Shinto in Spirited Away

Shinto in Miyazaki’s *Spirited Away*

The themes of the anime *Spirited Away* are a blend of selflessness, environmentalism, independence, and purifying the self. This blend of themes is the foundation for the main message of the film; the presence of Shinto is in people’s daily lives. Shinto, as it is known in Japan, is something like folk religion, with collected bits and pieces of beliefs, mythology, and spiritualism (Miyaji, 1966).

Simply explained, Shinto is a force that harmonizes the world and encompasses all of life, humans and nature alike. The manifestation of this power is called kami, and to experience this spiritual presence through the power of nature or a person, one has to be pure in heart and mind. Such a person is called kokoro. But kokoros are very rare, for an obvious reason: people who are pure are difficult to find (Boyd and Nishimura, 2004).

This film exemplifies Shinto and kokoro with its atmosphere and characterization. However, the complexity of the concept is not easily understood by those who are not familiar with Japanese culture or customs (Callis, 2010). There are many Shinto references in this film, and the director Miyazaki himself has acknowledged this. He has “very warm appreciation for the various, very humble rural Shinto rituals that continue to this day throughout rural Japan” (Boyd and Nishimura).

This Shinto perspective is a huge influence on the film and is the inspiration for many of its plot keys. An instance is the bathhouse for the kami. Cleaning, or purifying, the self is a huge supporting factor for the Shinto theme. Kami come to clean themselves in the bathhouse Chihiro labors in. But cleaning the self is not done just by the kami. It is also done figuratively by Chihiro. When she is riding on the back of recently-recovered Haku in dragon form, she has a flashback of her pink shoe lost in the river, and she is suddenly underwater on Haku’s back, and she appears to be naked. This could be taken as how Chihiro has been washed clean and purified by the river that is Haku, who as a boy guided her on the path of becoming a kokoro.

Our main character Chihiro is placed in a strange world where she has to change to adapt. If she retained the whiny, spoiled persona she had at the beginning of the movie, she would have been expelled from the bathhouse by Yubaba and doomed to wander as a fading spirit in this strange world (Cavallaro, 2006). So she is put to the test, both literally and figuratively. She falls in love with Haku, and that combined with hard work and new friends and determination to save her parents, all contribute to her new pure heart. Her selfishness has been lost, and she is transformed from a brat to a child who has empathy for others (examples include her actions for the soot balls and No-Face).

This is more than just character development; this is the essential core of Shinto. To experience joy at the spirituality of this world, one must have purity. However, Chihiro’s naivety at the concept of Shinto before she became spirited away (she did not know what the little shrines were before her mother explained they were for spirits) is representative of how modern society has forgotten about the spirituality of our world. This is shown by Chihiro’s behavior, which was sullen and whiny, before she purified herself by her actions. Her former behavior did not reflect or celebrate Shinto, but this is the state of the modern world because we have forgotten the existence of Shinto. To cleanse ourselves, we succeed in returning to our roots of spirituality. Miyazaki showed that with the episode of the Stink Spirit. The spirit was muddy, embedded with garbage and pollution, and weighed down to the ground. However, once it was washed clean, it was revealed to be a River Spirit that could float away. As well as reflecting Miyazaki’s environmentalism message, it also carries symbolism of our own state. We are weighed down with pollution of our own thoughts and actions, but once we purify ourselves, we can harmonize with nature again, and we will be able to know Shinto.

While the state of purity is needed for Shinto, we notice one thing while watching this film. No character seems to be consistently good or evil. Haku is an elusive being, unclearly defined. Rather, he is like murky waters; serving Yubaba but helping Chihiro, being gentle or rude whenever it suits him. Yubaba would be easy to point out as the villainess, yet her love for her son and the grudging way she shows respect for Chihiro are telling of her softer side. Chihiro’s mentor figure, Rin, is brash and insensitive, but she brings food for Chihiro and takes back her insult of calling her a dope. No-Face alternates between a terrifying figure that eats up people and a meek character that quietly helps Zeniba knit.

Those characters are authentic personas in how they are not clearly defined heroes or villains. Shinto is all around them, and yet they seem to be blind to its very existence, even as they serve kami. They remain petty and cruel and inconsistent, because that is the very nature of impurity. When Chihiro sits and eats the food Rin has given her and the water is raised to a high level and the sun is setting---it is a beautiful scene filled with a sense of spirituality. However, Chihiro is unable to appreciate this because she is too filled with misery and longing to save her parents and return to her familiar home. Even so, she is not evil for missing this. She is simply withdrawn to her own self rather than recognizing her power is called kami, and to experience this spiritual presence through the power of nature or a person, one has to be pure in heart and mind. Such a person is called kokoro. But kokoros are very rare, for an obvious reason: people who are pure are difficult to find (Boyd and Nishimura, 2004).

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