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Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film "Spirited Away"

James W. Boyd
Colorado State University, jwboyd@lamar.colostate.edu

Tetsuya Nishimura
eze00126@nifty.ne.jp

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Abstract

Among the anime films by Hayao Miyazaki made available in English translation, *Spirited Away* contains the most folk and Shrine Shinto motifs. The central locale of the film is a bathhouse where a great variety of creatures, including kami, come to bathe and be refreshed. This feature, plus the portrayal of various other folk beliefs and Shrine Shinto perspectives, suggests that Miyazaki is affirming some basic Japanese cultural values which can be a source of confidence and renewal for contemporary viewers.

I. Synopsis of the film

Spirited Away is the story of a young Japanese girl named Chihiro, who, with her parents, is moving to a new city to live. The first scene shows Chihiro sulking in the back seat of the car when her father takes the wrong road as they approach their new house.

They pass an old torii leaning against a large tree, surrounded by numerous "spirit houses," and Chihiro's eyes grow large. The road leads to a tunnel-like entrance of an abandoned theme park. Her parents set out to explore the park, cross a dry river bed, and to their surprise, find a food stall open but unattended. They begin to eat with voracious appetites, but Chihiro, worried that they shouldn't be eating, refuses to join them and cautiously looks around the area. She comes upon a large building that is apparently an operative bathhouse.

As it turns to dusk, she meets a young boy named Haku, who tells her to leave at once. Puzzled, she runs to get her parents, but they are still eating and to her horror have turned into pigs. Unable to leave -- the river bed is now filled with water -- she is comforted and helped by Haku, who escorts her through a strange realm of "ghosts and goblins," a world of wondrous creatures who have come to bathe and be refreshed in the bathhouse run by an old woman named Yubāba (*yu* = "hot water," *bāba* = "old woman").

Eventually Yubāba steals Chihiro's name (*chi* =1000, *hiro* = "inquire, fathom, look for," so Chihiro can mean "looking deeply," or "inquiring after many things"). Yubāba gives her a new name -- Sen (an alternate reading of the same written character), which she is commanded to use. Sen is given a difficult job cleaning the bathhouse, but is befriended by a young, assertive woman named Lynn, and an old man with multiple spider-like arms who is in charge of the boiler room, named Kama-jī (*kama* ="iron pot, boiler;" *jī* = "old man").

Sen encounters many other strange creatures, including three bouncing body-less heads, a sumo-sized creature with fingers like radishes, and apparitions dressed in classic court attire with white square masks (*kasuga sama*).¹ There are also non-human (but human-like) creatures such as "frog men" (*kaeru otoko*) and "cleaning women" (*namekuji onna*=slug women); a huge white dragon (probably a *ryūjin*= dragon associated with water); and a most mysterious black, shadowy, ambivalent figure named "No Face" (*kao nashi*).

Sen increasingly manages to be courageous and stand her ground firmly but politely in a number of frightening and potentially dangerous encounters. She eventually helps Haku (whose alternate form is a white dragon) remember his original name, i.e., his true identity. Sen, not forgetting her real name is Chihiro, is able, eventually, to leave this unusual place after passing a final test put to her by Yubāba. She is told to identify her parents among a group of pigs, but sees that

none of them are her parents and is soon reunited with her real human parents who had been anxious about Chihiro's whereabouts. They leave the theme park, walking back through the long tunnel-like passage, and to her parents' puzzlement, find their car slightly covered with dust and debris. Driving away her father asks (only in the dubbed English version of the film) if she is up to the challenges of a new home and new school. A more self-confident Chihiro responds "I think I can handle it."²

II. Shinto Perspectives

There are many folk and Shrine Shinto perspectives embedded in the cultural vocabulary of this film. The director Miyazaki explicitly acknowledges his indebtedness to this tradition. He refers, for example, to his "very warm appreciation for the various, very humble rural Shinto rituals that continue to this day throughout rural Japan"³ and cites the solstice rituals when villagers call forth all the local *kami* and invite them to bathe in their baths.⁴ This, apparently, is the inspiration for the bathhouse locale in the film, and his reference to *kami* invokes the essence of the Shinto tradition. A brief outline of some basic perspectives of the Shinto world view will provide an overall framework for understanding the film and various incidents and characters in it.

Shrine Shinto understands the whole of life, including both humans and nature, as creative and life giving.⁵ A generative, immanent force (*musubi*; *ki*; *kami*-

nature) harmoniously pervades the whole phenomenal world. This creative process is a continual, ongoing one, and is neither arbitrary nor deterministic. Unusual or "superior" manifestations of this generative, vital power, called *kami*, can be experienced as possessing an awesome presence and potency. All phenomena are candidates for this designation, e.g., the sun, moon, mountains, rivers, fields, seas, rain, wind, plants and animals, or great persons, heroes or leaders. However, to experience the *kami* presence of any one of these aspects of nature requires an aesthetically pure and cheerful heart/mind (*kokoro*), an emotional, mental and volitional condition that is not easily attained.

The reason for this is that although we are grounded in this pervasive vital process, we are too often unable to connect with it. Like a mirror covered with dust, the disposition of our personality, i.e., our *kokoro*, becomes clouded and opaque. Just as aspects of nature can become polluted -- a river can become dirty and foul-smelling -- so also the interior conditions of the human heart and mind can lack a sense of freshness and vitality. When so polluted, we do things poorly and sloppily; our *kokoro* hardens and we turn in on ourselves -- the way children do when they sulk and refuse to openly and politely relate to others.

Hence we need to act in such ways that we can "purify ourselves" -- wipe away the pollution. This means both to literally clean ourselves -- wash away the dirt, as well as cleanse our attitudes and cultivate a sound, pure and bright

heart/mind, in order to act with genuine "sincerity" (*makoto*) toward others and the world. This sense of cultivating the strength of character inherent in all of us is stated succinctly in a Japanese proverb: "Both suffering and happiness depend on how we bear (carry, take firm hold of) our *kokoro* (*kurushimu mo tanoshimu mo kokoro no mochiyō*).⁶ That is, each one of us is basically in charge of our attitudes and our actions, and we can either give in to unfavorable circumstances or try to "clean up" matters and improve our situation, as difficult as that may be.

This notion of learning to live with a sound, pure heart/mind is a central theme in Miyazaki's "Spirited Away," as the story depicts Chihiro's journey from being a sulking child to that of a young person who acts with genuine sincerity toward others and the world. Miyazaki portrays this spiritual transformation in a captivating way. He places Chihiro in the realm of the fantastic: the strange world of Yubāba, Haku, and the bathhouse, where she is put to the test, and through her tribulations cultivates a pure and cheerful heart which in turn enables her to help her friend Haku remember his true identity. The viewer comes to understand the story, especially in the dubbed English version of the film, principally as one of the internal character development of Chihiro. Although this theme is important, there is a great deal more to the film. Relating the film to the Shinto perspectives just noted and looking more closely at the Japanese version, one comes to understand

Chihiro's character development in a relational, rather than individualistic context, and the importance of tradition for Miyazaki comes into focus.

III. An Interpretation of Spirited Away

The first indication that Chihiro is about to enter a realm of the extraordinary is her wide-eyed glimpse of the *torii*, leaning against an old tree, surrounded by little house-like shrines. A *torii* marks a place of superior potency that can effect changes in one's life. But to benefit from the *kami* presences that inhabit such a place, something special is required: one must be sensitized to their presence. This can occur if one experientially moves from the mundane and everyday world, into a liminal realm. As Van Gennep and Turner have explained, in order to become something new one has to first abandon the old, move through a liminal phase that is neither here nor there (is betwixt and between), and then return -- but as one who is "re-formed" into a new persona.⁷ In the Japanese context it takes a cleansing -- a wiping away of the external and interior pollution that inhibits us, to arrive at such a fresh and dynamic condition.

Like Alice in Wonderland who falls through a rabbit hole into a strange realm, or Dorothy in the *Wizard of Oz* who follows the yellow brick road, Chihiro together with her parents walks through a tunnel-like passage,⁸ across a dry river bed, into a realm characterized by disorientation, ambiguity and a sense of

otherness. For an engaged audience, the film itself, through its own artistry, can effect a sense of disorientation and liminal space.

The Japanese title of the film explicitly indicates this liminal realm. The last phrase in the title *Sen to Chihiro no kami-kakushi* literally means "something hidden by *kami*." There is the expression in Japanese *kami-kakushi ni au* (to experience *kami-kakushi*) which refers to the folk designation of incidents when someone is inexplicably missing for some time. If and when that person returns -- and whether or not that person remembers being gone -- people say that that person has been "hidden by the *kami*." Chihiro's parents do not remember being gone; upon returning to their car they find it inexplicably covered with leaves and dust. But Chihiro herself does remember her transforming journey into a realm of the *kami*.

With fanciful insight, Miyazaki conveys to us how diverse and strange the myriad of *kami* (*yaoyorozu no kami*) can be.⁹ There is the young boy named Haku who, like the other river *kami* we will mention shortly, is, in his pure form, a white river dragon. Chihiro also encounters *kami* of animals and vegetation, such as small baby chicks and a white sumo-like radish *kami*, reflections of the Shinto notion that all phenomena have *kami* potential. Miyazaki himself refers to this idea: "In my grandparents' time," he says, "it was believed that spirits [*kami*] existed everywhere -- in trees, rivers, insects, wells, anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we should all treasure everything because spirits might exist

there, and we should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything."¹⁰

Being true to the Shinto insight that all phenomena often become polluted and are in need of cleansing and purification in order to manifest their vitality, Miyazaki has this strange array of creatures come to the bathhouse to be restored to their original freshness. This is made especially vivid when a "stink spirit" -- actually the *kami* (or *nushi*) of a badly polluted and smelly river, is cleansed of all sorts of trash including an old bicycle.¹¹ Once refreshed, the river's mask-like visage says to Sen "It feels good" (English version: "Well done;" cf. below). Sen sees the true nature of this river *kami* through the purifying waters -- at that moment her *kokoro* is clean and bright and she witnesses the forceful dragon-like river *kami* sail away white and pure.

Among the various other ghost-like creatures in the film are the wandering souls of dead persons who appear in this world due to past regrets or worries.¹² But a more haunting figure in the film is the "No Face" image (*kao nashi*). He likely represents the type of person who has little interest in things, is gloomy and melancholy, and subject to morbid introspection. As one whose energy [*ki*] is *inki*, i.e. one whose heart is closed (*kokoro o tojiru*),¹³ he has a voracious self-centered appetite. But No Face is lonely and unsuccessfully seeks Chihiro's friendship by offering her the semblance of shining gold nuggets. Her polite refusal to accept the

"gold," however, turns No Face into a terrifying menace to everyone in the bathhouse.

But No Face is not a fixed figure of evil. Toward the end of the film he begins to learn from Yubāba's twin sister Zenība how to improve his attitude and act with genuine "sincerity" (*makoto*) toward others, as he makes an effort to help "Granny" spin thread and knit a friendship hairband to protect Chihiro.

The kind of moral ambivalence we find in No Face is also true of Yubāba: sometimes fearsome with her ferocious anger, yet also capable of an affectionate spoiling of her child. Furthermore, Zenība, who is friendly to Chihiro and is encouraging to No Face, is Yubāba's *identical* twin. As such they represent a mixture of both bad and good encounters experienced by Chihiro -- encounters that at times diminish and at other times promote Chihiro's confidence.

In other words, from a Shinto perspective Yubāba and Zenība do not represent fixed opposites of good versus evil as you might find in films such as "*The Lord of the Rings*." Rather, these crone figures and No Face reflect a Shinto ethical outlook that views events in one's life as either reducing (polluting) or promoting (purifying) one's ability to participate fully in the life energy that permeates all of Great Nature.¹⁴ When the polluted river (the stink spirit) is cleansed, its mask-like visage says to Chihiro through the clear waters "It feels

good." That is, it has returned to its natural powerful freshness that characterizes all phenomena. In the English version the *kami* of the river says "Well done," making it a moral compliment regarding Chihiro's good deed -- not an affirmation of the river's natural state of purity so necessary to promote life.¹⁵

At the climax of the film Chihiro remembers an incident when she lost a pink shoe in a river and almost drowned trying to retrieve it, but was carried by the water's current to the safety of the shore. She comes to the realization that the river was the Kohaku river, and that this is Haku's true name --an identity which he could not remember because the river had been filled in and covered with buildings (likely Miyazaki's critique of the over-building in Japan at the expense of nature). In that moment when she explains this to Haku -- now in the form of a white river dragon -- he remembers his name, and both he and Chihiro look at each other with sparkling, luminous eyes.

As Victor Turner notes, there can be moments in the liminal experience of deep reciprocal encounters between persons or places, i.e. a deep sense of mutual relation (an I-Thou) between persons or with nature. Miyazaki is possibly portraying Chihiro as being in a genuine, authentic relation with the *kami* presence of the Kohaku river. In Shinto terms, such an occasion is called *shinjin-gouitsu*, a "uniting of kami with the human spirit," which occurs only when one approaches the other with the "sincerity and purity of one's heart" (*makoto no kokoro*). It was

as a result of Chihiro's transformative journey through a liminal world that both she and Haku came to know their true identity -- an identity of authentic relationship - - thus coming to know their real names.¹⁶

The character Haku is in some respects the embodiment of what we are calling traditional Japanese cultural values. His attire resembles that of the Heian period -- he wears something similar to a *hakama*, part of a Shinto priest's formal costume. Besides this courtly dress, his speech is formal and traditional. When he refers to himself, he does not use the more colloquial "*boku*" but the more formal "*watashi*." And when he addresses Sen, he uses the ancient, more noble aristocratic term "*sonata*." In fact, Haku's full name, *nigihayami kohaku-nushi*, is reminiscent of a reference in the *Kojiki* (the oldest extant book in Japanese), "*nigi haya hi no mikoto*" the name of an ancestor to one of the families of high courtly rank in ancient times.¹⁷

The fact that Haku embodies certain traditional values, that he is the one who helps Chihiro in the transitional world, and that Chihiro in turn helps Haku remember his identity, invites interpretation. Perhaps Miyazaki is affirming to contemporary viewers of this anime film some important insights in the Shinto Japanese tradition (represented by Haku) that can be helpful in these modern times. For example, Miyazaki conveys his perspective that there is "a kind of life to everything" and that certain customs such as cleansing both the external

environment and one's internal *kokoro* from pollution are practices to be reaffirmed. Likewise, Chihiro's contribution to Haku's sense of identity suggests that those of us in the contemporary world who are "inquiring after many things" (Chihiro) can assess and critique our inherited traditions and reappropriate those values that have been forgotten or covered over the way the Kohaku river had been. Just as Chihiro recognizes her parents at the end of the film, so also Miyazaki's film asserts that there are some basic Japanese cultural values that need to be re-recognized as valuable insights in life's journey. It is our interpretation that Miyazaki is reaffirming aspects of the Japanese tradition preserved in Shinto thought and practice that can serve as transformative sources of confidence and renewal for both the young and old.

¹ The "bouncing heads" are reminiscent of *daruma* dolls (representing Bodhidharma), or *youkai*, "mysterious, strange" human-like goblins. The "*kasuga sama*" masks appear to be created from the fabric masks worn at "bugaku" performances offered at Kasuga-jinja in Nara prefecture.

² It is safe to say that a Japanese audience would understand this ending, made explicit in the Disney version, simply from the context. It need not be said. The film concludes with an enchanting song titled "*Itsumo nando demo*" (lit. "Always, however many times"), translated "Always with me." A central verse is: "something is calling, deep inside, somewhere in my heart (*kokoro*); I want to dream an exciting dream."

³ Remarks made at a question and answer session with the press at the U.S. premier of the film on September 10th, 2002; cf. <http://www.theblackmoon.com/Deadmoon/spiritedaway.html>.

⁴ This is most probably in reference to the *Yutate Shinji* or "Hot water ritual," part of a November Festival (*Shimotsuki Matsuri*), held for example in Nagano-ken. Water is heated and the *kami* are invited to come and bathe in it. The water, now full of superior potency, is sprinkled or splashed on peoples' bodies to revivify them during the winter season. Cf. <http://www.shinmai.co.jp/kanko/saijiki/00053.html>; <http://senshohamada.hp.infoseek.co.jp/tooyamasimotuki.htm>.

⁵ The authors are especially grateful to the late Rev. Dr. Yuktaka Yamamoto and his associate priests at Tsubaki Grand Shrine, Mie Prefecture, for offering us insights into the religious significance of the "Way of the *kami*." For further reference, cf. also J.W Boyd and R. G. Williams, "Japanese Shinto: An Interpretation of a Priestly Perspective," forthcoming in *Philosophy East and West*, 55:1 (January 2005).

⁶ Helen Hardacre. *Kurozumikyo and the New Religions of Japan*. Princeton University Press, 1986, p 19.

⁷ Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960 (1909); Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine, 1969).

⁸ In *My Neighbor Totoro*, Mei falls into a hole in a giant tree marked with a shimenawa (a rope of interwoven strands of rice straw used to mark a place considered sacred) and lands upon Totoro -- she also enters a liminal space.

⁹ An alternative interpretation is that this liminal realm is populated mostly by *yokai* (mysterious, strange human-like figures that are said to have emerged from aged persons and things) who have come to be restored to their original *kami* nature.

¹⁰ *Japan Times Weekly*, 9/28/02.

¹¹ *Nushi* is a term used to refer to an exceptionally big and old creature in a confined area, e.g., a large fish in a pond or small river, or to an especially large animal in a forest, such as a bear or deer or a big wild boar (as, e.g., the large white boar in *Princess Mononoke*). The belief is that such creatures tend to accumulate special powers as they grow older because they live longer than most -- hence they are called the *nushi* of a place to show respect. It is a designation similar to that of *kami*.

¹² Toward the end of the film, such shadowy, human figures (possibly *yurei* --soul figures of dead persons who, in this film, appear to be from Japan of the 50's and 60's judging from their dress) ride on the train with Chihiro and get off at *Numa Hara* ("swamp field").

¹³ Cf. Hardacre (1986) p. 21.

¹⁴ In the episode where Chihiro steps on the black slug and Kamajī swipes his hand through Chihiro's fingers set in a square, the Japanese phrase, unlike the dubbed English ("Evil be gone") is *Engacho kitta* which means "Break the relation [to the pollution] for thousands of years." There is no term for "evil" in this Japanese phrase.

¹⁵ "It's good" (*yoki kana*) could also refer to the treatment done by Chihiro and the bathhouse workers. In either case, there is no apparent intention to compliment Chihiro's work.

¹⁶ This power of names may also echo the Shrine Shinto view that certain words (*norito*) have special spiritual powers. It is interesting to note that Chihiro, though she has helped Haku realize his *kami* identity, seems not to fully realize the fact that he is a river *kami*, as she says "[your name] sounds like (*mitai*) a *kami* name."

¹⁷ Cf. *Kojiki*, trans. Donald L. Philippi (University of Tokyo Press, 1995 [1968]), p.531.