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THE RELEVANCE OF NATURE IN JAPANESE SOCIETY
or
How Japanese folklore conveys the idea of nature to kids

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THE RELEVANCE OF NATURE IN JAPANESE SOCIETY or How Japanese folklore conveys the idea of nature to kids

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Nature, Beauty, Japanese aesthetic, *MukashiBanashi*, Japanese folklore.

Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to observe how the concept of nature is delivered to the Japanese kids and to determine the type of relationship that develops between the inhabitants and the environment by which they are surrounded. For this purpose, this research will consist of an analysis of five famous Japanese folkloric tales [*The Adventures of Kintarō*, *Momotarō*, *Urashima Tarō*, the *Lucky Tea Kettle* and *The Crane's gratitude*] in order to determine if there is indeed an emphasis towards a specific behaviour regarding nature and what it consists of. Each one of the chosen folktales portrays a variety of sceneries and characters, therefore allowing to achieve a more comprehensive overview of the subject of matter. Furthermore, through the exploration of nature-related symbolism and the study of the recurrent behaviour that people exhibit towards their environment, an attempt at determining whether the existence of a human-nature bond is a possibility will be made.

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LA IMPORTÀNCIA DE LA NATURALES A EN LA SOCIETAT JAPONESA o Com la idea de naturalesa és transmesa als nens a través del folklore japonès

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Curs acadèmic: 2018-2019

Paraules clau

Naturalesa, Bellesa, Estètica Japonesa, *MukashiBanashi*, Folklore japonès.

Resum del TFG

L'objectiu d'aquest article és observar com el concepte de naturalesa és introduït als nens japonesos i determinar el tipus de relació que es desenvolupa entre els habitants del país i l'entorn que els envolta. La investigació consistirà en analitzar cinc contes folklòrics japonesos de rellevància a nivell nacional [*Les aventures de Kintarō*, *Momotarō*, *Urashima Tarō*, la *Tetera de la sort* i *La Gratitude de la Grulla*] per determinar si realment s'emfatitza un comportament específic cap a la naturalesa i, en cas que sigui que sigui així, en què consisteix aquest. Cadascuna de les històries escollides retrata una varietat única d'escenes i personatges, fet que permet aconseguir una visió més completa del tema. A més, a través de l'exploració del simbolisme relacionat amb la naturalesa i l'estudi del comportament recurrent que les persones mostren cap al seu entorn, s'intentarà determinar la possibilitat de l'existència d'un vincle entre les persones i la natura.

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LA IMPORTANCIA DE LA NATURALEZA EN LA SOCIEDAD JAPONESA o Cómo la idea de naturaleza es transmitida a los niños a través del folklore japonés

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Palabras clave

Naturaleza, Belleza, Estética Japonesa, *MukashiBanashi*, Folklore japonés.

Resumen del TFG

El objetivo del presente artículo es observar cómo el concepto de naturaleza es introducido a los niños japoneses y determinar el tipo de relación que se desarrolla entre los habitantes del país y el entorno que los rodea. Para este propósito, la investigación consistirá en un análisis de cinco famosos cuentos folklóricos japoneses [*Las aventuras de Kintarō*, *Momotarō*, *Urashima Tarō*, *la Tetera de la suerte* y *La Gratitud de la Grulla*] para determinar si realmente se enfatiza un comportamiento específico con respecto a la naturaleza y, en caso de ser así, en qué consiste. Cada una de las historias elegidas retrata una variedad única de escenas y personajes, lo que permite conseguir una visión más completa del tema. Además, a través de la exploración del simbolismo relacionado con la naturaleza y el estudio del comportamiento recurrente que las personas muestran hacia su entorno, se intentará determinar la posibilidad de la existencia de un vínculo entre las personas y la naturaleza.

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1. Overview

Japan is greatly well-known on an International level as a country in harmony with Nature¹, being capable of perceiving and admiring even the smallest seasonal changes, fully aware of its short fading beauty. However, one might argue about how much of an all-encompassing this love for Nature in reality is. The absolute adoration of isolated spaces, such as the Mount Fuji or the blossomed *sakura* is in striking contrast to the perception of raw nature, often described as unsafe and wild.

This somehow two-faced approach towards what at first glance seems to be part of the same category has generated quite a notorious debate among researchers for the past decades. As it is remarked in the book *Japanese Perceptions of Nature: Ideals and Illusions* edited by two professors of Anthropology and specialists in Japanese culture, Asquith and Kalland (1997), several authors agree that nature is mostly appreciated by the citizens when linked directly to religious practices or other more artistic disciplines, such as painting or literature.

Therefore, the present research aims to consider the modern perception of nature in Japanese society. In order to avoid an excessively broad topic, this research will focus on getting a better understanding of how the Japanese folklore has preserved and transmitted the perception of nature, and how the ideas from the ancient stories have culturally influenced the children from the country.

Three major questions are expected to be answered during this paper;

The first one being, *how nature is presented to kids in Japan through folklore?*

The second one being, *the editions of folktales that are specifically aimed at kids are encouraging, directly or indirectly, towards some sort of human-nature bond? Are kids*

¹ In order to better differentiate between the natural force that surrounds human beings and coexists with the human world(1) and the set of all animals, plants, and everything found in the environment that was not made by people(2), the first definition will be portrayed with the word "Nature"(1) and the second one will be assigned the word "nature"(2). The fact that a capital N will be used in one of the cases does not portray any kind of worship towards any nature-based religion, it is just a way to simplify the analysis in the paper. Both Nature and nature have a special limitation in this research, referring exclusively to Japan.

taught how to properly interact with and respect nature? Are kids taught how to be careful and be aware of the dangers of wildlife?

The third one being, if the analysed stories contain, in fact, valuable lessons related to the proper interaction with nature (positive or negative), *does this knowledge have any effect on how nature is treated by the adult population?*

The main bibliography that is going to be used are five widely known Japanese folkloric stories in their adaptation for kids²: *The Adventures of Kintarō*, *Momotarō*, *Urashima Tarō*, the *Lucky Tea Kettle* and *The Crane's gratitude*. These type of stories usually have a substantial impact during the early stages of the person's development, as well as they portray some of the social norms and expected behaviour of a particular society. Therefore, they could not only help to understand to a certain degree how the Natural world has been perceived but also reveal a wealth of information about the relationship between society and nature, and illustrate what is the pursued ideal human-nature interaction.

An important remark to be made is that the folkloric tales presented in this research have been chosen under one main criterion: being famous folktales that are known by the majority of people around the country. What is more, each one of this stories contains a variety of topics that were considered important during the writing of this paper. By all means, the amount of Japanese folkloric tales with valuable information is vast, therefore it resulted impossible to include all of them in this limited research. The chosen ones were carefully considered in order to avoid any topic, scenery or symbolism recurrence. This way, a larger amount of aspects were able to be included in the research and repetition was avoided as much as possible.

Kintarō and *Momotarō* both share a similar type of protagonist, as well as the environmental characteristics in which the boys are born. However, the interactions that the characters have with the several animals that they encounter during their journeys portray a totally different set of behaviours worth of a separate analysis, as they help to understand the topic from two unique perspectives. *Urashima Tarō* is one of the only stories in the folkloric world of Japan that introduces the beautiful Dragon Palace; a place full of symbolism that

² All stories fall in the category of 昔ばなし (*MukashiBanashi*; literal translation: old story).

contributes immensely to the understanding of the Japanese psyche and aesthetics. *The Lucky Tea Kettle's* protagonist, a *tanuki*, plays an important role in the Japanese religious lore, therefore being an important matter of analysis. Finally, *The Crane's Gratitude* revolves around the idea of an animal shape-shifting into a woman and trying to hide its identity, a recurrent element in Japanese tales that is closely related to the topic of wild and tamed nature.

Indubitably, because these stories are part of the Japanese oral tradition, the amount of adaptations is quite large, therefore the present research chose particular editions (adapted for kids), using other ones for reference when/if needed.

On the other hand, previous academic literature regarding the subject of the natural world and its perception in Japan will also be analysed. Among those, special attention will be paid towards articles related to specific flora and fauna symbolism, as they are considered to be helpful in the better comprehension of the relationship between particular species and the Japanese population. Finally, academic research on the subject of Japanese Aesthetics will be used as a benchmark for the subject of beauty in the natural world.

1.1. State of affairs

In order to find possible answers for the previously raised questions, the topic of Nature requires to be analysed from different perspectives, so a more comprehensive outlook of the issue can be achieved. Each of these viewpoints will have their own status of the issue, as their findings are currently at completely different stages if compared among each other.

From the scientific and environmental point of view, the topic of the perception of nature for the inhabitants of Japan has been already extensively analysed by national and foreign scholars and writers during the last decades. All of them reaching similar conclusions in regards the difference in the perception of nature in theory and in practice, it seems that the vast majority of research has been primarily focused on the environmental issues of the archipelago. Despite the fact that authors like Paul Atkins (2013), professor in Asian Languages and Literature in the University of Washington, and Shudong Chen (2010), a specialist in East Asian Studies, among others, seem to focus on representing Japan in a form

of harmonious coexistence with Nature, both authors end up pointing out the exact opposite: how far from reality this idyllic portrayal of Japan is. It is indeed surprising how a country with such a limited amount of natural resources has achieved these levels of consumerism, easily observed even in such simple things as the action of gift-wrapping, a process with not only status-related but also cultural symbolism³. Japan, as well as many other industrialised countries, has been damaging the ecosystem for decades now, modifying the landscape through the excavation of mountain slopes and through artificial works on rivers to prevent floods, among other activities⁴.

In the artistic and cultural fields, nature has always been a prominent figure in paintings and poetic expressions. Haruo Shirane, a professor of Japanese Literature and Culture at Columbia University, dedicated a whole book to exemplify how the use of details in a poem or a painting, such as the mentioning of a specific animal, plant or phase of the moon, would immediately give hints to the reader about the context of a particular piece of art. Artists used to rely on natural features to express deep human emotions, hence why these acquired a trans-seasonal, metaphorical meaning. However, it was not until the Meiji Period (1868-1912) that *Japanese aesthetics* became a highly discussed topic, being it also the time when the term itself was introduced in the country⁵. Before that, according to several scholars such as Masao Watanabe (1974), nature was hardly seen as something foreign or apart of humanity, therefore no investigation nor conquer seemed to be necessary. Although this cosmology nowadays is considered once again to be socially constructed, the fact that nature does have a huge presence in art, literature, and architecture is undeniable.

Finally, on the folkloric perspective of the issue. First of all, it is important to point out, and quoting the author and editor of numerous publications on Japanese folklore Hiroyuki Araki (1992: 374), that: “the status of Japanese folklore research remains unknown to the world, not because folklore studies in Japan are negligible or insignificant, but because the language barrier is still preventing exchange of information with foreign countries”. Nonetheless, there has been profound investigations during the last years on the topic of specific flora and

³ For more information on this topic, Chen S. (2010).

⁴ See Karan (2005) for more information.

⁵ Some important figures of this period are Nishi Amane, Mori Ôgai and Alexander Baumgarten. For further information on this topic, read Marra, M. (2001), *A History of Modern Japanese Aesthetics*.

fauna that was ought to be recurrent in the Japanese folklore, such as the *tanuki* or the *tsukinowaguma* (moon bear). Despite this, it is undeniable that the subject still remains in the dark for the majority of the international community mainly due to limited materials written in languages that are not Japanese.

The amount of previous research on “Nature-human relationship in Japan” is not as astonishing as in other areas of the humanistic field, however, it is still enough to provide a general understanding of the topic. Therefore, in the present paper, it will mainly serve the purpose of guiding and referencing. However, even though the myth of all-nature loving Japan has been already debunked in a wide variety of fields, there is still little to no information about how the natural environment is portrayed to those who one day will inevitably become the ones in charge – the children. The level of awareness regarding the importance of nature deeply depends on how much the values of a *human-Nature* bond are emphasised during the growing-up period, being this one of the major reasons for the existence of the present research.

Taking into account the previous groundwork of this subject, this paper aims to identify the already conveyed theories in Japanese tales, in order to confirm or deny the idea of these tales containing messages that could affect the perception of nature in the society.

The present paper will revolve around the analysis of the five Japanese folktales mentioned above. Therefore, each section will be focused on a profound analysis in connection with the subject of Nature, preceded by a short presentation of each story. A combined interpretation followed by a comprehensive conclusion will be at the end.

2. The Adventures of Kintarō []

Kintarō or the Golden Boy is a tale about a young kid, whose strength is far superior from the average human. There are several versions regarding his progenitors and the exact location of his birthplace, although the main sources tend to agree that the Golden Boy was raised somewhere in the mount Ashigara [足柄山], on the border of the actual Shizuoka and Kanagawa prefectures [Sato, 1995: 61-64]. Kintarō has several animal companions, with whom he helps the ones in need and defeats the evil spirits.

In the illustrated version by Kawauchi Ayumi (2000), the story presents Kintarō as yet a small kid who one day, while walking through the mountains with his animal friends (mainly birds and rabbits), encounters a big sumo fight performed by various wild animals. The bear, seemingly the most powerful opponent in there, displayed a rather mean behaviour towards the other animals, which inclines Kintarō to challenge the animal to a fight. The boy emerges victorious and the defeated bear becomes his friend⁶. Another day, Kintarō decides to go fishing, quickly discovering that the chosen part of the river has its master⁷, a big koi or common carp, therefore being a private property of the fish. Kintarō, instead of changing spots, engages in a fight with the koi, and after winning, the fish accepts defeat and becomes his friend. The story ends up with a famous samurai asking Kintarō to join his party and he becomes a famous hero in his older years.

From this brief summary, it can be clearly seen how in the tale animals are represented as humans' friends/companions; they willingly follow the boy around and do not question his superiority (neither hold a grudge on him) once defeated. In the sumo episode, the bear's behaviour is initially portrayed as mean⁸, maybe even violent, and it only changes after a fight, when the animal seems to acknowledge the power of the human and submits to him. The episode with the fish is similar, reconciliation⁹ comes after the animal's defeat.

Violent behaviour or submission should not be by any means a topic in an adaptation for children (the tale's approach of the subject seems quite innocent and barely showcases any

⁶ 「大の仲良しになりました」 . They became close friends.

⁷ 「このふちのぬし」 . The master of this abyss.

⁸ The exact Japanese word that is used in the story is いじめる.

⁹ The book uses the expression なかなおり .

direct negativity), however it is important to keep in mind that, in both cases, neither the bear nor the *koi* were displaying any unnatural behaviour worth starting a fight over on the first place. What is more, their demeanour seems to be suitable and in accordance with the circumstances. The story itself remarks in the beginning that everything takes place in the middle of the mountains, the realm of nature and wildness, and in both scenarios it seems like the small protagonist interrupted the natural course of things.

In the incident with the *koi* the tale specifically refers to the fish as *the master of the place* [in the river], however Kintarō, instead of moving further along the river, still decides to stay fishing at that particular spot, *knowingly* disturbing the *koi's* home. During the fight, which occurs underwater, Kintarō even manages to ride the animal¹⁰, establishing his power over the fish. In other words, it seems that a wild behaviour is not regarded as a positive trait and nature ought to be tamed in order to be accepted and appreciated from the human perspective.

There is a myth, developed by the Japanese itself and proudly presented to the outside world, regarding people's love for nature and their harmonious relationship with it [Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 1-7]. It differs from the Western cultures¹¹ (where the main goal is the subjugation of the natural world) and aims for a balanced connection with it. In order to achieve this, nature is never conquered but tamed¹² through rituals¹³, becoming a manageable element which later can be easily combined with artistic disciplines, allowing the creation of poems, novels and paintings revolving around different aspects of nature. This type of manipulation, although being a gentle and subtle approach, creates an artificialized beauty, or as Rots defines it in his book *Shinto, Nature and Ideology in Contemporary Japan: Making Sacred Forests: "mental spaces"*. By this word, Rots refers to an untouched beauty existing only in people's minds.

This idyllic beauty is usually also isolated, focused primarily on particular landscapes or seasonal elements, where the raw nature has no place. The exclusion of raw beauty can

¹⁰ The exact word used is 馬乗り, used mostly when referring to riding a horse.

¹¹ In the present paper, this expression will refer to European and North-American countries unless stated otherwise.

¹² *Narasu*, 慣らす. Burke, 2014: 79.

¹³ Being the majority of them religious-related, with great influence of *Shintoism*.

even be seen in the Japanese language itself through the analysis of three different nature-related *kanji*: 自然 [*ShiZen*], 天然 [*TenNen*] and 野生 [*YaSei*]:

自然 1. Nature. 2. Natural, spontaneous.¹⁴

天然 1. Nature; spontaneity.

野生 1. Wild; growing wild; living in the wild.

At first glance, the definitions of the first two characters seem to overlap each other. However, when taking a closer look at their composition, spotting the difference becomes a much easier task. The combination of 天 [heavens, sky, imperial] and 然 [sort of thing, so, if so, in that case, well] leads to the word 天然 [heavens sort of thing]. On the other hand, 自 [oneself] and 然 lead to 自然 [oneself sort of thing]. Therefore, in practice, 天然 is usually used to refer to particular objects, such as natural resources, while 自然 seems to be more used in abstract contexts, especially environment and landscape related.

As describes the French specialist in Japanese religions Josef Kyburz in *Magical Thought at the interface of Nature and Culture* [Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 257-281], it was not until the Meiji Period that Japan decided to adopt the word 自然 [*ShiZen*] as a direct translation from the Western world “nature”, leaving behind the concept of 自ずから然り [*Onozukara Shikari*] or “spontaneously self-existent totality”. This traditional concept, that nowadays could be described as 自然 [*JiNen*] or something occurring naturally (without human influence), referred to the entirety of the Universe, including both the human and the Divine. By leaving behind such a powerful concept that encompassed the cosmic whole, the word of “nature” adapted a more particularistic meaning since the meaning of “totality” was lost.

Finally, the concept of 野生 [*YaSei*]. In this context, the combination of the first character presented, 野 [plains, field] and the second, 生 [raw] refers to the untouched and undisturbed places. The concept of 生 [*NaMa*] is practically never used in the context of nature, and 生の自然 [*NaMa no ShiZen*] or “Raw nature” is a non-existent concept in the Japanese modern language.

¹⁴ Unless stated otherwise, *jisho.org* has been the main source of the English-Japanese translations.

Neither of the words for “nature” do not share any of the *kanji* with the word “wild”, and when their meanings are analysed character by character, they barely share any conceptual similarities. Therefore, it seems that in order to become attractive and pleasant for the human eye, this *raw nature* needs to be tamed first, because, as an old Japanese proverb states: 見ぬが花¹⁵, or reality is never as beautiful as how something is imagined.

Similar is the scenario with the bear; often considered as one of the strongest animals in the Japanese forests. It is indubitably an intimidating figure for the other smaller creatures, whom he can, although quite rarely, kill for posterior consumption. Its intimidating behaviour is once again the quintessential attitude of a wild animal with its features, however, once again, it is seen as “raw” and “wild”, therefore unsafe and dreadful. It is interesting to point out, that the bear not only respected Kintarō’s presence, it also became good friends with the boy, unlike the *koi*. The reasoning behind this difference in behaviour could be better understood with Catherine Knight’s article *The moon bear as a Symbol of Yama* (2008), where this writer and environmental historian thoroughly analyses the figure of the Asiatic black bear, also known as moon bear or *tsukinowaguma*, in the oral tradition¹⁶.

The moon bear historically was, and still is, a resident of the upland and highland regions, which usually consisted out of forested mountains and small villages, concentrated in the valleys scattered around the mountainous areas. These upland regions constituted one of the two main landscapes of the country, being the lowland areas the other one. Mainly because of the environmental differences¹⁷, the folkloric symbolism has followed its own evolution in these regions, being bears, *tanuki*, sparrows, among others, the typically animals featured in highland-based tales.

For the highland inhabitants, the moon bear was considered to be an animal protected by the mountain deity [山の神; Knight, 2008: 90], and also seen as a messenger between the

¹⁵ *Not seeing is a flower*. Reality cannot compete with imagination.

¹⁶ Japan is populated by two types of bears: the Brown bear, which can be found exclusively in Hokkaido, and the Asiatic black bear, which mainly resides in Honshu and Shikoku. Since Kintarō’s supposed birthplace is somewhere around the Mount Ashigara, it is reasonable to assume that the bear featured in this legend belongs to the Asiatic black bear type.

¹⁷ Lowland areas consisted of a vast plain territory where the main income came from rice plantations. The features of highland regions forced an economic development based mainly on hunting, fishing and recollecting. Highlands are also well-known for their abundance of forests and wild flora and fauna.

deities and the humans. It was almost never seen as a fear symbol (unlike in the lowlands) and was considered to have some similarities with humans since they shared the ability to move on two paws and the love for wild foods like berries, nuts and honey – all highly valued products by the human race. Upland dwellers respected the bears, therefore it does not come as a surprise to see them being featured in folktales like *The Adventures of Kintarō* as good companions instead of fearful enemies.

Consequently, the tale of the boy named Kintarō carries a clear message of the importance of mental spaces above reality, or in other words, how a particularistic and tamed landscape is preferred to the raw nature that surrounds daily the inhabitants of Japan.

3. Momotarō []

Momotarō or the Peach Boy is the name of the protagonist of this legend, who was found inside a big peach. The fruit came floating from an upper river and was caught by an elder lady who happened to be doing her laundry there. Once home, the woman and her husband tried to open the peach, only to find inside a healthy boy. This story is strongly associated with the Okayama Prefecture, where it is believed lies its origin. Some versions also remark that the boy was a gift from the gods to a childless couple.

In the version edited by Sawai Keiko (2009) the boy that came from the peach grew up fast and soon started taking care of his elder parents. However, not long after that, the word spread around about the evil demons [*Oni*, 鬼] from the Demon Island [*OniGaShima*, 鬼が島], who were causing trouble to innocent people. When Momotarō heard the story, he decided to pay a visit to the Demon Island to battle the *Oni*, receiving some sweet millet dumpling [*KibiDanGo*, 吉備団子] as a departure gift from the mother. On his way to the Island, he met a dog, a monkey and a green pheasant, who in exchange for a sweet dumpling offered to be his companions¹⁸ and helped in the battle against the *Oni*. With the assistance of his new friends, Momotarō successfully defeated them and came back to the village victorious, carrying a huge treasure from the Demon Island, which he shared with all the villagers.

There are several symbolic elements throughout this tale; one of the most relevant of them all being the peach itself, where the protagonist came from. The fruit's symbolic meaning has its roots in Chinese mythology; considered to be connected to the Divine world¹⁹, it made its first appearance in the Japanese tradition in the *Kojiki*, a Shinto sacred text. Nowadays, the peach is a symbol of fertility and immortality according to Shintoism, being related to the Mother Goddess. Japanese mythology itself constantly reinforces the idea that natural phenomena are the offspring of the different *Kami*²⁰ embodied in nature, turning nature into a divine figure [Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 2]. Therefore, the symbolism behind a boy being found in a peach can be interpreted as Momotarō being a gift from the Gods to

¹⁸ The word used is *Otomo*, お伴.

¹⁹ For more information, see Mackenzie, D.A. *Myths of China and Japan*, 1988.

²⁰ "God/s" in Japanese.

humanity or, in other words, a gift from Nature itself. The Peach boy is not only strong and courageous but also in good terms with the surrounding environment, from which he receives help when in need.

The animals in the story approach the human with no fear, willingly becoming his companions after a shared meal. This dango-sharing episode portrays, once again, the clichéd belief of a “harmonious coexistence” of humans with nature [Atkins, 2013: 159], as all of them enjoy a tasty meal as equals while at the same time considering the action of sharing as a pledge of future loyalty and friendship between the two parts.

It is also necessary to remark the symbolic meaning that lies behind some of the animals featured in the story, especially the monkey. Being a very recurrent animal in the Japanese folklore, and similarly to the “moon bear”, it has been considered “a mediator between deities and humans” [Ohnuki-Tierney, 1990: 131], deeply connected to the Mountain Deity in Shintoism. A social animal, with a demeanour so much similar to the one of a human, the monkey was considered to be situated on a fine line between the deities’ world and the humans’ world. In ancient times, people would perform rituals in order to attract magical energy and purify their corrupted souls using specific animals, such as the monkey, as their mediators [Ohnuki-Tierney, 1990: 131].

The green pheasant or *Kiji* (雉) is yet another animal deeply connected to Shintoism, featured in both the *Kojiki* and the *Nihonshoki*. It is seen by the people as “a symbol of maternal devotion”, as well as the messenger of the Goddess (*Amaterasu*) [Sakai, 1949: 233].

From the information gathered above, it seems that the majority of nature-related symbols from Momotarō are directly related to Shintoism²¹, an animistic traditional faith of the Japanese people. Closely tied to natural beauty, this belief creates an intimate relationship between the mundane human world and the natural divinity world. For some scholars²², the appreciation of nature itself in Japan finds its whole origin in the Shinto beliefs. The divinities that safeguard and protect the Japanese land and its citizens abide in nature, adopting the

²¹ Even the dog, whose image has not been discussed thoroughly in this essay, is often featured as a protector and messenger of Shinto shrines in the form of *Komainu* (狛犬), or lion-dog.

²² Nakamura Hajime, Matsuhara Iwao, George Sansom, among others. See Asquith and Kalland (1997: 4-6).

form of a tree, a river or a mountain. Therefore, humans appreciate and try to connect with the natural environment, as it is the same as connecting with the Gods.

It is interesting to read the description that Dr. Sokyo Ono, a professor at a Shinto University in Tokyo (Kokugakuin Daigaku), provides in his book *Shinto, the Kami Way* (1962: 97):

Shrine worship is closely associated with a keen sense of beautiful, —a mystic sense of nature which plays an important part in leading the mind of man from the mundane to the higher and deeper world of the divine and in transforming his life into an experience of living with the kami. No amount of artificial beauty is an adequate substitute for the beauty of nature.

Nature is described as a basic element of the Shinto belief, being the world of dwelling for the deities. Humans only get to access this sacred space once their soul gets purified (with the help of ceremonies, rituals and messengers). However, there have been many discussions among Japanese and foreign scholars²³ about how the idealized nature is particularistic and situational, being the “mental beauty” (expressed through art and architecture, or imagined while performing rites and ceremonies) the one humanity craves and admires.

In Momotarō’s folktale, the messengers of the divinities welcome the boy who came from the peach as an equal (he was also a gift from the Divine), and a special bond is established between humanity and nature, sealed with a food offering. The boy does not seem to want to control the natural world itself, he is just striving to put an end to the chaos and disorder of his world. He accomplishes his mission with almost divine help, as if he had the guidance of the Goddess herself.

²³ See Rots, 2017; Atkins, 2013; Shirane, 2012.

4. Urashima Tarō []

The tale about the fisherman called Urashima Tarō dates back from around the 8th century and probably took place (as stated in the presented here version²⁴) in the former Tango Province, nowadays Kyoto Prefecture, facing the Sea of Japan. The tale explains that Urashima Tarō lived with his parents near the sea and his profession was a fisherman. One day, on his way to the coast, he saw some noisy kids with a captured baby turtle, towards which they were being extremely mean. The fisherman asked the kids to let the poor animal go, however, they refused, kicking the turtle even more and putting it on its back, so it couldn't escape. To save the animal and let it free Urashima Tarō had to exchange it for some coins that the kids gladly accepted.

In return, the turtle appeared to the fisherman some days later, inviting him to visit the Ryuu Land (竜宮城), where the Dragon Palace was located. There he was introduced to the young princess Otohime, who thanked him once again for rescuing the turtle and invited him to enjoy his stay there. After 3 years²⁵, Urashima Tarō felt homesick, so he asked to go visit his family. The princess allowed him to do so, giving him a jewellery's box (*TamaTeBako*, 玉手箱) as a parting gift he should never open, as it apparently contained the most valuable thing for humanity. Once back on the surface, however, the fisherman realised that not 3 but 300 years have already past, and no one he ever cared about was left. Desperately wondering how to get back to the Dragon Palace, he opened the parting gift, purple snow coming out of the box. He then instantly became old and died, as humanities' most precious treasure turned out to be their own lifespan.

This story is probably one of the most complex to analyse out of all the presented in this research, as it is teeming with nature-related symbolism.

First of all, it is interesting to pay attention to the relationship that develops between human kind and the turtle. The first human interaction the animal experiences is not a pleasant one; with the kids being in control, the animal had no power at all, reluctantly accepting its fate.

²⁴ Suzuki, 2008.

²⁵ The time lapse that the protagonist thinks that he stayed in the palace differs from version to version, being from 3 days up to 30 years.

The kids even did not stop when asked nicely by the protagonist, who tried to remind them about the kindness of human nature. Despite that, they continued being cruel and it was not until they received monetary compensation that they finally left the turtle alone.

Numerous studies that analysed the Japanese kids' behaviour towards the natural world agree that regardless of being encouraged to engage with nature in order to learn how to be more independent, responsible and aware of their surroundings, "raw" wild nature is usually an unwelcomed element. Tamed and shaped nature is seen as a safer environment for a playground, as well as a much friendlier one [Burke, 2014: 80-81]. However, given the fact that there is usually no supervision during playtime, and because kids are in fact actively encouraged to go and explore the wild, this could lead to abusive situations, such as the one described at the beginning of the tale.

Urashima Tarō is portrayed as a compassionate character, being greatly rewarded for it. Turtles are a very auspicious omen according to Japanese beliefs; among other things, they bring good luck, wisdom and longevity, being this last aspect something Urashima Tarō definitely receives in great amount. The turtle brings the human on its back to the Other World, the Dragon Palace, located somewhere under the water. An average human or terrestrial animal does not have access to this place, and it can only be accessed if some sort of exchange or offer has been made²⁶.

According to Professor Hayao Kawai (1996), the different versions of this story reflected the major values of each of the Periods in Japanese history. *Urashima Tarō* being at first a tale focused on the divine marriage, it later focused on elements such as longevity, immortality and finally kindness. No matter the version, however, the Dragon Palace and the king's second daughter Otohime remained always present.

While enjoying his stay in the palace, Urashima Tarō is invited by Otohime to "Come and enjoy the landscapes of the four seasons"²⁷. Then, a detailed description of the palace's garden, which contained four doors named after the four cardinal directions is presented to the reader. Behind the East door, the Spring season flourishes, with *sakura* trees in blossom,

²⁶ See other Japanese folktales, such as *The tale of the monkey's liver*, *The Dragon Palace child*.

²⁷ 「今度は四季の景色をお目にかけてましょう」.

willows, butterflies and small birds. Behind the South door, there is a green Summer, with flowering soybean pulps, red and white lotus flowers in the lake, ducks and the cry of cicadas. The West door concealed the Autumn season, with white and yellow chrysanthemum in bloom, *momiji* trees and frogs. Finally, the North door revealed the season of Winter, with some buried firewood under the snow, frost and dry leaves.

This rich description once again demonstrates the degree of presence of the culture of the Four Seasons that still prevails in Japan. As explained numerous times before, “nature loving” is a common theme in Japanese arts, especially in painting and literature, its main focus being on particular sceneries, compositions or states, but never on the whole picture of wild nature [Rots, 2017: 55-58]. Mental spaces, or how nature is portrayed idealistically in the humans’ minds, are much more welcomed in arts than a raw description of “real nature” (for aesthetic purposes mostly), hence why the description in the tale sounds so perfect and uncorrupted by human touch.

For the British cultural anthropologist Joy Hendry (1997: 95-100), every garden in existence is nothing else but a vague intent of modelling nature. They usually represent the efforts of humanity to “culturalize”, or, in other words, tame, the natural environment around them. For the human kind, recreating the natural world while omitting the dangers that are usually present in it, is a way of keeping thing under control. Wild and untamed are fearsome and difficult to predict, much less to control, therefore, the most plausible way of establishing superiority over Nature is through the creation of manageable copies of said natural world [Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 17-18].

To assume that the described scenery picture of the Dragon Palace’s garden corresponds to an “imagined” idyllic beauty rather than a physical space does not sound that out of proportion taking into account that the majority of the action takes place in a different world under the sea, where even time follows different rules (as can be seen by the ending of the story). It also follows all the basic clichés. The descriptions related to nature are seasonal, meaning that they clearly reference a particular phase of a certain season, with no apparent double meaning; however, as clearly stated by Haruo Shirane (2012: 19), “In Japanese literature and painting, the protagonist will often come across a garden in which the four seasons appear in four directions, a marker of a timeless utopia”. This remark stays in tune

with another author, S. Chen (2010: 118), as he considered that trying to make everything “look *more* natural than it actually *is*” seems to be a common desire among Japanese people.

Timeless utopia seems to be the perfect definition for the Dragon Palace, at least from Urashima Tarō’s perspective. The time he spends there is revolved around meals, dances and enjoyment, and it takes him 3 whole years to start thinking about his hometown again.

Therefore, not only the Dragon Palace appears to be a place from another World, but also a utopic land which revolves around aesthetical beauty, as even small things as a meal or tea time are occasions for the artistic appreciation of nature and its magic [Watanabe, 1974: 279].

5. The Magic Tea Kettle []

The main theme of *Bunbuku Chagama* is the gratefulness of a *tanuki* towards its rescuer and its willingness to help him using its tricks. The narration itself underwent numerous changes, existing now a wide variety of versions of the folktale²⁸, however the main trick of the *tanuki*, the teapot transformation, remaining always present.

Bunbuku Chagama takes place in the Kōzuke Province (nowadays Gunma Prefecture), being its origins not quite clear²⁹, although it is speculated to be during the 16th - 17th centuries. In the version compiled by Suzuki Atsushi (2003), the highest Priest [OShouSan, 和尚さん] of the temple of Morinji, who enjoyed doing tea ceremonies, bought in an items shop a teapot that he fancied. However, when he put the teapot above a fire, it started to scream and ran outside, with the feet and a tale resembling the ones of a *tanuki*. The “magic” teapot was sold to a junkman³⁰, to whom it later introduced as the *Bunbukuchagama*:

「わたしは文福茶がまといって、ほんとうはたぬきの化けた茶がまですよ」.³¹

The *tanuki* considered the junkman to be a nice person and wanted to help him if the man allowed him to stay at his place to get nourished and to rest. In exchange, the *tanuki* would use some of the tricks [*MiSeMono*, 見世物] it knew, such as walking on a tightrope as a teapot with legs, to help the junkman to coin money. A show was organized and the junkman quickly became rich. One day he thought that the *tanuki* had worked hard enough and that it should rest. With the words 「人間の 欲には限りがないといいながら」³², he brought the animal (as a teapot) to the Morinji temple as an offering, together with half the money they made from the show, and left it there. The *tanuki* was so tired that it never grew legs again, nor it moved, becoming a treasure of the temple forever.

²⁸ Some versions include other transformations of the *tanuki* a part of the kettle one, being one of them the transformation of the *tanuki* into a prostitute for sale. Although it may look shocking to the modern reader, keep in mind that it was a normal practice during the Edo Period (1603-1868) to sell a daughter to a brothel in order to pay off debts. Vrataner, 2018: 154.

²⁹ However it is a stated fact that the first written appearance of a *tanuki* (the protagonist animal of the folktale) in Japanese literature is in the *Nihonshoki* (The Chronicles of Japan – 8th Century). Schumacher, 2018.

³⁰ The analysed version uses the word くず屋, however other versions refer to him as a “tinker”.

³¹ “I am the Lucky Tea Pot, but truthfully I am a *tanuki* that transformed into a teapot.”

³² “Human greed has no end”.

In Modern times *Tanuki* is considered to be a popular magical figure; commercialization led to extreme changes in its appearance and behaviour, which drastically differ from the animal's folkloric origins. This shift occurred during the 20th century when the *tanuki* became a "cute icon of wealth and prosperity" [Schumacher, 2018].³³ The animal started to carry a positive meaning, its usual symbols (big belly, big scrotum, a bottle of *sake*, straw hat, big round eyes, tail, passbook) becoming the "*Tanuki's* Eight Virtues". The Modern *tanuki* represents the readiness for the unexpected, the confidence and boldness, the honesty and good-judgement, all highly valued traits in a 20th century society, where virtuous and confident heroes were needed to promote the Values of Modern Japan.

However, this friendlier version bears little to no correlation with the original folkloric *tanuki*, a mischievous animal that came from the Chinese lore³⁴, becoming part of the *Satoyama*³⁵ landscape.

Tanuki's main skill is the shape-shifting ability (mainly into objects), and its character is one of the most ambivalent ones, with some positive and negative traits that made it appear sometimes as a benevolent creature, while other times as a vengeful animal. However, its main attribute was being a prankster, often substituting the role of the witty foxes, which population was scarce in some areas of Japan, such as Shikoku, prompting the appearance of *tanuki*-related superstitions. As most accurately described by Violet Harada (1976: 5-6):

³³ It is speculated that the nowadays version of the animal was encouraged by the makers of *Tanuki* statues in Shigaraki (19th– 20th centuries) in order to increase sells, and by the Morinji Temple itself, where *Bunbuku Chagama* took place. Schumacher, 2018.

³⁴ It is important to remark, that *tanuki's* appearances in Japanese folklore is quite a recent event in comparison to other symbols. This points out that in its origins, *tanuki* was seen just as a simple animal with zero connections to the supernatural world. With the arrival from the Chinese mythology of the "magical foxes", whose population was not abundant in some Japanese areas, the *tanuki* started to be attributed the foxes' virtues. This is probably why foxes and *tanuki* share so many supernatural traits in tales. Idem.

³⁵ A reclusive place, all surrounded by nature, usually in the middle of the mountains.

The badger in Japanese folklore is a complex creature possessing special powers and capable of assuming a hundred shapes. It chants Buddhist sutras and makes merry with its belly-drum. It tricks unwary peasants travelers and devout priests and metes out revenge in its own cruel ways. Sometimes the duped, more often the irrepressible trickster, the badger weaves a unique magic in the oral tradition of Japan.

One peculiarity worth analysing mentioned by Harada is how strongly the *tanuki* seems to be related to Buddhism, unlike the previously analysed natural elements, which had a rather deep connection with Shinto beliefs. The explanation given by some anthropologists³⁶ is that *tanuki*'s mystical powers, together with the foxes' ones, were not Japanese creations, rather coming from the Chinese lore, therefore getting popular much later in the folklore. One of the first mentions of the *tanuki* as a magical creature came from *Wakan Sansai-zue* (Sini-Japanese Encyclopaedia) compiled by Terajima Ryōan in 1712 [Schumacher, 2018]. However, because Buddhism in Japan had to undergo fundamental changes in order to become accepted by the Japanese society, a strong animistic believer, and "had to come to terms with prevailing Japanese perceptions of nature"³⁷, Buddha itself became an intrinsic part of the natural world. Consequently, both Shinto and Buddhist beliefs in Japan share an equally strong connection with the divine Nature.

As for the influence *tanuki* had on the human world, it is first important to mention what exactly was the perception of the spiritual world for humans. According to Marcon (2015), an Associate Professor of East Asian Studies and History at Princeton University, in his book *The Knowledge of Nature and the Nature of Knowledge in Early Modern Japan*, there was a fundamental division, which occurred during the 6th century, between the human world and the sacred one. During that period, areas populated by humans started to be invaded by snake-like spirits (*YatsuNoKami*, 夜刀神). In order to get rid of them, wooden sticks were

³⁶ See Marcon, 2015; Winzeler, 2008.

³⁷ Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 3.

erected at a mountain entrance, thus marking the boundaries between the two worlds. A shrine and a *toori* were also created to pacify the supernatural creatures through worship and to warn humans where the domesticated nature came to its end.

The *tanuki* has a special role in this practice, as thanks to its shape-shifting abilities it could adopt a human form, therefore effectively communicating with humans without scaring them. Interacting with people at the boundaries between the two worlds was a rather safe place, therefore why *tanukis* would often transform into religious people, becoming “illegitimate” messengers between the worlds.

With time, and because of its original traits, *tanuki* started to portray through tales some negative human behaviours, such as the acts of drinking (symbols of the bottle of sake) or not paying the bills (symbol of the passbook). Even one of the most popular disguises of the animal – a Buddhist monk (*tanuki-bōzu* 狸坊主), started to be seen as a way to “deflate religious pomposity and hypocrisy”³⁸.

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, these traits were replaced by the “Eight Virtues”, which went along with the new morality of the Period.

In other words, the *tanuki* are special creatures with the unique ability of shape-shifting, which allows them to effectively infiltrate the human world without being noticed. They could observe and study the human’s behaviour (sometimes adopting one of their positive or negative traits) and even interfere with a specific course of action. However, even though their traits allow them to be the most efficient communicators with humans, they are not considered to be the messengers of deities according to the Japanese lore, as their behaviour is often dangerous and/or mischievous.

This infiltration of a supernatural creature into the human world can be perceived as the equivalent of the chaotic wildlife entering the organized human life. The natural chaos does not always lead towards the destruction of the tamed environment, and even can become beneficial sometimes, same as the *tanuki* can sometimes help the humans it decides to

³⁸ “The Tanuki Bōzu 狸坊主 (monk) is the sly but ruthless individual to whom any pretext and deception, even an apparent piousness, will serve his ends”. Schumacher, 2018.

interact with. In its beginning, a *tanuki* was a complex, quite unpredictable character, whose behaviour bore a lot of similarities with the human nature itself.

In *Bunbuku Chagama* the *tanuki* is not portrayed as a “monstrous creature”, but as a helping character, who aids a junkman in need. The animal uses its abilities for a good deed and is rewarded in the end by becoming a sacred treasure worshipped by humans. In other words, the chaotic wildlife becomes sacred once it served in human favour.

6. The Gratitude of the Crane []

Tsuru no Ongaeshi is a story about a requital of a favour from a crane in disguise towards its saviour with, however, quite a somber ending and a clear moral message that advises people to keep the promises they make. There have been several versions of the story, but its origins still remain unclear.

According to the version edited by Sawai (2009), the main protagonists are an elderly poor couple living in the middle of the mountains³⁹. One winter day, the husband went to the village to sell firewood, and on his way back he encountered a crane in the middle of the road. The crane was injured and stuck after managing to fall into a trap. The old man freed it and saw it sail the skies. The same evening a beautiful girl knocked on their houses' door, asking to stay over for the night since the weather was unfavourable. The girl started to live with the family, and one day decided to weave an item of clothing. After secluding herself in a room and explicitly asking the couple not to peek inside, she produced a rare, shiny fabric that got sold at a high price. After some time, she once again decided to create a new fabric, however, after three days of seclusion, the couple could not resist anymore and decided to peek into her room. Inside they saw a crane making the cloth out of its own feathers. After the fabric was finished, the girl stated that she was the injured crane that came to thank them. However, now that her true form was revealed, she had to leave. She then transformed into her real form again, and after one cry, flew the skies.

At first sight, this last story may not seem as much related to nature as the other ones, however, it is remarkably crucial in order to get a better understanding of the peculiarities of this culture and how it ends up projecting on its surrounding.

First of all, it is important to remark that the tale revolves around the idea of shape-shifting. It bears striking similarities with the *tanuki* legends, in both cases being the animal form their original one, as well as the interaction with humans their main motive for the transformation. However, this story belongs to the category of "Non-Human Females", as Hayao Kawai likes to refer to it in his research. Japan, as well as other cultures, is quite rich with stories that contain animal-human interaction, and even marriage. In Western folklore

³⁹ It is once again a *Satoyama* landscape.

Beauty and the Beast, *The Raven*, *The Frog Princess*, among others, are some of the familiar stories where a person is, usually temporary, transformed into an animal who then is put back again in contact with the human world. Some of the Japanese tales also share these plot similarities, being the main difference that originally they are, in fact, animals and not humans – a factor that always acts as the catalyser of the stories. Another important element to point out is the gender of these characters, being all of them females that usually become the wives of their male saviours when being animals in distress. Some versions of the *Gratitude of the Crane* talk about a young male instead of an elder couple, however, given that the act of marriage has little to no influence to the development of the story, this factor will be omitted from now on.

Cranes by itself are considered to be spiritual birds in several Asian countries, such as China and Japan. Seen as omens of good luck and longevity, their elegant form in flight reminds that of a gentle female figure, pure and naïve as the bird's white feathers.

The Crane in the tale portrays no one other but Nature in distress itself, which after being rescued by a man, decides to return the favour, adapting the shape of a human in order to better interact with the human world. It is clearly remarked in the story that the original form of the girl is the Crane's one, and hiding her true nature seems to be of major importance for her. She strictly forbids anyone to enter her chamber while she is creating the cloth, as if being ashamed of it, and once "the naked truth" comes to light, the woman feels shame and sorrow and decides to depart from her human life forever. In other words, once the "unclean"⁴⁰ side is revealed, the animal feels as it would not be able to live among humans anymore and its only option is to return to the world it belongs to.

Kawai remarks that this behaviour is particular almost exclusively to the Japanese folkloric tales, revealing the existing balance between the human and the natural world. According to his research, animals and humans seem to be able to live and have a temporal relationship with each other, however, in the end, it always results in them being able to only coexist by living in a divided territory [Kawai, 1996]. This relationship portrays the country in a

⁴⁰ In the case of the "Gratitude of the Crane" the protagonist uses her own feathers to create the clothes, which may not be considered as something dirty by the majority. However, in other similar stories, the non-human female is caught in acts such as urinating in a cooking pot in order to make the best meal, which could be considered as something quite shameful to be seen doing.

“delicately mediate position” between being one with nature and being opposite with it. Nature seems to be grateful for human kindness, trying to reach out and help the people around it. However, instead of just accepting the gifts as they are, humans need to be able to understand and explain everything that surrounds them, and similarly to the couple that disobeys the simple request of not peeking, they start to analyse, research and name the natural world. The Crane uses its own feathers (therefore probably hurting itself) in order to provide its rescuers with money; the sacrifice is however not appreciated enough, as the humans are too curious to accept the unknown, intruding and unwillingly harming the surroundings. In order to comprehend Nature, they first need to put themselves apart from it, thus creating the division between nature and humans. However, Nature is supposed to be wild, untamed, even dangerous; when the human tries to identify its secrets, it flies away as the grateful crane of the folktale, who escapes because it cannot hide its true nature in secrecy anymore.

7. The human-nature bond

As can be easily deduced from the previous part of this research, there is indeed a rather unique relationship between Japanese society as a whole and the Natural environment around it. The presented folkloric tales introduce to the readers quite a harmonious world between humans and nature; animals are identified as humans' companions, eager to assist them in times of need [*Kintarō*, *Momotarō*], to express their gratitude when rescued [*The Gratitude of the Crane*, *Magic Tea Kettle*, *Urashima Tarō*], and, in general, ready to coexist in balance with the human world, rarely bothering or interrupting the "good" humans' activities.

However, when this assumption is closely analysed, more and more flaws start to appear in the surface, leading to a conclusion that has been already postulated by several experts in the field [Asquith, Atkins, Chen, Rots, among others]: the unique love-relationship between the inhabitants of Japan and Nature is a myth, or as Shirane (2012: 5-9) referred to it in his book, a social construct.

Upon closer inspection of the provided descriptions of the characters and their relationships between each other, it is easily noticeable that the amicable bond between humans and nature is rather unequal, being the human on an obvious position of dominance. In the story of *Kintarō*, the boy was born in the middle of the *Satoyama* landscape, and because of the lack of other people around, the surrounding environment was his only friend. It is indisputable that nature favours him and that the small forest animals are his loyal friends. However, when he encounters other creatures during his adventures that seem to challenge his presence rather than befriend him immediately, the boy engages in a fight in order to reinforce his position.

There is a pattern of actions portrayed in the form of rituals that repeats itself every time an interaction between nature and people occur. These rituals are needed in order to establish a relationship with the natural world, where nature tends to end up tamed. According to the specialist in Education Rachael S. Burke (2014: 89), research has proven that Japanese kids are quite encouraged to get in direct contact with nature. Nonetheless, because the outside world is inevitably seen as polluted, the factor of it being a tamed and managed environment, where the dangers are minimized, becomes a major factor. Apart from

Kintarō's "fighting ritual", other stories also present a similar practice. In *Momotarō*, before the 3 animal companions decided to follow the boy's instructions, a "food offering" takes place; in *Urashima Tarō* and *The Gratitude of the Crane* tales, the act of saving a member of the natural world in distress allows the protagonists to obtain in exchange new commodities they never even dreamt of before. Finally, in the *Magic Tea Kettle* folktale, the poor junkman's kindness towards a tea kettle is the key to becoming rich.

These rituals, however, are not extended to everybody; only unique species are appreciated in the folktales. Despite saving a harassed turtle, Urashima Tarō's profession was a fisherman, which indicates that he clearly had hurt other sea organisms in the past. Kintarō did not fight every animal he crossed paths with, being only ready to attack the most "violent"⁴¹ ones. This particularism not only portrays a preference towards wild species that present a behaviour of domesticated ones but also the perception that the whole natural world is particularistic and extremely situational [Rots, 2017: 133].

The humans' idea of surrounding themselves with specific aspects from nature in order to avoid the wild elements only reinforces the belief that a chaotic cosmos is unwelcomed. Every forest and city in Japan, no matter the size, has its own shrine that establishes a clear barrier between the human world and Nature. It serves the purpose of a "meeting point", where the human soul can safely interact with the environment, express gratitude and make an offering, while at the same time it keeps behind a line the most "curious" creatures. Therefore, it prevents anyone from crossing to the other side, because if it happens, order will inevitably be interrupted once again. Shape-shifting creatures are usually the ones that more often get the opportunity of crossing the imaginary line since they are able to transform into something or someone common for the people's eyes and minds. However, disrupting the order that the other world has established is not always a good option, let alone a lasting one. The *tanuki* of the *Magic Tea Kettle* story, for example, caused a lot of commotion before ending up in good hands, and the crane, before being rescued by the old man, got itself injured by a human trap. In the *tanuki*'s case, the animal became appreciated and sacred in the monk's eyes only after it served its purpose of helping a person in need. As

⁴¹ It has been already discussed that behaviours that could be perceived as violent or frightening by humans are natural in the wild world, where the rule of the most powerful is still present.

for the crane, it was never even able to achieved full acceptance in among humans, since it felt ashamed of its true nature, therefore leaving immediately after its true form was discovered.

The underline message of the folktales seems to be that no matter the intentions, once the wild nature manages to barge into the human world, the order gets disrupted. The intent is to attempt to prevent kids from the unexpected dangers that could be found in the chaotic nature, therefore people started to limit its whole definition and chose to focus only on some of its specific elements, which exclusively radiated a perception of beauty and care. Or in other words, that resembled an art piece rather than the real wildlife.

In her book *Everyday Aesthetics*, the philosophy teacher Yuriko Saito (2007) ponders about the artistic value of mundane things, what makes them be appreciated, and why exactly they are different from pieces of art. Her arguments revolve around the idea that while works of art tend to be extraordinary, exceptional, memorable, aesthetically highly valued and therefore, everlasting, the mundane things are rather appreciated by their functionality and utility, thus going unnoticed in the everyday life.

The myth of a nature-loving country in the Japanese culture finds its groundwork here, in the radical difference between mundane and artistic, combined with the strong influence over the country of the Shinto and Buddhist⁴² philosophies. Being animism the religious basis of Japan, the sanctification of a specific mountain, tree or another natural element was a common practice in the early periods of history. Nature was admired not as a whole, but rather as some individual elements that were usually combinations between the surrounding environment, religion and art [Asquith and Kalland, 1997: 6]. Therefore, over the years, instead of considering nature as it is – a fragment of the common daily scenery, a useful surviving resource and also a quickly changing one – nature started to be presented as something extraordinary, deserving of being memorable for a long time, thus consequently becoming an everlasting element of the world. However, despite the fact that some natural elements can be perceived as timeless when compared to a human's lifespan, they undergo transformation every second, and if before the human influence over this environment was

⁴² Despite the fact that in its origins Buddhism bears little to no similarities with Shintoism, in order to prosper in Japan, this philosophy had to adapt and present itself as a more naturalistic one.

a rather modest one (some trees for wood, some berries for food), it is no surprise to anybody that the human impact on the natural world became one of the major causes of the nowadays global collapse.

Notwithstanding, can the theory of the encouragement of an idyllic, particularistic and situational nature be somehow conveyed in the pages of age-old Japanese folktales? The short answer is yes.

Summing up the ideas of Chen (2010), a reduced in size and pattern-made nature is visually more comforting and reassuring (there can be little danger in something that is clear and organized). A garden is nature in an idealized form [Hendry, 1997: 84]. Control is important for overpopulated societies confined in small-sized territories; if chaos starts to unravel, the possibilities of a nation-level collapse are an undeniable hazard. Therefore, it is of major importance that kids learn how the concept of order is a valuable asset and a necessity.

In the tale of *Momotarō*, the kid is presented as a gift from the Shinto *Kami* world. The protagonist is the strongest human being in the tale, and when the misbehaviour of the *Oni* starts to wreak havoc, he seems to be the perfect candidate to suppress and effectively eliminate the evil. The appearance of this kid is of course not coincidental; the natural world, in order to preserve its structure and prevent destruction, gifts the human world with a “super-natural” baby, which is able to put an end to whatever chaos that could somehow endanger the survival of both worlds. These gifts given by Nature itself teach a lesson of appreciation to the most little ones as well, as the received offerings have the purpose of protecting people from danger.

In contrast to *Momotarō*, where the boy does not seek superiority over nature, but rather a clichéd harmonious coexistence between humans and animals (bond reinforced by the food-giving ritual), in the tale of *Kintarō* a desire of taming the wild seems to be one of the main goals. Taming nature still allows the creation of a balance between the natural and the human world, but this bond is based on safety and order rather than equality. Therefore, a mental space of non-wild and perfect nature comes into existence [Rots, 2017: 175]. In *Kintarō*, there is no mention of dangerous vegetation, and the animals are presented as the human’s friends (after the appropriate ritual is performed).

The idea of presenting nature as a piece of art and not as an ordinary element can be probably best understood through the descriptions of the Dragon Palace in the folktale *Urashima Tarō*. When the protagonist is first taken there on the back of a turtle, the place is described as an enormous palace situated in an unknown location underwater, showing already that it is not an easy to find place, and that only the deserving humans can visit it. Once there, the protagonist seems to lose track of time, being overwhelmed by new emotions and experiences. Urashima Tarō forgets for years about his real life, drowning more and more in the “out-of-this-world” timeless utopia that is the Dragon Palace. One of the features of the place is the huge garden full of blossoming vegetation. Based on the description, the garden is a flawless place, everything is organized and cleaned, with only the “proper” vegetation for each season being mentioned. It is of course, once again a mental space, an artificial garden result of the human imagination that aims to reproduce an idyllic, perfect natural spot. This utopian mental space fits perfectly in the definition of “artificial gardens” given by Yuriko Saito (2007), where order and balance are the most important features, only the “correct” vegetation is flourishing and where it seems impossible that something dangerous could even happen.

This type of landscape aims to appeal to the kids’ sensitivity, encourage them to appreciate the aesthetically pleasant elements of their surroundings and to perceive order and tidiness as a positive feature that should always be present in their daily life environments. According to Wang Min (2006: 44-45), a professor of Hosei University, the need for this type of encouragement is a way to cope with the severe monsoonal climate that Japan in reality has, with extreme temperatures (especially hot humid summers) and natural disasters, such as annual floods, earthquakes and tsunamis [Shirane, 2012: 17]. Unable to fight against nor overpower the strong natural forces, the inhabitants of Japan decided to accept nature as it is and try to harmonize with its whims. Wang remarks that the ordinary Japanese nature is cruel, severe and in which it is rather difficult to survive without the reasonable precautions. Therefore, in order for people to accept its severity, a strong human-nature connection needed to be created. These bond would revolve around the idea of maximizing the value of specific natural aspects’ beauty and uniqueness so that people would start appreciating it rather than focusing on its hazard levels. Through the folktales kids are encouraged to appreciate the elegance of particularism, presented as a timeless component of the

Japanese landscape, even though in reality it is an ephemeral phenomenon that can only be immortalized through human practices, such as art.

This idea perfectly fits with the already proposed perception of nature as a mental space and a social construct. Because of the severity of the Japanese environment, and all the damage the frequent natural disasters can cause again and again in the country, perceiving nature as a mundane element of the world would inevitably cause some downsides, as people could start to despise the place where they were born. The Japanese seem to be eager to embellish nature; the amount of hazardous situations is immense, and the natural disasters are constantly forcing Japan to notice nature and respect it [Karan, 2005: 33]. Therefore, to focus mainly on nature's artistic beauty, which of course is only apparent in some specific landscapes and/or seasons, became the way for the inhabitants to accept their natural environment, overcoming all the hardships and worshipping its occasional, evanescent elegance.

In consequence to all the arguments illustrated above, a combination of wanting to reverence Nature while at the same time trying to tame it gives rise to a paradoxical society that strives to make everything appear looking *more* natural than it naturally is [Chen, 2010: 118]. This, in the last instance, created a double-standard culture, which desires, on one hand, to find a painfully utopian balance, while on the other hand which damages the nature with its actions. There is an attempt to reconcile these two excluding behaviours through taming the natural world, as it would allow to still maintain some sort of balance in a much more controlled space.

However, because "proper appearance and form are important in Japanese society" [Karan, 2005: 91], the country's desire for cleanliness usually applies only for the *Inside world* (beautiful gardens, organized natural spaces, etc.), not giving much attention to the *Outside*. This, therefore, same as it happened in many other places, leads to the creation of a country that is in danger because of overexploitation, rapid urbanization and an unconcerned public. As the crane giving up its own feathers, a *tanuki* exhausting itself, animals are ready to fight and entertain for the humans' sake, highlighting the idea that sacrifices from nature are

huge, but humans are usually too curious to just observe and appreciate, needing to know, to control, therefore intruding in the natural environment and usually ending up harming it.

8. Final conclusion

Several points related to the topic of coexistence between Japanese society and Nature were covered during this paper. Due to the fact that each of the analysed folktales presented its individual symbolism, the subject was analysed from a variety of different perspectives and research fields. Once combined, these perspectives allowed the creation of a much more comprehensive picture of the subject of matter.

Without any doubts, the concept of Nature is tightly related to the national culture in Japan. All five of the folktales exhibited clear nature-related aspects, which either contributed or somehow influenced the lives of the protagonists. The tales presented wild animals as loyal companions or grateful beings, and natural vegetation as the peak of elegance and beauty. This representation is partly due to the strong beliefs that the inhabitants inherited from Shintoism, a philosophical and religious movement that strongly reinforced the idea of natural elements being the representations of gods. Therefore acts of awe and worship towards nature were perceived not only as normal behaviour but also a strongly encouraged one. Nature and humans are portrayed in harmonic coexistence, presenting an equal and balanced relationship that could never be something more than a utopian representation. Harmony with nature in Japan is a myth, and a rather obvious one, however, its perpetuation through the lines of folktales does serve certain purposes in the learning process of the children (and eventually adults).

The five folkloric stories introduced the readers to a reality that was either already perfectly balanced from the beginning or achieved that harmonious state during the passage of the tale. The described protagonists were easily getting along with the nature that surrounded them, oblivious to the fact that their relationship was neither equal nor balanced. Nature is tamed and always ready to aid and assist the people in need. Security and safety are valued assets for the humans, therefore kids are only encouraged to directly engage with the natural elements that do not carry any dangerous adjectives, such as wild or chaotic. Human-made parks, domesticated animals and safe environments are always the preferred spots, even in the most remote *Satoyama* locations.

Through the folktales, kids are introduced to unique landscapes and species that are surprisingly encouraging towards the possibility of a “nature-human bond”, mostly

represented as mental spaces [of nature] and idealized situations, allowing them to assume that the dangers hidden in the wildlife are practically inexistent and, therefore, encouraging them to interact with it. This fact, together with isolated scenarios, such as Urashima saving the turtle or the old man saving the crane, works as a reassurance for kids to treat nature with kindness and even with some hints of paternalism.

The choice of animals featured in the folktales is not coincidental either. As mentioned in the research, the “moon bear” and the monkey used to have a sacred meaning for the inhabitants of upper lands. Therefore, it was important for the adults to transmit to their kids the idea that these creatures should not be killed, as they were the messengers from the Gods. According to Katherine Ball’s research [2014: 189-197], an artist and the first secretary of the Western Art Association, *koi* used to represent old age and wisdom, thus its choice to be friends with a kid cannot be a mistake. Other featured creatures, such as the crane or the turtle also had auspicious meanings, once again encouraging children not to fear specific wild species, as they were considered symbols of good luck, consequently becoming protected by Japanese culture.

It is only after some years, when the now grown-up kids start to realise that the only reason why the nature-human balance was even a theoretical possibility is because of the person being the superior constituent of that dual bond. The nature described in the tales has little correlation with the real wildlife, and Nature should never be considered as just a provider of resources for humans, with no danger whatsoever. This misconception that Nature “owes” something to the human world can encourage harmful acts towards the natural environment, such as deforestations, endangerment of species, among others.

Therefore, and to answer the first question raised at the beginning of this research about how nature is perceived to be presented to Japanese kids, the analysed folktales convey an idea of nature as a safe, friendly environment with an unlimited amount of resources. It is a nice message that transmits valuable lessons of respect and kindness towards the surrounding environment, helping to eradicate the general fear of nature that has existed in Japan over the centuries (harsh climate, recurrent natural disasters). Specific sceneries help kids to grow more courageous by encouraging them to explore the wildlife by themselves (with an unperceived adult supervision).

For the second question, the presented folktales do indeed encourage a human-nature bond, which, because of mostly being based on an idealised, utopian space rather than the real dangerous wildlife, can lead to the development of some sense of entitlement among the growing-up population. The message seems to reassure that an interaction with the tamed nature is favourable and helpful towards humans, as it rewards with “unlimited” resources, never creating dangerous situations.

As for the last questions, the answer is a rather arguable one. On one hand, the research that has been made during this paper is certainly not enough to give a proper answer, nor anything more than speculation. On the other hand, there needs to be a discussion whether taming the surrounding environment is a proper way to interact with Nature or not, as it highly depends on how valued are factors like safety and protection. There is an undeniable correlation between how nature-treatment is portrayed in the stories and how everything in reality is, however it seems like a portrayal of “higher values” is of bigger importance than the teachings of proper conduct. In other words, the tales try to sow in the consciousness of children the idea that nature is beautiful and peaceful, and it should be tamed in order to avoid its danger. These leads to cities surrounded by safe exhibitions of the natural world in the form of parks, landscapes and seasonal festivals (*Matsuri*). This creations are a mere presentation of a socially created environment, with little similarities to the ferocious power that nature in reality is, however they allows to safely interact with it.

In conclusion, the Japanese relationship with Nature is rather unique, as it combines the aesthetic nature (with timeless scenarios of specific natural spots) and the mundane one (with natural disasters and a harsh climate), allowing the inhabitants not only to find beauty and appreciate the evanescence of each moment but also to quickly adapt to the unexpected, accepting whatever is to come. This concept is carefully transmitted from generation to generation through a wide variety of channels, being the oral tradition one of them. In order to preserve the essence of the fragile nature, the tales present an idealized environment which perfectly depicts the willingness of the society to acknowledge the beauty of Nature. Children are encouraged to engage with their surroundings, and despite the fact that the nature they meet is just a mere model, an idealized version of the real world, it allows them to develop a feeling of spirituality, a deeper connection with the Divine Nature.

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