Storytelling Practices in the New Millennium

A Snake and Dragon Lore Case Study

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Martina Ferrara

s1880624

Supervisor

Professor Ivo Smits

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Abstract

In this new millennium, the world is facing many drastic changes. Technology has revolutionized our lives and we are still trying to grasp the essence of this new age. Many traditions are fading, one of them being the practice of oral storytelling, used in pre modern societies by common folks to amuse themselves and to educate children at the same time. This essay analyzes the transition from traditional storytelling to mass communication, and its implications, through the case study of Japanese snake and dragon lore. The dragon, a well established symbol of Eastern Asian cultures, is the mythical evolution of a snake, considered to belong to the same species. The two animals are treated, however, in very different ways: the first is venerated as a *kami*, a god, while the second, even though object of worship too, is so feared that speaking about it is still considered a taboo. During the last century oral storytelling practice has been fading out, overpowered by the attractiveness of new medias. However, while the traditional practice is slowly dying out, storytelling itself is, I argue, just changed media. This essay will look into modern portraying of snakes and dragons, comparing tradition with new media. Through the example of Oscar winner movie *Spirited Away* (2001) and especially through the character of the white dragon Haku, it will be shown how anime and manga can represent a new way for the transmission and preservation of folk tales and beliefs. The director, Hayao Miyazaki, created the movie with the precise aim of educate children about Japanese values and traditions. Manga and anime can be considered a new form of storytelling, accessible simultaneously by anybody and anywhere in the world, that at the same time crystallizes a set of stories and beliefs.

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Chapter One

Introduction

According to the Oxford Dictionary, storytelling is the activity of telling or writing stories. Such practice has been part of human life since the beginning of times. However, the New Millennium is drastically changing the way in which stories are told, and especially oral storytelling practices are fading away. Through the analysis of a case study from Japan, this essay aim is to come to a better understanding of the shift from old storytelling practices to new ones, and the consequences that may derive from it. The case study chosen comes from Japanese folklore, precisely from folk beliefs regarding snakes and dragons, considered supernatural beings. To what extent and in what ways did Hayao Miyazaki's Oscar winning anime movie *Spirited Away* connect to older traditions of storytelling involving these beliefs? Which of them were taken into account for the development of Haku, a white dragon, character in *Spirited Away*? How were these beliefs and folk tales transmitted in the past? What kind of beliefs and folk tales were they? How are they transmitted nowadays? And in which way are they portrayed? The comparison with modern storytelling will be made through the analysis of the character of Haku in *Spirited Away*.

The essay is divided in three main sections. Chapter two will examine the whole body of sources used in chronological order. What has been already written on snakes and dragons as mythical creatures? What has been written on the practice of storytelling and transmission of folktales in Japan? And how has *Spirited Away* been interpreted since its coming out in 2001? Authors like De Visser, Opler, Mackenzie, Sasaki, Sasaki, and Fox will be used as main sources on snakes and dragons beliefs and tales. De Visser especially, is the scholar that focused more than any other on the figure of the dragon and its mythical origins, that can be traced back to China and India. His work has been studied by all the other sources mentioned, and it is therefore the most important among them. Foster's studies will be also very important to establish the supernatural nature of these animals, and especially to define if they belong to the category of *kami* (gods) or *yōkai* (demons). It is also important to understand if their belonging to one or the other category changed with the changing of storytelling practices. Adams and Eder's essays will provide insights on storytelling practices itself and the mutations of the relationship between people and folktales. What are the reasons and the conditions for such changes? Do Japanese people still believe in them? The role of mass media, anime and manga in pop culture is then analyzed with the help of Tetsuo's,

and Shamoon essays. Finally, then, *Spirited Away* themes, issues and aims are the subjects, from different perspectives (religious, environmental etc…), of Lim and Boyd's articles. This chapter aim is to show the most possible complete body of literature available on each topic, and how they connect to each other.

The third chapter will deal with stories, folktales and beliefs about snakes and dragons. Snakes are attributed with many powers, usually water related. Snakes and dragon are considered as part of the same species, according to the most common beliefs, and they are represented visually in the same way. This chapter purpose is to report, organize and interpret the most relevant snake and dragon stories and beliefs, in the light of Foster's definitions regarding *kami* and *yōkai.* In order to better grasp the essence of these animals and their stories, two tales have been selected as main examples. First is the *Dōjōji legend*, also known as the *Legend of Madam White Snake*, and second *Urashima Taro*. They both are very famous tales, known all over Japan and with plenty of existing local variations. The first one, of Chinese origins, is the perfect example of a negative snake character while the second one is set up in the legendary *ryūgūjō,* an underwater palace belonging to the Dragon King. Furthermore, to challenge Foster's definitions, I will make use of Ueda Akinari's writings and interpretations regarding the *kami* realm. As author of *Tales of Rain and Moonlight*, a famous collection of spooky tales inspired by already existing stories (the tale *A Serpent's Lust* is deliberately inspired by the *Dōjōji legend*). Akinari represents a very relevant voice focused on supernatural issues and *kami* worship. This chapter is a necessary stepping stone towards the understanding of how traditional storytelling have depicted snakes and dragons, both through oral traditions and written sources from Japanese classics.

The fourth chapter will be dedicated to the transition from traditional storytelling practices to the modern one, among which can be found *anime* and *manga*. The first part of the chapter will explain the historical reasons and social changes that led to the decaying of traditional storytelling. Phenomenons like that of modernization had a great impact on Japanese society, and changed radically people's way of living and daily habits, where the conditions for oral transmission, for instance, could be found. These changes, especially in technological development, led to the birth of mass media communication and to the creation of something that Kogawa Tetsuo calls 'mass culture'. One important phenomenon that was generated by the growing popularity of *anime* and *manga* was the 'encyclopedic mode', or the tendency, explained by Deborah Shamoon, that fandoms have towards the creations of databases with properly organized information on their favourite stories. This mode plays an important role in mass culture, because that is the first place in

which the average fan goes to deepen his knowledge on a topic that caught his interest. Furthermore, it is a mode which origins can be traced back into folklore art and especially in Toriyama Sekien's bestiaries. The second, and longest, part of the chapter, will focus the attention on *Spirited Away*. What were the ideas and aims behind the creation of the movie? What values and features of the traditional snake dragon can be found in the character of Haku? Haku is a white dragon with snake like appearances who is, in fact, a river spirit. What does the dragon stand for? What does he embody? Why did Miyazaki chose to give it such an important role in the movie? As an example of conscious modern storytelling, it is important to understand what the Haku represent of the whole set of snakes and dragons beliefs and what features from the tradition were instead edited out.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

2.1 Typology of Snake and Dragon Studies, and the Question of *yōkai*

For centuries, oral storytelling has been one of the main activities with which people amused themselves. Such practice had at least two purposes: to entertain and to teach. Legends, tales and folk beliefs were often characterized by supernatural events or protagonists, and they often had some type of moral. This is also the case for Japanese folklore. This country political and social conditions, which will be further explained later in the essay, enabled scholars to have access to a great number of "first-hand materials".[1] An impressive quantity of folktales and legends have been recorded throughout history, and many of them survived until the last century. Oral storytelling has not disappeared yet from Japan and with it, all the folktales normally passed down generation to generation. Young Japanese people do not have the same lifestyles that their parents, or grandparents had. In which way, therefore, is this tradition kept alive? If the social context that allowed folktales to flourish, survive and evolve disappeared into the midst of the 20th century's modernization process, how can they survive this age?

One way to analyze this process is to select a folklore figure and to look into how it is perceived by people of different ages. Miracle animals such as *kappa*, *tanuki*, and *kitsune* have generated a great amount of scholarly literature, so many researchers, in fact, devoted part of their studies to these creatures. However, very little has been written about snakes, who are complex creatures that, according to folk beliefs, have the ability to evolve into a dragon, one of the characteristic images associated with Eastern Asian countries.

The first serious attempt to academically discuss this magical animal, in the west, was made by Willem De Visser back in 1913. In his book, *Dragon in China and Japan*, De Visser traces the mythological origins of the dragon all the way to India and its *nagas,* snakes believed to live under water bodies (mainly rivers) and in great wealth. The first part of his book is completely devoted to the explanation and analysis of these snake deities (cobras snakes to be more specifics). These supernatural beings can be found in many Hinduist and Buddhist tales. The rest of the book is

[1] Adams, Robert J. "Folktale Telling and Storytellers in Japan." *Asian Folklore Studies* 26, no. 1 (1967). p 106

divided between China and Japan, showing once more the great influence that the first had on the second. The book aims to shed light on the complex mythological origins and influences that contributed to the evolution of this iconic East Asian symbol. The information given by De Visser has been used in almost every later essay written on the topic, enabling future scholars to work from a set of reliable data. For these reasons, De Visser's book will be used many times in the essay as principal source of information on dragons and their connection with snakes.

This is also the case with Morris Edward Opler's *Japanese Folk Belief concerning the Snake* (1945). To De Visser's information, Opler adds a series of statements collected through interviews. Judging from what he reports, snakes in Japan appears to still be a taboo, especially in the countrysides, while urban realities already in the 40s were disregarding them with skepticism. An oddity, as Opler points out, regarding Japanese snake lore, is that, while in the majority of cultures around the world the snake is a symbol of masculinity, in Japan it is associated with bad qualities of the female gender. It looks like snake fear could be a male reaction to female potential power, hinted as a possible direction for further psychology studies. What is very useful of Opler's approach to the subject is the amount of first hand information collected from actual Japanese, from which t is possible to have an idea of how such beliefs were still alive in the first half of the 20th century.

The fact that people living in countrysides and in cities tend to react differently towards folk beliefs is the sign of Japan's modernization process that can be associated with the Westernization and social development of Japan. Modernization, is the global, but not uniform, process of technological and social transformation started during the nineteenth century, in Europe.[2] 1868, the year of the Meiji Revolution, was the starting point of the Modernization process that transformed Japan from an underdeveloped nation to one of the most industrialized societies of our age, some scholars seem to think that it is actually now the most modern society on earth.[3]

Robert J. Adams explains in a more detailed way the historical and social process that created such a great generational gap in Japan. In his essay from 1967, *Folktale Telling and Storytellers in Japan*, Adams claims that, before the beginning of this Westernization process, folktales were a form of entertainment enjoyed at every age, it was a way for families and entire communities, to relieve themselves from boredom during communal occupations or resting moments. For adults, especially men, spooky stories were fun and viewed as rite of passage, while for children the

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2 McCormack, Gavan, and Yoshio Sugimoto. “Introduction: Modernization and Beyond.” Introduction. In *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, edited by Gavan McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto, 1–14. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.1

3 Ibid p.1-2

purpose was an educational. However, after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, and especially after the Education Rescript Act in 1893, things changed.[4] Education became mandatory for boys and, later, for girls too. The time that children had for listening to tales during the evenings now was spent on books.[5] Tales became also standardized and studied, slowly replacing the many existing variants with just a few popular ones.[6] This process was more evident in urban realities rather than countrysides, where lifestyles changed on a different speed level. To give the final blow to storytelling practices (still alive to these days but on the verge of disappearing) came then television. With this new invention, older generations too found a new form of entertainment that became in a short period of time the main one.[7] In conclusion, Adams acknowledges that even though storytellers and people with first-hand memories of such stories, during the 1960s, were still alive, the social occasions in which such tales were told are not there anymore. This is an important historical fact that marks the ending of a form of communication. Storytelling practices may be dying, but are their stories dying too? Since there are still storyteller alive it is possible that they will find another way to transmit their stories, and that is what this essay aims to do: to compare traditional storytelling to new forms of storytelling, in which way each of them portrays the figure of the snake. What was the traditional perception of this animal and how it is portrayed with new storytelling.

Matthias Eder writes on the topic of folktales in 1969, analyzing the subject from a different perspective. Do Japanese people today still believe in folktales? And if they do, to what extent?[8] The question arises from the comparison with Western types of behavior towards supernatural beliefs or legend, that already Greek philosopher and the first Christian thinkers were disregarding as not real.[9] Reasons behind the almost unique relationship with the supernatural that Japan has are, as Eder points out, many: historical, social and most of all religious. Interestingly, credulity (the tendency of believing to easily in events and concepts, regardless of the fact that they are or not true) seem to appear in individuals that do not have any connection with old beliefs too. In addition, now new myths and beliefs tend to have a worldwide impact rather than just local. This can be seen as an involuntary addition to the issues pointed out by previous authors like Adams, such as the tendency to better hold on to folk beliefs in the countrysides. Even though it is undeniable that such

4 Adams, "Folktale Telling and Storytellers in Japan." p.108
5 Ibid. p.108
6 Ibid. p.108
7 Ibid. p.108
8 Eder, Matthias. "Reality in Japanese Folktales." *Asian Folklore Studies* 28, no. 1 (1969): 17-25 p.25
9 Ibid. p.18

tendency does exist, supernatural can turn people of way different backgrounds into believers. However, is believers really the right way of calling every person who just has an interest in the supernatural? Is believing in such creatures really necessary in order to not forget them? Love for these type of stories comes from the fact that they are interesting, and to read or hear such stories does not equal believing in them, in my opinion. I argue that, believing in folklore, is not a condition for its survival anymore. Storytelling evolution and people's relationship with folktales, analyzed by Adam and Eder's, are important phenomenons, vital for this research.

In 1988, Kogawa Tetsuo wrote an essay that shows even more how much communication changed in relation to technological development. While exploring the ways and meanings of new mass media Kogawa explains how this is leading to the formation of a mass culture.[10] With the circulation of the same information on a national scale, audiences too tend to homogenize into a mass.[11] However, the 'revolution' is caused not just by mass media, but from the whole set of new electronic devices that changed Japanese people lifestyles and created new daily habits of every kind: social relations, communication, values and political consciousness.[12] With precise numbers and data he shows the dramatic increasing of time that Japanese children spent in front of the television screen, from 56 minutes per day in 1960 to more than three hours per day in 1975.[13] He compares television to an extra body part that generates a new collective consciousness that later became popular culture.[14] For these reasons, Kogawa argues that mass media, including *anime* and *manga*, should not be taken lightly, because of the major influence that they have over Japan and over the creation of new aesthetic and social values.[15] This essay represent another stepping stone for the understanding of the evolution of communication, of which storytelling practices are part of.

The latest book that deals extensively with dragons and snakes is *China and Japan* by Donald Mackenzie, from 1995. The book deals extensively with Chinese and Japanese myths and legends, it traces their origins, connections and similarities with other ancient cults around the world. More than one-third of the book focuses on dragon and snake lore, using De Visser's book as the main source, but also adding more information and expanding the geographical origins of such beasts. Stories about snakes and snake like beings are found all over the world but the most ancient come

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10 Kogawa Tetsuo “New trends in Japanese popular culture.”. In *The Japanese Trajectory: Modernization and Beyond*, edited by Gavan McCormack and Yoshio Sugimoto, 54-66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. p.55

11 ibid. p. 55

12 ibid. p. 55

13 Ibid. p.56

14 Ibid. p.56

15 Ibid. p.59

from Egypt. It is evident, even from a superficial glance, that almost every culture or civilization connected snakes with the water element, from rivers and waterfall to the endless ocean. But Mackenzie point is, besides deepening the research about the roots of Japan and China's myths, to show how there is no such thing as a purely native originated culture.[16] Both in China and Japan, he explains, present-day cultures are the result of influences, ideas, and traditions from both inside and outside the countries. In addition, such imported elements have been more or less object of historical and political processes that choose the survival of one rather than another. This book shows how snake lore is a world wide spread reality, present in the roots of almost every culture. De Visser, Mackenzie and Opler's researches combined offer plenty of materials dealing with dragons and snakes. The first two look at the origins and roots of the supernatural beliefs associated with these animals, while Opler works from interviews that he collected first-hand. Their works are those from which this essay will rely more upon, as they are reliable sources of data.

Another important essay that will be used for this dissertation was written by Tai Wei Lim in 2013. Object of the essay is Spirited Away, movie that won an Oscar back in 2001 and considered an absolute masterpiece of Japanese animation, because of its themes and purposes. Lim discusses in the deep the environmental themes in which Hayao Miyazaki, the director, imbued his movie. Characters and settings do carry many environmental issues that are very important for the interpretation of the character of Haku, a white dragon and one of the main characters.[17] Pollution, waste and disrespect towards nature are just a few among the critiques that Miyazaki makes to human kind. Power dynamics, traditions, children upbringing, economy, communal life and many others are the themes permeating the movie, expressed through the journey of a human girl into the spirit's world, where our society can be seen reflected.[18] Her article will be particularly useful in the last part of the essay, where snakes and dragon will be discussed in relation to the new environmental meanings of which they became a symbol.[19]

Michael Dylan Foster is probably one of the best-known scholars of Japanese folklore active today; he works especially on the concept of *yōkai*. In his book *Pandemonium And Parade, Japanese Monsters And The Culture Of Yōkai* (2009), he analyzes this concept from a historical but at the same time psychological point of view. What are *yōkai*, he asks in the first introductory chapter? Defining these creatures is not easy, one could translate this word with terms like "monsters", or

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16 Mackenzie, Donald Alexander. *China and Japan*. London: Senate, 1995 p.VIII

17 Lim, Tai Wei. "Spirited Away: Conceptualizing a Film-Based Case Study through Comparative Narratives of Japanese Ecological and Environmental Discourses." *Animation* 8, no. 2 (2013): 149-62.

18 Ibid. p.149

19 Ibid. p.149

"demons", but Foster chose to use the expression "changing things". Why? Because *yōkai* defy proper translation, in Japanese too, there is no such thing as a precise definition. They are "'unspecifiable, without a clear form, and therefore extraordinary, strange, to be feared as an outside force"'.[20] *Yōkai*, an undefined and mysterious presence of Japanese folklore, Foster says, are actually an attempt of our minds to rationalize something that we do not understand by giving form to it.[21] Furthermore, when people create stories about *yōkai* they add to it an extra element that contributes to the diminishing fear: they make them fun.[22] Foster goes on, also, to remark the difference between *yōkai* and *kami*, Japanese gods. In his opinion, the fundamental difference between the two is the presence (*kami*) or absence (*yōkai*) of worship.[23] Interestingly, to better explain the difference between them, Foster uses water deities as an example:

> "A water spirit, for instance, may be simultaneously worshiped as a *kami* by families for whom the river provides ample irrigation and feared as a *yōkai* by families downriver who experienced drought."[24]

This statement, even though does not refer directly to snakes, is perfectly explaining the controversial nature of these animals that in their dragon form are worshiped and venerated as gods. The second chapter of the book points the finger to the encyclopedic mode that supernatural creatures and events tend to generate like it is evident in the work of Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788). Sekien contributed greatly to the visualization of *yōkai* in his bestiaries, (three books in which *yōkai* are drawn and completed with a brief explanation of their powers), full-fledged encyclopedias of the supernatural that will be further explained later in the essay. Foster identify Sekien's books as the marking moment in which folktales and supernatural became a subject of their own, the first moment in which scholars became aware of folklore as an independent study category.

Foster's fourth chapter is concerned with the already mentioned and still ongoing discussion about the social changes that Westernization caused in Japan after the Meiji Restoration. What is the new role of the supernatural in the scientifically oriented new societies? [25] During the 20th century, scholars started to study such beliefs for what they mean for Japan, in terms of social changes, and nationalism. Disregarded as not real at first, as silly superstitions generated by diffused ignorance,

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[20] Foster, Micheal Dylan, *Pandemonium And Parade, Japanese Monsters And The Culture Of Yōkai*, University of California Press, Berkley, 2009. p.6

[21] Ibid. p.11

[22] Ibid. p.14

[23] Ibid. p.15

[24] Ibid. p.15

[25] Ibid. p.27

scholars realized in time that there was more to it than pure science.[26] What did *yōkai* mean for Japan? What they represented of the country's culture and history was at the center of the debate.

Foster's last chapter offers an overview of what has become of *yōkai* culture in the last half of the century. New creatures have been born and *yōkai* populates new media like anime and manga. *yōkai* in the new millennium is, according to Foster, figures intrinsically Japanese, coming from the same cultural background and born from new fears of the new era.[27] They are, in the end, still a response to our own fears, reminding that we are not so different, after all, from "ignorant" folks of the past centuries. Foster's book extensively explains how *yōkai* have been perceived throughout history and the controversial relationship that Japan had with them. He presents clear facts and definitions to draw from and possibly criticize. Are really snakes fitting in his definitions? It is possible that they actually defy Foster's theory and that, in the new millennium they evolved in something new in which our fears do not play such a vital role for their survival.

Humanists are not the only scholars interested in folklore. Biologists and environmental scientists Sasaki, Sasaki and Fox, in their paper "Endangered traditional beliefs in Japan: influences on snake conservation" (2010), point out some consequences of snake beliefs are being discussed. The authors of the article, are pointing out a series of superstitions and folk beliefs that are, involuntarily, protecting this species on the Japanese archipelago. Snakes do not have a good reputation, still, in the new millennium, people fear them (in the countryside this phenomenon is, again, stronger). Japanese are so afraid of anger a snake, or to offend them in some way that they stay far away from the areas where they can be found. Therefore, snakes and their habitats are protected from humans damaging nature. As every generation become better educated than the previous ones, these beliefs are more often disregarded as silly superstition, which has no space in modern societies. Sasaki and Fox's aim is to suggest the reintroduction of such beliefs amongst the population in order to re-establish a "cultural" protection system for these endangered species. It is, however, my opinion, that such process would be extremely difficult to reverse (if not impossible at all), not to mention counterproductive in many other ways, for instance, because a proper scientific education might suffer from it. Sasaki, Sasaki and Fox's article is an important source of data. This is the essay with the most recent set of information, and for this reason essential for analyzing the relationship between those traditions still surviving today and the way in which they are transmitted.

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26 Ibid. p.28

27 Ibid. p.207

The encyclopedic mode, as in the practice of collecting and organizing information through categories and labels in the context of the supernatural is something that has started to a certain extent with Sekien but it has become a phenomenon typical of our generations too. Like Deborah Shamoon points out in the essay from 2013, *The Yōkai in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime*, Sekien's catalogues provided a set of images from which new generation of artist can be inspired from. It is the case, for example, of modern *manga* artist Mizuki Shigeru and his *manga* series *Gegege no Kitarō*, in which *yōkai* are deliberately drawn after Sekien's images. Thanks to the huge success of his *manga* and its *anime* adaptation, Mizuki gave new life to the supernatural, influencing the visual memory of new generation.[28]

The point is that there is a tendency towards the classification of the supernatural, started partly by Sekien and continued by later scholars or artists and that now can be seen brought to extreme level by modern fandoms. Every new manga gets his own share of fans that create systematically entire Wikipedia pages dedicated to the understanding of their favorite characters and themes. Shamoon's article offers another important insight regarding new tendencies of the *manga* and *anime* world, where readers and fans are creating researches of their own. They might be non-academic types of research, but they are available by whoever is interested in them and has access to an internet connection.

Michael Dylan Foster dedicates, finally, some attention to snakes in his last work *The Book of yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore* in 2015. The reason why snakes are so misunderstood is, according to him, because of their body shape, or at least partly. Having no legs or arms, and having behaviors so different from ours, or other "cuter" animals makes them hard to relate to (in general other mammals, or creatures that we can domesticate).[29] In Foster's words: "a snake is too alien for us to “personify” in this way; it is simply close to impossible to imagine its everyday life from the inside″.[30] This is the main reason behind the contradicting nature of snakes, treated often as *yōkai*, born in that border space between attraction and fear, rather than benevolent *kami* controllers of water. Snakes, like other real or fictional creatures believed to be somehow supernatural, do not make sense, we cannot relate emotionally or mentally to them. They test our power of empathy.[31] Foster's definitions and theories will be fundamental in this research, to

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[28] Shamoon, Deborah. "The *Yōkai* in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime." *Marvels & Tales* 27, no. 2 (2013): 276-289. p.279

[29] Foster, Michael Dylan. 2015. *The Book of yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. p.87

[30] Ibid. p.87

[31] Ibid. p.87

understand the evolution of snake and dragon lore, to see in which way they conform, or not, to modern folklore theories.

James Boyd, in 2016, analyses the Shinto influences that the author, Hayao Miyazaki, made use of for the creation of the movie. In his opinion, Spirited Away is full of Shinto's themes and sources that Miyazaki cares to transmit through the movie.[32] While it is true that Miyazaki imbued the movie with Japanese traditional spiritual values, the use of the world Shinto is problematic in many ways. The Shinto religion has a controversial history, deeply connected and sometimes fused with Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism, and it can be difficult to clearly distinguish what aspect belongs to one or the other. Controversies regarding Shinto are still subject of debate among scholars. However, it is not necessary for this essay to open this particular Pandora's box, and I just argue that to attribute some aspect of Spirited Away to Shinto is dangerous, because the very nature of this religion is still far from being established on an academic level. Therefore, Boyd's article will be put to very good use for the set of Japanese beliefs and traditional elements that clearly permeate the whole movie. However I will not refer to them as part of Shinto, but to a more general set of spiritual beliefs shared by Japan as a community. Furthermore, after screening many interviews to the director himself, it is very unlikely that Miyazaki would impose his own religious positions to its audience.[33]

New artists play with folklore, they play with *yōkai*, they invent new ones and the new generation is growing up with this new visual pantheon of monsters born from the ashes of old beliefs. Traditions are still passed on, in a different form and with different means worth being analyzed. What has become of the old fearsome snake? What is the new face of the rain giving dragon? In what way old storytelling and new storytelling portrays them differently?

Snake and dragon lore has been transmitted through oral storytelling, from believer to believer, but now both the means and the condition for their transmission are fading. Knowing how old storytelling functioned and the conditions for its survival is required in order to comprehend how the new forms of transmission work and why they can survive. The second chapter will look into how snakes and dragons are perceived and what beliefs are to them associated through traditional storytelling, while in the third one will look at which of these beliefs Hayao Miyazaki choose to represent in his movie *Spirited Away*.

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[32] Boyd, James W. and Nishimura, Tetsuya (2016) "Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film "Spirited Away"," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 8: Iss. 3, Article 4. p.8

[33] "Hayao Miyazaki." Interview by Tom Mes. Midnight Eye: Visions of Japanese Cinema.

Chapter Three

Beliefs and Stories Concerning Snakes

3.1 Hidden Beliefs and Taboos

Japan has a peculiar relationship with snakes. Snake cults and worships are very common around the world, however, in Japan, it is possible to notice a great fear towards these animals. High fevers and various illnesses are believed to be caused by snakes. But what makes these reptiles such complicated creatures to analyze is their association with dragons, a far more famous Eastern Asian symbol. As De Visser says, dragons and snakes are "considered to belong to the same species".[34] In addition, in many tales and visual representation their images are not easy to distinguish because they are portrayed in the same way. Images of great serpents and dragons are often visually identical and white snakes are believed to have the potential to transform into dragons. It is simply impossible to create independent discourses about one or the other.

This chapter's aim is to explain this relationship in the clearest way possible, through the eyes of folk beliefs and stories from Japanese (and possibly Chinese) traditions. Controversies and double standards that define the nature of snakes in Japan can be better exemplified through the analysis of some of the most well-known tales of the country, for instance Urashima Taro and the legend of Madam White Snake. Both stories changed a lot in terms of interpretation and themes throughout centuries, with every age adding something of their own. The historical changes of these stories can be tracked because they have been written down in important classics texts of Japan like the Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matter) sand the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan).

In order to understand how modern Japanese artist reinvented these stories, and in which way they are handed down to new generations, it is necessary to fully display their mythological origins. To what extent the connection between dragons and snakes is still alive? In which way their double nature of *yōkai* and *kami* can be defined? It has already been mentioned by Sasaki and Fox that snakes beliefs do have real repercussions on the safety of these animals, clearly not at fault for being misunderstood by humans. Therefore, to just disregard supernatural beliefs connected with snakes as silly superstitions is, in my opinion, also unproductive for the well being of these animals

[34] De Visser, Marinus Willem. *Dragon in China and Japan*. Nabu Press, 1913. p.178

and their whole habitats. Hopefully, new generations will be able to find a compromise between scientific facts and superstition, between modernity and tradition.

3.2 A Misunderstood Creature

At the beginning of Japanese history, snakes worship was very common among people and many deities described in the *Kojiki* had snake like appearances. The importance of this cult decreased but it is not at all disappeared from Japan.[35] So many communities, large and small, still have shrines dedicated to deities believed to have the body of a snake. Snake dedicated shrines can be recognized from the offers that people leave, usually cooked rice and raw eggs, of which they seem to be avid consumers.[36] One of the best examples of snake worship can be found in Nara, at the shrine on Mount Miwa.[37] This deity inhabiting the mountain is believed to take human form very often, in order to bear children, but its true form is that of serpent. The serpent is the god protector of the mountain which is considered, as a whole, sacred ground, indicated by the presence of the shrine at the bottom of it.[38] Mount Miwa and its snake deity is one of the survivors of an ancient rooted snake worship, a consequence of the association of snakes with water.[39] Mount Miwa itself is still an important religious place, it is infested by a variety of snake species and scholar gave the name of "Mount Miwa type tales" to stories with supernatural marriages.[40]They are believed to inhabit rivers, lakes or ponds and to send rains or big storms as they pleases.[41]

Such behaviour certainly looks weird in the light of what has already been said about them, namely the fact that they are mostly feared by folks. Albino snakes are especially considered sacred and this belief is so strong that in the last century areas inhabited by them have been established as protected areas and as natural monuments.[42] Often, the border line between a great serpent, believed to protect a certain territory, and a dragon is very hard to find. They are represented in the same way, and they have been attributed with similar powers, especially over water. It is forbidden to disrespect snakes: no one wants to anger one of them and at the same time nobody is willing to speak about such matter easily. This knowledge is a taboo, it is shared in the secrecy of a house, among close relatives and friends.[43] As one of Opler's informants in the Us says, nobody talks about snakes

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35 Sasaki, Fox,, Endangered traditional beliefs in Japan: influences on snake conservation. p. 476

36 Ibid. p.476

37 Daniels, F. J. "Snake and Dragon Lore of Japan." Folklore 71, no. 3 (1960): 145-64. p.156-157

38 Ibid. p.156-157

39 Ibid. p.156-157

40 Ibid. p.157

41 Ibid. p.156-157.

42 Ibid. p.477

43 Opler, "Japanese Folk Belief concerning the Snake." p.249

because Japanese think that if a snake is mentioned than it will appear.[44] It is believed that on a path created by one snake others will follow, creating a very dangerous situation from which humans could hardly escape unharmed.[45] This fear is so strong that some of Opler's informants asked to remain anonymous.

Lillywhite and Yamamoto attempted to formulate some theories behind this complicated relationship, and they identified four of them. Firstly, in order to avoid to drown, when storms and floods occur, snakes are forced to come out of their holes in the ground, often in human houses, who started to believe that there was a connection between them and such events.[46] Secondly, snakes change their skin, this has been interpreted as a sign of longevity and the potential of becoming immortal.[47] Thirdly, snakes tend to live and build nests in holes into the ground, and this led to the conclusion that they were able to travel between our realm and that of the dead.[48] Fourthly, and last, their habit of populating old buildings enhanced their association with the supernatural and ghostly activities.[49] It is clear that purely natural behavioral features of this animal have been misunderstood for "magical".

Another curious aspect of these animal's beliefs is their shape-shifting ability. Exactly like *tanuki* and *kitsune*, also snakes are believed to be able to take human form, very often that of beautiful women. A woman can be either a snake itself, and disguises herself in this way to begin love affairs with male humans, or a woman with snake like behaviors, for instance jealousy and coldness.[50] Among folk beliefs is also told that some people are born with either the power of controlling snakes or entire families that are protected by them.[51] The first examples are said to posses the power of hypnotize them and to have a small depression in the lobe of their ear. This at least was the case for a little girl mentioned by one of Opler's informant, who was famous in her village because she was not afraid of them and played with them as she pleased, putting snakes around her arms or neck.[52] She did have the depression in her earlobe, and therefore, concluded the informant, this specific belief must have been somehow true.[53] The second example is that of entire families

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44 Ibid. p.249

45 Ibid. p.249

46 Lillywhite, Jamie, and Akira Y. Yamamoto. "Snakes, Serpents and Humans." In *Japanese ghosts and demons: art of the supernatural*, 139-53. New York: G. Braziller. p.140-141

47 Ibid. p.140-141

48 Ibid. p.140-141

49 Ibid. p.140-141

50 Opler, "Japanese Folk beliefs concerning the snake", p.251

51 Ibid. p.256-257

52 Ibid. p.256-257

53 Ibid. p.256-257

and lineages that are told to “enjoy” the favor of snakes. These protection is viewed more as burden than an actual protection. Members of these families do have hard times in finding marriage partners, because considered too dangerous.[54] If a member of these families is hurt or wronged, the snake takes revenge, it does it out of its own will and the person itself does not have any control over it.[55]

3.3 Written Accounts on Snakes

Stories with snakes as protagonists are many and can be found all over Japan. In this section are reported tales found in written accounts, also from Japanese classics, that are still coherent however with tales still orally transmitted in the country today.

Keigo Seki in his "*Types of Japanese Folktale*" collected quite an impressive number of them and ordered them with their principal variations. His five criterias for the selection of such tales were very strict:

> “1) Tales with definite forms and coherent plots that have been recorded word for word. 2) Tales whose informants, locations and dates are identifiable. 3) Tales that are representative versions of each tale type. 4) Tales that are widely distributed and told very often. 5) Tales representing all parts of Japan”[56]

Marriages, affairs and pregnancies are the favorite themes of these stories. Seki reports many stories with a male snake and a female human spouse. *The Serpent Bridegroom* tells the story of a young lady who falls in love with an unknown man who visits her every night.[57] Wanting to know more about her mysterious lover she follows him thanks so a threaded needle attached to its clothes. She then reaches a pool in which she finds a wounded snake.[58] That, she discovers, is the true form of her lover, who tells her that the child that she is bearing will become a great man.[59] The story has many variants, sometimes the woman has a miscarriage or delivers prematurely a snake child: it seems that iris is the plant enemy to snakes and that it is used fix the bad deeds of snakes. In another story we discover another of the believed weak points of snakes: iron. A man promises to give in marriage one of his three daughters to whoever would have been able to water completely his dry

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54 Ibid. p.257
55 Ibid. p.257
56 Seki, Keigo."Types of Japanese Folktales." *Asian Folklore Studies* 25 (1966): 1-220. Introduction p.XVIII
57 Ibid. p.69-88
58 Ibid. p.69-88
59 Ibid. p.69-88

rice-field.[60] The only one answering the call is a young man, who is actually a snake.[61] The first two daughters refuse to answer to their duty, however, the third and most clever of the girls accepts.[62] She follows him to his pool and, with a trick, manages to throw metal needles in the water while he is in it.[63] The Serpent dies and the girl return safe and sound to her family.[64]

Both in China and Japan there is a widespread belief that says that snakes, and therefore dragons, fear iron very much.[65] It was a common practice in pre-modern China to throw iron into a water body believed to be inhabited by a dragon, in order to make it come out and bring rain.[66] In addition, it can happen that couples truly desiring a baby, receives from the gods or find a snake baby.[67] After raising him like their own, the snake for some reasons (his scary looks or behaviors) is left or escapes to the mountains.[68] Most of the time it becomes the rain giver deity of that area, but sometimes it also harms humans and is hunted down for that.[69] Another story reported by Seki tells about a snake saved by a man, and that returns in the shape of a beautiful woman in order to marry him. Afterwards, the snake bears a child and forbids husbands from assisting to the birth. The man breaks his promise, witness her true form and is thereafter punished by his wife.[70] She leaves him with the newborn, to return to her pond, but she leaves to him one of her eyes able to pour milk for the baby.[71] The eye is stolen by a Lord, and the man goes to the snake to ask for the other one. The second eye too is stolen by the Lord, which causes the rage of the snake, who takes revenge by flooding his domains and becomes the new ruler.[72] As we will see in the next sections, while the encounter with a snake can bring either great fortune or great misfortune, dragons encounters are always a good omen. In every story, as it will be evident later in the essay, when man meets a dragons is considered blessed and afterwards he obtains great power and success in life.

In the tale T*he Magic Ear*, one of the many stories collected by Keigo Seki, it is told of how a man received the gift of understanding animals after rescuing the only daughter of the great Dragon King under the sea. Afterwards, he begins to understand what animals says and discovers the real reason

60 Ibid. p.69-88
61 Ibid. p.69-88
62 Ibid. p.69-88
63 Ibid. p.69-88
64 Ibid. p.69-88
65 De Visser, *Dragon in China and Japan.* P.178
66 Ibid. P.178
67 Ibid. p.178
68 Ibid. p.178
69 Ibid. p.178
70 Seki,"Types of Japanese Folktales." p.69-88
71 Ibid. p.69-88
72 Ibid. p.69-88

behind a wealthy man's daughter illness:

> "Human beings are nothing but fools" -so the crows were saying. "They have called all the famous doctors there are, but none of them can heal the nobleman's daughter. The girl's disease is not one to be healed by medicines. When the roof of the nobleman's house was being thatched, a snake was put in with the thatching grass by mistake. If someone would only get the snake out and give it something to eat, the girl would get well again".[73]

Upon hearing such information, the man helps to resolve the situation. After rescuing and feeding the snake the girl miraculously regains her health and becomes the protagonist's wife. Beside mentioning the legendary Dragon King and his palace underwater, in a tale that is most probably one of the many variation of *Urashima Taro*'s legend, the tale represent a clear example of a mistreated snake behaviour.This leads to an important consideration: snakes, unlike the rest of *yōkai*, do not posses that fun vibe that other *yōkai* like foxes and racoon dogs do have. It is arguable that snakes can be considered fully *yōkai* in first place, even though Foster includes them in the category.[74] If the difference between *yōkai* and *kami* is reduced to the absence or presence of worship, then snakes have the potential to be regarded as full fledged *kami*.

One of the best examples of folktales with an evil snake is the *Dōjōji legend*. The story is inspired by *the Eternal Prisoner Under the Thunder Peak Pagoda*, a popular Chinese tale that was transmitted also to Japan and became known as the *Dōjōji legend*, believed to have taken place in the Dōjōji temple in Hidakagawa.[75] The names of the protagonists are Kiyohime, the woman that falls in love with the young monk Anchin, after spending one night together.[76] The man fails to return her feelings, causing the anger of Kiyohime who starts to chase after him and turns herself into a serpent in order to cross a river.[77] Anchin takes refuge inside a temple bell but she manages to find him anyway and burned him alive inside the bell.[78]

Jasei no in, or *A Serpent's Lust,* is the title of a story written by Ueda Akinari in 1776, part of *Ugetsu monogatari*, translated in English as *Tales of Rain and Moonlight*. The story is inspired by the *Dōjōji legend* and it has engraved itself in popular imagination, thanks also to movie and anime adaptations of the tales.[79] Unlike *Urashima Taro*'s legend, which is a popular tale today mainly for

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73 Seki. *Folktales of Japan*. p.139-142

74 Foster, The Book of *yōkai*: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore. p.87

75 Ueda, Akinari, and Anthony H. Chambers. *Tales of Moonlight and Rain*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. p.1

76 Ibid. p.157

77 Ibid. p.157

78 Ibid. p.157

79 Ibid. p.157

children, the *Dōjōji legend* is tragic and violent, and therefore less present in the imaginary of new generations. The legend evolved very differently in China and Japan. At the very beginning, Madame White Snake, the snake lady protagonist of the tale, was in both countries a lustful demon that seduced and killed a men.[80]However, while in China the character evolved into a positive one, first by becoming the ideal wife and mother. She became loving and caring, and saves her family and village from catastrophes. However, in Japan she remained a demon, representing every negative feature that a woman can have.[81] There is no sign whatsoever, in Japan, of the evolution of Madame White Snake, or of the feminist turn that her character saw in China.[82] Being a demon, and not just a defenseless woman, puts Madame White Snake in a position of power, something that made her a favorite among feminists, and simply overshadowed her male co protagonist.[83]

3.4 A Dragon Hidden in the Water is Useless

In East Asia, dragons are considered water deities, and they are associated with a great number of symbols and elements. In China and Japan, winter is the drought season, and dragons are believed to awaken in spring, when the rain season starts. From this association comes the old Chinese saying "a dragon hidden in the water is useless".[84] Many are the Chinese legends that report of encounters between humans and dragons. Meeting a dragon always brings great fortune to the man who witnessed his presence, even the man of lowest born afterwards becomes a great man able to serve well the Emperor, who grants him honors and wealth.

It has already been mentioned that dragons and snakes are believed to belong to the same species, and they have therefore similar powers and weaknesses, such as controlling the weather and vulnerability to iron.[85] De Visser mentions three ways to cause or stop rain, used in ancient Japanese and Chinese societies, and they all involve some sort of ritual to lure or keep away a dragon.[86] The first method involved the sacrifice of white or black horses to bring rain, and red horses to stop it.[87] The second method, already mentioned earlier in the chapter, saw people plagued by the drought throwing iron inside water bodies believed to be inhabited by dragons, these would come out at

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80 Lai, Whalen. "From Folklore to Literate Theater: Unpacking "Madame White Snake"." *Asian Folklore Studies* 51, no. 1 (1992): 51. p.52

81 Ibid. p.53

82 Ibid. p.53

83 Ibid. p.53

84 Mackenzie, *China and Japan*. p 56

85 De Visser, *Dragon in China and Japan.* P.178

86 Ibid. P.178

87 Ibid. P.178

once, lift in the sky and cause a storm with their rage.[88] These two methods seem to have older roots than the third one, of Buddhist origin and apparently dominant in Japan: the Buddhist priest prays and recites sutras constantly, until the *nagas*/dragons, moved by the suffering caused by the drought would help human kind at once.[89] It is evident that snakes, in different countries and different local shapes and perceptions, always maintained their role as water spirits or gods. The old annals of Japan do mention many dragons as water-gods, or great serpents.[90] The myth of creations also sees the genesis of Kura-okami, described in the Manyōshū as the god of rain and snow, born from one of the three pieces of the fire god body.[91] In another passage of an ancient text, the Nihongi, it is said how Izanami and Izanagi also gave birth to the gods of the sea, Watatsumi no Mikoto, that De Visser translates as "snake of the sea".[92] De Visser mentions also the existence in the ancient texts of Oho Watatsumi no Mikoto, "sea lord" or "sea snake". This deity is known also as Toyotama Hiko no Mikoto, the Abundant Pearl Prince, and his extraordinarily beautiful daughter, Toyotama Hime, or Abundant Pearl Princess, mentioned for the first time in the Kojiki, and then again in the Nihongi.[93] The legendary Dragon King of the Sea, according to the legends, lives in a beautiful and full of fortunes palace on the bottom of the ocean, called *ryūgūjō*, or sometimes in an island in the middle of it and not reachable by humans, a concept very similar to that of Tokoyo no kuni.[94] *Urashima Taro*'s legend shows both of them among the main protagonists of the story. In the story a young man named Urashima Taro, is invited to visit the *ryūgūjō* after saving the Dragon King's only daughter.[95] When the time to return to land comes, the Abundant Pearl Princess sends him off with a box and the promise to never open it.[96] However, once on land the man realizes that in the two worlds time passes differently, and that all of the people that he knew were long dead.[97] He then opens the box and vanishes in a smoke puff, because it contained his real age.[98] The tale has many variant and differences depending on each region or area of Japan but this version has been crystallized in the last century, and studied on textbooks.

The dragon is also one of the Four Benevolent Animals: Seiryū, the Azure Dragon, symbol of the

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88 Ibid. P.178
89 Ibid. P.178
90 Ibid. P.135
91 The Manyōshū is an ancient poetry collection from the Nara period.
92 Nihongi, Chronicles of Japan, one of the most important texts in Japanese literature. Nara period.
93 Ibid. P.139
94 Tokoyo no kuni: legendary distant land across the ocean from Japanese mythology.
95 Ibid. p.69-88
96 Ibid. p.69-88
97 Ibid. p.69-88
98 Ibid. p.69-88

East, of the spring, fertility, youth and water.[99] The other three animals are the Byakko, the White Tiger of the West and Autumn, Suzaku, the Vermillion Bird of the South and Summer, and Gembu, the Black Tortoise of the North and Winter. Representations of these animals are very popular in East Asian art, as they are all auspicious symbols.[100] As Holmes says, dragon are considered benign creatures and generally of good nature.[101] She also mentions the existence of five types of dragons, those heaven sent, those that cause rain to fall, then land-dragons that rule water courses and bodies, dragons who are guarding treasures and sea dragon kings (four of them exist and rule each over one of the four seas on earth).[102]

3.5 *Kami* or *Yōkai*?

Are snakes *kami* or *yōkai?* Ueda Akinari, author of *A Serpent's Lust*, was interested in supernatural related issues, and he dedicated a lot of his writings to a better understanding of the nature of *kami*. In Akinari's writings, however, there is not much distinction between *kami* and *yōkai*. Foxes and racoon dogs too are referred to as *kami*, instead of *yōkai*, like Foster does. All of these supernatural creatures fall, in his works, under the category of *kami* and felt as inappropriate the application of Confucianist and Buddhist theoretical frameworks on them. *Kami*, in his opinion, simply do not conform to their structure.[103] *Kami* and animal spirits both, in his opinion, do not conform to moral principle, they simply do not posses the concept of good and bad like human beings do.[104]

> "By nature, such [fox] spirits do not distinguish between good and bad, or right and wrong. They protect what is good for them and curse what is bad.... The *kami* are believed to be the same.... They bless their faithful with happiness and curse the unfaithful".[105]

For Akinari. it does not make sense to dispute about the good or ill nature of *kami*, because they cannot be understood with same parameters in which we understand humans. They can be generous and benevolent, if they are well served and worshiped, and vengeful spirits if angered.[106] This is also the basic distinction between Shinto, or *kami* worship practices, and Buddhism and

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99 Holmes, Yoshihiko. *Chronological evolution of the Urashima Taro story and its interpretation: a thesis submitted to the Victoria University of Wellington in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Japanese Studies*. Master's thesis, Victoria University of Wellington. p.31-32

100 Seki, Types of Japanese Folktales. p.56-57

101 Ibid. p.56-57

102 Ibid. p.56-57

103 Fessler, Susanna. "The Nature of the Kami. Ueda Akinari and Tandai Shoshin Roku." *Monumenta Nipponica* 51, no. 1 (1996): 1-15. doi:10.2307/2385314. p.1

104 Ibid. p.1

105 Ibid. p.2

106 Ibid. p.2

Confucianism. According to Buddhist and Confucianist doctrines, if a man follows the right spiritual path he has the potential of becoming a divine being. However, *kami* belong to what we can call a different species. The difference between humans and *kami* can be seen as biological, we simply belong to different species and we cannot become one or the other, not even the most pious and devout among us.[107]

The discourse about supernatural beings never stopped. It is interesting to notice that, while for Akinari, back in the 16th century, the difference between *kami* and *yōkai* was either not relevant or not existent at all, for Foster it represents such a key point for their analysis. Both entities do not posses a precise shape, they defy normal, we see them in the shape that makes are more comfortable with the mysterious and the unknown.[108] If *yōkai,* like Foster argues, are just not worshiped *kami* then snakes do not belong to the first category. Snake worship does exist. Legends about snake shaped deities, mythical rain dragons gods and great serpents with powers over water have been told and written down since ancient times, and they are the proof of a snake worship never ended and still very alive today, like the case of Mount Miwa shows.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that snakes and dragons both belong to the realm of *kami*, they both can be good or bad, depending on how they are treated by humans. If a snake is mistreated then misfortune will fall on the unlucky, or stupid, guilty human. However, if properly worshiped and nurtured, snakes, especially in their dragon form, are capable of reward with great fortunes and treasures, not to mention their protection. This is the image that traditional storytelling and written accounts of old events in Japan portray these creatures and how they were transmitted to people until the 20th century. How have things changed with the falling of old storytelling practices? What do snakes and dragon look like in young Japanese minds? Who is responsible for the transmission of old fairy tales and their protagonists? The answers to these questions will be the research aim of the next chapter.

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107 Ibid. p.4

108 Ibid. p.6

Chapter Four

Old and New Storytelling

4.1 Folklore and Traditional Storytelling Practices

Orally transmitted folktales can be found in every culture around the world and, as it was already stated in chapter one, they had the double function of educating young children and to relieve from boredom at the same time. Folktales, as can be seen in the previous chapter, have been recorded in written texts throughout history, and they generally match the oral versions still told in Japan. What is in danger are not the folktales, but the practice of oral transmission that created so local many variants. Nowadays, a great amount of these oral traditions are disappearing, especially among technologically advanced societies. In Japan, this process is deeply connected with the drastic changes started with the Meiji Revolution in 1868.[109] After 250 years of almost total isolation, Japan opened its borders to the rest of the world, and therefore also to Western countries. As Adams explains, these events influenced the daily habits of Japanese people, and changed, gradually, the conditions in which folktales were transmitted. For example, folktales were told often during winter indoors and mainly sedentary activities, when people used to produce daily necessities, or when it was time to rest in the evening.[110] They were a form of entertainment, used to pass time while fulfilling such repetitive and boring duties.[111] However, technological development came to Japan too, and especially in urban areas, these moments diminished or disappeared altogether, and those moments previously dedicated to the sharing of folktales were filled with other activities, like studying.[112] From 1893, education for men became compulsory and the time before spent in the evening listening to grandparents stories was now spent between books and homework.[113] Not long after that education became compulsory for girls too.[114] Folktales then began to appear in textbooks in a crystallized version, but not all of them could obviously make the cut, and consequently, a great quantity of the multitude of local variants gradually was eventually lost. This process worked way

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109 Adams, "Folktale Telling and Storytellers in Japan". p.106
110 Ibid. p.106
111 Ibid. p.106
112 Ibid. p.108-109
113 Ibid. p.108-109
114 Ibid. p.108-109

faster in cities, where children were raised far from the lifestyle of their grandparents, while in countryside folktales survived longer.[115] Another factor that accelerated such process was mass communication.[116] Televisions and radios had a strong power over older generations as well, and decreased the need for entertainment through folktales.[117] Adams argues that storytellers failed to realize that such tales could be still passed on if the proper conditions were to be re created, and instead joined the rest of family in front of the television.[118] However, folktales are still passed on to future generations. It is my assumption that storytelling simply changed its media.

The conditions that allowed oral transmission for so long are vanishing, but new form of communication took over the world in the meantime. As Kogawa Tetsuo points out:'traditional oral cultures are dying under the domination of overpowering mass media'. Electronics devices and internet connection can put in contact and 'reorganize' audiences in different categories, nation, interests and so on.[119] His article is from 1988, and shows data that confirm what Adams already pointed out. In his words:

> 'In this changing media environment, people more and more spent time watching television. In 1960 people over the age of ten watched television for 56 minutes every weekday; in 1975 for 3 hours and 19 minutes. Inversely, sleeping hours decreased from 8 hours and 13 minutes to 7 hours and 52 minutes. In this way, television has become a strong apparatus to transform everything into popular images mass culture. As television has become like one's extended 'body', one does not necessarily recognize what is happening on television. At a level beyond one's consciousness, happenings on television directly become a popular culture. In the earlier stage, television was a medium between reality and its image.'[120]

If this phenomenon was already so evident at the end of the 1980s, the situation in the new millennium became even more extreme, with devices that allow us to use internet connection everywhere we are at any given time. Kogawa argues that, given the amount of people that enjoy manga and anime, more attention should be given their aesthetics, and, I add, to their themes and the side effect that they generate.[121] One of these interesting phenomenons is the tendency of creating databases online. Shamoon claims that this tendency has pretty famous historical

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115 Ibid. p.108-109
116 Ibid. p.108-109
117 Ibid. p.108-109
118 Ibid. p.110
119 Kogawa Tetsuo “New trends in Japanese popular culture.” p.55
120 Ibid. p.56
121 Ibid. p.59

precedents in Japan, like Sekien's bestiaries.[122] The encyclopedic mode is a typical phenomenon belonging to *manga*'s fans, who create databases online where they classify every little detail of their favorite stories. These databases collect an impressive number of information that fans enjoy to collect, reorganize, read, and to discuss in their related blogs. Sometimes they even write possible sequels, spin offs, and fanfiction. Children and adults have access to all these wiki pages, and they are often the first stepping point for whoever wants to deepen their own knowledge on a specific story or character. It is entertaining and educational at the same time, just like old storytelling was. Even though oral storytelling remains fascinating and a unique form of transmission, whose charm is enhanced by the fact that it is disappearing, new media gave to folktales new possibilities and larger audience. They play along with the authors, and actively participate to the development of the new face of folklore tradition.

Manga and *anime* are forms of entertainment typically Japanese and their popularity is high both within the country and abroad. Many *mangaka* make use of characters and themes derived from Japanese tradition, sometimes sticking to it and sometimes not, because he can also use tradition and folklore as he pleases to create new stories and new worlds. By doing so, *kami* and *yōkai* are still relevant in pop culture. There are cases like that of Rumiko Takahashi, author of famous manga like *Inuyasha* and *Ranma 1/2*, who uses her creativity to shape folklore figures as she pleases, and as a side effect, they influence young people's minds. The main purpose of her stories is to entertain, but become also educational.

Authors, like Hayao Miyazaki, consciously choose to use *anime* to educate people, especially children. In this chapter the case of *Spirited Away,* one of Miyazaki's masterpieces, will be analyzed as an example of a conscious use of tradition for educational purposes, focusing on the figure of Haku, a white dragon who forgot his own name. What is Miyazaki trying to convey by using this character? In which way is Haku different (or not) from the traditional figure of the dragon-snake? Is it possible to understand if he fits into the previously given definitions of *kami* or *yōkai*? What kind of message does Haku carries for children of the new millennium?

4.2 *Spirited Away*

The movie begins with Chihiro, a ten year old girl, who is moving to a new house with her parents. The whole family is traveling with the car, when the father decides to take what looks like a short cut towards the new house, but they end up in front of strange building. Despite Chihiro's protests,

[122] Shamoon. "The *Yōkai* in the Database: Supernatural Creatures and Folklore in Manga and Anime." p.277

the family goes to explore the place. After crossing a river they end up in what it look like an abandoned village, with just a restaurant open. Chihiro's parents start to eat even though nobody is serving them, while the girl walks around, exploring the village. The girl reaches a massive spa where she meets a boy, alarmed by her presence and that tells her to get out of the city before night falls. Worried, Chihiro runs away to find her parents, while the sun sets and ghost like figures appear around her, just to find them turned into two pigs. With the help of Haku, the mysterious boy that she met previously, she manages to survive that strange reality and enter the spa, where she need to get a job in order to save her parents. Yubaba, the witch who owns the spa, is the one that has to decide whether to employ her or not, and through a magical contract that allows her to control people's name, and in the end, the person itself. Chihiro's new name is Sen, and she is now officially property of the witch and one of her many employees. Working hard in spa, Chihiro has to find away to save her parents and to not forget her name, source of Yubaba's power over her. Haku reveals himself as Yubaba's apprentice who has no power against her since he has long forgot his own name. Chihiro's life at the spa is not easy, difficult clients seem to wait for her around every corner: a bed smell spirit, that turns out to be a river god, then a No Face that eats people. There is really no time to rest for Chihiro, that has to rescue her friend Haku from a powerful curse that left him heavily injured, after fulfilling one of Yubaba's orders. The curse comes from a small golden seal belonging to Yubaba's twin sister, Zeniba. Chihiro then decides to begin a journey to return the seal to its rightful owner and save Haku. Once at Swamp Bottom, Chihiro discovers that Zeniba is in fact a good witch and they develop a grandmother-granddaughter type of relationship. Then Haku, fully healed and in his dragon form, comes to take Chihiro back to the spa, where she has the chance of saving her parents. While flying Chihiro recalls an episode of her childhood, when she fell into a river and a dragon rescued her: that dragon was Haku, who thanks to Chihiro finally remembers his real name, that of the river of which he was the spirit, Kohaku. After winning the last of Yubaba's challenges and having rescued her parents, Chihiro must leave the spirit's world and go back to the human world. While going back to the car Chihiro wonders if all of those events just happens are real or not, with the last scene showing the glow of an elastic band made by her supernatural friends.

4.2.1 Aims of the Movie

Spirited Away is a movie conceived for young girls, precisely of ten years old. As Miyazaki himself explains in an interview, Chihiro is modeled after the daughter of one of his friends, just one of the

many little girls nowadays: spoiled, insensitive and bored.[123] The director wanted to make a movie that could speak to those girls, with a character to whom they could relate to.[124] Having watched the movie for the first time at that same age, I too understand how relatable Chihiro is. The appeal comes from watching an absolutely normal girl accomplishing things that nobody would have thought her capable of. When faced with new challenges Chihiro is forced to grow, and she becomes determined and strong, like any other girl has the potential to become. Miyazaki describes her as 'just a girl you can encounter anywhere in Japan'.[125] Much have been said about the aims of the movie, both by the director and scholars. What Miyazaki himself stated during interviews is constantly used as, obviously, primary source for every essay written on the topic, but scholars do add their own interpretations. Among all the interpretations, the most important can be considered those of Alistair Swale on the theme of nostalgia, Noriko Reider on the theme of identity loss and Tai Wei Lim on the environmental theme.

The movie has many important themes and messages, among them the most important can be considered nostalgia, loss of identity and environmental awareness. Nostalgia is, for Miyazaki, a universal feeling, shared by people of all ages and cultures.[126] Like Swale points out, nostalgia in *Spirited Away* functions as an independent aesthetic category.[127] In this case, nostalgia does not need a precise representation or a specific image to work, the atmosphere of the movie and world evoked as whole is itself what makes this feeling evident. It is a painful jet enjoyable feeling of being reminded of a beautiful past that can never return, and this past is full of different historical and folklore references from different moments in history. Mythological creatures, dragons, *oni*, and so on live all together in the world of the spirits, with a vintage train with modernly dressed spirits too. Many elements together, without a clear historical setting, can therefore evoke nostalgia.

The theme of identity loss is represented by the act of stealing of a person's name.[128] Both Haku and Chihiro have been robbed of their own name, and that is how the witch can control them. Haku, knowing well what forgetting its own name means, prevent this from happening to Chihiro.[129] Haku is a lost character, his name represents his identity, and without it he is forced to complete all of

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123 "Hayao Miyazaki." Interview by Tom Mes. Midnight Eye: Visions of Japanese Cinema. January 7, 2002.

124 Ibid.

125 Ibid.

126 Ibid.

127 Swale, Alistair. "Miyazaki Hayao and the Aesthetics of Imagination: Nostalgia and Memory inSpirited Away." *Asian Studies Review* 39, no. 3 (2015): 413-29.

128 Reider, Noriko T. ""Spirited Away": Film of the Fantastic and Evolving Japanese Folk Symbols." *Film Criticism* 29, no. 3 (2005): 4-27. p.9-10

129 Ibid p.9-10

Yubaba's requests.[130] It is not clear what exactly he does because of Yubaba's orders and what of his own will, but also the possibly bad deeds that he might have done on his own can be interpreted as a struggle towards the understanding of his inner self.

This theme is actually deeply connected with the environmental message that the movie portrays. Haku is again a key character that Miyazaki uses to state many of his own environmental views: he is the spirit of a river that has been filled and covered with apartments, and therefore lost his home. [131] Something similar happens with the putrid river god, whose body was covered in so much human garbage that he became a stink spirit.[132] Cleaning him and freeing him from all that pollution is one of the hardest challenges that Chihiro has to overcome, and it shows how much effort it will take to right our own wrongs, and reestablish a healthy natural environment.

4.2.2 Haku, the White Dragon

Despite the fact that Miyazaki decided to draw Haku's dragon form with a canine face, he is without doubt connecting with many of the qualities attributed to these creatures in the previous chapter. In which way Haku's character follows tradition? How much of this dragon is the result of Miyazaki's imagination? Is he a *kami* or a *yōkai*?

There are many ways to interpret Haku. Cheng-Ing Wu sees in him Chihiro's guide in the spirit's world.[133] He helps Chihiro many times during the movie: he prevents her from vanishing, makes sure that she obtains a job and a kind hearted work partner, he tooks her to see her parents and returns his clothes and true name to her.[134] Without Haku, Chihiro's survival in the supernatural dimension would have been definitely much more difficult. These conclusions are surely correct, but Haku is so much more than this. From what has been explained of the snake dragons in the previous chapter it is possible to notice how close is Haku with tradition. Snakes, especially white snakes, were considered sacred creatures with power over water, and in fact, Haku is the spirit of a river. His shape, is behaviour and the hissing sounds he makes when transformed all fits perfectly. One of the few details that derails from tradition is his face, which resembles more that of a dog, or a wolf, rather than that of a reptile. As Foster points out, one possible explanation of snake fear is

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130 Ibid p.9-10

131 Lim "Spirited Away: Conceptualizing a Film-Based Case Study through Comparative Narratives of Japanese Ecological and Environmental Discourses." p.151-156

132 Ibid p.151-156

133 Wu, C.-I. "Hayao Miyazaki's Mythic Poetics: Experiencing the Narrative Persuasions in Spirited Away, Howls Moving Castle and Ponyo." *Animation* 11, no. 2 (2016): 189-203. doi:10.1177/1746847716643777. p.192

134 Ibid. p.192

that their looks are for us unrelatable, they are impossible to personify like it happens with "cuter" animals such as dogs or cats.[135] It is possible that Miyazaki choose for Haku friendlier looks in order to establish a stronger connection with his audience, in large part children.

One aspect of Haku in particular resembles the very nature of the snake. His personality is at times cold and difficult to understand, some scholars and fan pages described him as a character with multiple personalities. As explained in chapter two, for Akinari humans should not pretend to be able to understand supernatural beings morals or nature.[136] As he wrote, *kami* cannot be judged with human values because they are simply not like us.[137] Therefore, our inability to fully comprehend Haku should not come be a surprise. He could be seen as an evil snake when he behaves coldly and egoistically, but also as a benevolent *kami* when he helps Chihiro. In the light of the distinction previously made between *kami* and *yōkai* by Foster, namely the fact that the first is object of worship and the second one not, it is very tricky to establish what Haku really is. However, Miyazaki never mentions *yōkai* during interviews, just *kami*. Furthermore, there is no clear religious message carried on in the movie, only popular folk beliefs without a clear belonging to Buddhism or Shinto, and so on. Haku's personality, that contradicts itself, is actually what brings him closer to the figure of the snake dragon identified in chapter two. He is a controversial being with a connection with a water body, sometimes benevolent and sometimes not, that because of his young age (if compared with the river god) makes mistakes and he is still growing, exactly like Chihiro does.

Another point of dis accordance with tradition is Haku's magic. During the movie, Haku rarely uses powers related to water, preferring spells and magic learned from Yubaba. This can be interpreted as a direct consequence of his memory's loss. Along with his name, Haku does not know where he comes from, the connection that he had with his river-home is lost and that can be the reason why he cannot not use his natural powers. This theory is even more effective if we compare Haku with the other river god in the movie. The river god, as already mentioned, appears for the first time in the shape of a stink spirit. He became that way because of all the garbage and pollution thrown in his river by humans, and he goes to Yubaba's spa in order to clean himself from all the dirt.

In an interview, Miyazaki himself explains that the river spirit scene is not inspired by mythology, it is actually a real life experience of the director: a river close to his house had to be cleaned, and

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135 Foster, Michael Dylan. 2015. *The Book of yōkai: Mysterious Creatures of Japanese Folklore*. p.87

136 Fessler, Susanna. "The Nature of the Kami. Ueda Akinari and Tandai Shoshin Roku." p.6

137 Ibid. p.6

Miyazaki saw (and smelled) all the garbage and waste that had accumulated on its bottom.[138] The cleansing process, exactly like in the movie, was hard and unpleasant, because of the huge amount of dirt accumulated.[139] The inspiration for the scene might not be mythological, but the same cannot be said for the river god himself.

The river god can be seen as simply an older and more powerful version of Haku, that can use is dragon powers (soon to be explained) because he is perfectly aware of what he is, even under the fat layers of pollution in which he was covered. In other words, he is a white dragon too, with a snake like shape and personification of a river. Again, the only anomaly is his face, but if Haku can have a canine face, why is it so weird that this other dragon too has a different one? In this case it appears as the face of an old man, possibly representing his age and the reason why he is so much more powerful. Another detail has not been noticed in any of the literature that I have read until now, namely the fact that the arrival of the river god, even though in his stink spirit form, is accompanied by a heavy rain that transform the whole valley in a sea the day after. It has been mentioned in the previous chapter how in East Asia there were many rituals that people could use to evoke rain, and all of them involved some kind of trick to lure the dragon out of his home-water body. It does make sense, in this way, that the river god brings heavy rain with him, and that Haku is not able to do the same because he simply does not remember that he can do that.

For many scholars, Haku and the unnamed river god represent Miyazaki's positions regarding the environment, who has at its foundation the idea that spirits exist "everywhere: in trees, rivers, insects, wells, anything. My generation does not believe this, but I like the idea that we should all treasure everything because spirits might exist there, and we should treasure everything because there is a kind of life to everything".[140] In Boyd's opinion, Haku embodies also Japanese traditional values.[141] His looks, clothes, way of speaking and manners, he claims, are all traditional and imbued with Shinto values.[142] It is difficult to state whether this is true or not, because Miyazaki never mentions a specific religious orientation but refers more to a general belief. Furthermore it is very unlikely that the director would consciously impose his own spiritual beliefs on children, especially after stating that despite the positive and optimistic message of his movies, he is a pessimist:

> 'In fact, I am a pessimist. But when I'm making a film, I don't want to transfer my pessimism onto children. I keep it at bay. I don't believe that adults should impose their vision of the world

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138 "Hayao Miyazaki." Interview by Tom Mes. Midnight Eye: Visions of Japanese Cinema.

139 Ibid.

140 Boyd, "Shinto Perspectives in Miyazaki's Anime Film "Spirited Away" p.8

141 Ibid. p.11

142 Ibid. p.11

on children, children are very much capable of forming their own visions. There's no need to force our own visions onto them.'[143]

In the end, dragons in Spirited Away are the representation of both nature and lost values. As Tai Wei Lim says, they are the embodiment of natural environment, mistreated and polluted to the point that we cannot recognize a river anymore, if the river is still in its place at all.[144] It seems that, saving dragons is a metaphor for the need that we have to save nature. Maybe, for Miyazaki, in order to mature, Chihiro has to pass this test and prove that she must be kind with all the creatures, even the muddy and stinky ones. Everything seem to suggest that the dragon in Spirited Away symbolizes nature itself and at the same time old and positive Japanese values, that, like Haku's name, have been forgotten.

4.3 Storytelling and New Media

In which way the two forms of storytelling are different through the example of snakes and dragons. Are they portrayed as *kami* or *yōkai*? What did Miyazaki chose to keep or change from the tradition?

Obviously, not even a genius artist like Miyazaki could possibly condensate all the myriads of folk beliefs present in Japan. In order to present a clear message and clear metaphors Haku could not represent all alone every belief connected to snakes and dragons. However the essence of these creatures is captured more effectively in Haku rather than in the river god. The idea of dragon that is represented, and ultimately passed on to present and future generations, is comprehensive of the most important beliefs that traditions attributes to dragons and snakes. In the new millennium, the dragon became a symbol of nature, still deeply connected with water, like in the past, but now more associated with rivers rather than seas or waterfalls. The Dragon King under the sea and Kiyohime, from *Urashima Taro*'s tale and the *Dōjōji legend*, are not even remotely hinted as possible sources for the development of Haku. This can be due to Miyazaki's visions, a river dragon, or generally a water spirit, was probably fitting better the message he wanted to send.

And this message has been perfectly understood by the vast majority of its audience. Even though, it is possible as Lim says, that "Miyazaki himself may personally hold respectful recognition of the importance of environmental conservation but does not intend to advocate any strong environmental

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143 "Hayao Miyazaki." Interview by Tom Mes. Midnight Eye: Visions of Japanese Cinema.

144 Lim "Spirited Away: Conceptualizing a Film-Based Case Study through Comparative Narratives of Japanese Ecological and Environmental Discourses." p.151-156

views and agendas", the message that the movie carried was understood by the audience anyway. Even if Miyazaki might have opted for neutrality, regarding his own views, environmental awareness is still perceived as one of the aims of the movie.[145] Furthermore, the movie has the ability to speak on both Japanese and global level.[146] A river spirit so polluted that became something completely unrecognizable can speak clearly to foreign audiences, and it does, as it is possible to see from the wikipedia pages created by fan of the movie, and their related forum, where they further discuss the issues that Miyazaki brought up. Surely. some of the fans are better informed than others, but Haku's character seems to spark a lot of discussion on what a dragon is, with some pretty confused Western fans that do not understand why he does not breath fire and other, sometimes, not so kindly, that explain the difference to them.

Therefore, the diffusion and international dimension that *anime* and *manga* have nowadays is exporting Japanese folklore also outside of the country. There is a tendency, in my opinion, towards the globalization of folklore, not just Japanese, but also Western. Supernatural beings, monsters and fantastic creatures, derived from different folklore traditions, are forming altogether a fraction of pop culture in which they all mix in a bubble of weird. Experts and scholars are, obviously, able to distinguish their provenance, but this is not necessarily the case for audiences with less specific knowledge. Therefore, manga and anime, as new forms of storytelling, are contributing to the globalization of Japanese culture.

Inside the country, modern storytelling that makes use of *manga* and *anime*, can reach pretty much everybody, a quality that oral storytelling did not posses. On the other hand, though, *manga* and *anime* tend to crystallize just few stories and in this way so many interesting local variants will eventually be lost or just accessible to scholars and researchers. That is also what happened to dragons and snakes: despite the huge role played by them in folklore, much of the dragon's figure debt toward snakes failed to be conveyed through *Spirited Away*.

145 Ibid. 158-159

146 Ibid. 158-159

Chapter Five

Conclusions

Old and new Japanese artists, with different medias and means, play with folklore. From Akinari, who re invents spooky stories inspired by already existing folk tales, to Toriyama Sekien's encyclopedias of the supernatural, until Miyazaki's many tributes to Japaneseness. *Spirited Away* represents a true and conscious masterpiece able to bond traditions and new generations together. This essay shows, through the example of dragons and snakes, how storytelling re invented itself during the course of the last century. Folk beliefs and stories are still transmitted, even though new media and historical changes allowed just the spreading of a smaller amount of them, and in a crystallized form.

To enjoy such stories and creatures it is not necessary anymore to believe in them. However, if we follow the arguments provided by Akinari and Foster, representing two steps of folklore studies, it is clear that to classify dragon and snakes as *kami* or *yōkai* is a little tricky. Akinari does not make any distinction between them, and uses just the word *kami* to refer to Japanese spirits and deities, while Foster argues that the distinction between them lies mainly in the presence or absence of worship. In this case, we can safely establish that, since snake worship is still very much alive, they fall under the definition of *kami*, even if the great fear that they generate may mislead interpretations.

While old storytelling generated hundreds of local variations of the same story, each available in their small area, new storytelling works with just the most famous versions but it is able to make them accessible to anybody at any given time. The multitude of beliefs connected to snakes and dragon have been channeled in the character of Haku and the River God, who now are carrying new meanings. These animals deep connection with the water element became the symbol of a mistreated natural environment, that as much as old traditions, is precious, fragile and under a serious threat.

In conclusion, in this new age, the deep connection between snakes and dragons, according to how they are portrayed in *Spirited Away*, is not so evident. Toyotama Hiko no Mikoto, the Abundant Pearl Prince, his daughter and their palace under the sea are not part of this new image of the

dragon, and even less is Kiyohime, with her madness and violent temperament. The only hint toward snakes in Haku is his ambiguous personality and the fact that his body resembles that of snake. What is still strong, though, is their connection with nature, water and weather. They are still shown as object of worship, and therefore as *kami*. They are still rain and river gods, elevated now to symbol of nostalgia, environmental awareness and positive Japanese values that Miyazaki wants to preserve and pass down to children raised in an otherwise empty modernity. *Manga*, and in this case *anime*, can be surely considered a new form of storytelling that, in hands like those of Miyazaki, can benefit the upbringing of new Japanese generations. In the context of folklore they are perfectly able to fulfill their 'teaching duties' and to inspire and amuse children that could otherwise remain, like Chihiro, dull and passive towards life.

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