Hayao Miyazaki, Shinto and Environmentalism

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Abstract
Hayao Miyazaki (1941-) is arguably Japan's most successful and revered animator and screenwriter. It can be argued that three of his most iconic animations, *My Neighbor Totoro* (*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988), *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke-Hime*, 1997), and *Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, 2001), embody three unique variations of the human-spiritual-natural relationship. Respectively, the first animation starts from a highly utopian and idealized viewpoint of nature, the second from a confrontational standpoint between humanity and a spiritual version of nature, and the third from a process of human displacement and alienation from the natural world into the world of spirits. By intertwining his environmental concerns with his Shinto beliefs, Miyazaki aspires to artistically represent a harmonious way of cohabiting with nature. The best way to achieve this entails recognizing human dependence on the natural element, as well as developing a reverential and respectful attitude towards nature´s transience, attitudes that are historically imbued in Shinto praxis. This paper analyzes the Shinto references and allusions in these three works by Miyazaki, outlining three very distinct approaches to the complex relationship between spiritual belief and new environmental thought, to gain a richer understanding not only of Miyazaki's work and point of view but also of the pivotal role that spiritual belief and memory can play in promoting a new environmentally conscious way of living.

Keywords: Shinto, Nature, Idealization, Conflict, Alienation

Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki is a world-renowned Japanese artist. Three of his most acclaimed animations, *Tonari no Totoro* (1988), *Mononoke-Hime* (1997), and *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* (2001), encapsulate diverse spiritual beliefs and environmental concerns in their imagery and narrative, with numerous observable traits of Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion. This essay will focus on a comparative analysis of each film regarding the different human relationships with the surrounding nature. The aim is to map in more detail the different dynamics of the human-spiritual-natural triangular relationship.

My neighbor Totoro (*Tonari no Totoro*, 1988)

In his 4th film[1], Miyazaki intended to apply a «new method» and a «sense of discovery», avoiding «sentimentality» and focusing on «joy and entertainment» (Miyazaki, 1988). *Tonari no Totoro* tells the story of sisters Mei and Satsuki and their father, who move to an old house in a satoyama. Both sisters meet «fantastic creatures» that only they can see, like the eponymous character in the film, Totoro, through their organic, naturally curious relationship with the surrounding nature. This relationship motivates the exploration of hidden places containing a sacred/spiritual dimension, where the unknown stimulates their creativity. This creativity is, in turn, linked to the emergence and relationship with "creatures" inspired by the animist popular Shinto belief that designates them as *kami* (神), multiform spiritual entities venerated and intimately related to phenomena, landscapes, or forces of nature (Boyd & Williams, 2005).

There is a multitude of natural and spiritual phenomena treated as inseparable in this animation, serving to intimate Miyazaki's great concern in demonstrating that any boundaries between civilization and nature are never clearly outlined, but in a constant, overflowing relationship. As an example, a violent storm that frightens the family occurs early in the film. However, the storm fades and the *susuwatari* (harmless little house spirits) flee through the chimney, leaving the spectator unable to discern whether it was the result of the calmness of the storm or the fact that the family decided to provoke a fit of laughter amongst themselves, thus scaring away the little spirits. The ongoing correlation between human, natural, and spiritual phenomena fuels the film's holistic premise of human and natural interrelationships. As a result of this, it also becomes possible to uncover a causality: the spiritual dimension proliferates *from* the harmonious relationship between humanity and nature. This is the Shinto matrix that permeates the rural daily life portrayed in this film. The *kami*, who are part of nature, like humans and other animals, would be manifestations of *musubi* (結び, union/connection/combination), the interconnected energy of the universe, which animates and manifests itself through all beings and phenomena (Boyd & Williams, 2005).

This holistic premise feeds Miyazaki's utopian and nostalgic dimension concerning the rural world that, at the time of the film, was disappearing, as a consequence of the Japanese economic boom of the previous decades. It was notorious the nostalgic idealization that spread as a reaction to the potential loss of an ancient way of life that valued the relationship with the surrounding nature. As researcher Noriko Kawahashi describes it, Japan's «unique religiosity», rooted in an earlier folklore society, was undergoing «a radical transformation in the face of rapid industrialization and urbanization», and the richness of its diversity, from

[1] Miyazaki had directed, before *Tonari no Totoro*, *Lupine III: Cagliostro no Shiro* (1979), *Kaze no Tani no Naushika* (1984) and *Tenkū no Shiro: Laputa* (1986).

kami, *hayarigami,* and *mono*, are «clear spiritual manifestations of certain natural places considered sacred» (Kawahashi, 2005). However, as Kawahashi will later claim, it is a disservice to look back at such spiritual manifestations and to be tempted to reduce them to a social consequence of rural society. The Japanese *ethos* is not doomed to manifest itself depending solely on a rural framework. The uprooting of modern urbanization provoked a nostalgic and utopian counter-reaction in Miyazaki; specifically with *Tonari no Totoro*, he proceeded to create an idealization of rural life as a lifestyle harmoniously in contact with a placid version of nature. The use of animation and youthful protagonists becomes the ideal context to attenuate the message of holistic utopia and make it less doctrinaire, in order to focus on the «joy and entertainment» of the primordial discovery of natural elements during childhood. In this way, any claim to showcase environmentalist, naturalist, or spiritual concerns remains (still) secondary, blended in the background of a nostalgic narrative.

The explicitly religious manifestations in the film are reduced to the protagonists´ father taking them to an altar hidden under the huge camphor tree next to their house. This traditionally religious manifestation is not portrayed for doctrinal purposes. It serves as an illustration of a traditional practice of gratitude for the protection of the *kami*, in this case, the father who is grateful for the well-being and safety of his daughters. The detail of the camphor tree (Totoro's house) being surrounded by a *shimenawa* rope attests to the holistic dimension between nature and spirituality. Miyazaki´s interest resides in a popular cultural practice that manifests itself in people's daily lives. The utopian rural life he created in *Tonari no Totoro* is cooperative and community-based, devoid of doctrine and conflict, with a clear concern for the spiritual dimension that protects and values what is most sacred to man: his natural environment. The place where Totoro resides and first manifests to Mei is designated as sacred. It can be classified as a «well-structured and delimited space, which is seen as the residence of a deity» (Grapard, 1982). In Shintoism, concerning the place of residence of the divine, it is considered «both the specific object in which the divinity is present (a tree, for example) and the geographical unit in which that object is located, be it a sanctuary or not» (Grapard, 1982). For Totoro, the specific object from which it emanates is the camphor tree, the geographical unit being the surrounding forest.

Concerning the abilities of the *kami* Totoro, there is an episode that alludes to an ancient rural and religious practice. At one point, the protagonists receive a bag of seeds from Totoro, which leads their father to comment that «maybe they are magical». During the day, the sisters plant the seeds, complaining that they take too long to grow. At night, Totoro decides to go to the garden to perform what could be described as a rudimentary ceremonial dance. From the bedroom, the girls see him, get up and join him, continuing the dance, causing the first stems to sprout from the earth, growing to the size of an enormous tree, very similar to Totoro's camphor tree. A curious detail comes from this cooperation between a spiritual/imagined entity (Totoro) and the act of cultivation for personal use, which, in turn, represents an harmonious rural cooperation between the human and the natural. This representation allows recognition of human fragility and dependence on the natural element.

The Japanese term *satoyama*, applied to areas between mountain foothills and flat arable lands, is also associated with the maintenance of forests through local farming communities (Takeuchi et al., 2003). What is implied from this practice is a more sustainable way of exploiting the resources from the natural environment. At one point, the protagonist's father, witnessing the camphor tree's magnificence, comments that «a long, long time ago, trees and people were good friends». The allusion to an unspecific date reinforces the idealization of a time that does not exist, or that did not exist, but which the nostalgic factor idealizes and

sustains. The term «eco-nostalgia», put forth by Timo Thelen, may be suitable to describe *Tonari no Totoro´*s nature subtext because of the several allusions to an ecological, environmentalist, but also idealized lifestyle (Thelen, 2020). Japanese rural life was not as idyllic as that represented in *Tonari no Totoro*. However, through the filter of animation, the use of young characters, and the inherent lightness of the narrative, it is possible to make this harmonious version of rural life credible to the viewer, especially the younger and urban one, who has no experience of a previous rural past.

To conclude, the setting for this film originates from Miyazaki's recollections of pre-industrial Japan (*Showa* era), with which he nostalgically identifies various virtues and ecological attitudes. Any difficulties inherent to rural life were filtered through his childhood and his contemporary urban perception. In this film, it is the utopian harmony between humans and nature that gives rise to the spiritual dimension, which in turn imbues, celebrates, and protects the well-being of nature and humans. However, in the following film, such harmony between humanity and nature is questioned.

Princess Mononoke (*Mononoke-Hime*, 1997)

In this feature film, Miyazaki establishes an antagonism between industrial society and the natural environment. The protagonist, Ashitaka, contaminated by *Tsumi*[2] (罪, pollution caused by the violation of legal, social, or religious rules; usually used in a moral or religious sense), sets out in search of the source of this pollution and subsequent purification. This quest will take him to a sacred forest, where animals and various types of *kami* coexist, headed by a multiform *kami*, which at night takes the form of a giant *yōkai* (妖怪), similar to a *daidarabotchi* (ダイダラボッチ), and by day takes the form of an anthropomorphized deer. Years before the events of the story, the leader of a clan of dire wolves adopts a human child named San, nicknamed *mononoke-hime*, who grows up resenting humanity for its greed and violence against the forest she calls home.

The reference to San as *Mononoke* (物の怪 or もののけ), a term that designates both vengeful spirits and spirits known to possess individuals and make them suffer, causing illness and death (Kobayashi et al., 1986), serves to characterize San's liminal condition. The liminality lies in the fact that she belongs to the humanity that threatens the existence of the forest. San, as the title of the film alludes to, is a «princess of monsters», walking between worlds, a bridge between the world of the *kami* and nature, and between nature and the human world.

Opposite the sacred forest is the Iron City, led by Eboshi, responsible for its defense and the exploitation of the resources of the sacred forest. Eboshi established the Iron City as a haven for the dispossessed and outcasts where they, in exchange, helped produce iron and other resources to defend themselves from outside threats. Both the spectator and Ashitaka enter the conflict “forest against the city” *in media res*. However, Miyazaki does not place the two factions in a clear dispute of "good against evil". On both sides there are demonstrations of virtues and shortcomings, allowing the spectator to understand and empathize with different characters.

[2] Tsumi specifically refers to a broad and heterogeneous range of circumstances and actions: destroying agricultural works, inflicting injury or death [as is Ashitaka's case], scattering excrement, engaging in indiscriminate sexual relations, bestiality, leprosy, the falling of lightning, damage done by harmful birds, and the use of magic.» (Boyd & Williams, 2005)

There is an episode where Eboshi decides to shoot at a hill stripped of life, to drive away the forest *kami* responsible for the reanimation of that place. Miyazaki's environmental concern appears in these instances. He wants to show that, as a result of the endless exploitation of finite natural resources, a harmful predisposition begins to emerge in humanity towards nature. This predisposition entails detachment from the natural element, accompanied by an inability to perceive a core dimension of nature: its inherent mutability. The harmony with nature that Miyazaki seeks to convey comes from the serene recognition and acceptance of this mutability, of the processes inherent to the natural phenomenon: creation, maintenance, withering, and, above all, renewal. Eboshi´s bellicose actions showcase that she identifies the last natural process, that of renewal, as detrimental to the successful exploitation of natural resources. She is unable to understand the contradiction in which she put herself, that defending the perpetual extraction of natural resources implies the destruction of the capacity for self-renewal and sustainability of the natural environment from which she extracts the resources in the first place. Against this, Miyazaki decides to attribute agency and representation to the various animals and spirits in this forest. This is how a spiritual/natural counter-offensive is established against the *hubris* led by Eboshi and her city, seeking to expel men and their material interests from the forest where they live.

However, the viewer cannot help but empathize with the efforts of Eboshi, who struggles to build a refuge for people who were expelled from their societies, and would not have been able to survive in the wild natural environment. Given that the forest is not attacking, but defending itself from excessive exploitation, it seems that, if there is to be a change in mentality, it will have to be on the part of humanity. This is the point some critics claim contains a message of apocalyptic fatalism regarding the human condition: that it is necessary to prolong the conflict to the most brutal and deadliest dimension, so that, from the ashes, a renewed perspective can be born. Contrary to this apocalyptic argument, researcher Kristen Abbey argues that the conflict between humanity and nature «is an ongoing and insoluble part of the march of history», and those modern configurations that destroy natural beauty in the process, while immoral, are anything but apocalyptic (Abbey, 2015). Despite being a historicist and anti-apocalyptic argument, Abbey is pessimistic about the progressive creation of a society in total harmony with nature. By touching specifically on the Japanese relationship with the eventual erosion of the sacred natural space, Abbey argues that industrial society was «a necessary configuration in order to be able to free itself from feudal injustice towards modernity, idealized as a stronghold capable of social justice» (Abbey, 2015). The social justice emerging in industrial society, mirrored in *Mononoke-Hime* by the Iron City, would serve as a counterweight to the destruction and exploitation of nature. Abbey concludes that this work by Miyazaki offers no solution to such an imbalance.

Even so, we can advance a kind of intimation put forward in the final sequence of the film, that of raising a civilization that does not antagonize the nature on which it depends, but reciprocates what it receives from it, cohabiting in relative harmony. In Miyazaki's own words: «We need courtesy towards water, mountains, and air in addition to living things. We should not ask courtesy of these things, but we ourselves should give courtesy toward them» (DeWeese-Boyd, 2009). Nature, which does not show traits of human charity, provides conditions for humans to be able to show this charity to all other beings, given that Miyazaki «does not believe that the gods are found in temples, but in the depths of mountains and valleys» (Silva, 2019).

There are natural elements that bear more weight than others. Such is the forest in *Tonari no Totoro* and the water in *Mononoke-Hime*. There are countless instances when the lake hidden

in the depths of the forest is used as a place of purification of body and soul. When Ashitaka is accidentally shot, San takes him to the lake to be healed by the *Daidarabotchi*, who resides there. However, even after the wound is healed, the pollution (*tsumi*) received at the beginning of the film continues to spread through Ashitaka´s body, because his soul has not yet been purified. Thus, the pollution that manifests itself in the protagonist's body narratively merges with the human pollution that surrounds and interpenetrates the entire forest. The intention is to reinforce the deep connection that exists in the multidimensions of life, that is, *musubi*, the interconnected energy of the universe: if there is a dimension that suffers from some pollution, this will spread to all others. The curse will only be lifted at the end when Ashitaka and San return his severed head to the *Daidatarabochi*, a symbolic act to represent human retribution and gratitude to nature. The realization of such interdependence and interconnectedness allows Miyazaki to emphasize the impossibility of compartmentalizing personal, social, and ecological responsibilities. Any imbalance in one of these human dimensions «will trigger an imbalance in both the *kami* world and the natural world» (Rankin, 2010).

Unlike *Tonari no Totoro*, where only children can see *kami*, in *Mononoke-Hime*, all humans can see them. However, other than Ashitaka and San, no one else can understand them, reacting negatively to their manifestations. The Shinto concept of *Shinkai* (神界, "world of *kami*") may shed light on the appearance and traits of some *kami*. It is implied, by the comings and goings of the *kami* in the forest, the existence of other worlds, not only divine but also on earth itself (Yamakage et al., 2012). Contrary to popular belief, Shinto is not a strictly immanent religion. Shintoists believe in other worlds that unfold in an interrelationship with the natural world. This transboundary trend is reflected within the *Mononoke-Hime* narrative: the desire to impose clear distinctions between the forest and the human world is what ultimately causes the conflict. In addition, human appropriation of natural resources projects a certain passivity to nature, simultaneously eroding any dynamic spiritual connection that might spring from it. This passivity is antagonistic to Shinto belief, which attributes personality to natural elements such as rivers, mountains, and trees, as a way of painting a picture of a world full of vitality and agency. That is why the antagonism portrayed by Miyazaki, between an industrial society and a wild forest, proves to be the ideal premise for raising environmental concerns through a spiritual perspective. In turn, spiritual practices will then reflect admiration for the power to give and take life, encouraging a more harmonious and less exploitative way of acting toward nature. The irresolution of this conflict at the end of *Mononoke-Hime* will provide the ideal context for a role reversal of spiritual practices in the next film. Rather than being a consequence of human-nature harmony, spiritual practices in *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* will play an active role in the process of re-intertwining the human world and the natural world, thus offering a potential optimistic resolution to the conflict portrayed in *Mononoke- Hime*.

***Spirited Away* (*Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi*, 2001)**

Contrary to previous films, where *kami* visit the protagonist and interact with human beings, in *Spirited Away* we have the case of *kamikakushi* (神隠し), where *kami* are responsible for mysterious disappearances of people, abducted into the spiritual world (Reider, 2005). That is what happens to Chihiro, the ten-year-old protagonist who sees her parents turned into pigs by the sorceress Yubaba when she is transported from her world to the world of the *Kami*. In addition to losing her parents, Chihiro will also lose her name, reduced to Sen, hence the reference to the original Japanese title «Sen to Chihiro». Along this coming-of-age journey,

Chihiro will gain a broader understanding of nature and a respect for the powers of remembrance, friendship, and courage.

As in *Tonari no Totoro*, Miyazaki makes use of unpopulated places as symbolic threshold places, potentiators of youthful creativity. In this case, that use is directed towards the imagining of creatures capable of populating and reviving those places, where the human dimension inevitably gives way to the omnipresence of the natural element. The multidimensional ambiguity between the human and *kami* worlds is a trait that Miyazaki embodies in both Totoro's appearances and Chihiro's abduction. It is impossible to discern whether Chihiro's imagination "conjured" the *kami* world, whether she was abducted, or a combination of both. However, it is clear that the world where Chihiro is transported also appropriates details of the environment where Chihiro was abducted, from surrounding lakes to the infrastructure of the abandoned amusement park.

Chihiro is, at the beginning of the film, distrustful of the unknown and, when confronted with it, lets her imagination guide her negatively, filling her with emotions that discourage exploration and adventure. Before the abduction, Chihiro is startled by the presence of a peculiar statue. This is a *Dosojin* (道祖神), an «ancestral deity of the road» who guards borders and roads, and protects travelers in «transitional stages» from catastrophes or evil spirits (Schumacher). This statue marks the beginning of the state of transition to the *kami* world, as well as the idea of safeguarding against imminent danger. Miyazaki applies it to intimate the kind of spiritual journey Chihiro will embark on.

Within the world of the *kami*, Chihiro appears in a Sentō (銭湯), a community public bathing establishment where, as the owner Yubaba says, millions of *kami* come to purge themselves. The fact that humans and *kami* need purification rituals involving the element of water as an agent to remove pollution attests to the binary dimension that the concept of purification entails in Japanese popular tradition: it serves both to purify the body and the spirit. In Miyazaki's own words: «[I have] a very warm appreciation for the various humble rural Shinto rituals that continue to this day throughout rural Japan», citing the solstice rituals, when villagers call all local *kami* and invite them to take a bath in their public bathing establishments (Boyd & Nishimura, 2005). The intention would be, again, the harmonization with the natural and spiritual elements.

A curious detail unfolds when the character Haku, a river guardian *kami*, tries to comfort and energize Chihiro, placing a strengthening spell on the *onigiri*. This act of kindness by the *kami* also establishes a relationship between them, one of gift and retribution, thus mirroring the Shinto relational matrix between the believer and the *kami*. This relational matrix will, in turn, be applied throughout the friendships that Chihiro makes during the course of the narrative. Chihiro will eventually reciprocate the help Haku gives her at the beginning of the film; Yubaba's twin sister, Zeniba, repays Chihiro for returning an item that belonged to her; Chihiro returns the son to Yubaba unharmed, and in return, her parents are returned to her; Chihiro saves a *kami* from the river, polluted by human hand and, in exchange, receives an antidote that allows her to help other *kami*. Knowing how to play this game of exchanges is the only way for Chihiro to thrive in the *kami* world, save her parents and return to her world.

What Miyazaki wants to make explicit is that it would be possible to transfer this type of relationship and apply it to all types of relationships, not exclusively spiritual ones. We can apply the concept of *musubi* here, as the conceptual origin of the type of relational game that Chihiro plays during her stay in the *kami* world. *Musubi* is not just a concept that evokes the

vague idea of interconnection between all entities, elements, and dimensions; according to researcher Aidan Rankin, it is mainly about the «observation of patterns in nature, which affect the structures of human society and the relationship between humanity and *kami*» (Rankin, 2010). Rankin also makes a parallel with the Buddhist karmic concept, explaining that a possible heuristic could be the idea that *karma* is more cerebral and *musubi* more intuitive. The idea of accumulating good *karma* as opposed to negative *karma*, combined with the indigenous concept of *musubi*, promotes spiritual unity, harmony, and balance towards the idea of *kannagara-no-michi* (神ながらの道, the way of the *kami*) (Rankin, 2010).

In contrast to the two previous films, elements of magical metamorphoses are introduced, visible in different *kami*, which come from various references to mystical Shinto practices of conjuration and divination. We can speculate its relationship with the concept of *kotodama* (言霊, spirit/soul), a term referring to the Japanese belief that mystical powers reside in words and names. The popular idea is that sounds could affect objects and influence the environment, body, mind, and soul (Teruyoshi). This reference becomes more relevant from the moment in the film when Chihiro, upon signing a work contract with the sorceress Yubaba, loses ownership of her name, reducing the kanji of her name to Sen. The intention is to take full possession of Chihiro, making her a stripped-down version of herself and everything she considers part of her identity: her name, her family, environment, and community in which she was a part.

The notion of identity in a rural and spiritual setting is vastly different from the notion of identity in an urban setting, where the idea of community and interdependence moves from essential to optional. The film begins with Chihiro and her parents moving into a new house near a forest and an abandoned amusement park. Chihiro, saddened by the change and loss of friends, school, and old house, does not accept such a change. The subsequent spiritual transformation that Chihiro undergoes throughout her journey in the *kami* world will bring an awareness that relationship efforts have to be constantly carried out by the person, regardless of where they are or where they come from. The purpose of *Spirited Away* is, among other things, to put forth a renewed concept of identity, more as a continuous relational and social process and less as an internal individual idealization. Thus, the best way to raise such an identity and establish a fruitful relationship with the environment and with the *kami* is through the Shinto matrix of gifting and retribution implied throughout the film. This sense of identity is rooted in the rural communities that Miyazaki treasures and manifests through his films.

The fact that it is Chihiro who remembers the real name of Haku, the multiform *kami* of the river who saved her from drowning when she was a baby, showcases the preferred channel for maintaining sacred spiritual roots with natural spaces. The act of naming natural spaces, erecting altars, praying, and thanking *kami* and nature, all these activities implicitly intertwine the believer with the space, sacralizing it. The act of remembering in *Sen to Chihiro* serves as a catalyst that will lead the characters to recover the most important things they lost; remembering is an act that stimulates future agency and encourages action and a positive change of outlook towards life, and not something that induces the kind of negative emotional states that we associate with Chihiro before the abduction. The distinction between different types of memory is of great importance, as it reinforces the importance of artistic expression as a channel for manifesting memories, in a creative and positive way.

Conclusion

The different dynamics presented by Miyazaki in the analyzed films translate, respectively, into the idealization, confrontation, and alienation of the human relationship with the natural and spiritual aspects.

In *Tonari no Totoro*, human idealization and imagination seem to be the ideal ingredients for an opening up to the surrounding nature; imagination appropriates all phenomena and events and encourages the emergence of a harmonious relationship with nature. As a result, spiritual manifestations spring from this harmonious, albeit idealized interaction.

Mononoke-Hime places its protagonists in the middle of a conflict between the world of men and the world of *kami*. Miyazaki explicitly introduces environmentalist concerns to demonstrate the compatibility between these concerns and Shinto spiritual beliefs. Another intention is to demonstrate the state of liminality: contrary to what everyone involved in the conflict assumes, any clear boundaries between worlds are mere illusions. All natural phenomena overflow and influence the course of humanity and the *kami*.

Finally, *Sen to Chihiro no Kamikakushi* places its protagonist in a state of total alienation, removing her from the familiar world to a bizarre, unknown, and volatile world towards humans. Miyazaki masterfully inverts human and spiritual relationships in this animation: those placed in a bleak world, are not the *kami*, but the humans. This reversal seeks to encourage the viewer to relate in a more affable and reverent way to natural and, by extension, spiritual phenomena. In theory, such an act of reverence would mitigate our materialistic relationship with nature and move closer to the kind of balanced relationship that Shinto promotes.

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