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Capstone Project  
December 7, 2012

## **Living through Death in Anime**

### Introduction

“The popularity of anime is on the rise in America.” I hear statements like this online all the time. ‘They’ say that the number of anime watches has never been so high. And while that might be true, I still talk and listen to a startlingly large number of people who don’t really understand what anime is or what it’s about. Or if they do have some concept of anime, it is an incomplete picture of the whole. Part of the reason why that is so, is that some of the best anime have not made it onto television in America. Anime is a product of the internet, either shown on websites like Netflix or downloaded semi-illegally. Though anime also enjoys a number of releases on DVD in America, the more cautious consumer will read reviews or preview the show online first.

So, for those that are less aware of the medium, it seems best to define what anime is. The Merriam-Webster online website definition for anime is, “a style of animation originating in Japan that is characterized by stark colorful graphics depicting vibrant characters in action-filled plots often with fantastic or futuristic themes.” One might notice that this definition is rather vague and not very definite, but the extensive scope of anime makes this necessary. That said, it does have several good points about it. For one, it uses the word animation, which is word that anime shortened for its form. Next, it points out that the origins of anime are in Japan, and while it is debatable whether other countries will ever produce anime, the definition is worded loosely enough that it could be a possibility. Another important part of this definition is pointing out

“stark colorful graphics”, as it will be noticed that many things, especially hair and eye color, are heavily associated with different characters. My only criticism with this definition is that more recent anime are not always “action-filled” as were those in the past, opting to have a more slice-of-life approach to the story telling. Still, this is an excellent ground definition.

Now, at the heart of my project, I want to make anime more understandable and accessible to others. One of the major road blocks for people entering the anime genre is the cultural disconnect between America and Japan. Although I had not formally studied Japanese culture before this project, I could tell they held a number of different and, to me, strange points of view. One such area that is most significant is the theme of death in anime. Although death is represented in a number of different ways, a common thread I have found is that when a character dies, they often don’t stay dead in the sense that they no longer exist. Two areas in which I looked to understand this theme are Japanese religion and fairy tales. From there I wanted to relate these themes to anime, showing how the Japanese culture relates the two, and what values might show up in both in relation to death. Here, I considered it to be remiss of me to not use a bit of psychoanalysis as well as my own analysis when comparing anime. But, to restate my goals more concisely:

Goals:

- Understand the Japanese Religious Climate
- Associate Japanese Fairy Tales and Anime
- Apply Analysis and Compare Common Themes Shared between Anime

## Japanese Religion

The Japanese take on religion ended up being more complicated than I realized it would be. When looking at Japanese religions, Shinto is always mentioned first as the islands native and oldest religion. But, as W. G. Beasley explains in *The Japanese Experience*, “The sea was less of a barrier to foreign culture than to foreign armies” meaning that cultural ideas tended to stick even if the countries that held those ideals were beaten back (1). And the first text books that refer to Shinto myths, the *Kojiki* and the *Nihon Shoki*, “use the Chinese script” (Beasley 2). It is in the *Kojiki* that the first reference to death comes. Izanagi and Izanami are the male and female deities (or *kami*) of the Japanese island. But Izanami dies from burns when she gives birth to the fire-god. Izanagi then “follows her to the Nether World and insists on seeing her, only to discover that she is already in a state of putrefaction” (Beasley 3). Here we establish Japan’s earliest written record of an afterlife, though it is not very pretty. But here we should take a moment to go back to *kami*, as Beasley explains:

“The term *kami*, not surprisingly, poses problems of translation into languages other than Japanese. To call them ‘gods and goddesses’, or simply deities’, though convenient, is potentially misleading, unless one intends to make comparison with ancient Greece and Rome. The *kami* were superior beings, to whom humans might attribute supernatural powers, but they were neither omniscient nor omnipotent.” (16)

This distinction between *kami* and immortal beings explains why Izanami was able to die.

Now, to move onto a more current view of religion, Pradyumna P. Karan in *Japan in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Environment, Economy, and Society* expresses how, “Japan has a plurality of religious traditions and simultaneous or alternate participation of people in Shinto, Buddhist, and Christian traditions” (70). For example, the birth ceremony of a child may be held in a Shinto

shrine, then have a wedding in a Christian church, before their funeral was performed by a Buddhist monk. This is actually very significant in terms of this project, since all religions (especially Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity) and their interpretations of life after death are open to being used. However, Buddhism may be more important to keep in mind since, “More than 85 percent of the population profess the Buddhist faith” giving us a clear indication that the majority of Japanese people have some belief in the religion (Karan 72-3). Part of the reason for this may be because the Shinto religion is, “lacking... any doctrine of transcendent faith, or universal system of value” which the Japanese people get from Buddhism. In fact, “it may well have been their absence from Shinto that enabled the two religions to co-exist, even to establish a symbiotic relationship, for most of Japanese history” (Beasley 18).

The common belief in Buddhism is that we are reincarnated after we die, depending on the karma we have carried with us throughout life. Another concept from Buddhism that is important to keep in mind is Bardo. Bardo refers to the time spent between death and the next life. It is argued how long this state lasts, but the concept is what interests me, as it is said that the soul can wander during this time.

### **Japanese Fairy Tales and Anime**

Simply due to the amount of story involved in the fairy tales I read and the anime I watch, I am unable to fit everything in my project. However, I would like to take the opportunity here to connect some common themes. The fairy tales I used for this project came from *The Japanese Psyche: Major Motifs in the Fairy Tales of Japan* where Hayao Kawai does a Jungian psychoanalysis of the fairy tales collected there in.

In “The Laughter of the Oni” there is a disembodied spirit that gives helpful advice to a mother to rescue her daughter which relates closest to the *Ef* series where Yuuko is a spirit that gives advice to a number of people.

Yuuko from *Ef*

In “White Bird Sister” and “The Elder Sister and the Younger Brother” there are older siblings that take care of their younger brother. This is represented in both *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood* and *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann* where the older brother protects, worries about, and looks after their younger one, though in *Gurren Lagann* they are not actually brothers, they consider themselves “soul brothers.”

Dream Naru from *Ghost Hunt*

Also, in “The Elder Sister and the Younger Brother”, the deceased parents warn the sister in a dream about the brother being poisoned. In the anime *Ghost Hunt*, Mai has several dreams about a version of her boss she has nick-named Naru. This dream Naru proves useful on many occasions, and is revealed to actually be the dead twin brother of the real Naru.

Through a number of these stories there are multiple references to *kami* and *yokai* (monsters). As Michael Foster points out in his book *Pandemonium and Parade: Japanese Monsters and the Culture of Yokai*, “the distinction between yokai and kami is a fuzzy one at best” (15). The anime *Ghost Stories* relies heavily on these *yokai*, each episode focusing on a different one as the villain of the week. There are also a number of *kami* and *yokai* like figures in the anime *Shakugan no Shana*, where the Flame Hazes (*kami*) and the Crimson Denizens (*yokai*) fight one another.

The only anime I watched that does not contain an obvious link to the Japanese fairy tales covered by Kawai is *Clannad*. However, in *Clannad* there is a character named Fuko who is the projected spirit of a girl in a coma. This is also a theme from Japan though, called *Ikiryō* where a living soul leaves the body (Fairchild 34). I include her in this project because she makes for a very good counter example in a couple of cases. Also, we might consider her semi-dead as she shows no signs of waking from her coma.



Fuko from *Clannad*

### Fansubs

I feel I need to take a minute here to talk about fansubs. As Jorge Diaz Cintas and Pablo Munoz Sanchez say in their article “Fansubs: Audiovisual Translation in an Amateur Environment”, “A fansub is a fan-produced, translated, subtitled version of a Japanese anime programme” (37). A number of the anime I have reviewed have been in the fansubbed version, partly because I already had access to them, but also because sometimes an anime just doesn’t have an official release in the U.S., though it may be hoped that a company will pick them up in the future. And this is a big function of fansubbing groups, “to encourage certain titles to be distributed in the USA, and beyond” (Cintas and Sanchez 44). Largely there has been a gentlemen’s agreement between fansubbers and Japanese copyright holders. When an anime has been licensed in America, it has been a self-imposed custom to stop the distribution of the fansubbed version and that all fansubbed anime are nonprofit operations (Cintas and Sanchez 44).

Either way, it is a convention that seems likely to continue for the foreseeable future unless some major legal action is taken, and some anime companies in America are actually grateful for fansubbed versions as they help with their own translation of the anime. However, this is one of the reason's I use quotes of anime very sparingly, because although the lines might be quite close to each other, the fansubbed version of a line and the official version of a line might vary.

### Comparing Anime

At this point I would like to compare some anime to each other, hoping to highlight what anime likes to tell us about dead spirits, and their continued interaction with the living.

#### Mentor Spirit



Kamina from *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*

The most common theme I see in these spirits is that they often will guide and help the living people they knew in life. Perhaps one of the best examples of this is Kamina from *Tengen Toppa Gurren Lagann*. In the start of this anime,

the viewer may assume that Kamina is the main character of the series. However, he then dies about a quarter of the way into the show, leaving the rest of the character to carry on after his death. The real main character, Simon, carries on the story along with Yoko, who had been romantically interested in Kamina, confessing her feelings for him the eve before the battle in which he died.

Although there are still images and memories of Kamina throughout the show, he does not make reappearance until the second to the last episode, in which Simon, Yoko, and a number of their friends are trapped in a dream world by their enemy. Kamina appears first to Simon, who is dreaming of a time when he was younger and leaned a lot on Kamina as an older brother figure. When the true Kamina appears to him, Simon becomes confused as to which one is real. The spirit Kamina says that it should be obvious, and tells Simon to choose which he prefers. Simon ultimately chooses to side with his long dead soul brother, regaining his clarity enough to realize he is trapped in a dream world. Now appearing again as his older self, it is revealed that Simon is actually taller than Kamina was when he died, perhaps showing that Simon has outgrown Kamina in some way. As they are about to part, Kamina tells Simon, “This time it’s our final goodbye. Go, my brother!” To which Simon replies, “It’s not a goodbye. We’re together, right?” At this point Simon points at his heart and Kamina agrees with him. Simon then transforms and shoots off into the sky.

At this point in the episode the perspective switches to a television showing a number of Yoko’s dreams being played one after another, while a hand turns a dial between each one. Yoko reaches out to turn off the TV, at which point it is shown that it was Kamina who was turning the dial. It is then that Yoko tells Kamina, “Thank you. I’ll be off then.” Here Kamina does not make a response but smiles at Yoko as she flies off to join with Simon’s spirit soaring in the sky. With the two flying together, the others join Simon and Yoko flying in the sky.



Kayako from *Ghost Stories*

Another example of this guidance occurs in *Ghost Stories* where the spirit of the main character’s mother, Kayako, looks after her daughter, Satsuki. Here, the mother passed away before the beginning of



the anime, so we only ever see her interact directly with characters through flashback. However, Kayako uses a friend of Satsuki's named Momoko to talk to her daughter. It is revealed in flashback that Kayako and Momoko had met each other before in the hospital right before Kayako died.

Either way, Kayako was an expert on putting a number of evil spirits (some of which can be considered *yokai*) to spiritual sleep. Due to unforeseen chance, Satsuki comes back to where her mother put all these spirits to sleep just as they all wake back up. Through the majority of the anime Satsuki deals with these evil spirits by using a notebook that her mother left behind detailing how she dealt with each spirit. However, on a couple of occasions Kayako comes back through the possession of Momoko to tell her daughter what she needs to do to seal away their spirit.

Both of these examples are of dead spirits who knew their advisees in life, however, in *Ef: A tale of Memories* the spirit of Yuuko advises young people she never met while she was alive. Although not clearly stated that Yuuko is a spirit in *Memories* (it comes out later in *Ef: A Tale of Melodies* is an angel) she does have a habit of suddenly and inexplicably appearing to give advice at just the right time or to lend an ear to listen. Yuuko actually makes an interesting counter example to Kamina and Kayako, as she appears to be bound to the city of Otowa in Japan, while the love of her life, Yuu, is away in another country. She is instead being bound to a place, rather than a person, which is not something that happens in the fairy tales I reviewed.

This difference between Yuuko and the others may be due to that fact that she is an angel rather than a traditional Japanese spirit, though the details of her angel origins are somewhat vague. When she and Yuu finally meet again at the end of *Melodies*, she says "It was my duty to always be kind to as many people as possible, and to give everything for the benefit of others. He

told me to do it.” When Yuu asks who told her to do this, Yuuko only replies vaguely with, “Maybe it was God.”

The behavior of our fourth mentor spirit is a bit inexplicable, as he chooses to visit a girl in her dreams rather than interact with his own brother. In *Ghost Hunt* a young school girl named Mai breaks an expensive piece of ghost tracking equipment owned by Kazuya. In order to repay Kazuya, whom Mai nick-names Naru, she becomes an assistant at his ghost hunting business. During their adventures hunting ghosts, Mai is often visited by a dream version of Naru who is usually smiling, something the normal Naru doesn’t often do. It is later revealed through another media that this dream Naru is actually Kazuya’s twin brother Eugene, who died before the anime began. A reason why Mai may be able to see Naru’s brother in her dreams is because she is revealed to have latent psychic abilities which emerge as she hunts ghosts. Naru also possesses a strong measure of supernatural powers, but in his case he becomes physically ill when he uses them. Mai in this case seems to become a useful way for Eugene to look after his twin brother, much like Kayako used Momoko to look after Satsuki.

My last example here actually breaks the formula of mentor spirit, though she is working for the good of her own sister, and is more a spirit that needs a mentor. Fuko from *Clannad* is the spirit of a girl who is brain dead and comatose in the hospital, but she wants to make sure her older sister’s wedding is well attended and held in the school in which her sister used to teach. Fuko, however, is unable to express this wish to her sister herself, as a condition of her spell is if someone has seen her comatose body, they are unable to see her spirit. After learning Fuko’s story, the main characters of *Clannad*, Tomoya and Nagisa decide to help out Fuko towards her goal.

Fuko makes a number of wooden starfish, giving one to every student she invites to her sister's wedding. At first, it is hard to get students to promise to come to the wedding, but Tomoya uses Fuko's cuteness to get many people to accept the starfish and promise to come. Unfortunately, just as things appear to be going so well, Fuko starts to lose energy as her body stops breathing on its own in the hospital, making it so fewer and fewer people are able to see her. As characters lose sight of her, they also completely forget about her and their promise to go to the wedding of Fuko's sister. Since Tomoya and Nagisa have such a strong connection with Fuko, they remain able to see her and remind people of their promise to go to the wedding. When the wedding day comes, everyone who promised to come brings their wooden starfish and attends the wedding even though they don't quite remember why. Not long after, Fuko starts to fade from Tomoya and Nagisa as well, resulting in them both sleeping together with her one night to wake up in the morning feeling extremely sad and unable to understand why.

This fading from memory is symbolic of the other spirits as well, since their appearances are limited. And a reason for this might be summed up by Simon at the end of *Gurren Lagann*. When asked why Simon doesn't use his powers to revive the dead, Simon responds, "Dead people are dead people. If we revive them unwillingly, they'll just get in the way of our followers." What I believe Simon means by this is the lives of those must continue on even as loved ones die. And as he has already expressed earlier, our loved ones never truly leave us anyway, but stay in our hearts until we go to join them.

### Still Human?

The other two spirits that I looked at actually are quite similar to each other in one respect that I would like to examine. Those two spirits are Alphonse Elric from *Fullmetal Alchemist*:

*Brotherhood* and Yuji from *Shakugan no Shana*. These two are interesting characters as they both have to deal with the idea that they are no longer human after their death like experiences.



Alphonse from *Fullmetal Alchemist: Brotherhood*

Although *FMA: Brotherhood* starts with Al already in his suit of armor in the first episode, we are quickly told with flashbacks in the second episode how he lost his body and why he is still around. He and his brother Edward, the main characters of the anime, lose

their mother when they are very young but decide to use the science of alchemy to try and bring her back. However, the use of human transmutation is strictly forbidden, and the boys figure out why when Alphonse loses his whole body to the incident, while Edward loses his left leg.

Having gained a new set of knowledge from the process, Edward bonds his brother's soul to a nearby suit of armor to bring him back to the living world.

I would like to take a moment to get psychoanalytical though, in aid of analyzing whether Alphonse can still be considered human, which comes up later in the series. Returning to the death of their mother, both Edward and Alphonse go through a stage of denial about their mother's death as they believe they can bring her back to life. Edward then moves onto anger and bargaining in the moment he believes he lost Alphonse as well. After, he appears to be in a state of depression for a number of years before finally moving on to acceptance when he is given the opportunity to find a way to get his brother his body back. We do not see Alphonse go through these stages. We see him in the denial stage, and then we see him in the acceptance stage, but nowhere in-between. This could just be that the story would not benefit from seeing both brothers go through these stages, but it is an interesting aspect to consider as the question of Al's humanity comes up part way through the show.

While battling a person who has their soul also bound to a suit of armor, his opponent questions Al's humanity, telling him that he might just be a construct made by Edward to replace his dead brother. This point is settled later by Ed showing Al that he has memories that his brother does not, but the issue of Al's humanity was never in question to me. Although he does not have to eat, feel pain, or sleep, Alphonse keeps a journal of what he is going to eat when he has his body again, experiences sadness at not being able to feel things, and spends his nights lost in thought. Although stuck in an inhuman form, Alphonse is still a little boy on the "inside" and often shows it through his character's thoughts and actions.

Yuji, from *Shakugan no Shana* I am less sure about. Although he appears human, Yuji is actually a torch, the residue of a human that Flame Hazes make so a human's disappearance from life is not so jarring. Torches slowly burn out of energy and are forgotten once they disappear. Sound like Fuko to anyone else?



Yuji from *Shakugan no Shana*

Yuji has been dead for an uncertain amount of time, and is told by a Flame Haze, later named Shana by Yuji, that he is a torch and that he should disappear and be forgotten at some point. One would expect some form of the stages of grief to manifest themselves in this case, but they do not. After the first shock, Yuji fatalistically accepts this worse-than-death sentence fairly unfazed. Shana even comments on it, saying that when most torches learn of their fate they grow depressed. This level of acceptance almost seems inhuman to me, and though I like Yuji as a character, I am often left wondering about his humanity. He does seem to appreciate it when someone does consider him human, but he also seems just as content to hang around with Shana, who has trouble seeing him as anything but a torch for the longest time.

## Conclusion

Although one may gather many things from the different anime I have covered, I believe a common theme among them is that power of the human spirit, and that good spirits stay with us. Sure, in both *Ghost Hunt* and *Ghost Stories* they deal with a number of bad or evil spirits, but they are always defeated while the positive ones stick around to help fight another day. So from that, I would say that the Japanese point of view on death is fairly positive on the whole. What I gather from this is, if your karma was good in life, you are allowed to stay in the state of bardo for a lot longer than others, letting the good spirits watch over their loved ones while the bad ones will eventually fade.

I do not believe I completely met all of the goals I had for this project, though I do feel I met my first goal to understand the religious climate in Japan. I believe I compared the fairy tales and anime I had fairly well, but I get the nagging feeling there were much more appropriate fairy tales out there that I was just not exposed to. I also feel my last goal to compare anime to each other could have been better focused. At the same time, I feel there is so much more that could be said on how these seven anime I have used relate to one another. But to be concise, I would like to end this project here. For now.

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