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# DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of examination for the BA (Hons) in Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institute.

Signed 

# Abstract

This thesis will visually analyse the portrayal of myth and culture in animated media. Focusing on *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001), *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997), and *Avatar The Last Airbender* (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2005). An analysis of these works examines how folklore, culture and historical context contribute to the visual design and story.

I aim to explore the visual implementation of myth within Miyazaki's films. This investigates how Miyazaki's influences with his connection with Japanese folklore, culture and history are subtly integrated into his works. *Spirited Away* highlights certain aspects of Japanese folklore and culture, through the designs of the spirits and their world. I study these designs whilst applying theories I have learned through my research.

*Princess Mononoke* presents history through the lens of fantasy. Touching on themes of greed, industrialisation, and nature, the film captures the conflict of the Emishi tribe and their struggles.

I shift my focus to *Avatar The Last Airbender*, describing the cross-cultural influences of mainly Asian, Inuit, and Indigenous cultures. The analysis focuses on the visual features throughout the show ranging from martial arts, geography, clothing, and religious symbolism. I connect these visual features to their cultural influences, aided by a diverse range of sources.

Finally, I draw parallels between *Princess Mononoke* and *Avatar The Last Airbender*, highlighting how both works bear a resemblance when it comes to the design of some scenes. I make connections between the film and the show, demonstrating theories from my research to bridge the gap between the two forms of media.

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# Introduction

The retelling of myths and legends through animation has always fascinated me. Growing up watching films by Disney and Studio Ghibli, has always drawn me to the way animation breathes life into stories. I vividly remember watching *Ponyo* (Miyazaki, 2008) for the first time at my best friend's house. This film left a lasting impression on me as I yearned for more films that had the same atmosphere and energy.

As I continued to explore animated media, I became intrigued by how myths are adapted into successful visual stories. *Ponyo* (2008), for instance, is a reinterpretation of *The Little Mermaid* (Clements & Musker, 1990), yet distinct due to Miyazaki's vivid imagination, in addition to Studio Ghibli's unique style of animation. This film is successful in merging a classic myth with artistic expression, which makes it such a successful film.

This thesis aims to examine the use of myth and culture in influencing visual storytelling in animated media. *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001) implements Shinto beliefs and Japanese folklore, creating a visual story rich in symbolism. *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997) weaves Japanese history and folklore, particularly in the deception of the Emishi tribe and Japanese spiritualism. *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2005) takes a cross-cultural approach, blending East Asian and Indigenous cultures and traditions, to create an expansive fictional universe. By analysing these works, I aim to understand the root of inspiration for these pieces of media, and how it influences and is used as a tool to enhance the visual narrative and worldbuilding.

This analysis is structured into three chapters, each addressing a specific aspect of the key themes I mentioned above. Chapter one will describe mythic symbolism and historical influences within *Spirited Away* and *Princess Mononoke*, and how it is relevant to the visual narrative and success as a film. Chapter two will engage the world of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, evaluating how it integrates cross-cultural influences to craft an original world. Chapter three brings together the discussion of each case study, finding similarities and differences within each piece of media.

The use of animated media is interesting to me as it serves a different way of preserving stories, cultural traditions and history. This form of media uniquely engages the audience. As a form of expression for the mind, it brings a unique visual quality which is different from other mediums like live film, theatre and paintings. The limitations are different to those kinds of media which is why I believe myth and fantasy translate so well in animation. The pieces of media I will discuss demonstrate this unique quality within animation, as well as the inspiration and influence behind the production of these works.

## Chapter 1 – Case Study of *Spirited Away*

Each piece of media I have chosen relates to the criteria of myth, culture, and history. While still a piece of fiction, they stand out to me due to their real-life influences. Take *Spirited Away* (2001), follows the heroes' journey, which is a popular trope in many media, but it also takes inspiration from Japanese folklore and beliefs. The title itself is a subject of interest as translated from Japanese 'being hidden by the gods' this refers to the realm Chihiro (the main protagonist) enters through the tunnel (Osmond, 2020, p.11). This symbolism of the tunnel leading to another world has been interpreted differently. In this case, it is the Japanese belief of the tunnel leading to the spirit world.

This film is similar in narrative to other pieces of fiction, notably Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) (Osmond, 2020, p.8). While alike Miyazaki takes a much more unique approach with his influence from his own experience and heritage, that being Japanese culture and history. Much of the symbolism in this film has ties to Shinto beliefs. The first encounter of Shinto symbolism within the film is the old Torii on the side of the road signifying the gateway to the realm of gods. Chihiro and her parents do not enter this torii gate, instead they enter a tunnel further on. They encounter Dosijin which are usually stone statues that signify boundaries and protect travellers on their journey to the Ikai, which means the world of the spirits (Okuyama, 2015).





*Fig 1. Dosijin statue, Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*

While passing through the tunnel and abandoned train station, Chihiro and her parents walk into a town adorned with bright and vivid colours. While her parents gorge on food Chihiro finds herself wandering this new world. Chihiro encounters a large structure resembling what looks like an onsen. An onsen meaning hot spring/water, are bathhouse, a communal place to cleanse the body (StoryDive, 2019). As she makes her way back to her parents, the village begins to light up with shadow spirits appearing within the buildings. In Japanese folklore kami or spirits are not visible to the human eye unless they take the form of trees or other aspects of nature (StoryDive, 2019). Here these shadow spirits most resemble the notable yokai/spirits in Japanese folklore, which are spirits and entities described in many old stories.

Some of the spirits she encounters like the Kasuga, wearing strange masks and Sokutai which is traditional clothing worn by nobility. They are named after one of the Shinto shrines in the Nara prefecture, in this area there is a traditional dance called 'Ama' which is performed at the shrine. In this ritual, dancers wear masks called 'Zoumen' which are like the ones worn by the Kasuga spirits (StoryDive, 2019).



Fig 1.2. Zoumen Mask.



Fig 1.3. Spirits with Zoumen mask, *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001)



Fig 1.4. Chihiro eats the fruit to stay tangible. *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001)

Chihiro finds herself fading from this world as she is not of this world. Haku, the boy from earlier, finds her and comes to her aid. Haku insists she eats a berry from this world so that she will not vanish. Her parents may have turned to pigs, but this principle is the same, her parents gorged on food, became gluttonous and a part of this world. Unlike Chihiro who did not eat she begins to fade and eventually vanish until she eats the berry. This concept is familiar in many other stories, most notably the Japanese story of creation. It is said that when Izanami was sent to the underworld. Her husband Izanagi an attempt to retrieve her fails, as Izanami has already eaten food from this realm binding her to this place (Okuyama, 2015, p.104). This is also reminiscent of the Greek myth of Persephone eating pomegranate seeds, constraining her to the underworld during the winter months (Naskar, 2017 p.10). While the situation differs, the concept remains



the same. It is unknown if Miyazaki made this connection but it is worth noting as the resemblance in ideas is striking.

Chihiro returns to her physical form again. They make haste back towards the bathhouse. Visually the design of the building and bridge is heavily inspired by the Japanese castles, and onsens (bathhouses) (Osmond, 2020, p.61). The similarities in architectural style, from the bright red bridge to the grand stature of the building. It is clear inspiration was taken from these buildings in addition to Miyazaki's vivid imagination.



*Fig 1.5. Aburaya Bathhouse, Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*



*Fig 1.6. Image of Kiyosu Castle*



*Fig 1.7. Chihiro and the Radish Spirit. Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*

Chihiro gains Kamaji's approval and is sent upwards to make a deal with Yubaba to ensure her safety. Escorted by a spirit named Lin she makes her way to Yubaba's quarter located on the topmost floor of the Onsen. She encounters many different spirits of all kinds and shapes. One spirit grows suspicious of Lin escorting Chihiro and is questioned sharply, Lin distracts the other spirit and Chihiro makes her way up the elevator guided by the radish spirit (StoryDive, 2019) also known as 'Oshira-Sama' (Hiroshi, 2024). This spirit is a real deity in Shinto belief, guardian of agriculture and silkworm production. We can see that the spirits of this world are their own beings, in this case, Lin looks after and supports Chihiro which can be signified as a 'good spirit'.



*Fig 1.8. Chihiro meets with Yubaba, Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*



Chihiro finally meets with Yubaba, the owner of the bathhouse which is named Aburaya. She strikes a deal with Yubaba to get a job allowing her to stay in this world. With a contract signed Yubaba steals characters of Chihiro's name leaving only Sen, Yubaba gains power and control over the names she steals. Yubaba's ability and design are very reminiscent of Baba-Yaga, the old Slavic folklore of the forest witch. Yubaba is also like Yamauba in Japanese folklore, described as an 'old hag and witch of the Japanese Mountains,' these witches resort to trickery and magic to trap and eat their victims. The likeness between this description of Yamauba fits the characteristics and design of Yubaba in *Spirited Away* (StoryDive, 2019).



Fig 1.9. Yamauba depictions.



Fig 1.10. Arrival of the 'stink spirit', *Spirited Away* (Miyazaki, 2001)

The arrival of the stink spirit challenges Chihiro to cleanse the filth that has accumulated on the spirit. While trying to bathe the spirit Chihiro encounters a stick protruding from the spirit, Yububa rallies the bath workers to help Chihiro and Lin pull this stick out. This causes a domino effect of items and junk to be released from the spirit. This aspect was based on Miyazaki's own experience cleaning the river near his home (Mes, 2019). Chihiro sees the spirit's true form, presented as an Okina mask (This is described as a wise old man) from Japanese theatre (StoryDive, 2019).



*Fig 1.11. 'Stink spirit' true form, Spirited Away (2001) Hayao Miyazaki*



*Fig 1.12. Okina mask, from Japanese Theatre*

The spirit leaves in the form of a water dragon, signifying that it is a river spirit. In Japanese folklore, a serpent dragon symbolises the forces of nature like rain, storms, and the sea (Okuyama, 2015, p.127) Here the rain leaves with the river spirit further representing this concept. Earlier I described the river spirit leaving junk behind, that junk could have represented the pollution it may have faced over the years. This concept. Earlier I described the river spirit leaving junk behind, that junk could have represented the pollution it may have faced over the years. Earlier I described the river spirit leaving junk behind, that junk could have represented the pollution it may have faced over the years.



*Fig 1.13. The 'stink spirit' in dragon-like form leaves the bathhouse, Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*

After the celebration of liberating the river spirit of its pollution, the bathhouse is faced with the hungry spirit of No Face. No face appears several times in the movie but this time as a customer of the bathhouse with an insatiable hunger. Many of the bathhouse workers feed no face to be showered with gold ingots. Things take a turn for the worst when no face in response to Chihiro's rejection begins consuming the spirits at the bathhouse. No face's is an original design by Miyazaki. It changes its form based on the environment that it is in. No face in the bathhouse becomes greedy and gluttonous, resembling the characteristic of 'Gaki' (hungry Ghosts) in Japanese folklore. These spirits are forever hungry, and it is said that this form is a sin from a past life (Yokai). No face becomes an allegory for greed as its desire to lure the workers in with more money causes it to consume (Naskar, 2017, p.10). No face is shown to grow larger and devour the bathhouse workers.





*Fig 1.14. No face growing due to greed Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*



*Fig 1.15. Haku (in his dragon form) is attacked by paper dolls. Spirited Away (Miyazaki, 2001)*

Chihiro encounters Haku's spirit from being a dragon, signifying he is a river spirit. Being attacked by paper dolls resembles a Shikigami which is conjured by its master to perform their bidding (Okuyama, 2015). Chihiro defends Haku from the barrage of attacks but departs soon after to find Yubaba. Chihiro finds Haku injured and beaten as he meddles with Yubaba's sister Zeniba. Haku is dying due to the charm he stole from Zeniba, saved by Chihiro by giving him the gift of the river spirit. This reverses the spell returning to its humanlike form, spells and



magic in Japanese folklore are often depicted through talismans, characters on a medium or rituals. Haku is under the submission of Yubaba due to his name being stolen. Only when Chihiro recites his full name does he remember, and the spell is broken, releasing him from Yubaba's control.

*Spirited Away* is a fantastical movie with Japanese myth embedded throughout. Providing a unique and mystical view of Japanese myth and folklore we see unique design throughout the movie. Highlighting the mythic symbolism of the movie was intriguing as we can see where Miyazaki may have taken inspiration for many of his characters and designs. Analysing the movie and making connections between certain characters allowed me to further understand the mythical symbolism behind the designs. While many of the kami and spirits in this movie took inspiration from Japanese folklore, I found these spirits to be friendly and appealing, providing a unique perspective into Japanese folklore. The movie also challenges the Western view of good vs evil as no character in the movie is outright evil. Chihiro follows the heroes' journey in self-healing and discovery, helping the spirits of this world rather than the common troupe of 'defeating an evil.' I enjoyed this different approach to the 'heroes' journey,' using Japanese myth and folklore.

## Chapter 2 - A Case Study of Princess Mononoke

Another film which I would like to explore and discuss is *Princess Mononoke* by Studio Ghibli directed by Hayao Miyazaki. Historically the movie is based in the late Muromachi period of Japan (Okuyama, 2015, p.118). Ashitaka the main protagonist of the movie portrays the Emishi who were an ancient ethnic group of people who lived in part of Honshu, in the Tohoku region. The movie is also inspired by Shinto beliefs and Japanese folklore. The movie is mainly a fictional, fantasy-themed movie but discusses motifs related to real beliefs, cultures and history.



Fig 2.1. First encounter with the deer god, *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997)

In this image we see a creature with light emitting from behind, casting a shadowed figure in the form of a deer. This illustrates the creature being otherworldly, in other words, something out of a myth. I chose this image because of its effect on both the viewer and the protagonist. Visually this scene highlights the mystical element of the film. I found myself watching this movie for the first time thinking I was immersed in it. It was fantasy yet done in a way where you felt you were in the world of *Princess Mononoke* itself. We see that Shinto beliefs heavily inspire the characters and their design.

I want to highlight the myth aspect of the film and work of Miyazaki. The deer God we see highlights the life of the forest, which is illustrated through its interaction with the character and environment. Miyazaki's ability to transform environments into a character can be seen within this film. The image highlights the unique design through the silhouette. The scene where the image is extracted puts an

emphasis on the relationship between nature and humanity, as our protagonist Ashitaka encounters the deer god for the first time. Using this scene was key in highlighting the main theme of my thesis. Miyazaki balances both the written and visual aspects of worldbuilding. This balance brings cohesion and substance to his film allowing the audience to connect to the character and story. I find that the traditional element of animation aids in the visual storytelling of the movie. Hence, why this scene is so impactful as it highlights the craftsmanship of good storytelling in the visual form.

Many scenes within this movie highlight this and describe different themes. Such as the forest taking the form of 'Daidarabotchi', the colossal form which the kami takes when beheaded by the leader of the iron town. This is another example of Miyazaki taking inspiration from Japanese folklore. 'In conceptualizing the image of Shishi-gami (Deer God), the supreme deity among the spirit characters, he consulted the legends of a giant named Deidarabocchi, also known as Dada-boshi' (Okuyama, 2015, p.112).

Going deeper into the meaning of the movie we find ourselves looking at many different themes being highlighted. The main one is humanity and its relationship with the natural environment. This film illustrates this concern by using a point of conflict whereby the humans (irontown) are at war with the gods and spirits from the forest. We find Ashitaka's pure heart with a strong principle of justice (Yoshiko Okuyama 2015) becoming the mediator between the two points of conflict. We see this through his interaction between San (Princess Mononoke) and the Ironton. This conflict is based on the account of the Emishi tribe's resistance to the Yamato Imperial Family's expansion from west to east (Okuyama 2015).



*Fig 2.2. San with the wolf god Moro, Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, 1997)*

The presentation of the movie showcases an array of unique designs and a strong use of visual

storytelling. I appreciate how the creatures and character designs are both visually striking and memorable while also enhancing the storytelling. We see intuitive designs like San who wears clothing similar to the wolf god she is accompanied by. San matches the wildlife and characteristics like movement akin to wolves. Her wolf-like mane is an homage to the wolf god she was raised by. Her design visually tells the story of a child raised by the forest and its inhabitants; it takes inspiration from the wild child motif. San represents the side of humanity that embraces nature, in contrast to the people of Irontown disconnected from nature (Ritvik, 2020b). The visual designs amplify the contrasts between the Irontown's drive towards technology and Sans's acceptance of nature and spirits. This contrast also highlights the conflict between the Emishi tribe and Imperial rule (Okuyama 2015)



*Fig 2.3. Lady Eboshi vs San, surrounded by Irontown inhabitants, Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, 1997)*

This movie and many other movies became significant as Miyazaki had the desire to bring light to Japanese folktales, especially targeted towards the youth in aims to preserve tradition. As stated by Okuyama, 'He felt compelled to preserve the magic of storytelling using the fantasy world of anime. In his view, the traditional tales such as Kachi-katchi Yama (Fire-Crackle Mountain) and Momotaro (Peach Boy) are no longer convincing to children' (Okuyama, 2015, p.99). This resolve to preserve something traditional is an integral part of culture as we all have the urge to leave our mark or our legacy. I think Miyazaki has been successful in his mission as not only do we get visually stunning films, but also deep cultural and historical context based on traditions, experiences and a vivid imagination. The success of the movie has made many works mainstream and allows for conversations to arise.

*Princess Mononoke* highlights the portrayal of myth through its unique animation style and deep connection to Japanese folklore and beliefs, as well as historical influences such as the Emishi tribe. Miyazaki with his work illustrates the importance of preserving tradition and culture. He does this through stunning visual storytelling with his characters and landscapes.

## Chapter 3 – Cultural Influences within Avatar the Last Airbender

Like *Spirited Away*, *Avatar the Last Airbender (ATLA)* (DiMartino & Konietzko, 2005) draws heavily on inspiration from a wide variety of real-world cultures. This not only creates a unique setting but also provides exposure and representation of cultures around the world. ATLA encompasses a unique blend of cultures to bring forth its imaginary world. *Spirited Away* and *ATLA* emerged when Western audiences and industries became far more receptive and open to stories embedded with Eastern traditions and values. I would say that both would contribute to the increase in Asian and Indigenous cultural representation in the Western world.

In my analysis of *Spirited Away*, I discussed the mythic symbolism behind the movie and its cultural ties to Japanese traditions and folklore. With this analysis, I wish to highlight more the cultural influences within the world of *Avatar*, its magic system based on Chinese martial arts as well as many of the visual designs based on diverse cultures, customs and traditions. The premise behind the show is complex and unique so I shall do my best to discuss this in relation to my thesis.

The main idea I wish to discuss is the unique handling of cultural representation within the show. The show takes many influences from East Asian, South Asian, and Inuit cultures, as well as the philosophy and religions associated with these regions and cultures. My goal is to investigate the visual influence on the show and dive deeper into specific cultures and semiotics behind the characters and the world of ATLA.

The initial development of the show was very different to the outcome of the show. But it is interesting how the show's creators were big fans of Hayao Miyazaki and took inspiration from his works. The show was a culmination of everything they loved as stated 'We made the show out of everything we loved, pulling from our interests in Asian cultures and philosophies, traditional martial arts, yoga anime, Hong Kong cinema to create our own mythology' (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020), it was clear the influences for the world and characters as stated from the creator himself. Early development of the show was mainly focused on the characters based around the concept of 'the four nations'.

## The Air Nation



*Figure 15. Air Nation territory is highlighted in yellow, a map of the four nations.*



*Fig 3.1. Aang (air nomad clothing).*



*Fig 3.2. Dalai Lama, Tenzion Gyatso*

Aang was the first realised character design. His development led to the idea of a war-torn world in need of balance, this is where Aang came into play as he represented the Avatar. The creators stated that in their research they found the Hindu word Avatar (the manifestation of a deity in human form). This fit the idea they had for Aang being the deity that restores balance to the world. 'we saw a DVD of a Shaolin: Wheel of Life performance, in which Shaolin monks performed kung fu. In it there was an adorable kid about eleven or twelve years old, doing the most insane acrobatics. We both turned to each other and said, "That's Aang!"'. (Dimartino and



Konietzko, 2020). It is clear the character Aang is based on the monks inspired by Tibetan and Buddhist cultures, taking after their visuals and principles.

To discuss Aang further we must first understand the cultural inspiration behind his design. Within the four nations, Aang fits into the air nation also known as 'air nomads'. Aang and his people live a nomadic lifestyle modelled after the Tibetan and Buddhist monks. This can be seen visually within Aang's clothing and appearance, they pay a clear homage to the Tibetan monks closely matching their colours as well as their shaved heads.

Beyond that the air nomads are attributed to their pacifist nature, choosing to avoid conflict as well as following a vegetarian diet. This is very similar to the Buddhist philosophy of treating all life as sacred, even down to the little ant they harm no life, it is tied to the belief of karma that a balance of good and bad karma would allow the person to ascend into nirvana. One of the characters Uncle Iroh describes the air as the element of freedom, air nomads detach themselves from worldly and earthly concerns ('Bitter Work'). This is like the ideology in Buddhism whereby reaching nirvana requires one to live a simple life away from earthly attachments.

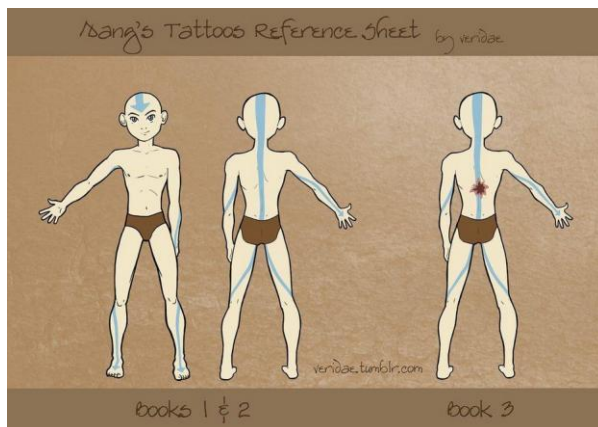


Fig 3.3. Air Nomad tattoos.

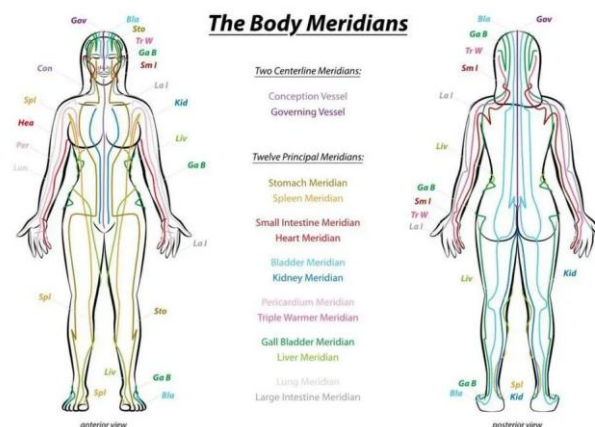


Fig 3.4. Meridian chart /Qi pathways

Certain aspects of the air nomads like their tattoos are unique to the show as they are a creative choice inspired by a real concept. These tattoos are given to airbenders who have complete mastery over the element and extreme skill. These arrows follow the natural 'chi' (the energy that follows within living beings) path that is well-known in Chinese medicine. These chi paths are also known as chakras within Hinduism.



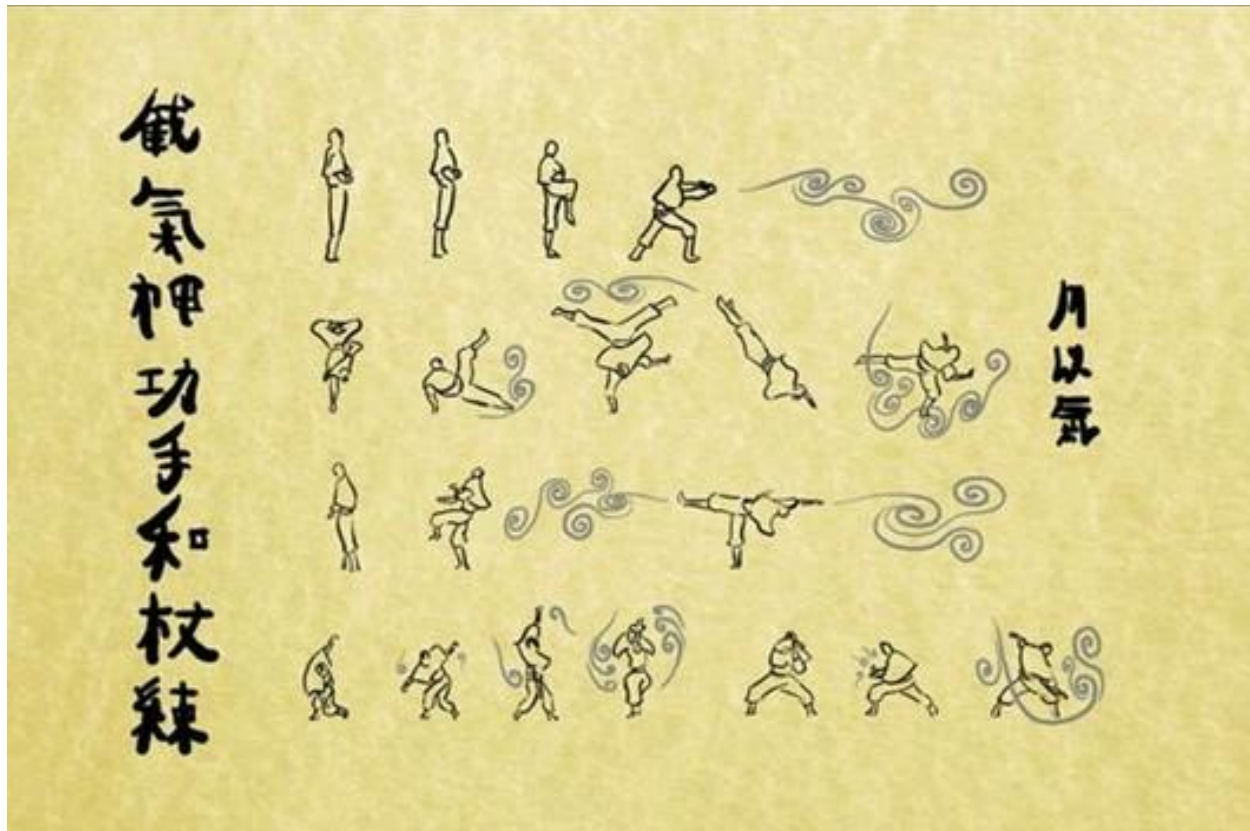


Fig 3.5. Airbending forms.

Regarding air-bending itself, this is an aspect of the unique magic system I mentioned before. The creators of the show's original idea were to base the characters around certain elements (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). The forces by which they controlled these elements were different, as they were closely modelled after specific Chinese Martial arts. Airbending was closely inspired by Baguazhang, known for its circular and evasive movements which matched with the air nomads' preferred style of movement. The creators and team worked closely with a martial arts consultant 'Sifu Kisu' (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). This gave the movements to bending another layer of depth. It was he who came up with the elements of their respective martial art.

We follow Aang's spiritual journey as both the avatar and an air nomad. There are certain points in the show where Aang is conflicted between his beliefs and his duty as their avatar. In the episode '*The Southern Air Temple*' Aang finds himself within the ruins of his people, Aang now deals with the fact of being the last living air nomad which is a theme he deals with throughout the three seasons of ATLA. The episode '*The Northern Air Temple*' showcases the spiritual conflict Aang feels about his people. Aang and his gang encounter a group of settlers who have made

the abandoned air temple their home. Throughout the episode, Aang feels a sense of disrespect that this once-sacred temple is being used in certain ways, such as machines being installed among sacred statues. This highlights Aang's strong spiritual belief but also his duty to the people of this world as the avatar. Having such real-world beliefs gives a sense of realism to Aang's internal conflict, adding depth to him as a character.

### The Water Tribe



*Fig 3.6. Water tribe settlements are highlighted in blue, a map of the four nations.*



*Fig 3.7. The water tribe siblings Katara and Sokka, are in water tribe clothing.*

Katara and Sokka are siblings from the Southern Water Tribe, who found Aang suspended in an iceberg with his animal companion Appa. This is the setting for the first episode of the show. The siblings and their inspiration can be found within Inuit and indigenous cultures whose climate is

similar to that of the southern water tribes. We can see that in relation to their environment, the Inuit and water tribe people wrapped in warm fur-like clothing have adapted to living in such harsh cold climates. This is a tight-knit community as relying on each other's help could mean life or death. We can also see that hunting and gathering is a part of their everyday life. Another aspect similar to Inuit and indigenous culture is their connection with spirituality. Within the water tribe, their belief in the ocean and moon spirit is due to their connection to the element of water. Their bending is stronger at night and during a full moon, this further strengthens their belief and spirituality in these natural forces. In many indigenous cultures the spiritual connection to natural forces like the moon, sun, nature, waves and rain can be seen across many cultures and traditions – the ancient Mayans believed the moon deities represented water and fertility (Strang, 2015).

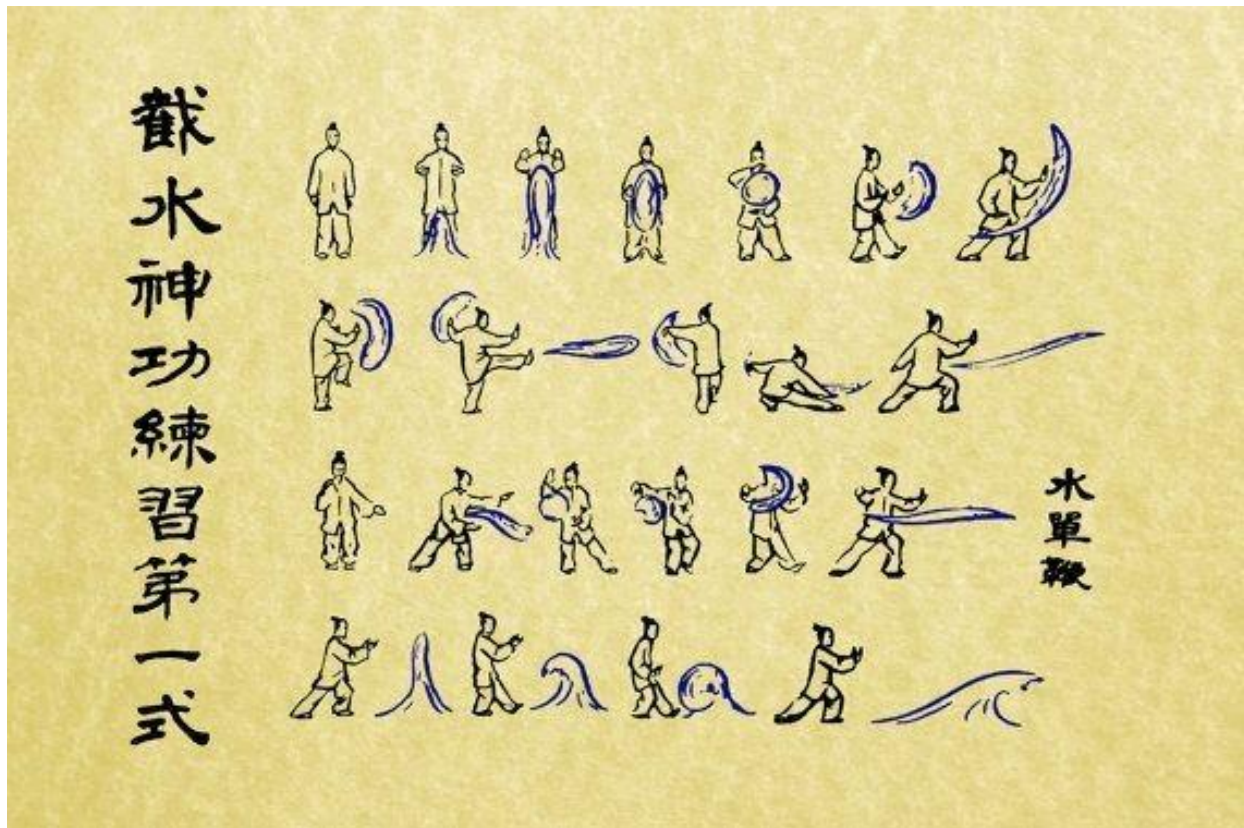


Fig 3.8. Waterbending movements based on the show





*Fig 3.9. Tai chi movements, which is what water bending is based on.*

With the water bending itself, the origins as a style can be found within Chinese martial arts, Sifu Kisu thought water was best represented by tai chi, due to its flowing nature and the idea of controlling and shifting one's chi within their body (Van Hoey, 2016). Tai Chi's fluid movement not only resembles water within its visual movements but also the adaptability with its movements, allowing for change at a moment's notice.

The people of the water tribe are attributed to their adaptability and the importance of community. They are described as being able to change in many situations, this is deeply rooted within their community and their respective element 'water' ('Bitter Work'). These attributes can be seen within Katara and her journey as a character. I mention Katara as she is quite special in that like Aang she is the last waterbender within her tribe (excluding the Northern Water Tribe). Katara goes on this journey with Aang and her brother leaving what she knew behind and exploring outside her tribe. Being the last water bender of her tribe meant she was self-taught. We see her skill develop from, complete novice to mastery of her element. Her ability to adapt and determination to be better can be attributed to her water tribe roots. We see these elements in her brother Sokka but in a different light as Sokka himself is not a water bender. Even still we

see what it means to lead people and adapt despite being in a world where bending is a clear advantage, forcing him to approach certain problems thoughtfully and carefully.

The siblings showcase values and traditions that are rooted in many Indigenous and Inuit cultures. Katara and Sokka and their individual growth as characters highlight their unique circumstances due to their upbringing. How they respond to the world of Avatar is unique to them and their tribe. Like Inuit people, they were able to sustain themselves as a community. Due to their maritime skills, in fishing, hunting and overall deep connection to their harsh environment. These attributes translate into key cultural features in shaping the water tribe siblings.

### The Earth Kingdom



*Fig 3.10. Earth Kingdom Regions, highlighted in deep yellow.*



Fig 3.11. Qianlong Emperor of the  
Fig 3.12. Earth King Kuei



In contrast to the previous nations I have discussed, the earth kingdom highlights the themes of strength, endurance and balance. The people of the earth kingdom show resilience and diversity ('Bitter Work'). The influences behind the earth kingdom and its people can be found in many places, but the main inspiration can be rooted in many East Asian cultures and traditions the most notable being China. The capital of the Earth Kingdom 'Ba Sing Se' draws inspiration from the Qing dynasty. Many of the costumes and architecture are modelled after Qing dynasty attire, such as King Kuei whose clothing matches closely with many of the Qing dynasty emperors.



Fig 3.13. Ba Sing Se

The architecture is very reminiscent of Chinese style architecture. The walls of Ba Sing Se are deeply inspired by the Great Wall of China due to its sheer scale (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). The creators themselves have stated that a visit to the Beijing capital provided great inspiration for the fictional city Ba Sing Se. The city is also divided into three major rings, each representing its respective class (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020).

Like its people earth bending is shown as an element of strength and power, and the earth kingdom has shown most resilience to the fire nation invasion. Earth-bending as a style is deeply rooted in the Hung Gar style of martial arts. This style focuses on deep, strong stances with an emphasis on stability for defence and strength from the ground up (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020).



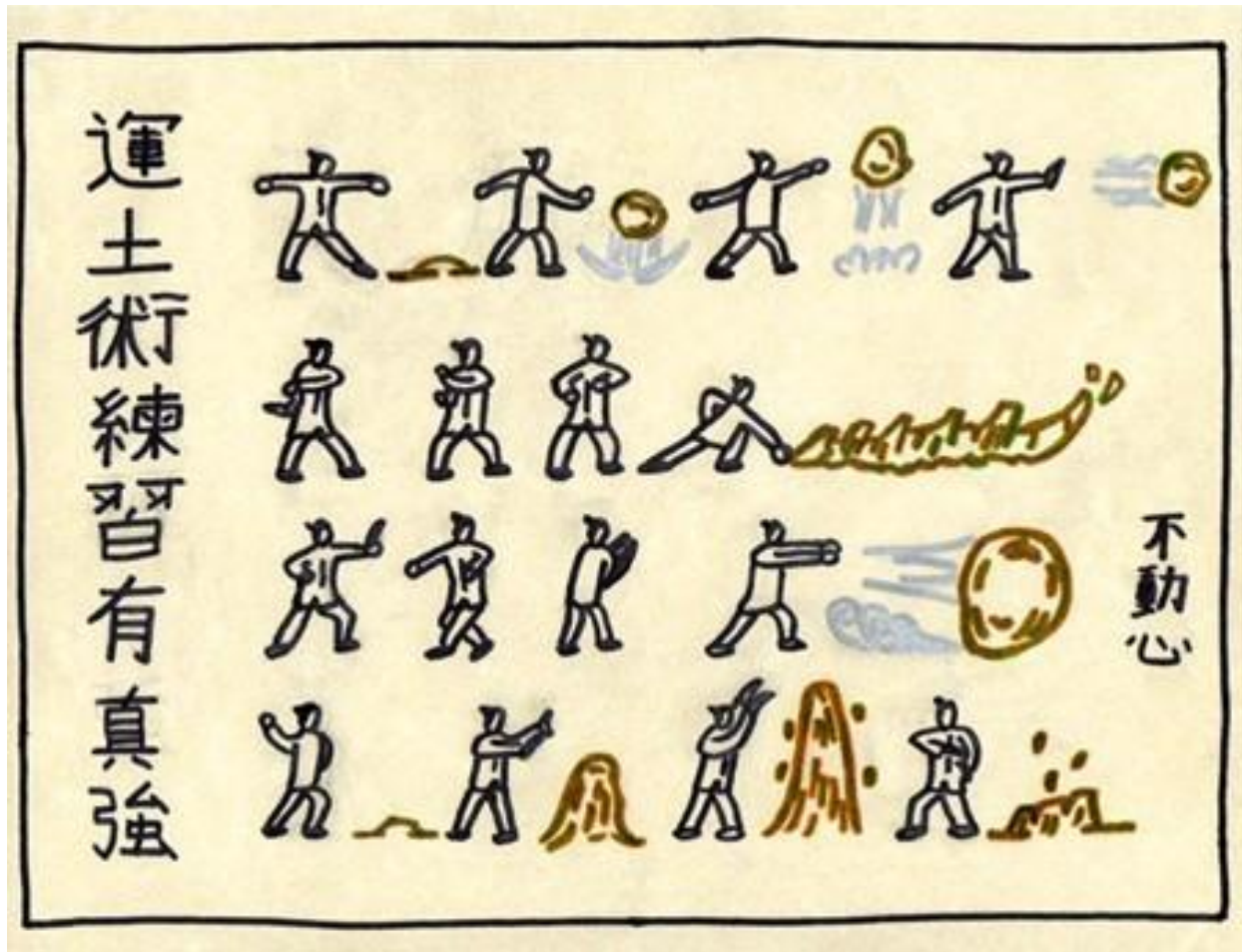


Fig 3.14. Earthbending stances.

A character called 'Toph' highlights a rare style of martial arts. Due to her blindness, the creators of the show wanted Toph's style to be unique and called upon Sifu Kisu's help, in the end, they modelled her style of bending after the rare praying 'Southern Mantis' style, the origin of this style was created by a blind woman (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). Visual this style is distinct instead of heavy and strong stances, we see tophs distinct style through a series of precise and calculated movements, emphasizing waiting and listening.



Fig 3.15. Toph earthbending



## The Fire Nation



*Fig 3.16. Fire nation, highlighted in deep red*

The fire nation draws heavy inspiration from Japan and China. Looking at the geography of the fire nation bears a resemblance to volcanic landscapes. The creators of the shows drew inspiration from the rugged landscapes of Iceland. They felt this was a fitting setting for the fire nation as it ties in with their respective element being fire (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). The design gave it a distinct geological feature compared to the other nations. Being surrounded by volcanic activity, heat and fire reflects their natural aggression and desire to control. Fire in the show is symbolic of power; this reflects their strong will and pride ('Bitter Work').



*Fig 3.17. Depiction of the fire nation being inspired by the Icelandic landscape.*



*Fig 3.18. Fire nation capital built within a volcano*

The fire nation buildings resemble traditional East Asian palaces. A hybrid of, Chinese, Japanese and elements of Thai style architecture influence the design of the capital and most fire nation buildings. Elements like spiked/flame roofs were common with many Southeastern buildings (atlaculture, 2021). This feature became a motif for most of the fire nation buildings within the show. common with many Southeastern buildings (atlaculture, 2021). This feature became a motif for most of the fire nation buildings within the show.



*Fig 3.19. Fire temple within the show*



*Fig.3.20. Yellow Crane Tower, Wuhan, China*



*Fig 3.21. Fire nation-building within the capital*



The feature of the flames/spikes is not only noticed within the buildings but many of the fire nation attire. Many of the fire nation clothing have this feature in their design. Inspiration from southeast Asian style of clothing (atlaculture, 2020) can be seen within the royal attire (as seen in figure 3.22). It takes elements of their designs such as the shoulders, found in traditional Burmese royal clothing. Thai styles of clothing reflect it some of the normal or casual attire of the fire nation (atlaculture, 2020). As depicted in the images below the flames as well as the colour are key to the design. It stands out and fits with their image of power and fire.



*Fig.3.22. Fire nation royal attire. Fig 3.23. Royal Burmese clothing*



*Fig 3.24 . comparsion between Thai attrie and fire nation clothing.*

*Fig 3.25 . Fire nation armour.*

With regards to the element of fire, in the world of avatar, firebenders draw their power from the

sun, like how waterbenders draw their power from the moon. The movements that come from firebending is heavily influenced by Northern Shaolin style of martial arts (Van Hoey, 2022, p.12). It is noted for its explosive offensive, which fits the creator's vision for their firebenders. Visually the fire nation design fits the element of fire, with red and yellow/gold as their main colour palette.



Fig 3.26. Depiction of firebending forms.

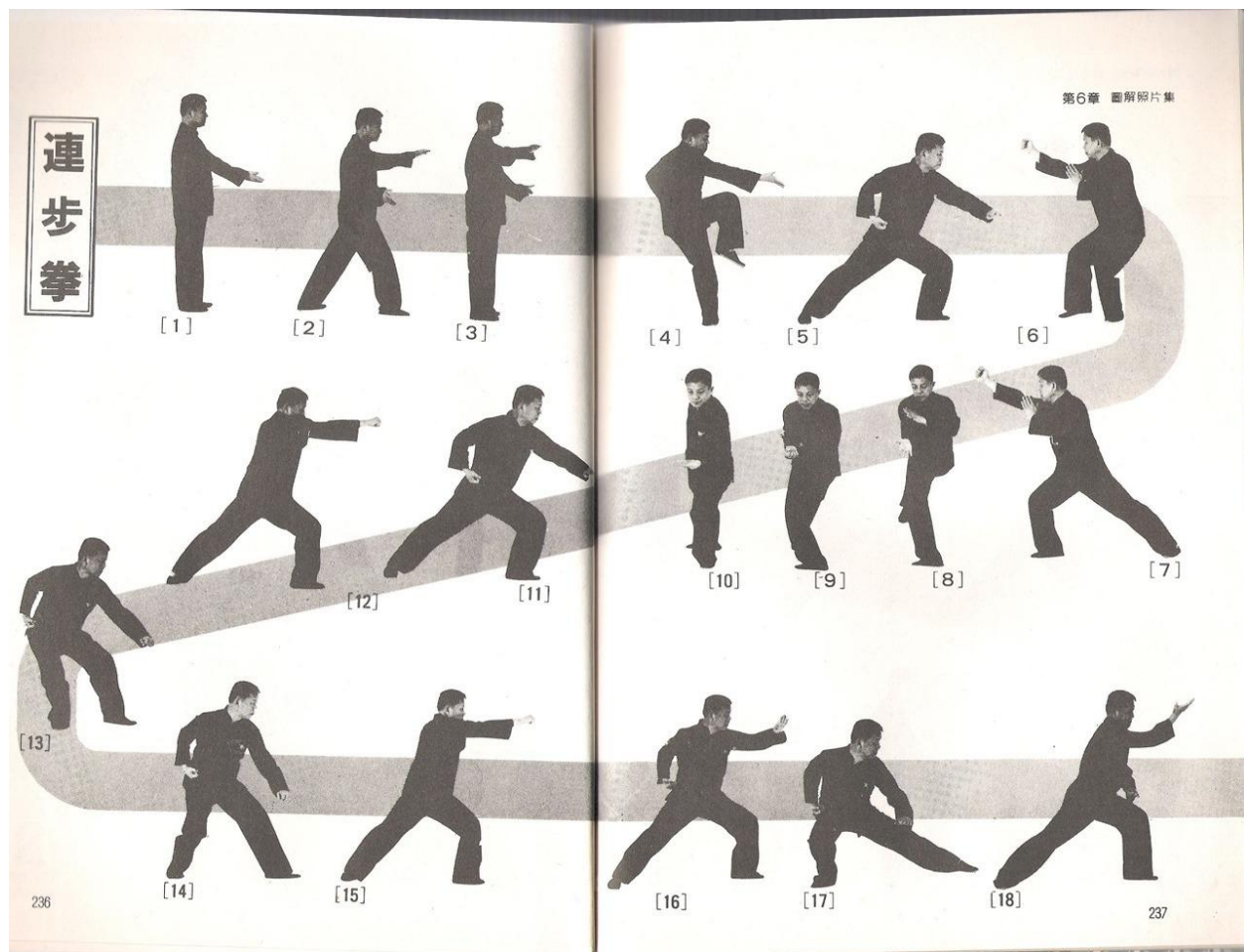


Fig 3.27. Depection of nothern shaolin forms

It is clear that the show takes both indirect and direct inspiration from many cultures and highlights them in unique ways, like bending being heavily inspired by martial arts and adding to it to create something new and exciting. This is an inherent feature of the ATLA that the fans adore. While the inspirations within the show may be clear to some, it is important to note that I do not believe ATLA meant for the show to represent these cultures. I merely wanted to highlight how the creators of the show created something entirely imaginary from real-world influences. It is not so different to how Miyazaki many of his popular films as he draws inspiration from his Japanese heritage and personal experience. Although the creators are not from these cultures, they have produced a work that both showcases these cultures uniquely and stands as its own independent piece.

## Chapter 4 - Drawing parallels between Princess Mononoke and Avatar the Last Airbender

Having discussed the inspirations behind the *Studio Ghibli* films and *Avatar The Last Airbender*, I wish to highlight the unique way in which they translate inspiration into a completely imaginative world. In the case with Miyazaki I found that many of the inspirations translated in the designs are deeply rooted in existing folklore and cultural heritage as highlighted before in my previous chapters. Unique to Ghibli films is Miyazaki's innate ability to conjure fantastical worlds from his own imagination, but in the case of *Princess Mononoke*, the setting behind the film was set in ancient Japan, making the historical and cultural context unique to that period of Japan. On top of this Miyazaki adds his own personal experience and vivid imagination, to inspire the younger generation. Miyazaki has said that he makes these films to provide value to his audience (Mes, 2019).

Contrast this to Bryan Konietzko and Mike DiMartino, who created the show from their passion towards Asian cultures, Hong Kong cinema, Studio Ghibli and Anime (Dimartino and Konietzko, 2020). This was translated in their creation of the show as those with Asian and Inuit backgrounds would see the inspirations behind the characters and architectural designs. These cross-cultural inspirations allowed for the show to connect with its Asian, Inuit and Indigenous based audience, especially for those raised and born in North America (where the show was created).

In this chapter I will be exploring the works of these creators and analysing the influence of myth and culture in the creation in these fictional worlds, how it adds depth and realism as well as connecting with the audience.

*Princess Mononoke* highlights how the combination of myth and culture is essential to the realism of a fictional world. While I have discussed the mythical aspects behind these films I would like to analyse the worldbuilding behind them, and how the specific archetypes of myth and culture add and enhance the worldbuilding of the films.

Highlighting different aspects of Japanese culture and traditions. This foundation grounds the film's context to existing material, giving the film substance and for Japanese people, a sense of familiarity. Miyazaki knew his audience would be broad, but he had the goal in mind to remind



the younger generation of the past traditions 'his artistic works and why doing so became his mission: because he felt the charm of mukashi-banashi (traditional Japanese folktales) has now vanished, he felt compelled to preserve the magic of storytelling using the fantasy world of anime.' (Okuyama, 2015) . The film is a homage to his heritage and has been received successfully both in the east and west.

*Princess Mononoke* is a unique film about ancient Japan and the conflict Indigenous people of Japan faced, presented as a children's film with fantastical elements. Ashitaka the main protagonist of the film as mentioned before is based on the ancient Emishi tribe, this highlights the history and cultural context of the film's setting. 'Miyazaki (2008) reveals that this hero was modelled after the real-life guerrilla fighter, Aterui, of Emishi background.' (Okuyama, 2015). Miyazaki interprets this into a fantasy world combining his creativity with Japanese folklore and culture to create a story with depth. Ashitaka is described as a character pure of heart, with a strong sense of justice and sets out to cure himself of his curse from defending his village. This point of conflict is like many of the Emishi tribes fighting back against imperial rule.



Fig 4.1. Ashitaka in his traditional clothing. *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997)



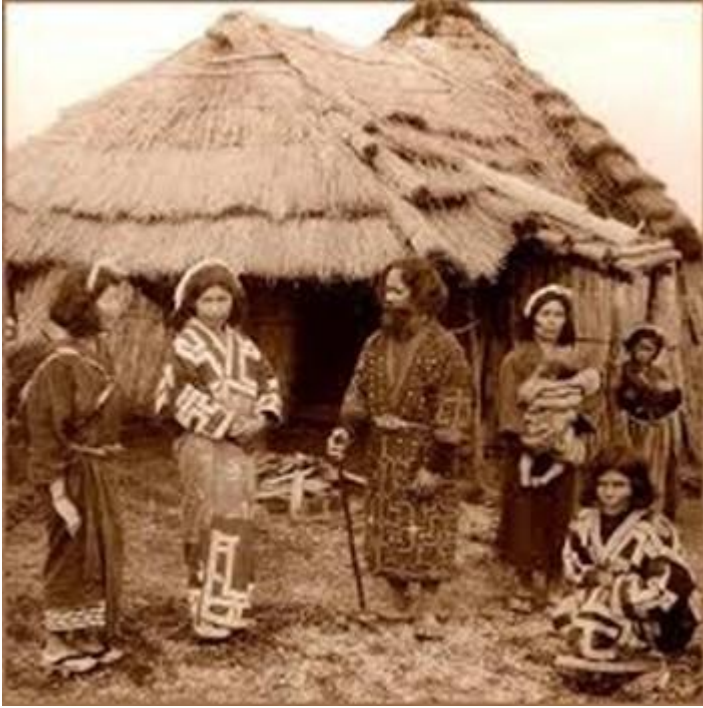


Fig 4.2. Emishi tribe



Fig 4.3. Lady Eboshi and iron-town villagers. *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997)

Rooted in Japanese folklore, the spirits and kami in Miyazaki's world reflect his personal beliefs and play a central role in the narrative (Okuyama, 2015). In *Princess Mononoke*, the conflict between humanity and nature is embodied in the clash between the Emishi people and industrial forces like Lady Eboshi. The spirits, representing the soul of the forest, respond to

humanity's greed for expansion, resulting in destruction. This struggle highlights Miyazaki's comment on the loss of cultural and environmental respect, as human greed for resources disrupts the balance of nature (Ritvik, 2020b). The film's portrayal of this tension feels both timeless and urgently relevant today.



Figure 4.4. Kodamas. *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997)

The kodama is an example of adding to the nature of a fictional world. The inspiration for Kodama (tree spirit) is a type of yokai that dwells in trees (Okuyama, 2015, p.113). Miyazaki's design is a completely original creation but was first depicted by Toriyama Sekien, in his book, *Gazu Hyakki Yagyo* in 1776 which had hundreds of illustrations of yokai. In this world, the forest is filled with these little spirits as a symbol of a healthy forest as said by Ashitaka. This element adds to the world-building as this is an indicator of a biological structure unique to this world. Wolf states 'Nature, then, deals with the materiality of a world, its physical, chemical, geological, and biological structures and the ecosystems connecting them.' (Wolf, 2012, p.172). He mentions how nature give substance to a world, in the case of the kodamas they are visual metaphors signifying the health of the forest. 'little kodama spirits start falling off of the trees, a visual metaphor for the death of the forest, and the Deer God stomps around blindly looking for his lost head.' (Okuyama, 2015, p.124).





Fig 4.5. Kodama falling from the trees in response to the deer god being beheaded. (Miyazaki, 1997)



Fig 4.6. Nago the boar god infested by the corruption from humans. Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, 1997)

As stated by (Okuyama, 2015) Kami (Japanese word for god/spirit), Miyazaki used his own imagination combined with his knowledge to create something unique such as the boar god Nago which Ashitaka encounters during the beginning of the film. Nago is represented by the

corruption infesting it due to the humans' disrespect to the forest . It goes deeper than that, as Nago is one of the four types of souls used to describe Kami, in this case 'araburu-kami' (aramitama) signifying raging god (Okuyama 2015). From this we can interpret the deer god and its many forms throughout the film.



*Fig 4.7. Ashitaka's first encounter with the deer-god Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, 1997)*

Firstly when Ashitaka encounters the kami for the first time, here I would describe this form as nigi-mitama (peaceful soul) (Okuyama, 2015) .



*Fig 4.8. The deer-god blessing Ashitaka. Princess Mononoke (Miyazaki, 1997)*



Secondly Ashitaka receives a blessing from the deer god that cures him of his curse received by Nago, this state can be described as kushi-mitama (miracle-giving soul) (Okuyama, 2015).



Fig 4.9 The deer-god is beheaded and transforms into an angry spirit. *Princess Mononoke* (Miyazaki, 1997)

Thirdly the enraged state when the deer god is beheaded and transforms into a giant like spirit, this would be like Nago 'araburu-kami' a raging god (Okuyama. 2015) .

Miyazaki demonstrates the power of visual storytelling using his roots in Japanese culture and imagination. This enhances the fictional worlds as it allows for him to comment on specific aspects of his culture like his love for Japanese folktales, and the loss of interest from the younger generation. These films targeting the younger audience is no coincidence yet still accessible to all. Miyazaki is able to use his skill in blending the real and his imagination to invent something new as discussed in *Princess Mononoke*. The spiritual symbolism behind the kami, spirits and the historical inspiration from the Emishi tribe all contribute to a layered storytelling experience. Miyazaki reminds us of the importance of preserving tradition and the value of storytelling.

Having explored the role of myth and culture in grounding the worldbuilding of *Princess Mononoke*, in this section, I will examine how *Avatar: The Last Airbender* draws from a broad spectrum of cultural inspirations to create a unique take of myth and folklore within a fictional world. Unlike Miyazaki's deeply personal reflection of Japanese heritage, *ATLA* adopts a cross-cultural approach, blending elements from various Asian and Inuit traditions to create a world that feels both familiar and fantastical.





*Fig 4.10. Hei Bai in a enraged state.*



*Fig 4.11. Hei Bai returns to normal.*

Creating an imaginary world involves extensive research (Wolf 2012), in the case with *ATLA* we find that the creators of the show combined their personal interests for anime, martial arts and Asian culture to create something entirely new. With a focus on one episode 'Winter Solstice: Part 1: the Spirit World' I found that this episode highlighted the concept of the kami discussed previously. Within the episode a forest is burned down by the fire nation, causing Aang and his group to investigate. It is later revealed that a spirit has been terrorising the nearby village due to its home being decimated. The spirit was clearly enraged like the Nago described as 'araburu -kami' (raging god). It is unclear if this was intentionally by the creator, but I found the similarity interesting. Aang consolidated the spirit allowing it to return to its normal form which resembled nigi-mitama (peaceful soul) (Okuyama, 2015).



*Fig 4.12. Ocean and Moon spirits and their physical form.*

A similar exploration can be made during the final episode of the first season. Involving the great ocean and moon spirit, described in a perpetual dance with one another, push and pull, yin and yang. This highlights the concepts of balance rooted in many Asian philosophies, but the idea of yin and yang originates from ancient Chinese philosophies. In the show the balance is heavily disrupted, when the moon spirit is killed. The ocean spirit is visible in distress, only when Aang bonds with the spirit allowing loss to consume him transforming into a rageful spirit ara-mitama (angry soul) (Okuyama, 2015). One of the character princess Yui who was blessed by the spirits gives life back to the moon spirit. Returning the balance and the spirits to nigimitama (peaceful soul) (Okuyama, 2015). This similarity between spirits and the kami from *Princess Mononoke* may be a result of the creators influences from Miyazaki works and the cross-cultural inspirations for the show.



Fig 4.13. Ocean spirit fusing with the Avatar projecting its rage and distress.

Both *Princess Mononoke* and *Avatar The Last Airbender*, showcase the role of myth and culture in creating an immersive and believable fictional world. Miyazaki and his films reflect his Japanese heritage and his beliefs, weaving them into the stories and world using his imagination to blend them together. Similarly, *ATLA* I draw upon cross-cultural inspirations to create a unique imaginative world. I highlighted how *Princess Mononoke* might share some similarity through the idea of spirits and through this I applied some of the concepts I have researched, to better understand the inspirations behind both cases.

## Conclusion

In this thesis my aim was to highlight the portrayal of myth and culture, providing context behind the inspirations for *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke* and *Avatar The last Airbender*. I did this by doing a case study into each piece of work, in attempts to understand the creator's thoughts and applied theories I have learned through my research.

I first introduced, *Spirited Away* as an introduction to Miyazaki's work and drew attention to the visual symbolism scattered throughout the film. I used Chihiro's journey to navigate and identify the hidden trail of influences within the film. These influences include Miyazaki's Japanese heritage, creative mind and personal experiences. Applying my research to the film I found interesting connections like Japanese myth and folklore being integrated into the film, providing unique visual aesthetics and story. It is clear both visually and narratively that *Spirited Away* is ingrained with myth and folklore, as it follows traditional values and superstitions some Japanese viewers would be familiar with (Macwilliams, 2008).

*Princess Mononoke* was presented in a different perspective, as it is set in ancient Japan. This provided a unique outlook while looking at modern issues. These issues were discussed through the lens of the Emishi's tribe conflict with imperial Japan. While not a direct connection it served as inspiration for the story and setting of the film. I discussed the visual characteristics like the mystical atmosphere of the forest and the introduction of Kamis (gods/spirits). I also explore San embracing nature, contrasted that to Lady Eboshi's desire to conquer and expand. This serves as a metaphor for the conflicting relationship with human and nature and its environment (Macwilliams, 2008).

After discussing Miyazaki's work, I explored *Avatar The Last Airbender* and its interesting cross-cultural references, drawing mainly from Asian, Inuit and Indigenous cultures and traditions I aimed to make a visual connection between the shows' depiction of real cultures. I structure the body in order of the element, air, water, earth and fire. This pays homage to the journey of the protagonist Aang, in learning the elements as is his duty. Each element has its own respective nation, where I discussed each nation's cultural influences. Sourcing a diverse range of references, aided my understanding of different aspects of the world of *Avatar*. Visual features ranging from martial arts, geography, clothing, and religious symbolism, all contributed to an expansive imaginative world. I focused on understanding the cultural influences relating to

the visual feature as listed before.

In my final chapter, I decided to combine the knowledge and research I have gained while this thesis. This chapter illustrates the parallel between *Princess Mononoke* and *Avatar The Last Airbender*, applying visual analysis while using theories I have learned. *Princess Mononoke* highlights the cost of industrialisation and expansion, the forest suffers resulting in the deer god causing havoc to reunite its lost head, after being beheaded (Okuyama, 2015, p.124). Similarly in *Avatar*, the moon spirit's murder, results in the ocean spirit's blind rage against the siege that occurred in 'The Siege of the North: Part 2'. It was interesting to see these parallels as both touch on themes of retaliation of expansion.

To conclude it is important to understand that while I have discussed these matters in somewhat detail, this does not set things as fact. The majority of what has been described followed my interpretation of both the material and research. While an analysis of Miyazaki's work reflects somewhat of his Japanese heritage, his works mainly reflect his own imagination and personal experiences (Osmond, 2020). Regarding *Avatar The Last Airbender*, my thesis was not focused on interpreting it as cultural appreciation or appropriation, but highlighting the visual cultural influences evident within the show.

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