamu Tezuka strictly has the introduction of Buddhism to Japan to thank for its creation. This work takes place during the Nara period where, as mentioned earlier, Buddhism was beginning to become integrated into Japanese society. The story takes influence from the real life event of the construction of the the great Daibutsu statue in the Todaiji temple located in Nara. The characters of Gao, the one armed murderous bandit, and Akanemaru, a sculpture in search of inspiration, are reflective of the Buddhist ideals of karma and reincarnation based on their actions taken in life. Gao starts off as murderous and thieving man whose motto is "kill or be killed" in a world where everyone seems to be against him. The events of meeting and losing a woman known as Hayame, who is actually a ladybug that Gao saved from a river long ago, manage to completely change his attitude and outlook on life. His character changes completely into a much more humbled man who learns to care for and value others more than his own life. On the other hand the young sculpture Akanemaru becomes twisted in his ways while on a journey to find the ever elusive phoenix. He becomes motivated

by self desire leading him to selfish actions in order to ensure his rise to the top. When both characters are faced with the end of their lives the actions that they took in life are examined by the phoenix and used to determine who they shall be in the next one. Gao is free to live out the rest of his life, but Akanemaru is decided by the phoenix to be born as a small fish enforcing the ideas of karma and reincarnation. The selfish actions that Akanemaru took in this life affected the outcome of what would happen to him in the next.

### ***A Letter To Momo and Shinto***

Though the practices of Shinto aren't clearly presented in *A Letter To Momo*, its ideals are reflected in another way. Various shrines and alters can be seen throughout the movie but it is not the act of worshipping or revering kami that is the main focus of film. Instead we are given three rambunctious yokai; Iwa, Kawa, and Mame; who have apparently been sent by Momo's deceased father as guardians for her and her mother. Unlike earlier conceptions of yokai during prior periods in Japanese history, these three act somewhat like guardian angels as a source of protection in Momo's daily life. What does relate them to the yokai of old is the various actions they take during the course of the film. I am specifically referring to them stealing food, causing uproars, and generally starting some sort of trouble that affects Momo and her family in various ways. Yokai were known to be troublemakers and partake in festivals that mocked the mannerisms of humans (Yoda, 2012, p. 4). Something perhaps a bit more reflective of Shinto is the dance that Iwa and Mame partake in in order to send off a report to their higher-ups. The dance is reflective of Shinto aesthetics in the sense that priests use their arms and legs as in a rhythm of chanting while muttering Buddhist phrases in order to ensure their success with whatever matter they are dealing with. Another aspect is the ceremony towards the end of the movie where the town sends off the grass-woven boats bearing offerings to the gods to sea in order to ensure a good harvest during the Miyajima Festival. The religion of Shinto plays a big

part in this film as it helped to shape the culture of the island and the yokai sent as guardians for Momo and her mother.

### **JAPANESE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL HABITS AS SEEN THROUGH ANIME**

Most anime films made in Japan are reflective of their culture and social aspects, whether it be tea ceremonies, school life, or samurai of old. Watching Japanese films is a definite way of learning their specific cultural and social habits if that an area that one might be interested in. However not all of these habits are shed in a positive light. There are still problems within Japanese society that are presented through forms of their media as well. For such subjects, like school life for example, there will always be a positive and negative aspect to it. One could emphasize the positivity in being able to attend school through making friends and gaining new knowledge. But on the opposite side is that of negative experiences such as bullying. Both films that I analyze have their share of positive and negative cultural and social habits and I will be elaborating on both ends.

#### ***Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* and Japanese Culture**

Though *Nausicaa* by Hayao Miyazaki seems to be a film set in a fictitious future filled with massive jungles and insects it was actually meant to reflect something that occurring now within our own lifetimes. Miyazaki is a director who very much likes to comment on the human condition through the characters and plots of his films and how our actions directly affect other people or the environment. *Nausicaa* is an example of how humans are affecting the environment through pollution and nuclear energy and the consequences of those actions. The plot of *Nausicaa* takes place one thousand years after an event that destroyed most of humanity known as the “Seven Days of Fire”. What this event seems to be most likely reflective of is a nuclear holocaust as the “God Warriors” seem to represent a sort of nuclear power as the characters describe them as being “poisonous light” suggesting that these massive warriors were



emitting some sort of radiation that caused the downfall of humanity. With the recent nuclear meltdown that occurred in Fukushima in 2011 I feel that the message presented in this film is more relevant than ever. Though the Japanese are very much respectful of the environment and the creatures that inhabit it, there is still an imminent danger of a nuclear disaster occurring again as Japan is fairly dependent on nuclear power. Hayao's comment on Japan's nuclear culture in this film is something that I believe all people should learn from, especially in our day and age where nuclear power and disasters are becoming commonplace in our societies today. On the positive side the film also reflects the Japanese ideal of a strong sense of community (Caudill, 1973, p. 349). The character of Nausicaa is reflective of this because of the actions and beliefs she holds towards her people of the valley and humanity in general. She strives towards the betterment and cooperation of humanity with the insects of the Toxic Jungle. Her actions work towards the safety of her people as a whole instead of focusing on the individual which is what films and stories tend to focus on in the Western world. Through her selfless actions Nausicaa is able to preserve her people while still living with the insects of the Toxic Jungle.

### ***Time of Eve and Japanese Society***

Another somewhat negative aspect of Japanese society and culture as seen in *Time of Eve* is that of racial superiority. This film focuses on the idea of robots possessing consciousness and perhaps a soul just as humans do. But just as with any social, political, or religious group there are those who oppose this idea of robots integrating into society. This opposition is presented through the Ethics Committee. Throughout the film we see protesters and advertisements directed towards the belittling of robots and the glorification of human made food and products. One such advertisement features the image a fresh, ripe tomato which is then suddenly picked up and squeezed by a robotic hand to reveal that it's full of wires and gears with the phrase "would you eat a tomato created by machines?" enforcing the idea that man-made food is what is proper

and superior to that made by machines. What this robotic prejudice reflects is actual prejudice that is still very much apart of Japanese society. As stated earlier the Japanese have a strong sense of pride and nationalism, which is to say that they believe they're superior to other cultures and ethnicities. A prime example is that of African Americans. There are many examples of black-face used in manga, such as Osamu Tezuka's, and product advertisements. Another prime example of this prejudice as it relates to *Time of Eve* can be seen in cases during the 80s of Japanese auto manufacturers hiring significantly fewer blacks in their plants located in the United States, despite having equal skill sets and qualifications compared to non-black laborers (Brown, 1988, p. 50). Though minorities have always been discriminated against in the work place but thanks to a study conducted at the University of Michigan a clear pattern of racial discrimination against African Americans in the Japanese work force has been discovered (Brown, 1988, p. 50). Though these studies and reports were conducted in the 80s this type of prejudice is something that is still deeply rooted in Japanese society and in my opinion is well represented through the robotic struggle as presented in this film. On the other hand, this film presents the Japanese people's attitude of showing a strong sense of sympathy and compassion for others (Caudill, 1973, p. 350). The respect and revere for nature and life is something that ties back into my discussion of Shinto. Nature is sacred, life is sacred, relationships are sacred, unseen forces like souls are sacred. In this film we see how the relationships between humans and robots and the understanding of robots being more than a bunch of parts and gears put together relate to the above thoughts of Japanese society. On the other side of those who oppose the integration of robots into society are those who have an understanding for the possibility of robots having a mind of their own that allows them to make decisions and judgments just as a real human can. This reflects the Japanese idea of non-living things like robots being able to

possess a soul and personality as it has been ingrained in them since childhood through Shinto beliefs that are deeply rooted into their society and culture.

## CONCLUSION

The inclusion of Japanese religion, cultural, and social aspects is something that creates unique and interesting forms of entertainment as seen through anime and manga. It is specifically through these habits and ideals that some of our favorite anime and manga works have been written and designed by. What makes it unique and specific to Japan is the history of this country and the different practices and beliefs that took place through the years. The religions of Shinto and Buddhism have been the subject of many famous written and animated works in Japan as I specifically described through *Hi no Tori* and *A Letter To Momo*. The uniqueness of the history of Buddhism being introduced into Japanese culture is something that is well represented in Osamu Tezuka's characters of Gao and Akanemaru as they both try to live through a changing time of religious and political adaptation. Through the unique history of Shinto religion audiences are able to enjoy the idea of yokai and other types of spirits through written and animated works as seen in *A Letter To Momo*. These creatures are specifically unique to Japan and the Shinto making it unlike any other religion in the world. Through these ideas we are able to learn more about the supernatural creatures specific to Japan and how they possibly would have interacted with humans making for a very interesting and comical storyline. As these religions tie into social and cultural practices as well we are able to see how they effect how the Japanese act and respond during their day to day lives, even if they are unaware of it themselves. Through the films of *Nausicaa of the Valley of the Wind* and *Time of Eve* we are able to see how religion has shaped their cultural and social ways of thinking. The ideals of community being most important along with the problems that are environment is facing, even today, *Nausicaa* presents a very current and proper example of the way that Japanese society works. Similar in

the sense of current examples is the social problems that occur in *Time of Eve*. Through the examples of robots we are able to see how prejudice is still alive and kicking within Japanese society. However, it is not simply this negative aspect that rings true. There is also the upside of sympathy and caring being a big part of how the Japanese view each other and even non-living things through the influence of Shinto belief. All in all the influence of Japanese religion and other cultural values is something that has proven to shape and create some truly interesting stories and characters. For those interested in learning more about the religions or cultural practices of Japan I would have to say that using their forms of media, like anime and manga, is a definite way of doing so. Though sometimes exaggerated or not true to its origins most stories present a very truthful and interesting take on the practices that Japanese people make and participate in in every day of their lives. Specifically through these four films are the different possibilities that come with these practices, whether it is done in a negative or positive fashion. So if you're someone who's interested in seeing the culture of Japan in all its forms and aspects, I would have to stand by my own belief that anime is great start into a world of cultural diversity.

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