



The Animated Shrine

Using Japanese Animation to Teach Japanese Religion

by Antonia Levi

Regardless of whether or not they are actively religious, most young Americans have been strongly influenced by the dominant Judeo-Christian tradition. For them, religion is monotheistic, exclusive, doctrinal, and serious. That makes it difficult for them to understand the Japanese, who are pantheistic, inclusive, syncretic, and often downright playful about beliefs and myths that seem to lie somewhere between allegories and fairy tales. It is not just that the gods are unfamiliar, but that the whole definition of religion is different from anything most Americans have ever known.

That poses a real problem for teachers of Japanese religion. Most teachers respond with some variation on a historical progression. But, fortunately, the sudden popularity of *anime*, Japanese animation, in America offers a dramatic alternative and a fresh approach to the problem. Unlike American cartoons, most *anime* are written for adults.¹ They play an important role in Japanese society where nearly everyone reads the comic books (*manga*) on which most *anime* are based. Many *anime*, especially those in the science fiction and fantasy genres, incorporate religious themes and assumptions in their stories. They are Japan's modern folklore, a retelling of ancient myths and epics in contemporary guise. They offer American students an unparalleled glimpse into aspects of Japanese belief that no Japanese will ever explain, not because they are secret, but because they are taken for granted.

Using these updated myths as a focus for discussion, or to illustrate lectures, serves three purposes. First, it helps students assign faces and personalities to an otherwise confusing array of unfamiliar gods, demons, and other mythic creatures. Second, it reveals a lot about contemporary Japanese attitudes toward their ancient beliefs: sometimes irreverent and playful, sometimes still a bit fearful and awestruck, but never as skeptical and remote as they often seem. Third, discussions of how and why an artist has reinterpreted an old tradition reveal as much about the tradition as they do about more modern beliefs.

TEACHING SHINTO

Defining Shinto,² Japan's indigenous religion, is difficult, if not impossible. The name itself means only "the way of the gods" and refers to a loose collection of animistic beliefs, most of which predate the arrival of Buddhism. Despite its restructuring as a state religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, contemporary Shinto retains much of the undefined character evident in its early history. It has little central organization and no real scripture. The *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*, oral histories taken down by scribes in the eighth century, contain the creation myths and some basic stories about the early gods and emperors, but Shinto goes far beyond those confines.

The *Nihongi* and *Kojiki* claim there are eight million Shinto gods or *kami*; that may be a low estimate. The reason there are so many is that *kami* are not really gods in the Judeo-Christian sense. *Kami* are actually the spirits of anything that inspires awe. Mountains, rivers, and trees can be *kami*. Abstracts like war, emotions, and weather can be *kami*. Animals are often *kami*. So are the spirits of the dead; the emperor is a *kami* even while he is alive. *Kami* and their stories differ according to region and shrine. Over the years, many Shinto stories were also passed on in the form of folk tales, songs, and plays. Today, that tradition continues in the form of *anime*.

Tenchi Muyō! © Pioneer LCD · A.I.C.

Unlike American cartoons, most *anime* are written for adults. They play an important role in Japanese society where nearly everyone reads the comic books (*manga*) on which most *anime* are based. Many *anime*, especially those in the science fiction and fantasy genres, incorporate religious themes and assumptions in their stories.

Anime can be used to stimulate discussion of the mythology contained in the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*. Although some cartoonists have produced fairly direct versions of Shinto mythology drawn from the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*, none of these are available in English translation.³ The *anime* listed below do not simply tell the old stories; they reinterpret them. Characters have been renamed and events have been changed, although never quite beyond recognition. This makes them ideal catalysts for discussion. By the time students have sorted out who is who and what came from where in the original story, they will find that they have become thoroughly conversant with some of Japan's most complex myths.

Tenchi Muyō! (90 min.):⁴ A science fiction comedy which combines two stories from the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*: the fight between the sun goddess, Amaterasu, and her brother, Susano-o, and Susano-o's later battle with an eight-headed dragon into a new tale about alien princesses and demonic space pirates. The implication is that humanity may have seen these events unfold, but misunderstood what they saw. In addition to figuring out how the new version differs from the original, teachers should also make sure students recognize the plethora of Shinto imagery (swords, jewels, mirrors, and the sacred ropes, *shimenawa*, girding the space trees), and the organic technology (the sentient space trees and adorably kittenish spaceship, for example) that reflects an animistic view of the universe.

Blue Seed (50 min.):⁵ Another science fiction retelling of the story of Susano-o and the dragon. *Blue Seed* is not as good an example as *Tenchi Muyō!* but it is shorter if time is a constraint.

Ranma 1/2: An Akane to Remember (30 min.):⁶ Yet another, even shorter, retelling of Susano-o and the dragon, this time as part of a romantic comedy about cross-dressing martial artists.

Urusei Yatsura: Inaba the Dreammaker (50 min.):⁷ A romantic comedy featuring the lead trickster from the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*, the White Hare of Inaba, recast as an apprentice time bunny who leads contemporary teens on a rampage between alternate futures. The new story has little to do with the original, but it does capture the quirky, amoral humor of the original and is a good start for a general discussion of the role of tricksters.

Contemporary Shinto mythology extends far beyond the stories in the *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*. Over the years, the Japanese have added numerous folk tales featuring gods, demons, ghosts, and a wide variety of supernatural creatures roughly analogous to elves, goblins, and gnomes in the western tradition.

Contemporary Shinto mythology also has its witches, although these are very different from their western counterparts. They are the *miko*, Shinto priestesses, and they are rarely evil. In



ancient times these female shamans were sometimes rulers, often empresses. Even after they were displaced by other forms of government, they continued to serve as mediums, oracles and exorcists until they were banned in 1873 by the Meiji government as part of the effort to create a new, nationalistic form of Shinto. Since 1945, they have made a modest comeback and can often be seen assisting priests or even dancing at Shinto festivals in their distinctive red and white (occasionally just red or white) costumes. A few have even justified the formation of new shrines and sects claiming spirit possession or powers of divination. That real life comeback is nothing, however, compared to their resurgence in the fantasy world of *anime*. There, in the hearts and minds of modern Japanese, the *miko* rule again. One suspects they never really left.

Because this wider interpretation of Shinto mythology is so vast, many teachers prefer to handle it with lectures rather than discussions. Even so, *anime* has something to offer in *Urusei Yatsura: The TV Series*.⁸ *Urusei Yatsura* is a romantic comedy about a lecherous adolescent and the pretty ogress (*oni*) who loves him. It is divided into 10–15 minute episodes, which means they can be used without taking up an entire class period. Some *Urusei Yatsura* episodes that are particularly useful for illustrating and enlivening lectures are:

Sakura: Raving Beauty of Mystery, Vol. 2: Introduces the *miko*. The depiction of the shrine and exorcism are fairly accurate, although the results are hilarious.

Neptune Is Beyond My Closet, Vol. 2: Introduces *Oyuki*, the ghostly snow maiden whose embrace means cold death. Here, she is a bit less lethal.

Princess Kurama: Sleeping Beauty, Vol. 7: Introduces the *tengu* (birdlike, long-nosed goblins) and legendary hero Minamoto Yoshitsune in a time travel sequence.

Can a Raccoon Repay a Favor? Vol.14: Introduces the *tanuki* (raccoon), another trickster. This one tries to deny his trickster heritage by living out a folk story about a virtuous crane.

The Great Spring War, Vol. 4: Introduces the *Setsubun* festival when Japanese drive demons from their homes. The Shinto-Taoist goddess, Benten, and the other lucky gods also make an appearance as intergalactic bikers.

The Big Springtime Picnic Uproar, Vol. 7: Introduces the *kappa* (water goblin) in a story with strong references to the tale of Urashima Tarō.

TEACHING BUDDHISM

For American students, Buddhism usually comes as a relief after the unfamiliar vagaries of Shinto. It has an organized clergy, doctrines, and different sects based on those doctrines.

Theologically speaking, Buddhism is more familiar turf. Teachers relax a bit, too. There is nothing wrong with that, provided no one relaxes too much. Sometimes Buddhism seems more familiar than it really is.

One area in which this is true is the Buddhist definition of desire, which many students assume is analogous to the Judeo-Christian definition of sin. Certainly the two often overlap, but in Japanese Buddhism, desire sometimes seems to refer to any attempt to put one's own needs above those of the group. Most student discussions eventually flounder when they get to desires that are neither sinful nor harmful, merely a little self-centered. *Anime* cannot provide them with an answer to this dilemma, but a series called *Zenki* can at least reassure them that Japanese share some of their reservations on this point.

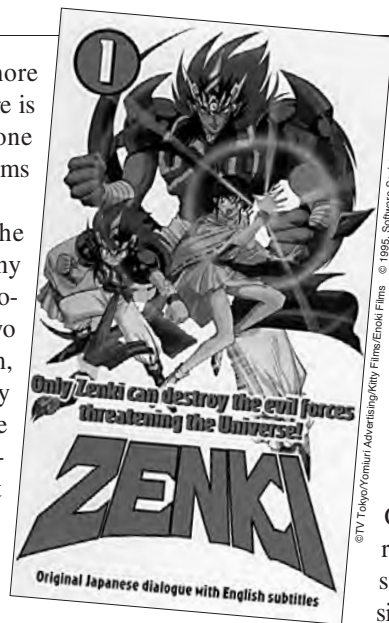
Zenki,⁹ an action fantasy about a teen-age *miko* and her captive demon lord who fight to save the earth from the evil Queen Karma, is an ideal catalyst for a discussion about the Buddhist attitude toward desire. Despite the presence of the *miko*, *Zenki* is predominantly Buddhist in tone. In each episode, Karma takes advantage of someone's deepest desire to infect the individual with a possession seed that turns him or her into a monster. Mayhem ensues until the demon lord finally tears the monster to shreds, thereby also killing the unfortunate individual who was possessed. Most of these victims are not terribly sympathetic even before they become monsters; their desires are usually familiar ones like greed, lust, or excessive ambition. Some, however, are sympathetic people with harmless, modest desires. In these cases, semi-happy endings are tagged on. That is not a normal attribute of *anime*, which usually delights in tragic endings; it reflects contemporary worries about carrying ancient beliefs to their logical conclusions. Two episodes of *Zenki* which are good for generating lively discussions on these points are:

Karma the Malevolent (30 min.):¹⁰ A novice monk's desire for an innocent date with the girl he loves turns him into a lecherous spider.

Teletemptation (30 min.):¹¹ An unpopular little boy's desire for a friend has disproportionately tragic results.

Japanese Buddhism also contains characters not mentioned in theological writings. This is because in practice the religion extends beyond the scriptures, especially in the areas of iconography and story telling. For example, standard Buddhist texts seldom mention Lord Enma, the king of hell, or the twenty-eight guardians of Buddhism, most of whom can be traced back to Hindu gods and demons. Yet these figures have been immortalized by statues in temples throughout Japan and occupy a very real place in the imaginations of most Japanese. Slides of such statues can do much to show what these characters look like, but *anime* can do more to reveal how contemporary Japanese see them. Two *anime* that are particularly useful in this regard are:

Judge (50 min.):¹² A murderous CEO is brought to hell's mandala of justice where he must face Lord Enma and nine other judges drawn from Chinese mythology. *Judge* also raises some



question of who goes to hell, since the blameless victim also winds up there.

RG Veda (50 min.):¹³ Eight of the twenty-eight guardians of Buddhism, Ashura (Asura), Yasha (Yaksa), Karura (Garuda), Kendappa (Gandharva), Ryu, Soma, and Kujaku (Mahamayuri Vidyarajni) join forces to battle the evil Taishakuten (Indra) and his minions.¹⁴ Teachers should note that in the Hindu version of this story, Taishakuten is the hero and Ashura a demon. The role reversals are not the work of the cartoonists, but are based on a common Buddhist version of the story as it exists in Japan.

TEACHING SYNCRETISM

Coming as they usually do from an exclusive religious tradition, American students find syncretism difficult to understand. Often, they simply equate it with religious tolerance. One way to get around this assumption is to focus on the fact that

different creeds relate to different aspects of life. Japanese often say that they are born Shinto, marry Shinto or Christian,¹⁵ live Confucian, and die Buddhist.

Unfortunately, like all generalizations, this overstates the case. Although it is true that in theory, Shinto focuses on life, Confucianism on family and duty, and Buddhism on death, in practice they frequently overlap. Shinto shrines often sell Buddhist charms such as *Daruma* dolls, while many *O-Bon* dances, Buddhist festivals for the dead, are held at Shinto shrines. Family shrines and Buddhist cemeteries often serve as a focus for ancestral rites. When other belief systems such as *yin-yang* cosmology, Taoism, and even Christianity are added to the mix, the situation becomes even harder to untangle.

Probably the best way for students to understand how syncretism works in Japan is to allow them to watch it in action. The best way to do this, of course, is to live in Japan. Where that is not an option, *anime* offers some entertaining examples of syncretism in action. One thing that students notice immediately is that although all the films listed below contain references to several religions, they are seldom practiced simultaneously. At any particular moment, one religion is usually dominant. Another point they notice is that in *anime*, Shinto is nearly always seen as female, while Buddhism's image is predominantly male. This is probably because of *anime*'s fascination with the *miko*. Teachers need to point out that it does not reflect scripture or even practice. In modern Japan, Shinto priests are usually male, and Buddhism supports a large number of nunneries as well as monasteries.

Some *anime* that are particularly useful for illustrating Japanese syncretic beliefs are:

Doomed Megalopolis: The Battle For Tokyo (50 min.):¹⁶ The final chapter in a four-hour epic about a demon terrorizing Tokyo in the 1920s. It features a *miko* who triumphs over the demon by becoming possessed by Kannon, the Buddhist goddess of mercy. *Doomed Megalopolis* also contains references to Confucian ideas about hungry ghosts, Taoist ideas about dragons in the earth and earthquakes, and western-style Satanism.

The Crystal Triangle (90 min):¹⁷ A science fiction film about an archeologist searching for God's last message to humanity. The

god is identified as Jehovah, but he left his message in Japan with Queen Himiko, a semi-historical Shinto shaman-queen who reigned ca. 300 C.E. There are also demonic monks from the Shingon (Tantric) Buddhist tradition, and a flashback to virtuous monks in the lamaseries of Tibet, to say nothing of Cold War secret agents, Japanese gangsters (*yakuza*), and scheming bureaucrats. Teachers should note that the negative view of Buddhism apparent in this film is not uncommon in *anime*, and probably derives from Buddhism's association with death and mystery. They should also note the relationship between the archeologist and his students, and the *sempai-kohai* (upper to lower classman) relationship between the two graduate students, which reflect Confucian ideas about hierarchical relationships.

Judge (50 min).¹⁸ Already recommended for its portrayal of Lord Enma, this story about supernatural justice also features a defense attorney who operates out of a Christian church and crosses himself in moments of stress. Teachers should note that in *anime*, Christianity is often affiliated with the occult in much the same way that Asian religions are often featured in Western horror films. This has nothing to do with actual doctrines, but simply with the fact that the religion thus used is alien, mysterious, and therefore, spooky.

FINDING ANIME

Although subtitled and dubbed *anime* is more accessible than it has ever been, it is still not available on every street corner. The best place to find *anime* for sale or rent is in Japanese ethnic neighborhoods like San Francisco's Nihonmachi, L.A.'s Little Tokyo, or Seattle's International District. Where that is not an option, Blockbuster usually carries a decent selection of rentals; so do smaller video outlets that specialize in foreign and art films. Sam Goody and Suncoast Video franchises usually feature a nice selection of *anime* for sale.

Anime can also be purchased through mail order catalogue companies. The best of these is The Right Stuf. Tapes can also be purchased directly from most distributors. To obtain catalogues and place orders, use the following phone numbers and e-mail addresses:

The Right Stuf: (800) 338-6827; atomu@centsys.com
 A.D. Vision: (713) 977-9181
 AnimEigo: (910) 251-1850; questions@animeigo.com
 Central Park Media: (800) 626-4277
 Software Sculptors: (212) 679-1171
 Streamline Pictures: (310) 998-0070
 Viz Video: (800) 394-3042 ■



NOTES

1. Teachers, especially those teaching below the college level, should preview videos for age suitability. None of the videos in this article are pornographic, but they do contain a certain amount of violence, nudity and/or sex.
2. Some scholars object to the use of the term Shinto on the grounds that it was not consistently used until the modern era, and has militaristic associations. They prefer to call it *kami* worship. However, the term Shinto is still the one most commonly used in American college texts, and I use it for the sake of simplicity.
3. The one exception is a subtitled live action film of Tezuka Osamu's classic *manga*, *Hi no tori* (Phoenix) by Action Video in Los Angeles. It is now out of print, overly long for class use, and the poor quality of its subtitles strains the eyes. It still exists, however, in some college libraries, and with judicious cutting, episodes can be effectively used to illustrate scenes from *Nihongi* and *Kojiki*.
4. *Tenchi Muyō!*, Vols. 1–3, Pioneer Entertainment, 1992. *Tenchi Muyō!* is an ongoing series, but the first three 30 minute episodes are ample to make the point. Do not confuse with *The Tenchi Movie: Tenchi Muyō in Love*.
5. *Blue Seed*, Vol. 1, A.D. Vision, 1995.
6. *Ranma 1/2: An Akane to Remember*, Viz Video, 1993.
7. *Urusei Yatsura*: OVA 1, AnimEigo, Inc., 1993.
8. *Urusei Yatsura: The TV Series*, AnimEigo, Inc., 1992.
9. *Zenki*, Software Sculptors, 1995.
10. *Ibid.*, Vol. 1.
11. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3.12.
12. *Judge*, Central Park Media, 1994.
13. *RG Veda*, Part 1, Central Park Media, 1993.

14. Names in parentheses are Sanskrit equivalents.
15. When non-Christian Japanese talk about a "Christian" wedding, they usually just mean a Western-style wedding. Often these ceremonies are held in church-like halls attached to hotels, and the "priest" who officiates is often a hotel employee.
16. *Doomed Megalopolis: The Battle for Tokyo*, Streamline Pictures, 1992.
17. *The Crystal Triangle*, Central Park Media, 1992.
18. *Judge*, Central Park Media, 1994.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blacker, Carmen. *The Catalpa Bow: A Study of Shamanistic Practices in Japan*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1986.
- Ledoux, Trish, and Ranney, Doug. *The Complete Anime Guide: Japanese Animation Video Directory & Resource Guide*. Issaquah, Washington: Tiger Mountain Press, 1995.
- Levi, Antonia. *Samurai From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation*. Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1996.
- McCarthy, Helen. *Anime!: A Beginner's Guide To Japanese Animation*. London: Titan Books, 1993.
- Reader, Ian. *Religion in Contemporary Japan*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1991.
- Schodt, Frederik L. *Dreamland Japan: Writings on Modern Manga*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1996.
- Schodt, Frederik L. *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha International, 1983.

ANTONIA LEVI is a full-time writer with a Ph.D. in Japanese History from Stanford University. She is the author of *Samurai From Outer Space: Understanding Japanese Animation*, and writes a regular column for *Animeco Magazine*.