

Japanese Culture: Moons, ribbons, sneezes

As with many anime, Sailormoon draws extensively from legends and history from both Japan and the west. In Sailormoon S, particularly, Shinto and imperial traditions feature strongly in the creation of the talismans, while the angelic metaphors, the Holy Grail and the heralding of a messiah have strong Christian overtones. Anime and manga, as with most creative works, weave stories from common culture into their own narratives in order to load additional meanings on characters and events and to make things generally more interesting. For a relatively low budget, made-for-TV anime, the research of myths and legends in Sailormoon is extensive. We owe this to Takeuchi Naoko's excellent background work for the manga.

Some of the references in Sailormoon refer to ancient epics and great characters of Japanese history, but there are also a number of references to children's stories and traditions of love and courtship. For instance, 'Tsuki no Usagi' means 'Rabbit of the Moon', a reference from Japan's version to the man on the moon. On a clear night, one can see a rabbit on the moon pounding mochi, a sticky yet firm paste made from rice. In some stories from both Japanese and Chinese cultures, the mochi feeds a young maiden banished to the moon.

In an early episode of Sailormoon, Luna uses the Sailor V arcade game to communicate with Artemis, whom viewers only hear as a voice. The password for the communicator was 'The rabbit on the moon pounds the mochi'. Note that the rice dumplings known as 'odango' are made from mochi, and Usagi is sometimes called 'odango atama'. *

The red ribbon that Sailorvenus wears in her hair also has mythic significance. Like many asian cultures, the Japanese believe that lovers are predestined to meet, and a red ribbon connects future couples. This ribbon, of course, is invisible to humans, but spirits and gods can observe the interconnections between fated pairs. This is particularly significant for Sailorvenus as she is the Senshi of love. Minako, however, has another reason for the ribbon — a boy once told her that it looks good on her.

"Any match ups between two people not connected by the ribbon are destined to fail. A euphemism for 'to break up' is 'ito wo kiru' - literally, to cut the thread." (From The Sailor Moon Miscellany FAQ, <http://hda.nethosting.com/sailormoon/ufaq/miscfaq.txt>) There are a number of variations on this theme in anime — threads are easier to animate than ribbons and some animes feature characters with threads tied to a finger.

Sneezing is a phenomenon loaded with significance. When someone suddenly sneezes for no obvious cause (i.e. the person is not sick and there is no dust in the air), that person is being talked about behind their back. Furthermore, silly people do not catch colds — perhaps they do not know enough to realize that flu is contagious. In one episode, Minako is perfectly healthy while all the others are down with flu and fevers.

* 'Dumpling head' is bad enough, but when characters shorten it to 'odango', it is much worse. A small round ball is not a flattering description of any teenage girl.

Japanese Culture: Sword, Mirror, Jewel

The three 'talismans' in Sailormoon S hearken to the forms of the Japanese imperial regalia. The elements of the sword, mirror and jewel have mythic significance within the Shinto religion. A specific set, distributed among the Atsuta Shrine, the Imperial Palace and Ise Jingu Shrine respectively, is representative of the actual objects from early Japanese legend. These national treasures may or may not be the actual mythic objects, but they have certainly inspired a great number of creative works based on their significance. Examples include Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* Grasscutter comic and animes such as Blue Seed and, of course, Sailormoon S.

In the Japanese legend of the creation of the earth, * the first three children born were Amaterasu (Sun Goddess), Tsuki-yumi (Moon God) and Susano-o, otherwise known as the God of Storms. Susano-o was particularly ill-tempered and cruel, and wreaked havoc on Amaterasu's domain in the heavens. Amaterasu, both angered and frightened, hid and sealed herself in a cave, thus denying the world of sunlight. To draw her out, the gods began a festival outside the cave, featuring beautiful mirrors and jewelry, laughing and raising sounds of music and laughter. Susano-o used a 'star hand mirror' to show Amaterasu the happenings outside. Amaretsu, noticing jewelry such as an eight-foot necklace, finally emerged from the cave, returning light to the earth, while Susano-o was banished to the land called Yomi.

The star hand mirror, Yata no Kagami, is made of copper and resembles a large metal disc. One side is smooth, the other has flower petals, and a star insignia engraved on it. The actual object in the Imperial Palace is apparently 1700 years old. Yasakani no Magatama, a tear-shaped piece of jade, is from the eight-foot necklace, and is thus a sacred jewel from Japanese legend. So where did the sword come from?

Susano-o, on Earth, used his trickery to make the eight-headed serpent, Yamato no Orochi drink buckets of sake and fall asleep. As the serpent slept, Susano-o sliced it into pieces, saving an old couple from losing their last remaining daughter to the serpent. Not only did he get the daughter as his own wife, Susano-o also found a beautiful sword within one of the eight tails of the serpent. He presented Murakumo no Tsurugi (Sword of gathering clouds) to his sister Amaterasu.

A long time later, the gods sent Amaterasu's grandson to the earth to govern the unruly humans. Marrying a human girl, one of their great-grandsons was Jimmu, the first Emperor of Japan. Amaterasu's grandson had the sword, mirror and jewel in his possession, which explains how the items came to be currently in imperial control. Many generations later, tall grass and fires trapped one of the emperor's descendants. He used the sword cut down the grass and discovered that the wind blew in the direction he cut. The magical sword was renamed 'Kusanagi no Tsurugi' (Grass Cutting Sword and the descendant became 'Yamato-take', the brave hero of Japan.

* The oldest known record of ancient matters in Japan is the 'Kojiki', which is also the name of an album by Kitaro, the Japanese new age composer. The festival outside the cave inspired one of his hits, 'Matsuri'.

Japanese Culture: Shinto and Buddhism

The Japanese religious tradition is rich and complex, encompassing within it both complementary and contradictory trends in religious thought and practice with an ease that may occasionally puzzle the Western observer. At the very heart of the tradition stand Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, and Buddhism, the Indian religion that reached Japan in the sixth through eighth centuries AD from Korea and China.

Shinto

Shinto was the earliest Japanese religion, its obscure beginnings dating back at least to the middle of the first millennium BC. Unlike Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, it had no founder and it did not develop sacred scriptures, an explicit religious philosophy, or a specific moral code. The word Shinto, “the way of the kami (gods/spirits)”, came into use only after the sixth century, as it gradually transformed into a religion of shrines with set festivals and rituals that were overseen by a distinct priestly class. However, such developments have had little effect on basic Shinto attitudes and values. More crucial to Shinto's survival, therefore, have been its deep roots in the daily and national life of the Japanese people and a strong conservative strain in Japanese culture.

Since Shinto is without scriptures, dogmas, and creeds, worship has always been central to the religion. Rather than through sermons or study, it has been through its festivals and rituals, as well as the physical features of the shrine itself, that Shinto has transmitted its characteristic attitudes and values. Most prominent among these are a sense of gratitude and respect for life, a deep appreciation of the beauty and power of nature, a love of purity and a preference for the simple and unadorned in the area of aesthetics.

Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism in Japan brought with it an enormous canon of religious literature, an elaborate body of doctrine, a well-organized priesthood, and a dazzling tradition of religious art and architecture — all of which Shinto lacked in the sixth century. Although its view of the world and mankind differed markedly from that of Shinto, differences and similarities to the native tradition exist with the teachings of Mahayana Buddhism. The optimism of Mahayana Buddhism meshed well with Shinto.

The Japanese first regarded the Buddha as simply another kami. By the seventh century, individuals capable of grasping Buddhism's message began to emerge. The subsequent development of Buddhism in Japan was the result of constant interaction between the foreign religion and the native religious tradition. Thus, the Japanese identified Shinto kami as manifestations of the various Buddhas and bodhisattvas that had grown up within Mahayana Buddhism. The Buddhists were thus able to introduce many of their own ideas into Shinto, and, to that end, argue that Shinto and Buddhism were complementary versions of the same fundamental truth — a view that gained wide acceptance in Japan.

Summarized from article written by Paul Watt for the Asia Society's Focus on Asian Studies, Vol. II, No. 1, Asian Religions, pp. 21-23, Fall 1982. Copyright AskAsia, 1996.

Japanese Animation & Culture: Christian Imagery

A large number of anime works integrate various Christian symbols in their visual style and plots. For instance, Sailormoon S centers on the search for the Messiah and the Holy Grail, and visions of Sailormoon throughout the five seasons emphasize Sailormoon's angelic quality. Many other animes also feature crucifixion, crosses, angels and churches. Characters may be nuns, priests, prophets and embodiments of the devil, drawing on influences distinct from traditional Japanese, Shinto and Buddhist imagery.

Despite there being relatively few Japanese Christians (normal estimates put it at about 1% of the population), the visibility of Christianity in Japan is far greater than the size of its following. Portuguese Jesuits only brought the Christian faith to Japan in the 16th century, a millennium after the arrival of Buddhism and accompanying an increase in Euro-Japanese trade. A series of imperial edicts over the next 100 years led to the execution of priests and Christian leaders, resulting in an almost total elimination of Christianity until the 19th century Meiji Restoration.

As a religion, Christianity is far less amenable to the reinterpretations that made Buddhist ideologies amenable to Shinto traditions. However, many Christian traditions have made their way into mainstream Japanese culture, such as Valentine's Day, Christmas and the church wedding ceremony. Aided by the Japanese's fascination with western media, Christianity is now well known (though still not commonly adopted) in Japan. As such, most of the general Japanese population vaguely recognizes Christian imagery, such as crosses, angels and devils, as being significant to followers of Christianity.

Of course, Christianity also has a wealth of literature that serves as a source of narrative inspiration and interpretation. For this purpose, Japanese writers of anime scripts, manga stories, novels and film screenplays draw extensively from material such as the Bible, the Catholic Apocrypha and Jewish scriptures. In creating their stories, the Japanese amplify the symbolic qualities of elements from these texts, rather than their literal significance. For instance, the cross emphasizes events of global importance and possibly apocalyptic foreshadowing. The messianic or sacrificial connotations of the cross are less relevant. The actual act of crucifixion simply visualizes torture and subjugation.

Angels, in particular, feature greatly in many anime and manga series. The angel is both beautiful and powerful, a human at its point of transcendence into something greater. The angel suspends herself above the petty affairs of men, while promises to bring happiness and unity to the world. This interpretation of the angel draws on sources of western art rather than religious texts, and dovetails well with the context of self-improvement and enlightenment within Buddhist ideology.

Although Japanese culture has its fair share of ghosts, demons and ogres (oni), animators use satanic qualities to depict hidden evil. Instead of the traditional imagery of horns and tails, the properties of possession, disguise, deception and Hell borrow extensively from Christian descriptions of the devil. Earth-shattering power is usually associated with these figures, although not entirely exclusive to satanic personalities.

Japanese Culture: School

Although Japanese students attend school from about the age of six, elementary school scenes are not as common in anime as middle and high school experiences. Middle school, sometimes translated as 'junior high', incorporates the seventh to the ninth grade and high school covers the tenth to the twelfth year of study (approximately). An intense entrance examination period in between determines which high school the student gets into, which thus affects their choice of universities and their future jobs.

The typical middle school and high school systems are not extremely different. Classes have about 40 to 50 students with student government hierarchies: class presidents, subject leaders and so on. For the most part, students remain in the same classroom for the academic day with the subject teachers moving from room to room. Students may remain at their desks to eat packed lunches from home, although some schools have cafeterias too. Of course, classes that require equipment or space, such as laboratory classes and physical education, will have students outside of their classrooms.

Students normally go through each period of three years with the same classmates. Upon entering middle or high school, the students are assigned to classes according to their electives (streamed subjects separate from the compulsory syllabus) in order to simplify teaching schedules. Seating arrangements in the class are also fixed, but the occasional reshuffle may occur during the academic year. Students may leave common belongings in their desk drawers and personalize their desks within the limits of school regulations.

After classes, students perform assigned duties to clean up the school, such as erasing blackboards, sweeping the floor and picking up litter. Once completed, students may participate in club activities, such as sports or cultural societies. Students only participate in one club, and this is primary avenue through which junior students (*kohai*) interact with senior students (*senpai/sempai*). *Kohai* have to listen and do what their *senpai* say.

Along with summer vacation, students also participate in cultural festivals (*bunkasai*), sports days and excursions (*ensoku*). Preparation for such activities may take up more time than the activities and students take the chance to have fun and be social. *Bunkasai* are school-wide, public festivals that let clubs display their skills. Classes may also organize games or activities, and students sell tickets to friends and family members in advance. On the day of the festival, the school assumes a carnivalesque air.

The majority of Japanese students attend *juku* and *yobiko*, expensive 'cram schools' in which revision classes continue into the early evening. In some *juku*, the teachers are more interesting and qualified than those from regular schools are, providing education in both academic and non-academic skills. Student and teacher hierarchies are also not as rigidly enforced. *Yobiko* primarily prepare students for important entrance examinations.

Some information from <http://www.indiana.edu/~japan/digest9.html>. An excellent, firsthand and very comprehensive account of school life (written with an anime slant) is at <http://www.projectanime.com/library/japaneschool.shtml>.