

YŌKAI AS REFLECTIONS OF MODERN SOCIETY IN *POM POKO* AND
PRINCESS MONONOKE

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ABSTRACT

Yōkai as Reflections of Modern Society in *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke*

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of *yōkai* (“supernatural and strange entities”) in modern Japanese society by analyzing two critically acclaimed animated movies *Pom Poko* (1994) and *Princess Mononoke* (1997) by Studio Ghibli. The movies, which are both centered around *yōkai* and *yōkai* related supernatural folklore use the *yōkai* to reflect contemporary Japanese society. The movies achieve this by showing the negative effects of rapid modernization has on *yōkai* in the movies, which are usually in the form of anthropomorphized animals. These negative effects include pollution, destruction of nature, deforestation, and animal deaths related to these consequences. The animal visage of *yōkai*, their mysterious status as creatures of the borderlands and their deep and rich history so well integrated in Japanese culture allows the directors of the movies Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki to tackle issues that plague modern Japan.

I believe looking at how folklore has been incorporated into popular culture is significant in this day and age. This is why I chose two animated movies beloved by both Japanese and global audiences. By analyzing these movies, I came to the conclusion that, *yōkai* play a big role in Japan: A reflection of society itself. I argue that the movies use *yōkai* to inspire younger audiences to think critically of the nature and culture they are a part of.

ÖZET

Pom Poko ve *Prenses Mononoke*'de Modern Toplumun Yansımaları Yōkai

Bu tezin amacı Studio Ghibli'den eleştirilenlerce beğenilen iki animasyon film *Pom Poko* (1994) ve *Prenses Mononoke*'yi (1997) analiz ederek modern Japon toplumunda yōkai'ın ("doğaüstü ve tuhaf varlıklar") yerini ortaya çıkarmaktır. Yōkai ve yōkai ile alakalı doğaüstü folklor üzerine kurulmuş bu filmler yōkai'ı kullanarak modern Japon toplumunu yansıtır. Filmler, genellikle antropomorfik hayvan formunda olan yōkai üzerinde modernleşmenin negatif etkilerini göstererek bunu başarır. Bu negatif etkiler çevre kirliliği, doğanın yok edilmesi, ormansızlaşma ve bunların sonunda ortaya çıkan hayvan ölümleridir. Yōkai'ın hayvan görünüşleri, sınır bölgelerinde yaşayan yaratıklar olmalarından gelen gizemli halleri ve Japon kültüründeki zengin ve geniş yerleri filmlerin yönetmenleri Isao Takahata ve Hayao Miyazaki'nin modern Japonya'yı rahatsız eden unsurların ele alınmasına yer verir.

Folklorun popüler kültür içine nasıl entegre edildiğine dikkat etmenin önemli olduğu kanısındayım. Bu sebeple hem Japon halkının hem de dünya çağında seyircilerin sevdiği iki animasyon film seçtim. Bu filmleri analiz ederek yōkai'ın Japonya'da büyük bir rol oynadığını ve toplumun bir yansıması oldukları sonucuna vardım. Filmlerin, yōkai'ı kullanarak genç izleyicileri kendilerinin de dahil olduğu doğa ve kültür hakkında daha eleştirel düşünmeye teşvik ettiğini düşünüyorum.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

[It's] no exaggeration to say that a deeper knowledge of yōkai is a prerequisite for a deeper understanding of Japanese culture as a whole.¹

– Kazuhiko Komatsu

Even if one is not necessarily interested in the world of supernatural folklore, it is inevitable for those who have taken an interest in any period of Japanese culture and history to come across depictions of strange creatures with anthropomorphic features. A one-eyed umbrella, green turtle-like creatures with a duck's beak, a fox with nine tails... The list is endless. These fearsome yet adorable figures are called *yōkai* ("supernatural and strange entities"). The word *yōkai* refers to a myriad of different supernatural beings such as ghosts, monsters, spirits, demons and apparitions from Japanese culture. There has been a growing interest in *yōkai* in the recent years both as entertainment and a subject for academic research in global circles. What I find interesting about *yōkai* is not just their intriguing physical attributes and lore, but also their innate connection to Japanese people and culture. The sheer number of scrolls, illustrations, stories, traditions, and encyclopedias about *yōkai* in Japan is a testament to this. The origins of different *yōkai*, their visual and literary depictions, and even studies surrounding them all reflect the time period in which they were created. Kazuhiko Komatsu, who is defined as the "leading academic authority on the supernatural in Japan"² by fellow folklorist Michael Dylan

¹ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 6.

² Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, xiii.

Foster boldly states that “Yōkai research is human research.”³. I share Komatsu’s sentiment as I have observed yōkai and yōkai related art and literature being used as criticism for contemporary society, especially concerning problems that arose with modernization. One of these works is Akutagawa Ryunosuke’s 1922 *Kappa* in which he illustrates early 20th century Japanese society with all its confusions, flaws and problems through a society of *kappa* (“water goblin”).

My aim in this thesis is to uncover the way in which yōkai were used to reflect and criticize contemporary problems such as a loss of identity related to modernization and urbanization in late 1980’s and 1990’s Japan. To achieve this, I will be analyzing two critically acclaimed Japanese animated movies from the Heisei era (1989-2019): The 1994 *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko* (“Heisei Raccoon Dog War Pon Poko”) or *Pom Poko* and the 1997 *Mononoke Hime* (“Princess Mononoke”). Both of these movies greatly feature yōkai and yōkai related folklore in relation to environmentalist crisis that were troubling Japan at the time, and even today.

Directed by the late Isao Takahata (1935-2018), *Pom Poko* tells the story of a group of *tanuki* (“raccoon dog”) who struggle to survive in their home in Tama Hills, the suburbs of Tokyo. Tanuki, which can be frequently seen in front of Japanese stores and restaurants as adorable statues are a big part of Japanese folklore. In the movie, the tanuki not only lose their homes to the ongoing suburban projects but they also lose their identity as both animals and supernatural creatures. *Princess Mononoke* tells the story of a young Emishi prince who gets cursed by a forest god who has transformed into a monster because of its hatred for humans who keep

³ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 77.

destroying his habitat. The prince meets both the agitated forest gods and the destructive humans who have transgressed into the boundaries of forest *kami* (“god”). The heavy inclusion of yōkai in these movies is a testament to the fact that narratives on yōkai are indeed reflections of Japanese values, culture, problems, anxieties and even fears. Both of these movies, which are centered around yōkai are ecocritical works that strongly carry environmentalist themes.

1.1 Folklore in animation and Studio Ghibli

I would first like to explain why I have decided to focus on two animated movies by the same studio, Studio Ghibli, as my main focus in analyzing the role of yōkai in Japanese society. Folktales, myths and legends have been an integral part of art for centuries. In the 20th century, these culturally beloved stories found themselves on the silver screen. Adaptations of folktales and works inspired by folktales were produced to entertain the new movie-goers. Fantasy, of course, was one of the most popular genres. The 1922 silent film *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* was inspired by Bram Stoker’s 1897 novel *Dracula*, which itself was inspired by the myth of the Transylvanian vampire. Japan was no exception to this as many movies were inspired by folklore, many of them being fantasy and horror films that utilized yōkai myths which were familiar to the audience. The 1968 *Kuroneko* which translates to “Black Cat” is an example of this as the movie is centered around *bakeneko* (“monster cat”).

On the other hand, the animation industry provided creatives with endless opportunities to give life to the realm of fantasy. The animated medium was perfect for achieving the fantastical worlds of folktales and legends. Talking animals, giants, fairies, ghosts and more could become alive through the hands of the talented artists

who worked tirelessly storyboarding, conceptualizing, drawing and painting the beloved stories. These animated films combined the nostalgic past with the modern day. I would like to bring attention to a rather late classic, the 1989 *The Little Mermaid*. A rather sanitized and happier version of Christian Andersen's Danish fairytale with the same name, the movie is concerned with mermaids, as the title suggests. The story of the mermaid is not necessarily a folktale, but mermaids themselves are. Ariel, the little mermaid in the movie is a young girl fascinated by human culture. As she gets married to her prince charming at the end of the movie, her wedding dress is 1980's style gown with puff sleeves, showing the amalgamation of old and modern, art and reality.

Anime ("animation") industry in Japan has achieved immense success all around the globe; whilst animated shows for TV such as *Naruto*, and *One Piece* have garnered both domestic and global love and attention, the most famous and critically acclaimed Japanese animations are those of Studio Ghibli. Famous for their whimsical and fantastical worlds, breathtaking depictions of nature and lovable characters, the animation studio has many admirers from all around the globe. In February of 2020, the popular global streaming service Netflix made 21 movies from the studio available worldwide, with subtitles in 28 languages⁴, which only added to the global interest and admiration. Unlike many anime with clear target demographics, Studio Ghibli creates an enjoyable viewing experience for all ages. The adorable characters and the fun, cheerful atmosphere present in the majority of movies from the studio obviously cater to a younger audience, however the topics at hand are never simply juvenile or overtly simplistic. Behind a colorful façade, lies discussions on human greed, environmental problems, war, personal identity and

⁴ Azuma and Chan, "Netflix releases 21 Studio Ghibli Masterpieces Around the World"

more. Thanks to the complex worlds they have created over the decades, the studio is also critically acclaimed worldwide. As of 2025, Studio Ghibli has won two Academy Awards for their movies *Spirited Away* (2001) and recently *The Boy and the Heron* (2023).

Admirers of the movies can also experience the magical worlds of Ghibli themselves. In Mitaka, a rather lush and green area within the hustle and bustle of modern Tokyo, lies the Ghibli Museum. The museum, which I myself have visited, is a celebration of the decades of highly intricate, lovingly crafted animated movies. There are special exhibitions and even museum exclusive short films on display which rotate regularly⁵. An insight into the minds of the directors, authors and artists behind the movies, the museum is a colorful and exciting experience. Hayao Miyazaki, the executive director of many Studio Ghibli movies, describes the museum as “A museum that makes you feel more enriched when you leave than when you entered!”⁶. The museum is indeed enriching with its focus on the artistry of the studio, but what also stands out is its celebration of nature.

Indeed, Studio Ghibli has garnered positive attention with their artists’ stunning depictions of nature and the screenwriters’ great emphasis on it. Many Studio Ghibli movies either have nature and animals as the main driving force of the movie (*Pom Poko* [1994], *Princess Mononoke* [1997], *The Cat Returns* [2002]) or carry simply stunning depictions of it (*Ponyo* [2008], *My Neighbor Totoro* [1988]). Lioi states: “Founded in 1985 by directors Hayao Miyazaki and Isao Takahata and by producer Toshio Suzuki, Ghibli should be of special interest to scholars because of its global reach, cinematic force, and thematic range. Many Ghibli films...

⁵ Ghibli Museum, Mitaka, <https://www.ghibli-museum.jp/en/>

⁶ Miyazaki, “This is the Kind of Museum I Want to Make!”

address ecological issues”⁷. Problems that arise within the destruction of habitats, deforestation, pollution are all addressed in Ghibli movies.

What I find special about many Studio Ghibli films are not just their ecological themes but also their inclusion of Japanese folklore and yōkai in their narratives. The use of yōkai are not just limited to the movies I will be covering in this thesis. The Academy Award winner *Spirited Away*, which was directed by Hayao Miyazaki transports the viewer into the world of yōkai alongside the human protagonist Chihiro. Chihiro has to navigate her way through this magical world as she tries to rescue her parents, who get turned into pigs because of the greed they have showed for food. The movie features a great number of yōkai with depictions ranging from adorable to creepy. There is also a yōkai who has turned into a disgusting monster that reeks because of pollution caused by humans. What I find special about both Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki’s yōkai is the fact they are multifaceted; they talk, sing, dance but they also make mistakes, cry, and even kill. They are not just comic relief or heartless monsters, but rather separate beings that get affected by humans’ selfish actions. The fascinating portrayals of Japanese folklore combined with the strong environmentalist themes make the work of Studio Ghibli the perfect research ground to delve into the world of yōkai in modern Japan.

1.2 Research questions and approaches

I am interested in the areas where popular culture and folklore meet, and this special connection is incredibly pronounced and one of a kind in Japan in the case of yōkai. Yōkai are folkloric; they are ancient; they are tied to spiritual belief. Yet, unlike many other folk beliefs and tales forgotten to time, they persist in a modernized

⁷ Lioi, “Introduction to Studio Ghibli.”, 1.

landscape, always present in stories, TV shows, movies, books, and even games.

There are also countless merchandise and products featuring yōkai which range from plush toys, bags, t-shirts, and stationery to themed drinks, food and desserts. Over the years they have been commodified as character merchandise but somehow did not lose their folkloric or even religious origins in the public eye. On the contrary, their traditional folkloric portrayals were utilized to discuss serious topics concerning the nation by artists. This has led me to my research questions, which are:

- What are yōkai in modern Japan and what role do they play?
- What do their wide use in Japanese popular culture tell us about contemporary Japanese society?

I argue that yōkai, their visual depictions and literary narratives are reflections of Japanese society that perfectly encapsulate the time period in which they were created. Both the created yōkai themselves and the narratives, illustrations, wood-block prints, books, comics and movies about them reflect the lifestyle, ideals, and problems of the people. Even the scholarship on yōkai reflect the era. Therefore, analyzing two works from late 20th century Japan that focus on yōkai gives us a unique perspective to early Heisei Era (1989-2019) Japan and its sentiments. Since yōkai myths, fiction, and even products are strongly connected to time in which they were created, I have decided to adopt a historical approach in my analysis of the yōkai movies I chose. Understanding 1980s and 1990s Japan is key to our understanding of these movies alongside the historical roots of yōkai.

I chose to base my thesis on *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke* because of their use of yōkai as criticism. I argue that these two movies heavily utilize yōkai to criticize contemporary issues of Japan such as deforestation, loss of animal habitats, and pollution because of their significance as traditional, folkloric figures. Using

yōkai, which come from folklore and Shinto, and combining them with environmentalism marks a desire to connect Japan's native religion with modern concerns.

Shinto which is the native religion of Japan, its history, and its relation to yōkai and modern Japanese culture is significant to our discussion. Yōkai are not necessarily religious figures like angels and demons of Abrahamic religions in everyday Japanese culture, but their creation and existence is a part of the Shinto belief system that anything and everything can carry a soul. Stationery goods with adorable yōkai faces printed on them may be greatly detached from Shinto themes but works that extensively feature yōkai and kami figures in a traditional and folkloric sense such as *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke* undoubtedly invite the viewer to think of the story with Shinto belief in mind. Shinto belief creates the basis of these characters' existence and behavior in the stories, so it is important to understand its principals. The late 19th and early 20th century Shinto and its ties with the emperor, and nationalism is also crucial to understand how Shinto was viewed by the masses in the Heisei Era, and will be discussed in detail in the upcoming chapter.

The movies choose to highlight the folk culture aspect of Shinto belief, including indigenous people of Japan such as the Emishi in *Princess Mononoke*. Both movies take yōkai figures as their center and reshape their worldviews in accordance with contemporary goals and needs such as nature preservation. By creating an environmentalist reimagining of folk figures such as yōkai and kami, the movies contribute to the image of an environmentalist Shinto. Both Takahata and Miyazaki choose to use yōkai to instill a love and appreciation towards nature through a distinctly Japanese culture. Folkloric figures fighting for their freedom in their destroyed habitats is a striking image for Japanese people because it combines

the traditional icons of the past with the concerns of modern day. I argue that the utilization of *yōkai* in the movies show us that *yōkai* have become a bridge between the traditional and the new, and as a means to imagine a better future whilst still being mindful of cultural identity and the past.

1.3 Sources and literature review

The exciting world of *yōkai* has undoubtedly brought much academic attention to the subject. *Yōkai* studies are primarily based in Japan, however the global interest in the exciting world of these creatures is growing rapidly. Studies on *yōkai* have a rather complicated past, the older examples being intertwined with entertainment. After the Meiji Restoration (1868) when Japan came into contact with the West and had to adapt to scientific methods of research. Inoue Enryō (1858-1919) was the first scholar to delve into the world of *yōkai* academically, but he had a rather peculiar intention to his studies: to eradicate *yōkai* and similar folk ‘superstitions’ from modern Japanese society. There were immediate objections to Enryō’s views from famed scholars such as Ema Tsutomu and the father of Japanese folklore studies, Kunio Yanagita (1875-1962). Kunio Yanagita, the most influential figure in the field, was concerned with preserving folktales for the sake of who he defined as the ‘common man’, which referred to the regular people of Japan that possessed the knowledge of various folktales, myths, and local customs, orally passed down from generation to generation. He was concerned for their preservation because he was worried these folktales would be lost to time within the rapidly modernizing Japan. Kunio Yanagita described *yōkai* as fallen gods and emphasized the importance of their study as a means to preserve folklore and folk belief. He collected and

documented Japanese folktales all around Japan, which also included yōkai narratives. I will be going into details of yōkai scholar's views in Chapter 1.

Modern study in Japanese folklore is flourishing, and so is Yōkai studies. Emeritus Professor Kazuhiko Komatsu's works are an invaluable part of Yōkai studies today. Komatsu, who has published multiple works on yōkai throughout his career also contributed to the International Research Center for Japanese Studies⁸ (Nichibunken) "Database of Folktales of Mysterious Phenomena and *Yōkai* (Spirits, Ghosts, Monsters)". Even though the database itself is in Japanese, it is an invaluable source for those interested in different types of supernatural creatures in Japanese folklore. One can browse upon thousands of different entries on yōkai with this useful tool. Komatsu states that the period he began his research on yōkai was barren⁹. He adds: "Scholars viewed these subjects as vulgar and unworthy as topics of research."¹⁰. In the 1980s scholars like Miyata Noboru, Nomura Jun'ichi and Tsunemitsu Tōru contributed to yōkai studies with their research on urban monsters and ghost tales.

English language works on the topic are few but rather strong. The first academic work on yōkai I was exposed to was by American folklorist Michael Dylan Foster who is currently a professor at University of California, Davis. Foster has published numerous studies on yōkai such as his analysis of Meiji era (1868-1912) tanuki myths: "Haunting Modernity Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan"¹¹ and the commodification of Kappa in modern Japan: "The Metamorphosis of the Kappa: Transformation of Folklore to Folklorism in Japan"¹². His *The Book of Yōkai*

⁸ https://www.nichibun.ac.jp/YoukaiDB/english_kaisetsu.html

⁹ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 73.

¹⁰ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 5.

¹¹ Foster, "Haunting Modernity Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan"

¹² Foster, "The Metamorphosis of the Kappa: Transformation of Folklore to Folklorism in Japan"

(2015) is a comprehensive encyclopedia-like research on *yōkai*. Foster goes into a brief detail of the definition and possible origins of *yōkai*, *Yōkai Studies* and its leading figures, and a codex of a great number of different *yōkai*. Alongside *The Book of Yōkai*, Foster's *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai* (2008) which focuses on four different moments in Japanese history and the role and place of *yōkai* within these time periods has also been a valuable source for me in my research.

One other aspect that I was interested in was of course the environmentalist critique that is present in almost all of Studio Ghibli movies. These movies, which I have first watched as a child. I was interested in the real-life problems that have pushed the writers and directors of the movies, respectively Isao Takahata and Hayao Miyazaki to use folklore in such a way that criticizes modern day practices. For this, I used sources that covered The Japanese Bubble Era, which refers to the Japanese economic boom that happened in the 1980s, making Japan one of the leading economic powers in the world, and the post-Bubble era which marked an era of uncertainty towards the future when the steady economic rise halted. The great advancements and developments that have happened during this time are undoubtedly admired by many around the world, especially developing countries. Japan, which took heavy losses at the aftermath of World War II became a powerhouse. But what were the consequences of this? These advancements were undoubtedly tied to modernization, which we might understand as a drive to modernize roads, industries, buildings, infrastructure, education, health so on and so forth as a means to become a global power.

The academic research on Studio Ghibli has also been abundant especially after the global success of the studio worldwide. Helen McCarthy has published a

book titled Hayao Miyazaki, *Master of Japanese Animation: Films, Themes, Artistry* in 1999. Similarly, Susan J. Napier has focused on the famous director of the studio, Hayao Miyazaki and his movies in her 2002 book *Miyazakiworld*¹³. Some of the awards Miyazaki has received include: “the Golden Bear Award in Germany (2002); the Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film, Silver Screen Award from the Amsterdam Fantastic Film Festival, and the Broadcast Film Critics Association Award (2003)”¹⁴. Whilst I have great admiration for the work of Hayao Miyazaki, and I do believe learning about his motives is valuable, I choose not to dwell much on the director’s personal life and instead will focus on the movies themselves. Ghibli movies have also garnered attention from scholars of ecology, ecocriticism, ecologic economics, post-war studies and gender studies. There are multiple works dedicated to Miyazaki’s environmentalist messages such as Pamela Gossin’s “Animated Nature: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Empathy in Miyazaki Hayao’s Ecophilosophy”¹⁵, and “The ecological and consumption themes of the films of Hayao Miyazaki” by Kozo Mayumi, Barry D. Solomon and Jason Chang. I also utilized these works in my research on Miyazaki’s environmentalism.

1.4 Chapters

The thesis is divided into three chapters excluding the introduction and the conclusion. The aim of Chapter 1 is to provide a “cultural translation” to the colorful world of yōkai. Komatsu states that “the individual types of yōkai...are historical and cultural entities, and as such can’t easily transcend their history or culture.”¹⁶.

¹³ Napier, *Miyazakiworld: A Life in Art*

¹⁴ Mayumi, Solomon and Chang, “The ecological and consumption themes of the films of Hayao Miyazaki”, 2.

¹⁵ Gossin, “Animated Nature: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Empathy in Miyazaki Hayao’s Ecophilosophy”

¹⁶ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 35.

Yōkai scholarship has flourished in Japan naturally, not just because yōkai are a part of Japanese culture but because Japanese people grow up hearing and seeing about yōkai and consume yōkai related media. For those of us who have learned of yōkai later in life, it is necessary to learn the definitions of yōkai made by Japanese scholars. I found it necessary to dedicate a chapter on an attempt to familiarize ourselves with the world of these supernatural creatures. Since yōkai is not easily translated into English, I provide possible translations for the word. I also give examples of popular yōkai such as tsukumogami (“object yōkai”) and *bakeneko* (“monster cat”) to describe some common traits we find in yōkai such as the duality of their characterization in folklore. Since wood block prints, illustrations, and plays played a huge role in the popularization and growth of yōkai, I also provide information on yōkai art. The chapter also goes into detail of yōkai studies and examines the leading figures in the field such as Inoue Enryō, Kunio Yanagita, Kazuhiko Komatsu and Micheal Dylan Foster, and their aims in researching yōkai and their method of classifying them.

Chapters 2 and 3 will focus on the animated movies. Chapter 2 is about Isao Takahata’s 1994 *Pom Poko*. The movie is about a group of *tanuki* (“raccoon dog”) whose living spaces are getting destroyed by humans who are constructing new apartment blocks. I argue that the movie utilizes the much adored, adorable tricksters *tanuki* to criticize the problems that arose with rapid and careless urban development. The movie achieves this by using the nostalgia attached to *tanuki*, and their cuteness. Chapter 3 focuses on Hayao Miyazaki’s 1997 *Princess Mononoke*. The story is much more bleaker and serious compared to the jovial *Pom Poko*. Since *Princess Mononoke* does not feature as easily recognizable yōkai as *Pom Poko*, but rather *mononoke* (“a sense of mystery”), I will be describing these supernatural

beings in detail. I also give information on environmental crisis that affected 1990's Japan such as the Isahaya Bay project that caused damage to the local wildlife and nature, and the protests surrounding it. The environmental crisis that affected Japan in the late 20th century are related to our conversation of yōkai in ecocritical works because they are the biggest indicators of urban change. The crisis themselves show the reality of the various infrastructure and housing projects directly harming nature and animals, and the public disinterest in the destruction of nature. The crisis shows the changing reality of late 20th century of Japan and how urbanization has affected her relationship with nature.

CHAPTER 2

DEFINING YŌKAI

To understand how *yōkai* were used as criticism in *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke*, first we need to establish what *yōkai* are and what kind of place they occupied in people's lives throughout history. The aim of this chapter is to establish an understanding of the fluidity of *yōkai* as folkloric figures as there are countless of them with different origins, traits, and shapes. I want to give information on the definition, natural creation, history and categorization of *yōkai* alongside an introduction to the colorful world of *yōkai* artwork, literature and media. Before analyzing *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke*'s utilization of *yōkai*, I also want to give examples to some other works produced by Japanese artists and authors with the same aim: criticism of society. Even though some were created with the aim of illustrating myths for entertainment, many of them especially those of which were produced in the last two hundred years utilized *yōkai* as criticism towards contemporary issues.

2.1 Definition and origins

Yōkai (妖怪) are monstrous figures that come from Japanese folklore. The compound 妖怪 is made up from two *characters*, 妖 and 怪. ‘妖’ is described as “attractive, bewitching, calamity”¹⁷ in the dictionary, and it contains the radical for woman ‘女’. ‘怪’ on the other hand means “suspicious, mystery, apparition”¹⁸. The adjective *ayashii* (怪しい) also has this kanji, and it carries a variety of meanings such as

¹⁷ Jisho, <https://jisho.org/search/妖%20%23kanji>

¹⁸ Jisho, <https://jisho.org/search/怪%20%23kanji>

“suspicious, dubious, questionable, weird, eerie, spooky, uncanny, ominous”¹⁹. As the kanji suggests, *yōkai* refers to strange and curious beings that stem from the unknown in people’s lives.

Despite its common usage in our time, *yōkai* was not the only word used to describe monsters, ghosts, and spirits. Foster states that “Historically, the popularity of the word [*yōkai*] is relatively new... it did not develop into the default technical term until the Meiji-period writings of Inoue Enryō”²⁰. Inoue Enryō wrote about *yōkai* in the Meiji period (1868-1912), influenced by the influx of scientific knowledge Japan received upon contact with the West. He developed an interest in giving scientific reasons for folk beliefs and supernatural phenomena and refuting them. There have been many words used to describe *yōkai* or adjacent beings such as demons and gods throughout Japanese history, such as *mononoke* (“spirit”), *bakemono* (“monster”), *oni* (“demon”), or *obake* (“ghost”). Much like the word *yōkai*, it is rather difficult to pinpoint an exact translation for these words.

Translating the word *yōkai* into other languages proves to be difficult as it is an umbrella term that encompasses many different kinds of supernatural beings. The most common translation of *yōkai* into English would be the word “monster” however, monster is just simply not enough to capture the scope of what they actually are. Michael Dylan Foster, an important figure in the *yōkai* studies field who has published numerous works on Japanese folklore lists the possible translations for the word *yōkai*:

In a sense, *yōkai* is nothing more than a convenient label to indicate a whole range of otherwise ineffable experiences that might, in English, be translated with the words *spirits*, *goblins*, *phantoms*, *specters*, *sprites*, *shape-shifters*, *demons*, *fantastic beings*, *numinous occurrences*, *the supernatural*, and perhaps most commonly today, *monsters*.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 5.

²¹ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 14.

Similarly to other monster myths around the world, yōkai were born out of the strange experiences people have lived through in their everyday lives. These experiences could be anything ranging from odd sounds in the night to disappearances of random household items. People came up with reasons for these strange occurrences and eventually over time attached visual imagery and characteristics to these nuisances called the unknown. Precisely because of this reason, a yōkai could be absolutely anything that humans have found unfamiliar, odd, mysterious, confusing, unnerving or even terrifying. One example is a *kamaitachi*, which translates to sickle weasel²². The kamaitachi is a yōkai who causes mysterious cuts in the leg. It seems that people who have discovered these strange cuts on their legs at the end of the day, perhaps from working in the fields all day long, were unnerved by their sudden appearance. In time, they have attributed these minor injuries on a creature, such as the weasel playing tricks on them. Both Foster and Komatsu Kazuhiko, emphasize the factor of mystery, hardship, and suspense humans have been surrounded and struggled with for centuries which contributed to the creation of many different yōkai. Easy access to water, light, heating, and medical assistance are some of the luxuries we take for granted in our daily lives. People were much closer to nature because of their dependency on it, which created many a strange encounter. If one was awoken with an odd sound in the dead of the night, and the only way to examine it was a flimsy candlelight or a torch. Even a familiar visage shrouded in darkness may give us feelings of fear and dread.

Since yōkai refer to such a great number of supernatural beings that stem from mystery in human life, naturally, there are thousands of different yōkai. Some

²² Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 214-215.

of the most well-known yōkai are *kappa* (“water goblin”), *kitsune* (“fox”), *bakeneko* (“monster cat”), *kasa-bake* (“umbrella monster”) and more recently, *kuchi-sake-onna* (“slit-mouthed woman”). As these examples suggest, yōkai can be in the shape of animals, objects or humans. Some yōkai do not have physical forms at all. The sheer variety of yōkai is what makes researching them so exciting and intriguing for so many scholars. They can be humans with odd characteristics or unusual bodies such as the *nurarihyon* who is a monk with an unusually large head. They can be even household objects called *tsukumogami* (“object yōkai”), who start the process of transforming into *oni* (“demons”) once they turn 100 years old. These creatures, spirits, gods, and monsters were given this anthropomorphic form because it was and is believed that they already had a spirit inside them. The notion that every being has a spirit inside them or has the potential to develop into one comes from Shinto belief.

2.2 Shinto and kami

Shinto, which is usually described as the indigenous religion of Japan is essential to our understanding of yōkai since the creation of these monsters stem from Shinto worldviews. Hane and Perez state that Shinto started “as an animistic religion, which incorporated the shamanism that came in from Southeast Asia as well as from the northern Tungus”²³. The usage of the word “religion” in regards to Shinto is debated since it differs quite a lot from organized religions as it has “no body of divinely inspired written canon, no established ethical code, and until the late nineteenth century, not even a hierarchical priestly caste.”²⁴. Shinto practice was also heavily intertwined with Confucian beliefs and Buddhism for centuries, earliest being 6th

²³ Hane and Perez, *Modern Japan: A Historical Survey*, 6.

²⁴ Ibid.

century. Shrines would be built next to Buddhist temples and Buddhism was even cherished as a way to control deities²⁵.

Shinto was not considered a separate, individual practice until late 19th century and was later divided into different sects of thought. Even though right now ‘Shinto’ is a distinct label, many scholars of Japanese history such as Kuroda Toshio²⁶ and Aike P. Rots²⁷ argue that such a distinction did not exist in the past. Breen and Teeuwen also argue that “kami shrines, myths, and rituals are a great deal older than their conceptualization as components of Shinto.”²⁸. Kami myths, shrines and rituals existed, but they were not coherent or unified under the Shinto name or even under Japan. A distinctive, native, ‘Japanese’ Shinto with strong ties to the Japanese emperor was introduced with the Meiji Restoration and had tremendous influence till the defeat of Japan in World War II. This nationalistic version of Shinto is called State Shinto, and was promoted by the state and focused on secularity and patriotism. After the loss of the war, Shinto gained negative connotations because of its association with the emperor and wartime politics. As opposed to the nationalistic, emperor focused views of State Shinto, some scholars such as Kunio Yanagita chose to emphasize the folkloric quality of Shinto and stressed the importance of local customs, and stories that have been passed down from generation to generation. Breen and Teeuwen state that these scholars defined Shinto as “A broad swathe of local rituals that addressed a range of other concerns, from community prosperity to individual good luck and health.”²⁹. Shrine going, worship of kami and local deities, and prayers are also important aspects of Shinto.

²⁵ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 39.

²⁶ Kuroda Toshio, “Shinto in the history of Japanese Religion”

²⁷ Aike P. Rots, “Shinto belief: Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of “Chinju no Mori””

²⁸ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 21.

²⁹ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 18.

Kami worship and mythology is the basis of Shinto we know of today. The most common translation of kami (神) would be god, yet it does not refer to the god in monotheistic religions with omnipotent and omnipresent qualities, rather they are the product of animistic views. Deity or spirit are also acceptable translations of the word in English. There are many kami myths dating back centuries. *Kojiki* (712), which John Breen and Mark Teeuwen describe as “a treasure trove of mythological motifs, names, unexplained references, and dead ends”³⁰ is an invaluable text that features many Shinto myths of kami, such as Izanagi and Izanami, the twin siblings who are responsible for the creation of Japanese islands and many other deities³¹, and also Amaterasu, the sun goddess and ancestor of the Japanese imperial family. However, kami are not just simply mythological figures. They are also associated with ancestor worship. Kami worshipped in Japan and are celebrated through festivals and ceremonies. People who have achieved extraordinary feats in life like emperors or generals can also be considered kami.

The animistic belief in the soul of beings including objects, animals, and nature has contributed to a special perception of nature in Shinto. Foster states:

[There] are multitudes of kami inhabiting all sorts of things in the natural world. A large or striking feature of the landscape, like a mountain or a waterfall or an ancient tree, may contain (or actually be) a kami... Kami are abundant and varied and all around: almost anything, potentially, can possess a spirit.³²

Mountains, trees, waterfalls, animals, and other elements of nature having the potential to be kami is a strong reason why Shinto is oftentimes associated with environmentalist worldviews. Sacred forests and respect towards deities of nature are also a part of Japanese culture. Recently, there have been efforts by Shintoists to use

³⁰ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 29.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 20.

this animist understanding of nature in Shinto to create positive change for the environment. The animistic nature allowed for the conceptualization of Shinto as an environmentalist religion. Breen and Teeuwen give the example of The Shasō Gakkai, “the first ever environmental society inspired by Shrine priests”, which was “set up in 2002 to raise awareness of the threat faced by shrine forests and groves.”³³. Some scholars argue that the environmentalist views of Shinto are rather recent.

Whether or not Shinto, as an institution, is or has been an environmentally friendly religion is debated by some scholars such as Aike P. Rots, in “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of “Chinju no Mori””. Rots introduces the term Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and questions the “credibility of the “sustainable Shinto” narrative.”³⁴. Whether or not there is an attempt to depoliticize Shinto by painting the image of a secular, environmentally friendly religion, I would argue that the customs, culture and beliefs of the people themselves matter greatly when it comes to the role of nature within society. The recent destruction of the environment aligning with the influence of Shinto diminishing in the public sphere may suggest a connection between the two. Artists and scholars alike who have noticed this connection might have started to emphasize Shinto beliefs of the past as being environmentally friendly.

Even though there are not many examples of Shinto followers of the past being environmentally conscious in the modern sense, it is clear that the animistic nature of the belief has created a unique relationship between the people and nature. Even though many Japanese people do not necessarily refer to themselves as

³³ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 210.

³⁴ Rots, “Sacred Forests, Sacred Nation: The Shinto Environmentalist Paradigm and the Rediscovery of “Chinju no Mori”, 207.

followers of Shinto religion, and mostly go to shrines for New Year's celebration³⁵, the sheer abundance of kami and yōkai references in modern culture is a testament to this unique relationship that persists through modern times.

Kami and yōkai are two closely related words and have many common qualities. Foster calls kami “A key concept associated with yōkai”³⁶. Even though kami (神), and yōkai are not the same word, they overlap tremendously since in their essence, they are all spirits who inhabit a part of the world with mysterious and unknown qualities, and powers. For example, *tsukumogami* (付喪神) (“object yōkai”) have the kanji of *kami*, 神, inside it. “Foster states that “the distinction between yōkai and kami is a fuzzy one at best.”³⁷. We have already established that yōkai are not necessarily evil or threatening beings, and some of them are humorous. This is also the case for kami. Some kami can be cherished and loved whilst others invoke fear in people's hearts. In *A New History of Shinto*, Breen and Teeuwen give examples of multiple kami. Hakami, who is a tooth kami helps toothache sufferers to relieve them of their pain³⁸ whilst Konjin is an example of a scary kami who was a real person before he became a kami³⁹. The lack of distinction of certain qualities of yōkai and kami blurs the line between the two even more. Distinct or the same, both kami and yōkai stem from animistic Shinto beliefs. The lack of a clear distinction between kami and yōkai, and the difficulty of translating yōkai into English show us the difference in religious belief. Words like “demon”, and “god” have much clearer definitions in Abrahamic religions whilst these words in Japanese might even overlap whilst talking about certain deities. Because of the abundance of yōkai

³⁵ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 203.

³⁶ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 19

³⁷ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 15.

³⁸ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 58.

³⁹ Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*, 59.

myths, there are many yōkai that are incredibly different from one another and possess different traits, motivations, and quirks. Even stories about the same yōkai can be wildly different. In the next section, I will be giving examples of two yōkai to demonstrate some of their important qualities that make them unique.

2.3 Yōkai examples

I would like to give examples of two yōkai that have been featured in a variety of Japanese art and literature throughout the ages, *tsukumogami* (“household objects”) and *bakeneko* (“monster cat”). The influence of animist Shinto belief are also quite apparent in these two examples as inanimate objects or animals gain anthropomorphic qualities.

Tsukumogami (付喪神) refers to common objects that have taken an anthropomorphic form. Animated lanterns, umbrellas, teapots, and sandals are the most common tsukumogami alongside other everyday objects such as “rice paddles, futons, pillows and grinding pestles”⁴⁰. The most famous explanation for the sudden humanized form of household items is the need for revenge after being abandoned by their owners. The objects turn into demons over time. Many popular yōkai imagery are tsukumogami since common objects with a face, arms and legs could be made amusing and entertaining easily. Kasa-obake (“umbrella ghost”) is the most famous example of this. One can see this paper umbrella with one eye in many different places, even in kabuki plays. However, they were not always portrayed or narrated as amusing or comical. Many of them would simply startle oblivious humans with their existence, and some of them were dangerous. For example, *Ittan-momen* (“cloth strip yōkai”), documented in Kagoshima Prefecture refers to an

⁴⁰ Ito, *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*, 127.

anthropomorphic strip of white clothing that would wrap itself around people's necks and fly away⁴¹.

The popularity of tsukumogami soared with picture scrolls made in the medieval period. Komatsu states that it was in the Middle Ages that anthropomorphized 'supporting characters' started to appear alongside the ancient oni, and kitsune:

Among them were interspersed everyday objects with added eyes, noses, hands, and legs: human tools become yōkai. Animistic ideas remain fundamental to Japanese culture to this day, but it was in the medieval period that the Japanese began expanding their concept of animism to see spirits even in man-made objects.⁴²

Starting from the medieval period, anthropomorphizing everyday objects and making them into ghosts became the norm. Many artworks were created to display them such as the famous *Hyakki yagyō emaki* ("Demons' Night Parade Picture Scroll")⁴³ which features a great variety of oni and yōkai. *Tsukumogami Ekotaba* ("Tsukumogami in pictures and words")⁴⁴ which is a picture scroll that dates back to the Muromachi period (1336-1573) and focuses on tsukumogami only. It shows the heartbroken and angered old tools discarded by humans transforming into oni. As they transform with revenge on their minds, they gain human features like eyes, legs and arms. In *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*, Shingo Ito states that after being defeated by humans, tsukumogami "repent and ultimately reach Buddhist enlightenment."⁴⁵ It is worth noting that Shinto animism and Buddhist

⁴¹ Ito, *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*, 133.

⁴² Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 20.

⁴³ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ito, *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*, 129.

enlightenment are both important components of tsukumogami portrayals and stories.

Similar to everyday objects, animals were also anthropomorphized quite frequently as yōkai, and one of the most well-known shapeshifters of all yōkai folklore is bakeneko, the monster cat. Bakeneko are regular cats who have somehow transformed into anthropomorphic, monstrous beings in Japanese folklore. According to the myths, this is usually the result of old age; in “The Goblin Fox and Badger and Other Witch Animals of Japan”, U. A. Casal states that: “Particularly dangerous are old cats: those that have human knowledge and the art of walking upright on the hindlegs. They can be quite devilish, and if somebody should kill one, he will be cursed during seven lives”⁴⁶. It was believed that these cats would start walking, dancing and most importantly, shapeshifting. There are many folktales starring these feisty felines, and I believe the most interesting part about them is just how different they were portrayed in respective stories, which exposes the duality of yōkai. According to Foster, “The most famous bakeneko narrative is “Nabeshima no bakeneko sōdō” (The disturbance of the bakeneko of Nabeshima), a legend that developed from a succession dispute”⁴⁷.

This popular bakeneko tale is a great example that features the shapeshifting talents and cunning behavior of monster cats. Even though there are many versions of Japanese folktales passed down orally, I will be using Mitford’s version, “The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima” as it is the late Edo period version of the story known to many. Baron Algernon Bertram Freeman-Mitford Redesdale, a British diplomat, and author born to the aristocratic Mitford family was sent to Japan in 1866 as a part of

⁴⁶ Casal, *The Goblin Fox and Badger and Other Witch Animals of Japan*, 63.

⁴⁷ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 214-215.

the British Foreign Office. During his seven year stay in Japan, he authored *The Tales of Old Japan*, just before the Meiji Revolution and documented many folktales, myths, legends and customs such as weddings and funerals in this book. One of the earliest English-language documenting Japanese folktales, the book contains many stories about yōkai as well. Two interesting bakeneko stories from the book are “The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima” and “The Story of the Faithful Cat”. This legend was even adapted into movies in the 20th century. Both of these stories feature bakeneko, shapeshifting anthropomorphic cats with speech and intellect. However, the part where they differ is how they act. In “The Vampire Cat of Nabeshima”, as the title suggests, the cat is a killer who transforms itself into a beautiful lady in order to beguile and kill the prince of Nabeshima house:

At midnight she awoke with a start, and became aware of a huge cat that crouched watching her; and when she cried out, the beast sprang on her, and, fixing its cruel teeth in her delicate throat, throttled her to death... Then the cat, having scratched out a grave under the verandah, buried the corpse of O Toyo [the lady of Nabeshima house], and assuming her form, began to bewitch the Prince.⁴⁸

We can conclude from this passage that narrates O Toyo’s death is that bakeneko is a violent and most importantly smart creature. It possesses the intellect to bury the corpse of O Toyo to not be caught by others who will go searching for her. Perhaps the most disturbing quality about it is that it can shapeshift and blend into the daily life of O Toyo so seamlessly. Then, in order not to attract suspicions upon itself, the cat chooses to kill the prince slowly and not hastily. The vampire cat of Nabeshima is cunning, intelligent and murderous. Fittingly enough, Casal describes bakeneko with these words: “A cat [bakeneko] can thus prey on a victim for years-in fact is nothing but a blood-sucking vampire.”⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Mitford, *Tales of Old Japan*, 215.

⁴⁹ Casal, *The Goblin Fox and Badger and Other Witch Animals of Japan*, 62.

The story right after this, “The Story of the Faithful Cat” is the exact opposite of the feracious vampire cat. In the story, the master of the house is suspicious of a tomcat because he realizes that it follows his daughter closely. He wants to kill the cat for lusting after his daughter, but the cat speaks to him in a human voice, warning him of a large rat who dwells under the house and tells him that he is the one chasing after his daughter instead. The reason that the cat was following the daughter was to protect her from this beastly rat. This is not a regular cat story but a bakeneko one because the cat has the ability to change its voice, and it carries the desire to be loyal to his owners. He is a loyal companion to his master and even gives up its life to protect the family he was a part of. From these two different tales of bakeneko, we can come to the conclusion that even the same yōkai can appear to be vastly different folkloric figures in different legends. There are countless yōkai with a myriad of different depictions and portrayals highlighting either a violent or lighthearted part of them.

2.4 Yōkai in art, literature, and media

The aim of this section is to introduce the presence and impact of yōkai in art, literature and media. Yōkai have been the topic of many different forms of art. In this section, I will focus on mythological texts, stories, books, wood block prints, illustrations, comic books, movies, and TV series including or about yōkai, not the texts that had the aim of categorizing or documenting yōkai.

Yōkai have appeared in written form as early as the 8th century and were a part of oral literature even earlier, and in our current day and age they have become a lively part of popular culture. Komatsu Kazuhiko states that behind the interest in yōkai “lies a traditional yokai culture nurtured over many centuries within Japan

itself”⁵⁰. Yōkai have been a part of folktales and oral traditions for a long time, but their visual forms started to become fixed in the public consciousness after illustrations of monsters became popular. Komatsu states that:

Naturally, depictions of yokai were based on descriptions in older stories and folk traditions. However, once a yokai’s form as imagined by an artist was shared among the populace, it tended to become fixed. For example, oni were depicted in this way relatively early and have remained largely unchanged to the present day.⁵¹

The monsters that evoked fear and awe in the hearts of people gradually became characterized, and even adored.

Because the interest in the supernatural in Japan has been enormous for centuries, it is impossible to summarize the sheer extent of artwork on yōkai so I will focus on examples that had massive popularity and effects on Japanese society and culture. Different time periods had different aims in their production of yōkai art, earlier periods focusing more on portrayal of myth whilst more modern works focused on entertainment value and criticism.

One of the earliest examples to yōkai in literature come from the Muromachi (1336-1573) period. Whilst earlier examples of yōkai content that come from old texts like *Kojiki* told yōkai myths sincerely and seriously, later examples of yōkai in books started to entertain the reader with amusing depictions – visual or literary. For example, *Otogizōshi* (“companion books”) were popular during the Muromachi and early Edo periods. These short books included illustrations and interesting stories from a variety of different topics, which included yōkai tales ⁵².

⁵⁰ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 12.

⁵¹ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 20.

⁵² Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 37.

But perhaps the most lively and dynamic period of yōkai artwork was the Edo period (1608-1867). The Edo Period, which corresponds to the rule of Tokugawa Shogunate that united and isolated Japan was a dynamic period of flourishing in the arts. Urbanization, rising literary rates, the flourishing printing press, the rise of the merchant class, and the blossoming of the arts went hand in hand. Unlike the companion books, artwork created in the Edo period reached a wider audience as Edo, modern day Tokyo, became more and more populated, lively, bustling and wealthy. *Ukiyo-e* or wood block prints are perhaps the most famous art pieces that have come out of Japan. “The Great Wave off Kanagawa” made by Katsushika Hokusai in 1831 is one of the most renowned and recognizable pieces of art of all time. Wood block prints have also inspired artists around the world, such as Van Gogh who used the prints of ukiyo-e master Hiroshige as inspiration for his paintings. Ukiyo-e refers to pictures of the floating world. This floating world refers to the newly emerging pleasures the urban landscape provided for city dwellers in Edo. Frederick Harris, who is a painter from New York with a special interest in Japanese wood block prints writes:

In the early stages, most *ukiyo-e* were created as posters advertising local entertainment such as theater performances and wrestling and services offered by teahouses, restaurants, bars and brothels. Many carried portraits of popular actors and beautiful women from the tearooms, shops and pleasure quarters of Edo. Some were specially created as souvenirs for clientele, sometimes in the form of flat fans.⁵³

Portraits of actors, beautiful women and entertainment maintained as popular topics for wood block prints, but with time prints of nature, animals, and of course, monsters, gods and demons joined the compendium. Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1798-1861), usually known as the last great master of ukiyo-e produced hundreds of prints

⁵³ Harris, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*, 14.

starring ghosts, demons, and yōkai. He was known for his love of cats as he illustrated hundreds of them alongside legends, myths, folktales, actors. Kuniyoshi also frequently combined his felines with legends as he portrayed them as anthropomorphic animals. Kuniyoshi's artworks are not just fun, playful and masterful interpretations of myths but they are also subtle criticisms. During the Edo period, "the two most popular forms of mass public entertainment were without a doubt *kabuki* theater and *sumo* wrestling."⁵⁴ Kabuki refers to a style of traditional Japanese theater that utilizes classical myths and tales, dance performances and dramatic make-up and costumes. Many of these kabuki performances featured ghost stories and legends of the past. Kabuki and kabuki actors were so massively popular that there were fan clubs for them! Ukiyo-e was an essential part of the kabuki experience, as fans purchased these prints of their favorites. Harris states: "For the kabuki audience and buyers of ukiyo-e, the main focus was on the actors. The prints depicting kabuki actors (*yakusha-e*) in full make-up, sometimes on stage, promoted not only theater productions but also the actors themselves."⁵⁵ However, in the 1840's the portrayal of actors in ukiyo-e was banned because of moral concerns. Kuniyoshi found a way to get around this censorship by illustrating the actors as anthropomorphized cats. Apparently, these portrayals looked so much like the actors themselves despite having cat features that people were still highly interested in buying these prints. Harris adds:

in the face of increasingly strict censorship, to symbolically and humorously disguise his criticism of the social and political maladies of the day by having fantastic creatures appear as substitutes for real people, especially the ruling élite. His prints thus appealed enormously to the politically dissatisfied public.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Harris, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*, 87.

⁵⁵ Harris, *Ukiyo-e: The Art of the Japanese Print*, 88.

⁵⁶ Harris, *Ukiyo-e : The Art of the Japanese Print*, 156.

Much like many modern-day artists, Kuniyoshi chose to use yōkai to criticize society, in his case censorship and political turmoil. The cats, who have donned anthropomorphic forms are depictions of bakeneko.

Yōkai tales even garnered the interest of Western authors, such as Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904), who was one of the first few authors to passionately write on Japan. Hearn had a special interest in Japan, but particularly old, traditional Japan. Hearn loved Japanese culture so much that “he even said that he had been born Japanese, had accidentally appeared in the wrong place, but had now finally found his way home.”⁵⁷. He frequently documented and wrote Japanese folktales and legends, such as the 1899 *In Ghostly Japan*. The tales he recorded throughout his time in Japan are valuable to this day and are even referenced by yōkai works today, which I will briefly discuss in the following chapter.

One other great example of yōkai being used as criticism of contemporary society is Ryunosuke Akutagawa’s 1927 novella *Kappa*. Akutagawa, one of the most famous Japanese authors of all time published this highly critical novella just shortly before his suicide. The book is about a Japanese man who is a patient in a psychiatric hospital narrating the days he spent alongside kappa. In the novella, kappa carry their traditional characteristics such as their frog and turtle like appearance and love for water, however they are not uncivilized monsters whose sole hobby is kidnapping children in rivers, they have actually created a whole society for themselves. This rather magical atmosphere to the kappa settlements is disturbed by the contemporary criticism Akutagawa includes into the narrative. Kappa, monsters who are traditionally Japanese folk monsters, are rather baffled by the actions of modern-day

⁵⁷ Richie, *Lafcadio Hearn’s Japan : Fascinating Stories and Essays by Japan’s Most Famous Foreign Observer*, 2.

Japanese. Modern day intellectuals who contemplated nihilism, gender equality, economic turmoil, international relations and more ills that tormented the society at the time are criticized through the eye of Kappa.

It is impossible to have a discussion on yōkai media without mentioning the legendary artist Mizuki Shigeru (1922-2015), who is one of the most famous names on the topic of yōkai. A massive lover of Japanese folk tales and of course, yōkai themselves, Shigeru produced the incredibly popular manga series *GeGeGe no Kitarō* (“*Kitarō*’s ge ge ge [cackling sound]”) and *Akuma-kun* (“Demon Boy”) whose main characters include various yōkai such as ghosts, demons, and beastly creatures. Shigeru made characters out of already existing yōkai and made them into popular figures that cemented themselves in the public imagination. He was also an avid researcher of yōkai and has even contributed to the documentation of yōkai by publishing yōkai catalogues⁵⁸. Shigeru and his characters are so popular that there is a “Mizuki Shigeru Road,” in Shigeru’s hometown Sakaiminato, which is described as “a downtown street festooned with more than one hundred bronze statues modeled on his yōkai”⁵⁹ by Foster.

Following in the footsteps of the successful manga series of Shigeru, many artists have gravitated towards creating their own yōkai media franchises and merchandise. One of the most popular cartoons of all time, children’s animation show, and video game series Pokémon is an example to this. Children worldwide enjoy these cute anthropomorphic monsters with different abilities and traits. Pokémon could be considered a modern yōkai, created for a modern audience who are looking for cuteness, earnestness and a friendly spirit in their monsters. And of

⁵⁸ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 165.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

course, the main topic of this thesis, the two animated movies of Studio Ghibli, *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke* are also examples to this. Other Studio Ghibli creations that include yōkai are *My Neighbor Totoro* and the Best Animated Feature Academy Award Winner *Spirited Away* (2003). These movies are heartwarming and nostalgic tales that cater to an audience who would feel warmth upon seeing the eerie yet adorable world of yōkai.

These cute, and rather sanitized yōkai are vastly different to those of earlier manuscripts that portray yōkai as fearsome and eerie creatures. Even though there are still rather scary yōkai stories and art being produced in Japan, the cuteness outweighs the frightening. Is this simply the result of Japanese artists, producers and manufacturers appealing to a younger audience who is ready to spend money on cute yōkai on pencil cases, stickers, bags, keychains and of course TV shows, movies, comic books and games? With the popularity of cute Japanese characters, it would not be plausible to think the demand for cuteness did not play a role in the cuteness of yōkai. Yet, it is not just the financial aspect that calls for this. I would argue that, after the devastation of the war, those who miss the simplicity of old days could have gravitated towards icons of the past. The destruction of many forests, habitats, rapid urbanization and all the other drastic changes could have made people think of yōkai in a different, more empathetic way which resulted in more adorable, friendly, and ‘human’ yōkai. They have come to represent a rather simple and traditional lifestyle in nature, a product of the past.

2.5 Yōkai as a sign of the times

We may be accustomed to thinking that the creation of folkloric figures and legends are a thing of the past, and our creative process involving folklore is just

reproductions and retellings of the already existing stories, however this is not true, especially not in the case of yōkai. The creation of a yōkai and the attributes of these creatures will always give hints about the time period, social constructs, customs and problems of the era. I have included an example from *The Book Yōkai*'s codex, concerning the yōkai *makura-gaeshi* ("the pillow shifter"). This yōkai is a great example of how certain period specific beliefs have played a huge role in the creation of monsters in people's imaginations:

You wake up in the morning to discover that your pillow has been mysteriously flipped over or moved from your head to your feet or to some other place in the room. Or perhaps you find your entire futon was moved to a different position after you went to sleep. This is the handiwork of a pillow-shifting yōkai called the *makura-gaeshi*.⁶⁰

Flipping a pillow or changing positions during sleep is not time nor location specific and can happen anywhere and anytime. However, there is a reason why this occurrence, and subsequently the yōkai who has caused this occurrence to happen would be found distressing by Japanese people from the 18th century. A monster with the sole purpose of shifting the position of one's pillow sounds humorous yet apparently, the position of your pillow could determine if you would die in your sleep:

This notion of the *kita-makura*, or "north-pillow," is commonly connected with the fact that the historical Buddha is said to have died lying down with his head to the north—so north came to be the direction associated with the sleep of death. Even today, common custom in Japan dictates that you avoid sleeping with your head to the north, because by the mechanism of sympathetic magic, this would mean your sleeping position replicates the position of death, which you would therefore be tempting.⁶¹

So *makura-gaeshi*, as humorous as it sounds, would actually be putting the clueless sleeper in danger of death by changing the position of their pillow. This yōkai is a

⁶⁰ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 236-237.

⁶¹ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 237.

great example of how culturally specific some yōkai can get, as the anxieties they stemmed out of come from certain specific beliefs, in this case a religious one. The anxieties that plagued people were then later expressed through the creation of yōkai. This also continues in our present day with the creation of new yōkai that reflect urban anxieties.

Two great examples created in modern Japan and reflect contemporary problems and anxieties are *Hanako-san* (“Miss Hanako”) and *Kuchi-sake Onna* (“slit mouthed woman”). Both of these yōkai came into existence at the same time, around late 1970s and 1980s. *Hanako-san*, refers to the legend of a ghostly young girl who would appear on the third stall of the third-floor girl’s bathroom of a school upon knocking. There are many versions of the story, Foster suggests in the yōkai codex of his *Book of Yōkai* that Hanako could very well represent the anxieties young adolescent girls feel about growing up and menstruation and that’s why she is usually pictured wearing a red skirt⁶². Hanako is not an obscure, and unheard-of ghost story either, she is a popular yōkai now known to many, especially told in schools in Japan. Just 3 years ago in 2022, she was the topic of the song “Hanako” by the popular Japanese music group Atarashii Gakko!, which features a spooky music video shot in a girl’s bathroom.

Kuchi-sake-onna is another terrifying horror story that originated and spread around in the 1970s and 1980s urban areas. Foster identifies her as “the first yōkai produced within the context of a national community linked by television, radio, and nationally distributed printmedia.”⁶³. According to this relatively new legend, *kuchi-sake-onna*, whose name literally translates to slit mouthed woman appears on the

⁶² Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 219.

⁶³ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 183.

street wearing a surgical mask on her face and asks the victim (usually a child going to school) if she is pretty. If the person gives a wrong answer, kuchi-sake-onna will take off her mask revealing her slit mouth from ear to ear and chase, threaten or attack the victim depending on the answer they gave. There are many iterations to this contemporary horror story. A surgical operation for the sake of beauty has been a popular topic for horror stories since it reflects the anxieties people, especially women who have felt pressured because of the beauty standards of the time. In this iteration of the story, Kuchi-sake-onna reflects the modern obsession with beauty procedures:

The kuchi-sake-onna came into being because there was this very beautiful woman, but she was concerned that her mouth was too small so she went to a certain cosmetic surgery clinic and had an operation. But there was a mistake with the operation to make her mouth larger, and the instant she saw her face after the operation, she went insane and became the kuchi-sake-onna.⁶⁴

One can come across many plastic surgery clinics walking around in the city, and there are ads usually targeted towards women for face alterations everywhere on the internet. Thousands of people will fly to other countries to get the new trendy cosmetic procedure such as rhinoplasty or a face lift. However, this is our 2025 reality. With plastic surgery taking off in the latter part of the 20th century, it is no surprise that it would confuse or even scare some people who were exposed to it the first time. Some cosmetic procedures were practiced in Japan as early as 1896. Asian Plastic Surgery, a plastic surgery clinic based in Australia shares the following information: “[plastic] and reconstructive surgery became an official specialty in Japan in 1975. This era saw some young Japanese surgeons succeeding overseas, while others at home developed innovations in microsurgery, craniofacial surgery

⁶⁴ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 224.

and tissue expansion.”⁶⁵. The sudden ‘specialty’ Japanese surgeons have gained regarding plastic surgery might have also put pressure on young girls and women to proceed with the procedures to fit in.

The contents, popularity and abundance of Kuchi-sake-onna’s stories also point to other issues and concerns that disturbed the masses in 1970s and 1980s. In *Pandemonium and Parade*, Foster gives “the dangers of rapid industrialization, unchecked pollution, and most viscerally, the role of women in a hegemonic male social structure”⁶⁶ as some of the reasons for Kuchi-sake-onna’s creation. Kuchi-sake-onna’s medical mask is the most important indicator of all of these. First of all, the mask’s primary function, which is to protect the wearer from the germs might have in and of itself caused anxiety about illnesses spreading through germs in crowded cities, where a great number of people live close to one another. It is also protective measure for pollution in the air, which was becoming a serious problem in rapidly urbanized Japan. The appearance of a medical mask might have also aroused suspicion or even fear in people seeing it for the first time since it covers half of the face. But combined with her concern with appearing attractive, the mask that hides the deformed half of her face becomes her shield. Just with her mask alone, she reflects anxieties about illnesses, pollution and beauty standards. Kuchi-sake-onna is a perfect example of how yōkai are social beings that are produced by a collective. Makura-gaeshi, Hanako-san and Kuchi-sake-onna are three examples that strongly show the connection between the timeframe a yōkai was created and its traits.

⁶⁵ Asian Plastic Surgery, “Japanese Plastic Surgery”.

⁶⁶ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 183-184.

2.6 Categorizing yōkai through the ages and yōkai studies

This section is dedicated to yōkai studies and the pioneers in the field such as the father of Japanese folklore studies Kunio Yanagita and Kazuhiko Komatsu. I will be explaining the aim of these scholars' research of yōkai and will briefly introduce their thesis on yōkai. The term yōkai itself and yōkai studies are relatively new, yet there has always been an interest in documenting and categorizing yōkai.

The Japanese have been writing about and documenting yōkai for centuries. The aim of identifying, documenting and categorizing yōkai changed from time period to time period. The earlier periods represented yōkai as a part of Japan's history and nature. Foster states that: "Along with the *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki*, some of the earliest Japanese texts are regional gazetteers, known as *fudoki*, which contained all sorts of historical and geographical records as well as local legends, myths, folktales, rituals, and beliefs."⁶⁷ These texts, much like *Kojiki* and *Nihonshoki* which are the oldest texts written on Japanese history (from the 8th century) do not include these supernatural creatures in their collection for pure entertainment value but as examples of deities.

The illustrated catalogues of yōkai were created for entertainment value, documentation and information. Throughout the years, there have been many catalogues of yōkai, "[the] oldest of these catalogs is the Gazu hyakkiyagyo (Illustrated Hyakkiyagyo) series: four illustrated sets of books published between 1776 and 1784 by Toriyama Sekien (1712–1788) and collectively documenting more than two hundred yōkai."⁶⁸ Sekien's illustrated catalogue of yōkai continues to be truly an impressive collection of monsters centuries after its creation. In the

⁶⁷ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 35-36.

⁶⁸ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 30.

Tokugawa period (1600-1868), where printing press was booming in new urban spaces, what Foster calls an “Encyclopedic Mode” appeared. As the name suggests, the encyclopedic mode was a serious effort in identifying, documenting and even illustrating with the aim of creating a “presentation of an inclusive collection of knowledge about a subject”⁶⁹. The first illustrated encyclopedia of Japan, *Kinmōzui* who was compiled by Nakamura Tekisai features yōkai, however they are not labeled so:

The *Kinmōzui*, then, offers no epistemological distinctions between “normal” animals and those believed to possess some sort of supernatural powers. It is possible that one reason Tekisai does not comment on the special powers of the fox and tanuki is that these powers were considered not supernatural but simply the nature of the beasts in question.⁷⁰

Tekisai not noting the difference between regular qualities of animals versus their supernatural powers remind us of the Shinto roots of yōkai. According to this logic, the shapeshifting qualities would already be a part of these animals, since every animal (and object) had a spirit that could take on a different form.

Yōkai Studies itself was created in the Meiji period (1868-1912) by Inoue Enryō (1858-1919), called the *yokaigaku* (“yōkai studies”). The Meiji era was a time of great change in Japan as the island came into direct contact with the West and became an important player in world dynamics. Even though the Tokugawa period is known as a period of cultural isolation for Japan, this was far from Japan’s first contact with the West as they have consistently kept friendly relations with the Dutch, learning about world affairs and developments. However, since the Tokugawa period was a time of isolation, Japan was out of touch with scientific methods that dominated the West after the Enlightenment. With friendly relations

⁶⁹ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 31.

⁷⁰ Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yōkai*, 37.

with The Great Britain on the rise, Meiji Japan's top priority was to modernize every single part of life. Clothing, houses, decoration, festivals, newspapers and even hairstyles had a massive change. Of course, education and academic endeavors was one of the main changes in the Meiji Revolution. There was a massive interest in scientific thinking, and even yōkai, who were a part of folk religion, a part of the borderlands between real and imaginary were subject to scholarship. Inoue Enryō was one of the first figures who took scientific interest in folktales and yōkai, followed by Kunio Yanagita (1875-1962) who is perhaps the most influential figure of yōkai studies. As a product of the Meiji spirit, Kunio Yanagita donned a scientific approach when he collected and documented countless Japanese folktales:

Yanagita's ethnological project was founded on two not always mutually reconcilable principles: literary form and scientific methodology. Aspiring early to be a writer, he relied on the form of narrative to tell the timeless story of the folk and to present his ethnological findings as an eventless tale. The collection of data was thus prefigured by the authority of narrative in his first major publication, *Tōno monogatari* (1910)⁷¹

Yanagita's aim in collection, documenting and studying Japanese folktales was for the 'common man' who was the bearer of Japanese culture, passed down from generation to generation. In a rapidly modernizing world, Yanagita was concerned with the loss of tradition. In his "Yanagita Kunio", Takayanagi argues that Yanagita is "considered the first scholar who used this native tradition in his efforts to cope with the aftermath of Japan's modernization on the Western pattern."⁷². Precisely because of this reason, Yanagita strongly supported the collection, categorization and documentation of yōkai folktales and the scholarship on it. He has many works discussing yōkai such as the 1936 *Yōkai dangi* ("Discussions of Yōkai") and *Tanuki to demonorōji* (Tanuki and demonology). According to Komatsu, "Yanagita argued

⁷¹ Harootunian, "Disciplinizing Native Knowledge and Producing Place: Kunio Yanagita, Origuchi Shinobu, Takata Yasuma", 101.

⁷² Takayanagi, "Yanagita Kunio", 330.

that yōkai are deeply rooted in the awe and fear felt by Japanese people—that they are those emotions given form.”⁷³ and “He also believed that yōkai were fallen versions of once-worshipped deities.”⁷⁴. It is important to note that Yanagita gives a rational explanation to the creation of yōkai that emphasizes the feelings of Japanese people.

Whilst Yanagita had an approach that focused on the people and their folk culture itself, there were also efforts to promote the native culture and religion of Japan, under the influence of nationalism. Unlike Buddhist myths, which were not of Japanese origin, various kami and yōkai who were a part of native folk religion that went back centuries, also known by most Japanese would be pushed to the front. After the loss of the war, the patriotic, nationalist connotations that were attached to these deities diminished and in its stead were feelings of nostalgia for a distant past, a past before the war, before the modernization and industrialization, before the rapid changes that transformed Japan so greatly. The trickster tanuki playing pranks to their neighboring humans were humorous tales that narrated times where people lived close to nature and their culture. Artists and scholars were inspired and intrigued by the mystical world of yōkai.

Yōkai studies have been gaining traction the last few decades as yōkai grow to be more and more popular around the globe with different media franchises and movies. In the Preface to his 2016 English edition of *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, Komatsu Kazuhiko writes:

In recent years, interest in yōkai culture has continued to build in Japan. Yōkai have never been so popular with the population at large in the postwar

⁷³ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 70.

⁷⁴ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 71.

era. Every year, exhibitions of yōkai art are held at museums and galleries across Japan, and the “packaging” of yōkai culture in this way has thrust a great deal of once forgotten or poorly regarded art back into the light of day to charm modern audiences. Underlying all this is the remarkable progress and development of yōkai scholarship in Japan.⁷⁵

Komatsu, who emphasizes the current ‘boom’ of interest in yōkai started to write about yōkai in a period where it was neglected. He states: “I took pains not to treat yokai as folk beliefs, fallen gods, or material for reconstructing ancient beliefs; nor did I limit my scope to oral folktales, or view such folktales as lamentable and unnecessary relics of the past.”⁷⁶ Komatsu’s 2017 book *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History* an excellent source on yōkai. There are still catalogues of yōkai being published today, but online and in book form. A very recent one is by Shingo Ito, who is a professor at Hirosaki Gakuin University, called *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*. The book, which is an illustrated catalogue of yōkai was published in May of 2025.

The categorization of yōkai and the approach differs from scholar to scholar. Both Komatsu and Foster look at yōkai are from a secular perspective and not a religious one. They also both focus on the folklore aspect of yōkai. When it comes to categorization, Komatsu categorizes yōkai as presence, objects and event. In his *Book of Yōkai*, Foster categorizes yōkai based on their dwelling. “Wilds”, “Water”, “Countryside”, “Village and City” and “Home” are the main sections. In Komatsu’s categorization tsukumogami would fall under the category of “objects” whilst for Foster they would be categorized as a part of the house. The biggest advantage of Foster’s method of categorization is that it makes it easier to identity certain regional yōkai and the timeline in which the yōkai was created. As one might guess, the yōkai

⁷⁵ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 5.

⁷⁶ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 73-74.

in the “Wilds” chapter have yōkai documented centuries ago compared to the “Village and City” chapter which primarily features yōkai from the Edo period and as late as the 1990s. Keigo Seki, in his 1966 *Types of Japanese Folktales*, includes the chapters “Escape from Ogre”, “Stupid Animals”, “Grateful Animals” “Supernatural Wives and Husbands”, “Man and Waterspirit [sic]”, and “Magic Objects”⁷⁷ for yōkai tales.

The sheer abundance of yōkai, alongside their different characteristics that continue to excite scholars to this day. Yōkai are unique in the sense that even though they were called mysterious and odd creatures of borderlands, they could also be simultaneously portrayed as humorous or benevolent. There are countless yōkai recorded throughout the ages and whilst many of them carry cruel and murderous intent, many of them don’t. I would argue that their sheer versatility is what makes them stand out from other monster myths from other countries. The next chapter, which focuses on *Pom Poko* by Isao Takahata is a great example to this. *Pom Poko* greatly utilizes the versatile nature of yōkai, making them adorable yet violent warriors of justice, all the while perfectly reflecting modern anxieties and problems of 1980’s-1990’s Japan.

⁷⁷ Seki. *Types of Japanese Folktales*, 1.

CHAPTER 3

POM POKO

Isao Takahata's 1994 *Pom Poko* is an undoubtedly charming animated movie that is centered around tanuki ("raccoon dog"). The tanuki, who were previously leading peaceful lives in their home in Tama Hills, the outskirts of Tokyo, are under the threat of losing their homes to a suburban housing project. The movie's original Japanese title *Heisei Tanuki Gassen Ponpoko* translates to Heisei Raccoon Dog War Pon Poko. 'Pon Poko' is an onomatopoeia word describing the sound of a tanuki playing the drums on its own belly. The expression is also used in a popular children's song called "Shoji no Tanuki"⁷⁸. The name of the movie, which combines this comical and childlike expression with war encapsulates the spirit of the movie. Rich in its use of folkloric imagery, the movie is a cheerful yet serious illustration of late 20th century Japan. The bold colors, stunning landscapes, portrayals of destroyed forests and habitats, adorable depictions of tanuki and the riveting fight for survival all stay with the viewer after the movie. The tanuki who have an important place in Japanese folklore as mischievous tricksters facing hardships finding food and shelter and even losing members of their community to the wrath of fast cars and hunter traps constitutes as a criticism of both environmentalist problems of the modern era and the ideological alienation from one's own culture. Studying the yōkai in the movie paints us a comprehensive picture of late 20th century Tokyo.

The co-founder of Studio Ghibli, Isao Takahata (1935-2018) was the director, writer and producer of many highly acclaimed animated series and movies. His most

⁷⁸ Mama Lisa's World International Music and Culture, "Shoji no Tanuki".

famous works include *Heidi, Girl of the Alps* (1974), *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988), *My Neighbors the Yamadas* (1999) and of course, *Pom Poko* (1994). Takahata was truly a special screenwriter and director who mastered both tragedy and comedy. Some of his works, like *Grave of the Fireflies* which was based on a 1968 story by Akiyuki Nosaka deal with serious subjects such as war. The heartbreaking movie follows brother and sister Seita and Setsuko and takes place in the last years of World War II. The movie shows the stark cruelty of war as it covers times of extreme poverty, and starvation. *My Neighbors the Yamadas*, on the other hand is a hilarious sit-com like study of the average Japanese family. In his “The Art of Anime” which is a tribute to Takahata himself, author Alex Dudok de Wit describes *My Neighbors the Yamadas* as “the closest thing Japan has to The Simpsons”⁷⁹. Compared to Takahata’s more serious works, *Pom Poko* is jovial, lighthearted and charming in appearance, yet it narrates a tragedy at its core. A masterful blend of laughs and tears, *Pom Poko* illustrates 1980s Japan and its society, values and problems with the aid of adorable yōkai. Takahata utilized Japanese folklore multiple times in his career, including his last directorial role: *The Tale of the Princess Kaguya* (2013). The story is based on *The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*, a traditional Japanese folktale that tells the story of a girl born out of a bamboo shoot. Since Takahata was born in 1935, right at the beginnings of a tumultuous, painful and desperate period of time for Japan, he and his generation grew up with the glimpses of the old world, watched it all fall apart and saw the rise of Japan as an economic world power throughout their lifetimes. His great attention to nature, folktales, Japanese culture and customs in his movies are what makes them so lifelike and

⁷⁹ Wit, “The Art of Anime.”, 18.

special, despite some of them being comical. Even though *Pom Poko* is comedic, every scene depicting nature and its heartbreaking destruction are sincere and touching.

By basing the story on animal figures from folklore, Takahata portrays both the environmental and societal problems that arose within rapid industrialization, modernization and urbanization in Japan. Raccoon dogs in Japan have become popular and nostalgic icons famous for their cheery disposition and miraculous shapeshifting abilities. Even without taking the magical powers and long, rich history of oral folklore and traditions into account, the movie's environmental message is clear. The movie calls for awareness on animals losing their homes and lives as a result of urbanization. Takahata's criticism is not necessarily towards modernization and urbanization but the way in which it is being carried out. Furthermore, the negative effects that are the result of modernization such as people losing touch with nature, their culture and even identity. The negative effects urbanization had on animals are shown through tanuki, but the effects on people are also reflected through them. Their reliance on modern objects such as the television, their infatuation with fast food like hamburgers and their eventual jump into the stressful city life are some examples.

3.1 Film summary

Pom Poko is about a group of tanuki living on the outskirts of Tokyo, Tama Hills. Even though they have samurai-style battles with other tanuki as a means to protect their grounds, they live pretty peaceful and mundane lives. They eat, sleep, play, and fall in love. Unlike the elder who are experts on shapeshifting, the young tanuki have forgotten this ancient art that requires a lot of discipline and willpower. The elder

tanuki try to teach them to transform into different objects, and people. The reason they have decided to hone their shapeshifting skills is because they are in danger. Their habitat, the mountains and the forest will be destroyed by humans to make new apartments.

Angered by the nerve of humans who are carelessly harming them, the tanuki decide to scare the humans away from their home. The desolate landscape filled with bulldozers pulling away at all the greenery and trees cause them great distress. They even start calling their once lush and beautiful home “Bald Hills” instead of its name, Tama Hills. By shapeshifting into various objects, they cause accidents in the construction site. The aim is to damage construction materials and machines to stop the construction of apartments all together, but they end up hurting the people on the site as well. The reporter on TV states: “Multiple accidents at construction site. Disaster struck Tama New Town Development Site at approximately 2:30 pm. A series of landslides and accidents killed three workers, injured two and destroyed a residence under construction.”⁸⁰. Upon hearing these news, the tanuki are filled with immense joy and excitement. Even when the elders ask for a moment of silence for the deceased, they cannot contain their laughter and break out into dance and celebration. However, they are devastated when the reporter states that the construction will continue as planned. They decide to ‘haunt’ the area by appearing as child ghosts or faceless humans which result in a panic. Some of their hauntings even reference tales recorded by Lafcadio Hearn. One of the tanuki shapeshift into a beautiful woman and start sobbing near the sidewalk. A policeman sees the distressed ‘woman’ and asks her what is wrong; she keeps crying and then lifts up her hands from her face: She has no eyes, nose or mouth. Incredibly scared by the

⁸⁰ Takahata, *Pom Poko*, 21:59-22:09

faceless woman, the policeman runs into his *koban* (“small police station”) and frantically tells another policeman of what he saw. The policeman shows his face to the man, also revealing he has no facial features. This policeman is also a tanuki. This amusing encounter is a reference to Lafcadio Hearn’s “Mujina”. The story is about a kind old man who came across a woman crying covering her face. He calls out to her as *O-jochū* (“honorable damsel”) and offers her help. After his calls, the woman reveals her true identity: “Then that O-jochū turned around, and dropped her sleeve, and stroked her face with her hand;—and the man saw that she had no eyes or nose or mouth,—and he screamed and ran away.”⁸¹ The scared old man has another supernatural encounter moments later:

Up Kii-no-kuni-zaka [name of a slope in Akasaka Road, Tokyo] he ran and ran; and all was black and empty before him. On and on he ran, never daring to look back; and at last he saw a lantern, so far away that it looked like the gleam of a firefly; and he made for it. It proved to be only the lantern of an itinerant soba-seller...[He tells the soba-seller] “I saw... I saw a woman—by the moat;—and she showed me... Ah! I cannot tell you what she showed me!”...[He answers with] “Hé! Was it anything like THIS that she showed you?” cried the soba-man, stroking his own face—which therewith became like unto an Egg... And, simultaneously, the light went out.⁸²

There is no clue on the identity of the yōkai itself in the spooky tale except the title, “Mujina” which refers to the *anaguma*, the Japanese badger. The Japanese badger looks very similar to the tanuki except for their heads. Whilst tanuki have more rotund and fluffy faces with a rounder black ‘mask’ around their eyes, anaguma have thinner faces with vertical ‘masks’. Even though they are not the same animal, they share enough characteristics to be considered as a part of the same folklore tradition. Interestingly enough, the tanuki in the movie are also informed of the ‘mujina’ legend and mimic it.

⁸¹ Hearn, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, “Mujina”, 38.

⁸² Hearn, “Mujina”, 38-39.

Even though the tanuki scare away the locals and construction workers, new ones keep coming in the hills to continue the construction. The elders of the village decide to send delegates to the tanuki elders of Shikoku Island, a rather rural part of Japan, to come together and defeat the evil plans of humans once and for all. Unfortunately, their plans fail one by one. Their biggest attempt is the yōkai parade which kills one of the Shikoku elders, Inugami, who uses all of his power on the art of transformation. The tanuki want to scare the humans and make them recognize the power they still possess. Ghosts, apparitions, monsters, creatures, demons all from Japanese folklore constitute to a simply breathtaking spectacle. The humans are in awe at the yōkai parade; as they watch it, they get scared, awestruck, amazed and amused. Many people try to give rational explanations as to what they have seen late at night, yet it is to no avail. Much to the tanuki's surprise, a mean-spirited, opportunist businessman who owns the amusement park Wonderland goes on broadcast and apologizes for the parade. Bowing apologetically, he states that he takes responsibility for the spectacle and apologizes for the inconvenience it has caused everyone, and anybody who is interested can see similar shows at Wonderland. Even the village elders are outraged by the nerve of him and want to exclaim that it was them who organized the parade.

From that point on, no matter what they do the construction goes strong and the numbers of tanuki start decreasing. Faced with starvation and the loss of their home, the tanuki have to accept the fact that the olden days are over. In the last moments of the movie, the tanuki create one last spectacle. This spectacle transforms the barren and desolate landscape into the lush forests, mountains and villages of the old days. It can be observed that some humans also feel nostalgic for the old days, whilst some young children want to pet the tanuki and get to know them. Yet when

the beautiful spectacle is over, they are faced with the harsh reality once again. The yōkai who can shapeshift join the hustle and bustle of city life by working. Those who can't shapeshift are forced to live in the small areas of greenery that are left in the city, many of them are shown being hit by cars and scrambling for food desperately. Even though the situation is bleak, the movie ends in a cheerful note, showing tanuki coming together and dancing in their animal forms, asking the audience to be considerate of animals.

The tanuki in the movie mirror contemporary issues. The beautiful landscapes alongside the adorable, plump tanuki playing, dancing and having fun is contrasted by their tragedy. Even though the movie is intended for a younger audience, it does not shy away from showing the heartbreaking scenes in which the tanuki cry and wail in frustration and sadness, both for the loss of their homes and their friends and family. A well-known and beloved part of Japanese folklore being disrespected, not taken seriously, and even destroyed signal the disappearance of past customs and beliefs. Also, the fact that tanuki themselves are real animals native to Japan bring attention to the fact that alongside traditional culture, distinctly Japanese animals are also forced adapt to the new urban landscape.

In the following sections, I will be explaining what tanuki are as animals and as yōkai. I will explain the supernatural powers they have such as shapeshifting and the characterization of their powers in the movie. I will also be giving background information on the latter half of 20th century in Japan, where industrialization and urbanization reached its peak in an economic boom. Lastly, I will provide an analysis on the utilization of yōkai in the movie, mainly focusing on their cuteness and status as creatures of borderlands.

3.2 Tanuki as animals

Before I start talking about tanuki yōkai and related myths and folktales, I would like to give information on tanuki as animals. In English they are called badgers or racoon dogs, even though they are not scientifically related to raccoons. Fanny Hagin Mayer, who has translated many of Kunio Yanagita's collection of folktales, translates tanuki as 'badger' in *Kunio Yanagita: Japanese Folktales*. Foster states that tanuki "are small, primarily nocturnal, omnivorous mammals that look like a cross between raccoon and possum."⁸³ They do not have the signature long and striped tails of raccoons, but the coloring of the fur around their eyes appears like black masks which is probably the reason why tanuki was translated as raccoon or badger into English. They are usually various shades of brown, gray and black. They have fluffy fur and much like raccoons, they have a chubby and adorable look and disposition. Foster states: "Native throughout East Asia, tanuki have spread to Scandinavia and much of northern Europe. They have a high rate of reproduction, as well as the ability to eat human-made foods and live close to human settlement."⁸⁴ As expected of Isao Takahata's attention to detail, these characteristics of tanuki are realistically and comically represented in the movie. Tanuki were also hunted for their fur, which is also referenced in the movie, where one of the tanuki recalls her grandfather becoming a prized pelt.

In the movie, there are two 'true' forms of tanuki: animal form and yōkai form, which is anthropomorphized. Their animal form, which is primarily used in scenes featuring nature and landscapes is quite realistic. The tanuki walk on four legs, run and play like their real-life counterparts. The deaths of tanuki are also

⁸³ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 187.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

shown in this form. The tanuki who have lost their lives to fast cars or construction workers are represented realistically, their roughed up, limp bodies serve as harsh reminders of the severity of the situation as the number of tanuki living in cities were undoubtedly affected by the urbanization of the country.

In their yōkai form, the tanuki are drawn standing on two legs, with cute faces making human like expressions. I call this the yōkai form because the anthropomorphic way they have been characterized is similar to traditional tanuki illustrations of the past, just made much cuter, and fluffier. The tanuki also wear clothes and accessories in this form. Some yōkai, even have distinctive qualities such as moles, dark circles and different hair styles. It is also important to note that unlike traditional tanuki narratives, the tanuki are distinctly gendered. For example, the majority of tanuki who wear clothes are female tanuki. In her “(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and Other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao's *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko*”, Melek Ortabasi calls this form of tanuki the ‘iconic mode’, and she argues that in this form “the tanuki possess agency, complex emotions, and independent will, much as would human characters.”⁸⁵.

Ortabasi also argues that there is another form that appears in the movie, which she calls the ‘comic mode’ in which the tanuki appear even more cartoon-like than their usual appearance with rounder lines, and red cheeks. This style appears in moments of celebration, where tanuki display their usual tanuki characteristics such as enthusiastically eating, drinking or dancing. Even though there is a difference in the art style used, I think this form could be considered as an extension of the already existing yōkai form. Albeit being more two-dimensional and amusing compared to

⁸⁵ Ortabasi, “(Re)animating Folklore: Raccoon Dogs, Foxes, and Other Supernatural Japanese Citizens in Takahata Isao's *Heisei tanuki gassen pompoko*”, 262.

the usual way tanuki represent themselves, all the qualities of ‘comic mode’ are already present in all the other forms of tanuki such as their passion for food, and love for celebration. These moments, where the tanuki are illustrated as stereotypically as possible paint the picture of traditional and nostalgic past that were present in many traditional yōkai narratives of tanuki.

3.3 Tanuki as yōkai

What makes tanuki special in Japan, are the plethora of stories, illustrations, folktales, legends about them. One can often see little statues of plump tanuki with a straw hat and a bottle of sake in their hand in front of stores and restaurants. This is because tanuki are symbols of good luck and fertility in Japan. Even though they are usually alone, some statues consist of two tanuki, one male and one female. Their appearance in folktales is not so different from their real-life counterparts; the most noticeable difference would be that in yōkai depictions tanuki walk on their hind legs and have a giant scrotum. In most of the legends and folktales on tanuki, their most prominent characteristics are their mischievous and playful personalities, their love for tricks and pranks, big appetites, and most importantly, shapeshifting. Each one of these qualities are represented in the movie.

Shapeshifting and transformation are common themes in Japanese folklore and there are countless examples of it in myths, stories and even kabuki plays. Shapeshifting plays a crucial role in the movie and is used numerous times. In the movie, the tanuki, frustrated with the humans’ cruelty towards them transform themselves into humans, monsters and even objects to block the construction workers’ paths figuratively and literally. Shapeshifting is not unique to tanuki as famously kitsune (“fox”) and bakeneko (“monster cat”) also possess the ability to

shapeshift into a variety of things, especially humans which is also represented in the movie. People believed in shapeshifting, transformation and possession sincerely, so we have a great number of shapeshifting narratives produced throughout the centuries. One of the comical examples of a shapeshifting tanuki is *Bunbuku Chagama*⁸⁶ (“The Lucky Teapot”) which is a magical teapot that has transformed into a tanuki in Morin-ji Temple, Gunma Prefecture. There are many local tales accounting shapeshifting animals just like this.

In the movie, the tanuki are not the only shapeshifting yōkai that have been affected by the changes in Japanese society and urban landscape. Kitsune, the foxes have also been driven out their homes. Kitsune folklore is even more extended than tanuki and go back centuries. Kitsune has also come to be closely associated with Inari, who is the kami of rice and rice cultivation. There are currently around forty thousand Inari shrines throughout Japan⁸⁷, and Fushimi Inari in Kyoto which is famous for its bright red torii gates is the main one. Even though the first written portrayals of shapeshifting foxes date back to 11th century⁸⁸, their history goes even further. Casal states that:

The belief in spooky or shape-changing foxes does not seem to have grown on the soil of Japan itself, but to have been acquired from China, where these fearful animals, able to assume human form or to play foul tricks, were already described in the literature of the Han dynasty [sic], 202 B.C. to 221 A.D. Since the Japanese were fundamentally animistic from the beginning, the belief found no difficulty in being accepted.⁸⁹

Even though there are also comical portrayals of them, oftentimes shapeshifting foxes would be portrayed as cunning women who seduce men away from their families. There are many kitsune myths in Japan and they are quite similar to tanuki

⁸⁶ Ito, *Yokai: Japanese Mysterious Monsters and Phenomena*, 84.

⁸⁷ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 188.

⁸⁸ Casal, *The goblin Fox, Badger and Other Witch Animals of Japan*, 1.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

and bakeneko in the way they shapeshift into other creatures. Foster summarizes the main differences between kitsune and tanuki:

Tanuki tend to be comical and less adept at their deceptions; kitsune appear to be more serious about their performances, and their abilities are better honed. Both creatures are members of the Canidae family. The folkloric characteristics of the kitsune, like those of the tanuki, reflect its zoological traits as a creature that can live on the edges of human society—visible one moment and gone the next.⁹⁰

Shapeshifting narratives are usually amusing reads, and they reveal the relationship people had with animals and the supernatural in the past. Kunio Yanagita, who strongly believed in preserving folktales of common people documented many of these shapeshifting accounts in his book *Nippon no Mukashibanashi* 日本の昔話 (“Japanese Folktales”) (1942), which was translated to English in 1952 by Fanny Hagin Mayer⁹¹. The stories collected in this book are oral narratives collected all around Japan. There is short excerpt from a fox tale:

Late one night a splendidly dressed traveling *samurai* stopped at Kihê's rest-house. If one looked closely, he could see that it was a fox in disguise. Only his clothes, his pleated skirt, and his pair of swords were like a real samurai. He still looked like an inexperienced fox with hair still on his face which came to a point, and his pointed ears stood up. Not aware of this himself, he thought that he was well disguised and tried to look very important.⁹²

This story, *Kitsune ga Warau* (“Foxes Laugh”) is about an amateur kitsune who gets caught in his disguise by a rest-house owner. He is so amused by the fox that he pretends not to notice his ears and gives him a metal basin to wash. Upon seeing his reflection, the fox gets embarrassed and leaves the inn. The next day the encounter continues:

A tiny voice said, " Kihê San [“Mr. Kihê”]! Kihê San! " He couldn't see his form, but he answered. The little voice said, "Wasn't it funny last night?" Then Kihê San knew right away that it was last night's fox. In olden days,

⁹⁰ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 178.

⁹¹ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales.

⁹² Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 37.

even foxes were honest like this and could laugh with men in this way, many people in the mountains used to think.⁹³

The friendly encounter between the shapeshifting fox and the rest-house owner reveals the belief that a shapeshifting fox was thought of as a common occurrence in the past. The last line of the narrator indicates a shift in the way supernatural creatures were perceived in the past. It seems that the belief in shapeshifting animals started out as rather lighthearted and amusing but I was honestly surprised when I first read this tale because I was so used to reading tales where humans capture and kill the shapeshifting yōkai even though they did not do anything harmful to the humans.

Shapeshifting is a natural ability of these monsters in folklore, however sometimes some objects are involved in the act of shapeshifting such as leaves. An excerpt from “Kongō-in and the Fox”, which is another story in Yanagita’s book, reads:

A fox, seemed unaware that men were passing, was standing at the edge of a pond. While he gazed into the watery mirror, he repeatedly put grass or twigs on his head and across his shoulders. Looking on and wondering what he was going to do, the priests presently saw him shake his body and, in a twinkling, change into the form of Kongō-in [a mountain priest].⁹⁴

In this tale, the fox uses grass or twigs to enhance his shapeshifting abilities. Many shapeshifting yōkai, like bakeneko are commonly illustrated with leaves on their heads, dancing. Interestingly enough, the village elders in the movie tell the youngsters that using leaves is the work of amateurs. Tanuki also famously use their scrotum to transform, which they also do many times in the movie.

Tanuki, like kitsune and bakeneko, can shapeshift into a variety of things including humans, other animals, and objects. In some tales, tanuki can even

⁹³ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 36.

⁹⁴ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 31.

transform the landscape itself, tricking confused travelers. Another tale from

“Japanese Folktales” by Yanagita is a great example to this clever trick tanuki play:

Long ago, Hage Badger of Awa came to propose that he and Shibaemon Badger compare their ability to disguise themselves... with, Hage Badger displayed a disguise which looked like the feudal lord of Awa crossing the sea. Many ships, far and near, were lined up in fine array with all sorts of banners and pennants flying in the wind. The voices of sailors could be heard singing on the state barge.⁹⁵

In many narratives humans kill the shapeshifting yōkai. For example, in the story “The old one-eyed man”, the old woman tricks the fox who has shapeshifted into her old one-eyed husband into going inside a straw bag and tying him up. When the fox is captured, she makes fox soup out of him⁹⁶. In another story in Yanagita’s collection, “How to mountain priest overcame the badger”⁹⁷, a priest whose tools and food keep getting stolen realize that a trickster tanuki is the culprit. He deals with the situation by poisoning the package that was sent to him.

But why do tanuki, kitsune and bakeneko shapeshift? The aims of these creatures depend on their nature. It seems that kitsune tales vary from playful to plain terrifying. For example, in the story I gave an example of “Kongô-in and the Fox”, the fox transforms into Kongô-in to take revenge on him for frightening him the day before.

Unlike kitsune, stories on tanuki tend to be on the playful side. Many yōkai are threatening and murderous in nature and the folktales on them have eerie and scary atmospheres. This is not the case for tanuki, as many of these tales feature tanuki cheerfully playing pranks on humans and going after food. If anything, many of the tanuki tales I have read end with humans harming the badger who was playing harmless tricks on them.

⁹⁵ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 34.

⁹⁶ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 33.

⁹⁷ Mayer, and Yanagita, “Kunio Yanagita”: Japanese Folktales, 35.

3.4 Tanuki narratives throughout the ages

Tanuki have been talked about and written on and illustrated on for centuries, but for the purpose of this thesis I would like to focus on tanuki narratives that were the result of the rapid modernization of Japan in late 19th century and early 20th century. For this section, I will be using Michael Dylan Foster's "Haunting Trains and Modernity".

Not only did traditional tanuki myths and folktales persist throughout the years, but new tanuki myths were conceived in the modern age. I have briefly talked about the massive changes that took place in Meiji era Japan in the previous chapter. The sudden influx of Western thought, reforms that affected every single part of life, new technology, and urban developments changed the lives of Japanese people in a massive way. But it was not just the isolated people of Edo period that were face to face with modernity, the native animals of Japan and consequently the folklore that surround them were also confronted by rapid developments. In "Haunting Trains and Modernity", Foster explores the new tanuki narratives that appeared after the incorporation of the biggest indicator of modernity, trains into Japanese cities. The train, with its power to shorten distances was a miraculous aid to humanity, but a burden to wild animals. People who saw the negative effect the trains had on the wildlife, who were already contemplating the effects it had on the people expressed their opinions through tanuki. Foster argues that these newly emerging tales were "a counter-narrative to the hegemonic story of progress and modernity: through the din of industrialization, urbanization, and modern science, tales of tanuki voice a subtle ideological resistance."⁹⁸.

⁹⁸ Foster, "Haunting Modernity: Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan.", 6.

Could Takahata's use of tanuki be considered an ideological resistance too?

Even though the premise is very similar, I think the answer to this question would be negative. I argue that Takahata is not necessarily criticizing modernity itself or the fact that new suburban housing is being constructed in the cities thus it is not an ideological resistance. He instead criticizes the way in which this urbanization was being carried out. Foster also argues that “folklore relating to the tanuki (and other *yōkai*) intersected dynamically with popular cultural concerns, veiled political sentiments, and commercial and artistic interests.”⁹⁹. This perfectly applies to *Pom Poko* as well, since identity crisis, and environmental destruction are illustrated in the movie. When the tanuki try and save up money to buy supplies to survive, one of the tanuki decide to steal from a shrine. But his theft has no use as there is barely any money – just coins – inside the donation box¹⁰⁰. At the start of the movie, the tanuki get into a disagreement, the problem is solved when McDonalds hamburgers are offered to them. Even though the argument is serious, their intense love for an American food product outweighs their intensive to argue for their own opinion. In this segment, the sudden modern craze for Western, especially American goods is criticized through the tanuki. Even though these are not big plot points, the small details make the big picture.

3.5 Background for the Movie

In order to further our discussion on the movie, we must familiarize ourselves with the time period in which *Pom Poko* was written and produced. Takahata lived through quite drastically different eras of Japan. The wealth and prosperity Japan

⁹⁹ Foster, “Haunting Modernity: Tanuki, Trains, and Transformation in Japan.”, 8.

¹⁰⁰ Professor Selçuk Esenbel's comment on the donation box: “That there were very few coins in the Shrine box is a discreet critic of the public's lack of interest in adhering to Shinto traditions and supporting the upkeep of the Shrines.”.

reached in the 1970's and 1980's juxtaposed the poverty and hopelessness of post-war years greatly. The main change we will focus on in this section is the rapid urbanization and industrialization of Japan throughout 20th century and its devastating effects it had on the environment and people.

In the 1950s and 1960s the rural and urban landscapes were changing rapidly. After the devastation of World War II and the atomic bombings, Japan was rebuilt from the ground up. At the heart of the change was modernization, urbanization and industrialization. Harris states that "Production rose rapidly in consumer durable goods such as transistor radios, television sets, and room-size air conditioners and in office machines such as calculators and copying machines."¹⁰¹ Alongside the production of small consumer goods, automobile industry was also booming with the rise of today's renowned Toyota, Nissan and Honda. Consequently, "the automobile industry generated satellite industries for the manufacture of parts, stimulated the need for steel, tires, glass, and electronics, provided off-season employment and income for farm workers"¹⁰². This resulted in great industrial development and opportunities but also caused the depopulation of rural areas and the consequent overpopulation of the cities. In his *The Making of Modern Japan*, Marius Jansen summarizes the move from rural areas to the cities after the war:

During the half century that followed the war, Japan experienced urbanization that moved tens of millions from country to city. At the time of the San Francisco Treaty of Peace some 44 percent of the Japanese population was engaged in agriculture. By 1970 that percentage had fallen to 17, and by the end of the century it was closer to 4. Even among those who remained in the villages, agriculture was often a part-time occupation, its income supplemented by off-season employment in the factories of nearby cities.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Harris, "The Urban and Industrial Transformation of Japan", 65.

¹⁰² Jansen, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 738.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

This rapid population shift into the cities and the urgent need for suburban housing in cities is also expressed in the movie. Two tanuki enter the construction builder's hut shapeshifted into little child ghosts. The workers are absolutely terrified of what they see and immediately leave work. The tanuki celebrate this victory yet they are devastated when they see new workers arriving to the construction site. They are shocked at the speed in which new people showed up to work even though the site is thought to be haunted by many. The workers' immediate arrival to the construction site shows the great number of people who were moving to the big city to find job opportunities. The speed in which the construction was continued after the unnerving incident also shows how humans viewed the construction of suburban housing as a strictly urgent matter.

The steady rise of urban population resulted in the construction of housing which constitutes the plot of the movie. When the tanuki constantly attack and scare the humans, many are wary of the construction site, and they believe it may be haunted. Yet, the TV reporter announces that the construction must continue because of the sheer number of people moving to the city, and housing them is a huge priority. The rise of city populations and urbanization brought upon many housing projects to accommodate the rapidly rising number of urban dwellers but also other development and infrastructure projects in the cityscape. These large-scale projects such as dam projects, airplane, railway constructions and more were the start of environmental problems.

After the ambitious and rapid urban developments picked up steam, pollution levels reached concerning heights and caused sickness amongst adults and children. Knight gives examples of the diseases that have affected people greatly:

The cases of severe industrial pollution in the 1950s and 1960s (which became known as the 'big four') were the two incidents of Minamata 'disease'

of the late 1950s and 1960s, when chemical waste containing mercury was discharged into Minamata Bay from a fertiliser factory; Yokkaichi asthma, caused by sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide emissions from the petrochemical industry; and *Itai-itai* 'disease' of the 1960s, when chemical waste containing cadmium and other heavy metals was discharged into a river.¹⁰⁴

Environmental movements organized by citizens were key in dealing with these illnesses caused by industrial pollution. Schreurs state that later on, “the Japanese government established an elaborate air pollution monitoring system that helped to keep citizens informed and provided incentives for industry to invest in pollution control.”¹⁰⁵ Even though these industrial projects have undoubtedly aided Japan’s rise to a global power immensely, the effects they had on the environment and Japanese people were severe. Understandably so, artists such as Takahata chose to cover these severe negative effects in their movies.

3.6 Why tanuki?

This section aims to answer to question as to why tanuki were chosen as the main characters of the movie. Even if we strip away the tanuki’s yōkai status, and their supernatural powers from the story, the movie’s environmental message is clear as there is a clear criticism on the destruction of animal habitats during the urbanization of cities. However, what makes the story so special is the fact that these raccoon dogs are a part of centuries long folklore that is native to Japan. As we have discussed in the previous sections, there are countless tanuki narratives and artwork from every age. I argue that tanuki were chose to reflect the problems of contemporary society because of their shapeshifting lore, and cuteness.

¹⁰⁴ Knight, “The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan.” 354.

¹⁰⁵ Schreurs, *Environmental Politics in Japan, Germany, and the United States*, 16.

The shapeshifting magic of tanuki is not just tied to one body in the movie. Tanuki possess the ability to transform and morph the landscape, even creating sounds as an illusion. This ability is also heavily utilized by the tanuki in *Pom Poko*. Whilst their folklore counterparts used this ability to be mischievous and have fun, the transformation of the landscape in *Pom Poko* is rather serious. Towards the end of the movie, they transform the barren landscape into its former glory as a last resort to convince humans. During this transformation, they also include people and animals who have long passed. Both tanuki themselves and humans get emotional upon seeing the lush forests, rice paddies, traditional homes and of course, their loved ones. This scene which invokes feelings of nostalgia and perhaps, regret for the human audience utilizes the ability of yōkai to transform the environment around them. Humans also have transformed the environment, albeit in such a way that it has harmed nature. This rather beautiful transformation carried out by the tanuki creates a contrast to the destructive one by the humans.

In the movie, the kitsune have already integrated in human society. They work primarily in nightlife and use their shapeshifting powers to their advantage. Unlike the tanuki we get familiar with during the movie, the foxes are much more money driven and don't seem to be too disturbed about the state of affairs. The foxes in the movie create a foil to the earnest, sincere and comical tanuki as they have accepted their assimilation alongside big business owners and capitalists.

At the end of the movie, tanuki themselves have to shapeshift into humans to survive. These scenes showing tanuki businessmen drinking energy drinks, rushing to work, using the train and working in different fields feel comical yet they are a representation of the immense speed Japan has urbanized. Whilst the tanuki represent the general public who may feel nostalgia towards the past and compassion

for nature, foxes have adopted the role of opportunists going after money no matter what.

Tanuki's cuteness is also one of these reasons why they were chosen as the main yōkai in the movie. Komatsu gives the cuteness of Japanese yōkai as one of the reasons as to why yōkai have flourished the way they did.¹⁰⁶ *Pom Poko* was one of my favorite movies as a child because I found them to be cute, similar to Totoro from *My Neighbor Totoro* another Ghibli movie with a friendly forest spirit. The cuteness allows for adults and children alike to sympathize and connect with the characters easily. With the cute image, they separate from their folktale counterparts which are sometimes violent. Foster's statement on the topic of yōkai becoming family friendly, adorable characters:

As advertising icons, tanuki and kappa are cute and cuddly, akin to commercial characters such as Sanrio's Kero Kero Keroppi or most famously, Hello Kitty. The mascot-ified tanuki and kappa are still indexable as traditional yōkai, but as representatives for credit card company they presumably are no longer associated with causing mischief or drowning children!¹⁰⁷

Unless they are in horror media today, the yōkai in popular Japanese culture have become more advertiser friendly and commercially viable. Both product and media consumers tend to gravitate towards cuter figures appealing to all ages. All sorts of yōkai, no matter the spooky folklore tales behind them have been made cuter and sanitized for the modern audience and of course the more popular certain yōkai are, the more depictions of them are in media.

I argue that Takahata has benefited from the already adorable visual and literary depictions of tanuki as using adorable characters aided in creating stronger sympathy and love for the characters. Would the movie achieve the same success

¹⁰⁶ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yōkai Culture: Monsters Ghosts and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 6-7.

¹⁰⁷ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 19.

and receive the same adoration if the main characters were *mukade* (“centipede”) yōkai? Undoubtedly so, the choice of an already lovable, and plump animal was deliberate. In her “The Nature Conservation Moment in Post-War Japan” Catherine Knight argues that several environmental disasters that have affected Japan were argued against because of the effects they had on humans. She states that: “Even when there is a high level of concern about a development project with significant environmental impacts...environmental opposition tends to be based not on wider ecological premises, but specific impacts, such as the extinction of one species within a habitat”¹⁰⁸. One example Knight gives is of “the campaign against the construction of a golf course on the southern Amami Islands of Japan”¹⁰⁹ which made the endangered Amami black rabbit its focus. Knight argues that “In employing this strategy, the organisation was able to garner strong public support for conservation efforts and was ultimately successful: the Ministry of Culture subsequently put a halt to development plans.”¹¹⁰. Thanks to the cuteness of the Amami black rabbit, all the other animals that were under the risk of endangerment had a fighting chance. Since people tend to gravitate towards protecting animals with an adorable appearance, the choice of tanuki in the movie proves to be effective in conveying an environmentalist message whilst using a folkloric background. However, it is important to add that the tanuki in the movie are not portrayed to be just adorable. Some of them, like Gonta are aggressive and even murderous. I would argue that their cuteness and status as adorable tricksters with a friendly, plump look in the public imagination was utilized, especially for a younger audience but the

¹⁰⁸ Knight, “The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan.” 352-353.

¹⁰⁹ Knight, “The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan.” 353.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

scenes including violence and rather realistic descriptions of tanuki were also included to emphasize the tragedy that was happening to the tanuki.

I would argue that the most important reason as to why tanuki were chosen as the main characters of the movie is the fact that they are true creatures of borderlands. The concept of borderlands is important on the topic of yōkai and have been covered by many yōkai scholars. As we have covered in the first chapter, even the very definition of yōkai is an area of uncertainty. Are they monsters with a physical manifestation or not? Even this simple trait varies from yōkai to yōkai. Komatsu Kazuhiko has a whole chapter dedicated to the borderlands and the academic studies surrounding borderlands in his book, *An introduction to Yōkai culture: monsters, ghosts, and outsiders in Japanese history*. They occupy a special space between humans and animals, and villages and wilderness. This blurry inhabitation of yōkai is extra pronounced within tanuki myths. The tanuki is a creature one can see in real life, yet its mischievous endeavors are a mystery. It lives close to human settlements, eats human food much like raccoons, yet when it disappears into its own animal world in the wilderness it becomes a peculiar and curious creature that brings about whispers on its tricks, and pranks in the shadows. In his yōkai codex, Foster places the tanuki in the “Countryside” section, he explains that the yōkai in this section “might appear by a shrine or small shelter in a lonely forest, but they also might come right down to a farmhouse or field or a bridge in town.”¹¹¹ These creatures that exist in between the real world and the supernatural provide artists to reflect the dualities of human identity in a modernized world. Perhaps most prominent in the Meiji era where modernization efforts started at full steam, dualities became the norm. People had Western style houses built with a

¹¹¹ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 172.

specific traditional Japanese style room. They wore Japanese clothes in their daily lives yet strictly chose Western clothes for work. The urbanization has also pushed people to live their lives in dualities. The big city housed a great number of people, but most people lived alone, separate lives from the masses. Unlike close knitted communities of the past, the many faces one saw on the daily commute, and streets were just strangers leading completely unknown lives. This uncertainty and duality of the modern age has allowed for yōkai such as tanuki to flourish as icons representing a dual nature.

To conclude, yōkai in the movie are used as reflections of Japanese society in the movie. This is first and foremost achieved with the shapeshifting quality of the tanuki yōkai that showcase the rapidly shifting culture and landscape of Japan. The young tanuki forgetting their own cultural practices of shapeshifting also echo a dent in the way Japanese people have come to view traditional customs and practices such as shrine going. The tanuki are not only reflections but also reminders of the past and the culture. It is important to note that the yōkai parade organized by the tanuki movie end up in failure. As we have discussed, this failure stems from the fact that people have lost touch with their old beliefs.

Above all, *Pom Poko* serves as a reminder of the connection to nature that already exists in Japanese culture. With the movie, they go beyond their status as icons of traditional, rural and nostalgic Japan and become a friendly face for Japanese children and adults to be considerate of native animals and culture. Perhaps these sentiments in *Pom Poko* have contributed to the yōkai boom we are experiencing right now. The movie encourages the audience to think of animals that are native to Japan, their survival and the actions of humans.

CHAPTER 4

PRINCESS MONONOKE AND THE AIM OF COEXISTENCE

A touching tale, striking in its criticism of modernity's careless destruction of nature, Studio Ghibli's 1997 animated film *Mononoke Hime* ("Princess Mononoke") has become a cultural phenomenon¹¹² and an environmentalist classic in Japan. Hayao Miyazaki, who has worked on many other beloved animated films such as the highly acclaimed *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) and *Spirited Away* (2001) is the screenwriter and director of the movie. The film is set in the Muromachi period (1336-1573) which makes the movie a historical fantasy. *Princess Mononoke* has been acclaimed as an environmentalist movie that does not alleviate the solemnity of environmental destruction. It is similar to *Pom Poko* in its criticism of careless modernization and destruction of nature but takes a considerably less comical approach. The beautiful landscapes featuring brightly colored lush trees, dreamy mountains and rivers are juxtaposed by the rotting flesh of a cursed forest god, a giant boar, in the very first scene of the movie.

Princess Mononoke is special in the sense that it illustrates the conflicts between humans and supernatural forces (who are folkloric figures in the movie) on an equal caliber. We are accustomed to seeing distinct antagonists in movies with an environmentalist message, especially in children's media. Usually the humans, driven by their greed ruin nature and the habitats of animals by polluting and destroying forests, and oceans. *The Lorax* (2012), an adaption of Dr. Seuss's book of the same name is a popular animated movie that follows a similar premise. *Princess*

¹¹² Napier, "The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke." 177.

Mononoke also openly features human characters who take part in destroying the environment, however there is no clear antagonist of the movie. In *Miyazakiworld*, Susan Napier states that “Miyazaki wanted to give equal agency to human, natural, and supernatural forces.”¹¹³ She adds:

The director treats both humans and nature evenhandedly in the movie. The film is not simply an environmentalist paean that blames humanity and suggests that a return to nature is a simple and easy solution. Instead, the movie presents a radical vision of hybridity and interdependence between natural, supernatural, and human that only the animated medium with its transformative possibilities could express.¹¹⁴

I share Napier’s opinion on Miyazaki’s emphasis on coexistence within nature. The aim of the movie is not rejecting modernity and only embracing traditions, but being considerate of the environment and culture as the world changes and evolves. What is special about *Princess Mononoke* is this desired coexistence. In the movie, the desired coexistence is between humans the supernatural, and nature. The supernatural characters in the movie, the *yōkai* are synonymous with nature itself. Moro, a forest spirit in the shape of a giant white wolf states in an agitated voice: “The trees cry out as they die, but you cannot hear them. I listen to the forest’s pain and feel the ache of the bullet in my chest...”¹¹⁵ The reason Moro got wounded by Lady Eboshi in the first place was her constant attempts to protect the forest from invaders.

My aim in this chapter is to highlight the importance of Japanese folkloric monsters, *yōkai*, their function and utilization in the story. Miyazaki uses *yōkai* not to criticize modernization, but rather the careless way in which society has been involved in selfish destruction of nature and assimilation of culture in pursuit of modernity. I argue that Miyazaki chose to revolve the story around *yōkai* primarily

¹¹³ Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke.” 181.

¹¹⁴ Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke.” 185.

¹¹⁵ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, Studio Ghibli, 1:20:00.

because of the cultural significance and nature of yōkai. Similar to *Pom Poko*, heavily featuring figures from Japanese folklore invokes nostalgic feelings in the audience and makes a statement on the assimilation of the culture the (Japanese) audience feels is a part of the ancient past. By showing the literal assimilation and extermination of yōkai in the movie, the movie makes a point of the loss of identity, and the process of being alienated from one's own culture. Because Miyazaki portrays the ancient culture to be interconnected with nature. Miyazaki gives a voice to the nonhuman Other, creating a collaboration between folklore itself and humans within the movie to highlight an important point crucial to Shinto belief itself: coexistence. The curse that affects both the humans and spirits in the movie also reflect anxieties stemming from environmental destruction and cultural uncertainty that was apparent in the early Heisei years. *Yōkai*, which are creatures of borderlands reflect the uncertainty of the era itself and serve as the perfect agent to highlight the companionship of nature and Japanese folklore.

We have discussed in Chapter 1 how yōkai came to be a rather distinct culture in Japanese society compared to approaches to monsters in other cultures. This movie is an outstanding example of the culturally, and historically rich, unique yōkai culture Japan has developed throughout the centuries. It is entirely possible to understand the movie's environmentalist message that criticizes the destruction of forests and habitats without being informed of Japanese folklore. The forest spirits and gods appear to be large animals who talk, very similar to fables the Western audience are accustomed to. However, understanding who these forest spirits are in the movie and why they were used creates a richer and deeper understanding of the movie, one that recognizes the criticism of cultural loss within modernization. The

culture that is being assimilated is also one that recognizes the non-human agents in our life, which is essential to coexistence.

The story follows Ashitaka, a young Emishi prince. A cursed boar god, with worm-like black liquid oozing from him, rots and destroys everything in its way as it enters Ashitaka's village located in a breathtakingly beautiful landscape settled between mountains covered in lush trees. As the prince, Ashitaka bravely protects his people, but gets in contact with the foul black liquid as he does so. He succeeds in killing the boar, but his right forearm gets infected. After Ashitaka's blow, what's left of the boar god's body are bones and a small piece of iron, which came from a rifle. Doomed to die with this terrible curse on his arm, Ashitaka travels West to find a cure. There, he meets the girl on the title of the movie, Princess Mononoke, whose name is San. San has been raised by a mountain dog/wolf kami called Moro, and she feels nothing but hatred and disgust towards humans. With her pelt, dagger and bloody mouth, San creates a direct contrast to the strong but gentle village boy Ashitaka. The young prince helps two workers who were injured by San to get back to their home, a newly emerging town called Tatara ("Iron Town"). Iron Town is led by Lady Eboshi, an enigmatic leader who has been bringing every part of society together including former prostitutes and people suffering from leprosy to build a strong town that can stand on its own against attacks both from *kami* of the forest and other humans who carry the same expansionist plans they do. As charismatic as Lady Eboshi is, and apparently director Miyazaki's favorite character in the whole movie¹¹⁶, she has vowed to destroy the forest gods and the forest itself, blinded by greed. Iron Town produces iron and rifles which gives them superiority over others who do not have this technology. In the movie, Lady Eboshi is seen leading a

¹¹⁶ Napier, "The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke." 183.

defense against the samurai of Lord Asano, who is after her iron. Yet, Lady Eboshi is not satisfied with her prospering town strong enough to defend itself from enemies. She goes after the forest spirits to claim ownership of the land. Consequently, the forest spirits that have been shot by the rifles, succumb to their hatred, turn into demons and spew out black liquid that rots everything. Above all, Jigo, a money hungry monk and the violent huntsmen accompanying him are after the head of the Shishigami, which is called the “forest spirit” in the English subtitled version. The emperor wants the forest spirit’s head because it is believed to be the key to eternal youth and healing. Okkoto, the leader of the boar gods, who is enraged by Lady Eboshi’s constant aggression, attacks Iron Town alongside the boar gods and San. Eboshi and Jigo’s joint attack which involves grenades kill a great number of boars, but also some Iron Town residents. They succeed in entering the divine forest, and Lady Eboshi shoots Shishigami as it is transforming, resulting in death, rot and ruin in the forest. Only when San retrieves the head back to the Nightwalker, the transformed version of Shishigami, the forest blooms and flourishes. San cannot forgive humanity, but Ashitaka chooses to help Iron Town since they suffered losses during their battles with the forest spirits and the samurai of Lord Asano.

4.1 The modernization critique

It is important to note that even though the movie is set in the Muromachi period, and Lady Eboshi’s actions reflect Meiji era sentiments, the movie’s criticism of modernization efforts is quite contemporary. We have talked about some environmentalist crisis that have affected Japan in the 20th century such as the “Ashio copper mine effluent, which poisoned rivers and threatened the livelihood of

hundreds of thousands of farm families”¹¹⁷ in Chapter 2. Similar to *Pom Poko*, *Princess Mononoke* also criticizes the problems that arise with urbanization such as deforestation, destroying animal habitats and the selfish approach humans have donned towards animals and nature in 1980s and 1990s.

Similar to Takahata, what Miyazaki is criticizing is not modernization and industrialization itself but rather the careless way in which it has been carried out in Japan that has caused pollution, diseases and the loss of animal habitats. The movie does not call for a complete halt of industrialization and urbanization, in fact it even deems it necessary for humans with the case of Iron Town. At first glance, Iron Town, its residents and of course its leader lady Eboshi seems to be the root of all evil in the story as they have caused the hatred to grow inside the gods. However, Lady Eboshi’s genuine care and support of her residents in Iron Town adds another layer to the story of human characters in *Princess Mononoke*. Lady Eboshi’s stern and ambitious efforts to rapidly modernize her small town in the face of threats evokes the image of Meiji leaders. Even though Japan was no small town when the Edo period of isolation ended in 1850’s with the arrival of black ships of an American fleet, it was no doubt under the threat of bigger world powers. At that point Japan did not possess modern rifles and was left behind on certain technologies that gave the West advantage over her. This was the reason why Meiji reforms were so rapid, extensive and substantial. They essentially did not have any choice, much like Lady Eboshi who was constantly under the threat of bigger towns and supernatural creatures. This stressful environment pushed her to be as overly ambitious and greedy in the protection of her people.

¹¹⁷ Marius, *The Making of Modern Japan*, 455.

The main human trait criticized in the movie is selfishness and greed which has caused great environmental damage. Lady Eboshi is adored and celebrated by the residents of Iron Town in the movie. She has gathered women out of brothels and made them work in the production of rifles. The women, who work the bellows in the movie have agency and power in the society they have constructed in Iron Town. They work, make their own money and their own decisions. Lady Eboshi has also made people with leprosy a crucial part of society in Iron Town; they are not feared of but rather uplifted. San, and her wolf-god brothers attack Iron Town residents on the mountains and some of them end up falling down to their death. Two of these men however fall near a river and survive. Ashitaka, comes across them and helps them. When Ashitaka is welcomed back into Iron Town, Lady Eboshi shows him her secret area inside Iron Town. A quaint little shack surrounded by plants houses numerous people with leprosy. They have been given the task of creating rifles for the people of Iron Town to use against the gods. Ashitaka is bewildered by this production of rifles and says: “How much more hatred and pain do you think we need?” and his right arm, which has been cursed by Nago, the boar god Lady Eboshi killed reacts to her cruel plan and draws a sword on its own. The arm, which is filled with the curse of an angered kami, acting on its own shows the strong hatred of the kami have towards Lady Eboshi. Lying down in a blanket, his face covered with bandages, one of the people suffering from leprosy reply to Ashitaka’s haste action:

Young man, like you, I know what rage feels like...and grief and helplessness. But you must not take your revenge on Lady Eboshi. She is the only one who saw us as human beings. We are lepers. The world hates and fears us, but she took us in and washed our rotting flesh and bandaged us. Life is suffering. It is hard. The world is cursed, but still you find reasons to keep living.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 40:43-41:32.

They are the main engineers behind the rifles, and they feel grateful for her. Lady Eboshi's caring nature and leadership qualities are what makes her a charismatic character. As level-headed as she is, her desire for power and riches is her worst quality. Lady Eboshi calls the rifles: "the perfect thing for ruling the world"¹¹⁹. Even though her intentions were pure at first, she has been blinded by her own greed. She shoots at the ape tribe in the movie who are planting trees in place of the ones Iron Town residents destroyed. She does not realize the forest is not an endless source of resources she can abuse and if she continues, she will break the balance of everything. On her desire to kill the Shishigami, the forest spirit, she states:

Without the ancient god, the animals here would be nothing but dumb beasts once more. When the forest has been cleared and the wolves wiped out, this desolate land will be the richest land in the world, and Princess Mononoke will become human.¹²⁰

The desire to protect one's community from dangers and live a prosperous life is natural for many people. Where Lady Eboshi diverts from this is her desire to destroy all of the nonhumans she cannot use for her gain in the ecosystem. There are regular ox living in Iron Town because they are useful for work. This notion that if something is not useful for profit, then it is worthless is what plagues Lady Eboshi's philosophy, and many people who disregard culture, animals and nature. Lady Eboshi's later thirst for destruction is an exaggerated portrayal of contemporary destruction of nature in the name of profit.

One of the most important examples of this would be of Isahaya Bay, which refers to a project started in 1986 to close off the bay; the project "involved the building of a seven kilometre-long dike intended to convert the tideland flats in Isahaya Bay into farmland and freshwater reservoirs for flood control."¹²¹ Isahaya

¹¹⁹ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 42:50.

¹²⁰ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 41:48-42:23.

¹²¹ Knight, "The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan." 354.

Bay is located within the Ariake Sea of Nagasaki Prefecture, south-west of Japan. This project threatened the lives of migrant birds and many species of fish. The project received passionate criticism from the fishing industry and environmentalists. Closing off the bay would result in the death of thousands of animals that depended on Isahaya Bay for their lives. In an article published in *The Japan Times*, it is reported that “In April [of 1997], the agricultural ministry erected seawalls that cut off Isahaya Bay from the ocean, leaving the animal life there to die a slow death and prompting a nationwide protest.”¹²² Even though fishermen and environmentalists protested against the tragic situation of the local wildlife for years, there was no response from the government. However, when edible *nori* (“seaweed”) which “constitutes 40 per cent of all the *nori* consumed in Japan”¹²³ had a poor harvest because of the sluice gates in the bay, both the public and government responded swiftly. In her article “The Nature Conversation Movement in Post-War Japan”, Catherine Knight states that:

The lack of supply and possible price increases of *nori* caused concern among government officials who had remained unmoved by the previous environmental opposition to the project: questions were tabled in parliament, newspapers gave the issue extensive coverage, and opposition party politicians joined in the protests of the *nori* harvesters. Finally, in 2002, in response to the widespread concern, the sluice gates were opened for the first time since their closure in 1997.¹²⁴

The Isahaya Bay project was actively harming wildlife but only when profit and human benefits were endangered did many react for the first time. However, the damage was already done. The damage to the wildlife and stunning nature of the area were reported by many, such as wildlife photographer who has photographed birds in Isahaya Bay, John Wright. He states in 2012:

¹²² *Japan Times*, “...Isahaya Bay protestors swing”.

¹²³ Knight, “The Nature Conservation Movement in Post-War Japan.” 355.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

The resulting environmental impact on marine and bird life has been devastating not only in Isahaya Bay but also in the greater Ariake Sea region... it was an incredibly beautiful natural coastal wetland supporting hundreds of different species of birds that numbered in the hundreds of thousands, especially in winter. The Isahaya Bay (or perhaps more appropriately, Chosei Lake) I know is but a shadow of its former self.¹²⁵

I argue that this desire for profit in the expense of the lives we share our world with drove Miyazaki to create this story. In the movie, Miyazaki chooses to represent the struggles of the animals and the unfair way in which they are being treated through kami and yōkai because of the animist worldview of Shinto. We have established that Shinto's animist qualities resulted in the creation of a unique relationship between the people of Japan and parts of nature. Yet Shinto was not necessarily environmentalist in the modern sense in the past. The animist quality of the religion created a sense of respect for nature and animals, however an effort for conservation of nature within Shinto was not present until recent times. Writing in 2002, Mark Teewuen and Bernhard Scheid argue that:

After WWII, more than one generation of Shintoists have sought to give new meaning to kami worship by redefining Shinto. We may be witnessing yet another radical shift in the term's meaning in the recently popular definition of Shinto as an ecological religion, or as a form of polytheistic nature worship of the same type as the religions of various indigenous peoples around the globe.¹²⁶

Miyazaki uses Shinto elements such as kami to make his environmentalist point in the movie. The timeframe of an ecological focus in Shinto aligns with Miyazaki's creation of *Princess Mononoke*. This could an example of the radical shift of thinking Shinto as an ecological religion and perhaps movies like *Princess Mononoke* have even contributed to this understanding worldwide. I argue that Miyazaki chose to represent forest spirits of Shinto as environmentalist icons in the

¹²⁵ Wright, "Isahaya Bay in Winter".

¹²⁶ Teeuwen, and Scheid, "Tracing Shinto in the History of Kami Worship: Editors' Introduction." 206.

movie because of the selfishness of humans who have come to think of the world as a human's world and nothing else. By connecting Shinto figures to environmentalist ideologies, he reminds people the animist quality of Shinto that prompted people to think of the world as a world of kami, humans, and animals.

In the story, humans are portrayed to break this respect for nature. I would like to give the example of the death of the Shishigami as this scene and the movie behind it perfectly encapsulate the role of yōkai in the story. The last climactic scene in the movie, Lady Eboshi and the greedy monk Jigo enter the mystical forest in which forest spirits reside. They do this by tricking Ottoko, the blind boar god which is the leader of other boar gods. The hunters wear the skin of the boars they have killed to trick Ottoko who can't see the uncanny and disturbing scene but can only smell his fellow boars. By following his trail, they reach the forest. We know that Lady Eboshi has killed and wants to kill forest spirits because they get in the way of her plans. For example, Nago, the very first forest god we see in the movie is shown to kill Lady Eboshi's people who come close to the mountains in a flashback. However, the Shishigami never attacks or even comes close to Lady Eboshi nor Jigo. The reason they are after the spirit is its head. The legend is that the person who owns the head of the deer god would gain immortality, and in this story this person who desires the head and immortality is the emperor. He offers riches for those who will come forth with this impossible bounty. Lady Eboshi succeeds in killing and beheading the deer god. This action of killing and taking the head is disturbing in two levels. One being the obvious one: an animal gets killed and used for profit. The other being the folkloric aspect. The one that was killed is a forest spirit. Instead of respecting its boundaries, Eboshi goes a step further to establish herself and the other humans as the owners of the forest. She defies nature and culture with this act. What

is interesting is that Lady Eboshi does not even believe that taking the head of Shishigami will grant eternal life, as she mocks Jigo who is after the head for the emperor. She is after destruction and complete ownership. Instead of just taking what they need, it has become a race for profit and endless taking and never giving.

Princess Mononoke is not a cry for help to return to the old ways as Miyazaki “subverts many Japanese traditions in *Princess Mononoke*”¹²⁷ such as “the sacredness of the emperor, the nobility of the samurai”¹²⁸. Even though the emperor holds an important place in Shinto religion, the person who seeks the head of the forest spirit being the emperor also adds a layer of criticism. Napier states:

...he [Hayao Miyazaki] hoped to create a work that would comment on Japan’s emptiness and confusion in the postbubble era. A country that had worshiped materialism and success seemed now to be floundering in a spiritual vacuum, reflected in the increasing use among contemporary Japanese of the word *kyomu*: emptiness.¹²⁹

I believe that Miyazaki achieved the reflection of this “spiritual vacuum” through the use of *yōkai* in the movie. Since *yōkai* are an integral part of Japanese folklore, Miyazaki makes a statement about rapid urbanization and modernization in contemporary society and how it has placed Japanese society further from its roots. In his “Kunio Yanagita: An Interpretive Study” Kōichi Mori writes: “Yanagita [Kunio] was seeking a way of overcoming the evils that followed in the wake of a modernization program that ignored the very people on whom its success depended.”¹³⁰. As we have discussed in Chapter 1, Kunio Yanagita’s interest in folklore originated from an effort to preserve the customs, traditions, tales, and culture of ordinary people. He emphasized the importance of collecting and

¹²⁷ Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in *Princess Mononoke*.” 183.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in *Princess Mononoke*.” 181.

¹³⁰ Mori, “Kunio Yanagita: An Interpretive Study.” 108.

documenting folklore to illustrate the importance of Japanese people and their culture.

Miyazaki on the other hand, is not human-centered nor nature centered in his criticism. He wants to highlight the fact that culturally Japan's folklore already features figures that were already closely associated with nature, the kami, because he cares for the culture and the environment both. He reinterprets kami worship in an environmentalist way to fight modern day problems such as a loss of cultural elements. He blames the disconnect from native culture and roots in contemporary Japan for environmental destruction and an endless desire for profit.

4.2 The setting

The setting and visuals of the movie play an important role in the movie as nature is its own character. One of the most striking parts of *Princess Mononoke* is its visual appeal that comes from the scenes featuring natural landscapes. Ashitaka's quaint Emishi village features vibrant and beautiful shades of green and a clear blue sky. The divine forest, where Shishigami, the deer god resides primarily features deep, jewel toned greens. Moss covered islets, crystal clear waters, trees that almost reach the sky, and colorful dragonflies that sparkle are the main characteristics of this magical place. The first shot of Iron Town in the movie creates a great contrast to the previous scene in which Ashitaka walks through the mystical forest. There is black smog rising from the town and it is illustrated within the hues of gray and brown and there is no greenery to be seen. It is encircled by a wooden palisade with dangerously sharp edges. The only animals in the town are the ox, which are constantly tied down. Even though the people inside the town are quite joyous, the grim and bleak design of the town itself resembles modern day cities engaged in rapid urbanization

without care for animals and nature and has become dull and gray versions of their once beautiful past. As Lady Eboshi shoots the forest spirit, everything starts to rot. All the beautiful trees, vivid flowers turn sickly gray.

4.3 Terms related to yōkai and translation problems

The aim of this section is to provide an understanding of some of the other words that were used to describe yōkai and classes of it such as *kami* (“god”), and *mononoke* (“a sense of spookiness and mystery”)¹³¹ throughout the ages. As to be expected, the English subtitled version of *Princess Mononoke* heavily features words related to monsters in the English language. Words like “demon”, “curse”, and “spirit” are abundantly used however the original meaning of these words in Japanese unfortunately get lost in translation. For example, a *tatarigami* (“cursed god”) is translated as “some kind of demon” in the English subtitle version. As we have discussed in Chapter 1, the word yōkai is hard to translate and refers to different kinds of supernatural Japanese folklore at once and words related to yōkai are ever the same. Since these words have a cultural history behind them, a one-word translation, as convenient as it is, cannot give us the full definition of the word. In order to understand their role in the story, we will look at some of these words in this section.

The words yōkai, kami, and mononoke have different meanings, connotations and histories however they fall under the same area of discussion. In his *An Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and outsiders in Japanese History*, Kazuhiko Komatsu writes:

When discussing such mystical presences in Japan, one should remember the prevalence of an animistic worldview in which the natural world is inhabited

¹³¹ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 14.

by *reikon* (spirits). Known variously as *kami*, *tama*, *rei*, and *mononoke*, these spirits are anthropomorphic and exhibit the full range of human emotions, including delight, anger, sorrow, and pleasure. Their anger brings misfortune to humans, their delight, happiness.¹³²

This description Komatsu gives is not written for *yōkai*, but it fits quite well because of the similarities between them, especially the focus on the animistic worldview. In “scholarly literature in Japan today, *yōkai* has become the umbrella term for an entire panoply of mysterious phenomena and weird creatures.”¹³³, so the spirits and beasts we come across the movie can be included in our discussion of *yōkai* being utilized as criticism.

In *Princess Mononoke*, the *yōkai* are less recognizable by image but rather as concept. In our discussion of *Pom Poko* we covered *yōkai* that have become icons in Japanese popular culture like *tanuki* or *kitsune*, but *Princess Mononoke* is different in this aspect. A *tanuki*, with its round belly, mischievous look, straw hat and drink, has come to have a recognizable image in contemporary Japan. *Kodama* (“tree spirit”), the small, white-colored creatures with an adorable image are not necessarily portrayed often in popular media. Because they do not have a fixed image or behavior pattern, Miyazaki could have creative control over their full characterization. “Toriyama Sekien uses a *kodama* as the opening image in his first catalog of *yōkai*, completed in 1776—making it the first *yōkai* in his famous series. The picture shows an old man and woman who seem to have emerged out of a crooked old pine tree.”¹³⁴ yet in the movie they barely resemble humans at all. There are thousands of them in the mystical forest. As the trees are their mother. They smile, get surprised, turn invisible, and even carry each other on their backs. They do

¹³² Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 15.

¹³³ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 14.

¹³⁴ Foster, *Book of Yōkai*, 117.

not talk but rather accompany Ashitaka and San through their walk in the forest. This is also true for San's wolf mother Moro, who is a *yama inu* ("mountain dog") god, which has been translated as wolf god in the English subtitled versions. There have been depictions of mountain dog gods, however Miyazaki had the chance to give unique characteristics but visually and thematically to these gods.

Throughout the movie, Ashitaka is accompanied by an elk named Yakul. He gets scared of the threats they come across the way, whether it be supernatural or human, yet stays by his owner's side. Yakul is just a regular elk, unlike the other beings in the movie which have taken an animal form, he truly does not possess any supernatural abilities and powers. There is another character who appears to be very similar to Yakul, yet he is the most interesting one and far from a regular animal. It is called Shishigami, the deer god. It has the body of a deer, antlers made out of plants and a rather uncanny, human looking reddish face. It can walk on water, transform into the nightwalker at night, rot and kill beings at will, and cure any ailment. He is the embodiment of mononoke in the movie, a creature of duality and borderlands: It takes and gives life, is natural yet looks odd, concerned with everything and nothing at the same time.

Mononoke, the word in the title of the movie, is perhaps the most important word in our discussion of *Princess Mononoke*. Compared to the other words used to describe supernatural folklore in Japan, mononoke is one of the oldest terms. Just like *yōkai*, *mononoke* is another word difficult to translate. Whilst Susan J. Napier states it "refers to spirit possession"¹³⁵, and Foster defines it as "a sense of spookiness and mystery"¹³⁶. Examining the kanji of the word gives us clues to its

¹³⁵ Napier, "The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke." 189.

¹³⁶ Foster, Book of Yōkai, 14.

meaning. Mono-no-ke (物-の-怪), means *ke* (“mystery”) of *mono* (“thing”). *Mono* is usually translated as a “thing”, but it can also mean “sense” or “matter”. One other, older interpretation for it is “spirit”. *Ke* translates to “something mysterious, suspicious, or troubling”¹³⁷ and could refer to a disease or a curse. This makes *mononoke* a thing of mystery or suspicion or “a sense of spookiness and mystery”¹³⁸ as Foster puts it. The translation Napier chose, which is “spirit possession”¹³⁹, may come from the older origin of the word. As Foster also points, out, in her *A Woman's Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji* Doris G. Bergen interprets mononoke as spirit possession that plagues the women in *The Tale of Genji*, the most famous Japanese literary text of the Heian Period (794-1185), written by Murasaki Shikibu. Bergen argues that the mononoke passages became “esoteric because of its uncertain authorship. What the speech meant was a function of the identity of the speaker, but the speaker’s identity had itself become mysterious. The possessed person had become the other.”¹⁴⁰. The speech of the bodies possessed by mononoke invoked a feeling of uncanny because the speaker could not be identified anymore. This is similar to San, who is the princess of mononoke in the story; even though she has the body of a human her speech resembles her wolf mother and siblings who are forest gods. The content of her speech is also aggressive and threatening towards the humankind. In the movie, she barely speaks to humans and when she faces her enemies like Lady Eboshi, she wears a mask. She has the ability to speak to animals and her demeanor changes when she speaks to them. She is loving and respectful. Moro tells Ashitaka that San

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke.” 189.

¹⁴⁰ Bergen, *A Woman's Weapon: Spirit Possession in The Tale of Genji*, 21-22.

came to be her daughter when she came across her parents in the forest. She adds that her parents were defiling the forest, and when they noticed Moro's presence, they threw away their baby in fear and ran away. Moro raised San as a member of the wolf tribe, tied to nature. Yet, she also recognizes that as a 'human' princess of beasts, she is a being of contradictions. She adds: "Now, my poor, ugly, beautiful daughter is neither human nor wolf."¹⁴¹. This adds to the characterization of mononoke as creatures of borderlands and dualities.

Mononoke is also a collective term that invokes other words such as *tatari* ("curse"), *onryo* ("cursed god"), spirit and possession. The meaning of the word itself highlights the dual place San has found herself in, a gray area of the borderlands where beasts and humans, civilization and wilderness, and life and death meet. She has been raised by her wolf mother Moro who is a forest god. This way, she has learned to despise humans and view herself on par with other gods. However, at the end of the movie Moro dies. San comes to the harsh understanding that she is physically human, yet she decides to still continue her life in the wilderness, and not next to other humans. Yet, she still decides to meet up with Ashitaka from time to time. This makes her an even more mysterious figure, who inhabits both human and otherworldly spaces like *yōkai* do. She is princess of the poor forest gods who have fallen victim to the never-ending greed of humans. The uncertainty, illustrated by San's dual image in the movie is a reflection of post bubble era Japan. The constant drive for modernization and profit suddenly coming to a halt, cultural aspects being forgotten whilst environmental crisis occur has inspired Miyazaki to delve into the realm of mononoke.

¹⁴¹ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 1:21:00.

Why was the word “mononoke” chosen as a title to San and not a more contemporary word like yōkai? I argue that Miyazaki chose the word mononoke because unlike yōkai, a rather contemporary word that invokes nostalgia towards a recent past, mononoke invokes ancient feelings of terror and uncertainty. Initially, the movie was not planned to be called *Princess Mononoke*, but rather “*The Tale of Ashitaka* (Ashitaka no sekki)”¹⁴². Napier argues that “Ashitaka’s gentleness, perseverance, and tolerance suggest an idealized version of the romantic young Miyazaki”¹⁴³, perhaps explaining the reason why Miyazaki was so inclined to include Ashitaka in the title, and not San, who is the princess of the supernatural, the mysterious, the Other.

Ashitaka, who is the main character of the movie and one of the few ‘good’ human characters, and his Emishi roots are important to our discussion. I have stated that Miyazaki’s use of kami and his subsequent utilization of them as environmentalist icons are inspired by an observation in the loss of native Japanese culture. Japan is usually represented as a homogenous country that consists of Yamato people. In his “Multiethnic Japan and the Monoethnic Myth” Stephen Murphy Shigematsu states that: “Japan’s monoethnic myth is believed at all levels of society in Japan, and abroad as well. It is so pervasive that the obvious evidence that falsifies it is often blatantly ignored.”¹⁴⁴. The monoethnic myth refers to the common fallacy of imagining Japan as only being inhabited by Yamato people. However, indigenous people of Japan have always been present in history, and still continue to exist today. One of the examples to these indigenous groups is of the Emishi. Emishi, who are often associated with Ainu people of Northern Japan were forced to

¹⁴² Napier, “The Faces of Others: Boundary Crossing in Princess Mononoke.” 182.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Murphy-Shigematsu, “Multiethnic Japan and the Monoethnic Myth”, 65.

assimilate into the Yamato Japanese society. We have some reports on the Emishi from the past that describe what kind of lives they lived such as a 7th century record from China: “The [Emishi] envoys explained that they came from the ‘land of the Emishi’ in the northeast, that they had no settled villages, and that they foraged and hunted.”¹⁴⁵. 8th century marked a series of wars and battles between the emperor and Emishi people¹⁴⁶, these wars resulted in the defeat of Emishi as they were pushed Northeast of Japan. Miyazaki making the main character of the story an Emishi prince challenges the idea of the monoethnic myth and includes Emishi into the conversation regarding ‘native Japanese culture’. It also paints Emishi people in a positive light as people who deeply respect the kami and nature.

4.4 Kami, yōkai, and tatari

The kami/ yōkai indifference is also apparent in the movie as even though kami are meant to be worshipped and cherished, the Iron Town townsfolk and their leader almost see them as pests meant to be ridden of. It is significant that the forest spirits in the movie are not animals in the movie but are called kami. They invoke fear in the people of Iron town because they have angered them, yet they do not scare Ashitaka because he is accustomed to respecting and even protecting their presence.

In *Princess Mononoke*, we come across multiple kami such as Moro, San’s wolf mother and her children, Shishigami (“deer god”), monkey god. I am choosing to call them kami and not yōkai, even though the distinction is blurry, because they literally carry the title “kami” in their names (Shishigami シシ神, boar god 猪神, *tatarigami* タタリ神, mountain dog/ wolf god 山犬神). Yet, they are despised by

¹⁴⁵ Walker, “The Courtly Age” 28.

¹⁴⁶ Walker, “The Courtly Age” 29.

the residents of Iron Town, would these gods would be perceived as yōkai and not kami? I would argue that despite their names, they look at the gods like yōkai and wish for them to disappear.

Since humans have become so obsessed with modernization, they lose this initial respect and fear they have for kami and consequently, kami themselves change and lose their important status. This is a reflection of Miyazaki's vision of 1990's Japan, when the movie was written and produced. Kami worship or visiting shrines did not cease to exist in the early Heisei era, however its important components such as coexistence with the nature was being threatened by a drive for profit. In the story, Lady Eboshi and the monk want to take the head of the forest spirit and gift it to the emperor, since the emperor believes it will grant him eternal life. We can see this as the emperor himself wanting to become kami even though he would already have a close relation to kami in Shinto religion. Also, the Emishi people who have been driven away into the mountains do not disrespect Nago, the cursed boar god that has attacked their village in the slightest. The wise woman of the village says: "O nameless god of rage and hate, I bow before you. Where you have fallen we will raise a mounds and perform rites. Pass on in peace and bear us no hatred."¹⁴⁷. Ashitaka's peaceful and calm nature is juxtaposed by the greed of the other humans around him who do not respect kami, which interestingly enough, includes the emperor.

Miyazaki illustrates the result of this constant disrespect and abuse of nature to be death, destruction and a *tatari*, curse that stems from hatred. *Tatari* ("curse") is a word featured heavily in the movie as the forest spirits who were shot by Lady Eboshi's rifles and turned to hatred and contempt, covered in a black liquid curse

¹⁴⁷ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 6:59-7:14.

that brings destruction are called tatarigami (“cursed god”). Multiple characters in the world state that the world is a cursed place. The movie starts with the disruption caused by a tatarigami, as it attacks Ashitaka’s peaceful village. Later in the movie we learn that this cursed god was once a forest spirit in the name of Nago. With blood oozing from his mouth, Nago states: “Disgusting little creatures, soon all of you will feel my hate and suffer as I have suffered.”¹⁴⁸ and his flesh melts away in an instant, leaving only the reason for his loathing behind, the iron ball that came from Lady Eboshi’s rifle.

The ape tribe in the movie are also forest gods, and they are at the brink of becoming tatarigami themselves. They have glowing red eyes and fearsome, shadowy bodies. Their faces have become blank and voices monotonous. When Ashitaka, San and her wolf family are alone in the forest, these apes come and demand the wolves hand the body of Ashitaka. They want to eat him: “If we eat the human, we will steal his strength, and we will drive the other humans away.”¹⁴⁹, they say. San is shocked at this request since monkeys do not eat human flesh. They are becoming cursed gods because of their anger. The monkeys say: “We plant trees. Humans tear them up. The forest does not come back. If we kill the humans we will save the forest.”¹⁵⁰. These heart wrenching words are a great illustration of the sense of hopelessness caused by excessive destruction caused by a needless drive for expansion, and riches. The once revered and esteemed kami of the forest are being shot at whilst they try to restore balance to nature.

Kazuhiko Komatsu gives examples to the way tatari was perceived in old Japan, which enriches our understanding of the curse in the movie:

¹⁴⁸ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 7:15-7:24.

¹⁴⁹ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 56:28-56:29.

¹⁵⁰ Miyazaki, *Princess Mononoke*, 56:42-56:51.

A wide range of phenomena were interpreted as tatari. Political enemies slain by government officials were suspected of causing plagues, bad harvests, and wars, as well as mysterious diseases and deaths affecting the officials or their extended families directly. Nor were descriptions of tatari ambiguous reports of illnesses mystically caused by some resentful spirit in the other world. They were characterized as mononoke, the work of vengeful onryo returned from the other world with the intention of possessing or causing illness in specific people or their relatives.¹⁵¹

In the movie *tatarigami* seem alive but they are actually ghosts looking for revenge. They have immense strength, they can run, jump attack and infect others with their curse as black and reddish liquid ooze through their bodies. However, understanding onryo (“vengeful spirit”) as spirits who have passed, and the other world as Komatsu puts it makes us gain a new perspective. The terms tatari or tatarigami are not always necessarily related to onryo. Yet, since the mononoke characters who turn into tatarigami are fueled by their anger and passion for revenge, we could perceive them as already deceased. They become obsessed with trying to take revenge on whoever has done this to them, and the other spirits, beasts, and gods around them. Miyazaki shows that the greed and consequent destruction caused by humans only create more hate, death, and destruction.

4.5 Conclusion

Princess Mononoke is an acclaimed classic that speaks its environmentalist message through Japanese folklore. Miyazaki utilizes the definition and history of *mononoke* and *kami* to reflect the environmental problems which were the result of rapid modernization and urbanization he has perceived in 1990s Japan. The word *mononoke*, also present in the title of the movie, is an older word that invokes spirit

¹⁵¹ Komatsu, *An Introduction to Yokai Culture: Monsters, Ghosts, and Outsiders in Japanese History*, 145-146.

possession. Princess Mononoke, San and her dual position as human and spirit is a reflection of the uncertainties of the era.

Miyazaki reminds Japanese audience of the fact that the pursuit of modernization and urbanization has caused society to lose touch with its roots which are respectful to nature in essence. This is illustrated by the cursed gods in the movie. These gods were once kami, benevolent spirits that were worshipped by humans. As humans got consumed by their greed and started to hurt nature, which are closely related to kami in Shinto, the gods started to turn into *tatarigami*, cursed gods. I believe that Miyazaki's abundant use of Japanese folkloric figures is a part of an environmentalist message that highlights the importance of coexistence with nature on a cultural level.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis is to examine the role of yōkai in modern Japan and how they have been utilized in media with folkloric imagery. It is fascinating to see the abundance and popularity of yōkai and yōkai related media in Japan as many mainstream movies, animated TV series and games have been produced in the last 30 years feature yōkai characters greatly. Even though folk monsters such as vampires thrive in Western horror media, the love traditional monsters, ghosts and specters receive in popular media and culture seem to be unique to Japan. The movies that are covered in this thesis are two popular examples of animated movies that use yōkai imagery and look at the contemporary world through the perspective of yōkai.

Throughout the thesis I have stated that yōkai have been used as reflections of contemporary issues, but it seems that their role in modern Japanese society is even more profound. They are not just reflections of Japanese people and their issues; they also function as a bridge between modern people and their culture. The genuine belief in yōkai shifted in the late 19th century with the influx of western scientific thinking and skepticism, and as the perception of yōkai changed from mysterious and mischievous parts of borderlands to superstition, there were many such as the father of Japanese folklore studies Kunio Yanagita who supported the collection and documentation of these tales to preserve Japanese culture itself. As Japan became more and more modernized in the 20th century, yōkai became nostalgic icons of the past and reminders of the ‘olden days’ which were not even that long ago. This rapid transformation and urbanization of the country was

reflected in newly emerging folktales and were also utilized by creatives express their feelings on the new, modern landscape. Yōkai were used to connect the past and the present, the modern and the traditional.

The objection of Chapter 1 is to establish the necessary framework and background of yōkai and yōkai studies. The chapter contains detailed definitions of yōkai which could be summarized as supernatural beings that are a part of Japanese folklore. The amount of illustrations, stories, and media on yōkai are a testament to their popularity. The examples of different yōkai such as bakeneko and tsukumogami in the chapter to further our understanding of yōkai and what kind of qualities they possess. The aspect of Shinto, the native religion of Japan is also discussed in detail as its Japanese roots and recent history play a big role in the utilization of yōkai by artists.

This unique connection between yōkai and people have been utilized by artists to speak directly to a Japanese audience. The worldwide popularity of Studio Ghibli movies is a testament to the fact that whilst Japanese folklore is heavily utilized in their works, it is not compulsory to enjoy the movies. The stunning nature landscapes, and adorable characters, combined with plots that support universal values such as friendship, community, and respect for the environment, provide for a delightful watching experience to many. However, as we have discussed throughout the thesis, the folklore aspect of the movies brings in a uniquely Japanese perspective. Even tanuki, the main characters of *Pom Poko* are animals native to Japan. The movies contribute to an environmentalist understanding of Shinto and Japanese folklore and guides Japanese people to perceive the modern world through their own culture and even reinterpret some of them to fit the modernized landscape. Even though Buddhism is also a big part of Japanese religious landscape and culture,

the movies do not make it the focus but rather opt to pick native Japanese figures as representatives of traditional culture, which further demonstrates the focus on Japanese values. The environmentalist reimagining of Shinto and yōkai were explored in the chapters “*Pom Poko*” and “*Princess Mononoke* and the Aim of Coexistence”.

Chapter 2 focuses on Isao Takahata’s 1994 animated movie *Pom Poko*. The attributes of real raccoon dogs and their folklore that dates back to centuries ago were given as background information. The use of tanuki yōkai in the movie and their immense struggle to survive in a human dominated world is a criticism of rapidly urbanizing Japan. Since tanuki are both animals and folkloric characters, Takahata narrates both the destruction of animal habitats and the loss of identity within urbanization and careless modernization. The shapeshifting supernatural powers of tanuki were used to mimic the ‘shapeshifting’ of Japan and Japanese people as rapid urbanization caused both the nature and the culture to transform. In the chapter, I gave examples of how urbanization and the consequent population increase in the cities, affected the environment and had negative effects on both animals and humans. The end of the movie, which shows tanuki who are able to shapeshift change into humans and get assimilated in a human society shows the devastating results of carelessness towards animals.

Takahata deliberately chose to convey tanuki in an adorable image to invoke feelings of empathy from the audience. Their anthropomorphic form in which they convey deep emotions and feel frustration, happiness, and anger also aids this aim. Tanuki have never been as murderous or cunning as kitsune or bakeneko in traditional folklore, however altering and adding to the folklore to make tanuki appear lovable to the audience shows us how yōkai have been made into characters

rather than just folkloric figures. The characterization of tanuki allows for the environmentalist message of the movie to permeate even further. The image of tanuki as creatures of borderlands also reflects Heisei era anxieties. Yōkai have always been defined as mysterious beings ‘in-between’, and tanuki is the perfect example to it. They occupy a place between human civilization and wilderness, being immersed in both. Their role in the ‘borderlands’ of human society, their cuteness, and shapeshifting abilities are important aspects of their characterization.

Chapter 3 focused on Hayao Miyazaki’s 1997 animated movie *Princess Mononoke*. This movie, much more serious and somber than *Pom Poko* ever is, illustrates the sadness and rage yōkai feel against humans who constantly disrespect them, and want to destroy them. Within this chapter, important folkloric concepts such as mononoke, kami, and tatari are introduced. I examined the words themselves and their history to further our understanding of the characters in the movie. Similar to the premise in *Pom Poko*, the mysterious, peculiar and shifting persona of the mononoke reflect the changing landscape and identity of modern Japan. The role of Shinto and animistic religion in Japan and its relation to modern environmentalism is also discussed in this chapter.

These two works, despite being from the same studio, produced in a very close time frame have some major differences. Despite being about talking raccoons, *Pom Poko* is more grounded in reality than *Princess Mononoke*. By the time the movie came out, citizens of Tokyo could see well with their own eyes how Tokyo has already transformed into a huge urban city with big development projects. They could also observe, nature and wildlife diminishing slowly. The adorable faces of the tanuki in *Pom Poko* invite the viewer, no matter their age, to take in their surroundings and think of others who are being affected by the drastic changes going

on. It is a tale that emphasizes the importance of community and identity in an urban landscape. *Princess Mononoke* too asks the human viewer to sit back and observe what has happened to those once held in so high esteem; since when did humans start to break the boundaries of nature and disrespect it? Unlike *Pom Poko*, who tells a contemporary tale, *Princess Mononoke*'s story takes place in the Muromachi period, a long time ago. This is precisely why the movie feels bleaker, as if there is no hope left after the forest god has been killed. The death scene of kami also adds to the serious atmosphere. It also functions as a warning, to not be greedy like the monk and fictional emperor in the story, who are after immortality and riches, but to be more like the Emishi Prince Ashitaka and his people, who respect the kami and nature as a part of their culture.

I argue that these movies focus so much on yōkai and their relation to nature because the creators of the movies want to emphasize the fact that nature, folklore, and Japanese identity are closely interlinked. Neither of these movies reject modernity or propose to get rid of cities and urban housing. Instead, they inspire Japan's youth to be mindful of the coexistence of humans, nature and their common history. It seems that even though the narratives themselves go back to ancient times, they will continue to be used and evolved within Japanese culture as long as there is an interest in nature and culture. The goal is not to suggest that humans have always been benevolent and peaceful towards animals and yōkai. Per my examples in Chapter 2, many yōkai narratives include the grisly death of creatures in the hands of humans. In *Pom Poko*, the raccoons talk about their grandparents who have been hunted and made into pelt. *Princess Mononoke* takes place in the Muromachi period in the first place and there is plenty of violence towards animals in the movie. The movies do not claim that the past was perfect, but ask for a better future. Despite

using traditional cultural imagery, they are not tied to the past, but the future. It asks of the presumably younger Japanese audience to think critically about nature in the midst of a modernized Japan, and ultimately the culture too. It is not about claiming that yōkai, and essentially Shinto were always symbols of the peaceful relationship between humans, the supernatural and nature but rather incorporating cultural elements to inspire the younger generations to be more mindful of rather modern concerns such as environmentalism.

Studio Ghibli movies have been successful in their goal of creating an environmentally conscious change in Japan. Totoro no Furusato (The Homeland of Totoro) Foundation and the Totoro Fund is a great example of this positive change. The foundation, which was founded in 1990 with the aim of preserving Sayama Hills, a woodland area that is located 40 km from Tokyo was named after the cute forest spirit character Totoro, from *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988) which was directed by Hayao Miyazaki. The foundation was named in the honor of Totoro¹⁵², whose beautiful, lush green forest home was inspired by Sayama Hills. Hayao Miyazaki himself was also one of the contributors for the founding of the foundation. The foundation acquires land for preservation in the name of Totoro forest and educates people on local wildlife and landscape. It is also possible to donate to the foundation to support the conservation efforts. Studio Ghibli still shows support for the foundation as just recently in 2022, they announced a limited campaign to gift Totoro artwork to the donators of the cause.

We can conclude that these special monsters and creatures that date back to antiquity have acquired a special place in many Japanese people's lives through movies like *Pom Poko* and *Princess Mononoke* that emphasize not just the

¹⁵² Totoro no Furusato Foundation, "Totoro Fund"

importance of folk culture but also the environment. Yōkai bridge together the nostalgic sentiments of the past that were characterized by living peacefully within nature and modern people, who have adapted to living in big cities. Takahata and Miyazaki's environmentally friendly yōkai have made quite the lasting impression on the minds and hearts of many by encouraging the embracement of local values with a critical mind that looks out for others.



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