CHAPTER 12

Shadowing the Brutality and Cruelty of Nature: On History and Human Nature in *Princess Mononoke*

Martin van der Linden

INTRODUCTION

> Some people think that Japanese treated nature very gently up to a certain period, that is, until toward the end of the war, and that it was during the postwar period of rapid economic growth that they grew cruel. From certain phenomena it looks that way, but I think we have always been cruel toward nature—Miyazaki Hayao, in conversation with Satō Tadao, 1997. (Miyazaki 2014, 56)

This quote is taken from a conversation between the Japanese movie director, acclaimed animator, and author Miyazaki Hayao and film critic Satō Tadao in the wake of the release of Miyazaki's 1997 movie *Princess Mononoke*.[1] The movie is an animated historical fantasy epic set in late Muromachi Japan. The story follows the Emishi prince Ashitaka and his involvement in a conflict between the *kami* inhabitants of an ancient forest and a human community of ironworkers bordering the forest, consuming

M. van der Linden (✉)
Linnaeus University, Småland, Sweden
e-mail: martin.vanderlinden@lnu.se

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its resources. Throughout the conversation, the topic of environmentalism and nature continues to come up, which is a common theme in Miyazaki's movies often discussed by scholars.[2] I think the above-quoted statement is crucial for understanding Miyazaki's overall view on environmental history and his notion that humanity, throughout history, has never been able to fully live in harmony with nature.

Miyazaki has claimed that in making this movie, he was interested in exploring three historical themes: human relationship with and view of nature, the historical influence of ironworks in Japanese history, and the fate of the Emishi (Miyazaki 2014, 47–50). Throughout this chapter, I will argue that *Princess Mononoke* (*Mononoke Hime*) can inform us of Miyazaki Hayao's often-discussed views on environmentalism and history, as well as his influence on notions of Japanese culture and identity. I will study the three different communities portrayed in the movie (the Emishi, Irowntown, and the Forest) and how Miyazaki these communities to give voice to different historical counter-narratives and problematize common notions of history and historiography.

A Short Summary of *Princess Mononoke*

The story of Princess Mononoke takes place during the Muromachi period (1338–1573) and follows the fictional conflict between the "old world" of nature and its spirits, and the "new world" of human ambition and rapid industrialization. The movie starts with a boar *kami*,[3] poisoned by an iron bullet, turned *tatarigami* ("cursed *kami*", a vengeful entity) attacking an Emishi village. Their young prince, Ashitaka, kills the tatarigami but by doing so gets cursed with a deadly wound. Ashitaka gets exiled and leaves the village to find a cure, knowing that he will not be able to return to the village. Ashitaka decides to travel to the West, where the boar *kami* came from.

Near the end of his journey, he encounters two communities in conflict. On one side is Lady Eboshi's Irontown at the borders of an ancient forest which is ruled by the mysterious and mighty being named Shishigami.[4] On the other side is a pack of wolf *kami*, led by Moro the She-wolf and her human daughter San (or Princess Mononoke). Lady Eboshi, wishing for her community to thrive, wants to expand the ironworks of Irontown into the forest. However, this is the Shishigami's domain, which San and the wolves want to protect.

Ashitaka is sympathetic to both causes; he feels sympathy for Irontown, for its population consists of marginalized people whom Lady Eboshi has given a home; yet he is also understanding of San and her wolf pack's wish to protect the forest and nature. In a rapid unfolding of events, the conflict becomes more serious as Lady Eboshi moves to slay the Shishigami at the request of the emperor, who had heard that the Shishigami's head would bestow immortality. The forest's forces are aided by an army of boar *kami* to attack the forces of both the ironworks and the army of a local warlord seeking to besiege Irontown.

The forest's forces lose the initial battle and Lady Eboshi succeeds in decapitating the Shishigami by way of blasting off its head with a musket, giving it to the emperor's servants who then flee the scene, for this act of defilement spells disaster for both sides. The Shishigami's corpse turns into a massive dark and headless giant (*Daidarabotchi*), searching for its head, destroying the land around it by killing everything it touches: humans, animals, and the entire forest. In the end, Ashitaka hunts down the emperor's servants and recovers the head, giving it back to the aimless Shishigami's corpse, saving the day, and healing his curse in the process. San and Ashitaka stay friends, but they cannot be together; San cannot face the humans who wished for her forest to be burnt down. Ashitaka goes to the ironworks, and San returns to the forest, thus ending the movie on a melancholic note. With the onslaught of the Shishigami stopped, the forest is revived, but the Shishigami remains dead. And although Ashitaka tells San that the Shishigami is still alive, San is unconvinced. Nature returns, but its spirit is killed and Ashitaka's mark will never fully disappear.

The Last of the Emishi

Although it is never actually specified in the movie itself,[5] Miyazaki in several interviews said that the story is set in the Muromachi period, but no specific dates or locations are provided (e.g., Miyazaki 2014, 16; 34; 60–61). And despite the ad hoc periodization and that the depiction of the Muromachi countryside is akin to the aesthetics of a Kurosawa Akira movie, such as *Seven Samurai* or *Rashomon,* the narrative design choices surrounding the three main communities of conflict in the movie, the Emishi village, Irontown, and the Forest of the Shishigami, are fictional and set in a fictional space and time, separate from any historical occurrence.

The first community shown in the movie is Ashitaka's, the hidden Emishi village. Historically, the Emishi were an ethnic group who lived in independent communities (*mura*) in the mountainous northern regions of Japan's main island of Honshu. The few historical sources left regarding the Emishi are biased accounts written by members of the Yamato court in the south of Honshu, describing the Emishi as being "Eastern savages" with primitive lifestyles, lacking both farming technology and proper housing. These descriptions are discredited by archaeological evidence indicating that, despite cultural and linguistic differences between the northern and southern regions, Yayoi agrarian culture had spread to the northern regions about two centuries after its inception in the south and the northeast and northern regions had a technology level comparable to the Yamato culture (Friday 1997, 3–4).

When the Yamato court in the south of Honshu started to garner influence and power during the eighth century, they started to extend their borders to the north, where they came into conflict with Emishi communities that had their farmsteads, fishing waters, and hunting grounds there. Starting in 774, the Yamato embarked on a military and colonial subjugation mission. Beyond periodic warfare, the Yamato court settled outposts in the northern regions, declared jurisdiction over Emishi land and communities, and recruited Emishi leaders to their cause, coopting their power (Friday 1997, 7). Lacking the military might of the south, the Emishi used guerilla tactics to combat the Yamato armies, resulting in many setbacks for the Yamato expansion. But in 811, the Yamato court declared the Emishi to be officially subjugated and the villages that had not participated in the resistance got assimilated into the Yamato cultural hegemony (Friday 1997, 23). This assimilation suggests the possibility that many Emishi communities survived after subjugation for a long time. However, the Muromachi period (1338–1573) is 500 years after the subjugation wars, and it is quite implausible for the Emishi village, as depicted in the movie, to have remained isolated and hidden for so long. Yet in Miyazaki's mind, small, independent villages remained. Hidden and isolated, their presence on the verge of extinction, the village and Ashitaka himself, embody one of the thematic leitmotifs of the movie: marginalization.

Ashitaka and his village are the last of the Emishi, their village lies hidden deep in the mountains of Honshu, and he is their last prince,[6] as the elders of the village note at the start of the movie. The curse from the wild boar carries the threat of almost certain death for Ashitaka and at the same time dooms the village to fade into obscurity. The Emishi shaman,

Hii-Sama, declares that Ashitaka's curse will mark him an outsider, and he must leave the village. Ashitaka cuts off his topknot (*mage*, the symbol of his manhood in the village), as a visual marker of his outsider status and leaves in the dark of night. Kaya, a girl from the village, against the village's laws and customs, meets Ashitaka at the entrance and gives him a small obsidian pendant in the form of a sword as a final gift to remember her (and the village) by. Ashitaka accepts this gift. This pendant is later in turn gifted to San at the end of the movie.

Virtually nothing has survived of Emishi culture, religion, customs, and art, and thus many of the materials on display in the movie are plausible historical fictional creations by Miyazaki and his art team, visually relating the movie's Emishi village to certain historical periods and cultures. In one of the first scenes of the movie, Ashitaka rushes to the village watchtower, which visually is reminiscent of the reconstruction of a great wooden tower found at the Sannai-Maruyama Iseki archaeological site in Aomori, Japan, dating to the Jōmon period (14,000–300 B.C.). The addition of this tower informs the audience that the Emishi are an ancient people, but not people foreign to Honshu because Aomori is in the northern part of Honshu, in the Tohoku region. Other visual cues, visually moving the movie's portrayal of the Emishi away from the dominant culture is villagers' dress, reminiscent of the traditional clothing worn by Ainu people in Hokkaidō, the northern island of Japan; clothes that are not used by other people in the movie. Here Miyazaki and his team refer to the widespread claim that the Emishi and Ainu people are related, yet modern scholarship has started to dispute this (Friday 1997; Matsumura and Dodo 2009; Hudson et al. 2017). Nevertheless, these active design choices, as Eija Niskanen points out, make it clear that "Miyazaki's version of the Emishi tribe is therefore visually and culturally distinctive even within *Princess Mononoke's* fantasy world" (Niskanen 2019: 45).

References to the isolated and hidden nature of the Emishi in the movie include the fact that Ashitaka never actually reveals his origins to anyone, despite people around him constantly asking him due to his steed Yakul (a fantasy creature called a "red elk" akin to a Lechwe from western Africa), the gold he carries and his clothing. The only person Ashitaka tells the location of the village is San, at the end of the movie as a sign of deep respect and trust between the two.

Despite the unlikelihood of Emishi culture to have survived into the Muromachi period, the movie makes sure to underline that the village has its own culture. By visually encoding the indigenous Emishi village as both

indigenous to the land, as well as distinct from the dominant culture, as Niskanen observes, Miyazaki goes against the nationalist and nativist *Nihonjinron* ideology and historiography where the notion of "Japaneseness" is bound to certain visual cues not present in Miyazaki's portrayal of the Emishi (Niskanen 2019, 48). This narrative design choice enables the audience to understand that (1) the Emishi are an isolated group of people, hiding from the rest of Japanese society; yet, by using visual codes such as the Sannai-Maruyama Iseki tower and the "Ainu-esque" clothing; (2) the Emishi are not portrayed as outsiders in their own country; rather, they are depicted as a minority culture. Different from the dominant culture, but in no sense less connected to Japan. Their claim to identity is as strong as the other cultures portrayed in the movie. Miyazaki noted in an interview that: "Though they [the Emishi] have been obliterated, they were Japanese people, as it were. They had an independent state before Japan became unified" (Miyazaki 2014, 49). This marginalized nature interested Miyazaki, and despite the subdued role of the Emishi village in the movie as a whole, its spirit of resistance found within Ashitaka's character is one of the driving forces throughout the plot. Their marginalization, on the other hand, is symbolized by his curse mark.

The red–black bruise (*akaguroisaze*) of the curse mark grows bigger and bigger throughout the movie until it is foretold to devour and kill Ashitaka. And when the mark's power is used black phantom-like worms ooze out of Ashitaka's arm. But this mark also gifts Ashitaka monstrous strength, strength that can easily behead a man with little effort. But, as Benjamin Thevenin notes, while in other movies this mark and its powers would have been interpreted as a gift, in *Princess Mononoke* the audience can only interpret it as a curse, for it allows the otherwise peaceful and kind-hearted protagonist to commit horrendous acts of unnatural violence (Thevenin 2013, 162–163). The mark not only signifies the physical curse laid upon Ashitaka and how its power corrupts and changes him, it also signifies the end of the Emishi.

Commenting upon the nature Ashitaka's curse at the end of the movie, Miyazaki stated the following in a roundtable discussion moderated by manga scholar Makino Keiichu and partaken by philosopher Umehara Takeshi, Buddhist priest Kōsaka Seiryū, and medievalist Amino Yoshihiko:

> **Miyazaki**: His mark did grow fainter. Young people nowadays aren't convinced by a happy ending. They would feel it is more realistic not to have the

mark disappear completely, and to have Ashitaka continue to live, bearing the burden of something that might flare up again at any time.
Umehara: It is the mark of discrimination.
Miyazaki: Yes it is.
(Miyazaki 2014, 113–114)

Miyazaki's intentions are clear. Ashitaka and his mark, in the end, become a symbol for marginalized people, people who are shunned by common historiography, and even when their history is brought to the foreground, they must bear the mark of discrimination forever.

Miyazaki's stance on marginalized groups was part of a national debate in the 1990s and early 2000s regarding national identity, what it means to be Japanese and the question or rather criticism of Japanese homogeneity (Napier 2001, 474). Miyazaki shows an awareness of these issues in his movie and the portrayal of the Emishi reject the notion of Japan as an ethnically homogeneous nation. This is accentuated by setting the movie during the Muromachi period, an era often seen as quintessentially "Japanese," marked by a long period of civil war (*Sengoku jidai*, "warring states period," 1463–1603) that continued into the Azuchi-Momoyama period (1568–1600), when the power of the emperor had waned and the Shogunate fought for supremacy against other warlords and their samurai. This period is immortalized in thousands of books and movies; Miyazaki's contribution is to highlight that not even these periods, "the apex of Japanese high culture" (Napier 2005, 233), were as homogeneously ethnically "Japanese" as nativist narratives try to portray them. By making the story's hero a Emishi prince Miyazaki points out that the Japanese nation always has been, and always will be, a nation of cultural diversity and multiplicity.

The Utopia of the Ironworks

The subversion of nationalist historical narratives in *Princess Mononoke* continues when it comes to a major set piece in the movie. Miyazaki has said in an interview that the movie is set in the Muromachi period because it can be closely compared to the twentieth century; with its change in attitudes toward nature, social disorder, and humanity moving farther away from the supernatural toward an anthropocentric worldview (Napier 2005, 237). The second community, Irontown (*Tataraba*) is a very on-the-nose, powerful depiction of these changing times.

Lady Eboshi (*Eboshi Gozen*[7] in the original Japanese) is the leader of Irontown, an isolated wooden fortress with large ironworks at the edge of a great lake, bordering the Shishigami's Forest. Her town produces iron and metal weapons which it trades with merchants. The iron is produced by cutting down and burning the forests, so the town can build waterways to make the gathering of iron-sand easier. Angering the inhabitants of the forest. The town has no farmland of its own and thus must trade for food with neighboring towns. The settlement is populated primarily by former prostitutes, soldiers, homeless people, and iron workers, as well as a group of lepers whom Lady Eboshi gives relief in a small garden area of the town. The town is thriving, and its spirit of community is portrayed as strong and unbendingly loyal to Lady Eboshi and her cause to create a society where the dispossessed have a place and function. The women work the bellows of the *tatara* ("furnace") and work as hard as the men. The iron production and technology depicted in the movie are quite accurate according to archeological research (Kozuka 1968; cf. Inoue 2010). Irontowns's gender equality on the other hand is fiction. The main form of defense used by the townspeople is hand canons and muskets created by the ironworks' smiths. Ashitaka learns that it is bullets from one of these that hurt the boar *kami* at the beginning of the movie and turned him into a *tatarigami* and that it was Lady Eboshi who pulled the trigger. Lady Eboshi is thus also a military commander and a fearsome warrior in her own right, who does not fear the wrath of the *kami*, and someone whom the emperor personally commissions to kill the Shishigami.

With the inclusion of Irontown, Miyazaki once again goes against history and introduces a female leader as the main ambitious counter-cultural force of the movie. Certainly, the communities in the movie belonging to the dominant culture: a trading town Ashitaka visits before continuing his journey, which Irontown has dealings with, and the local warlord whose forces lay siege to Irontown at the end of the movie, all have the air of the Kurosawa-esque Sengoku era often seen in Japanese historical dramas, but Irontown is different. Susan J. Napier has pointed out that the movie portrays a historically utopian society by featuring two strong women, San (Princess Mononoke) and Lady Eboshi as the leaders of two conflicting counter-cultural communities (Napier 2001, 480–481). One can argue that the inclusion of Irontown, like the Emishi village, is an attempt by Miyazaki to go against the grain of contemporary and widely held historiography.

Women had no position of power in the Muromachi period. During this period, established laws of property rights and inheritance declined, and women could no longer inherit from either their fathers or their husbands (Ackroyd 1959, 43–44; cf. Kurushima 2004). Institutions were put in place to reduce the influence women could gain, and a marriage law was instituted that would make the bride the property of her husband and his family (Ackroyd 1959, 47–48; cf. Tonomura 1990). Likewise, despite ironworks and metal manufacturing growing more common throughout the country (Hall and Takeshi 1977; cf. Kenichi 1980, 14–27), as Napier points out: "the notion of such a community being led by a woman who is also a military commander and fiercely determined fighter is clearly fictional" (Napier 2001, 482). The wife of an influential lord, merchant, or another form of a high-status man in Muromachi Japan would have been able to enter certain spheres of political, labor, and economic influence, via their husband (Goto 2006, 195). But Lady Eboshi is unmarried, and throughout the movie, it is made clear that she has no partner or plans to get one; therefore, her position of power is fictional.

Miyazaki's movies are famous for their portrayal of powerful women. From the female military leaders in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984, "Kaze no Tani no Naushika") to the ambitious and entrepreneurial Kiki in *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989, "*Majo no Takkyūbin*"), it is unsurprising that the main characters in a position of leadership in *Princess Mononoke* are female. Yet this contradicts all available historical evidence about the status of women during the period. Therefore, the isolation of Irontown is very interesting; the secluded nature of the town, comparable with the hidden nature of the Emishi village, makes it a plausibility for such a community to have existed, despite historical evidence of the opposite. A hidden Emishi village, inhabited by a people long forgotten and suppressed, and a secluded ironworks, headed by a female warrior and populated by prostitutes and lepers, become historical possibilities. Furthermore, the isolated and dispossessed nature of Irontown thematically expresses Lady Eboshi's ambitions of leadership and agency, ambitions that women in the Muromachi period would not have been able to pursue.

In the abovementioned interview with Satō Tadao and elsewhere, Miyazaki has spoken more in depth about the characterization of Lady Eboshi as a "twentieth century person" put in the Muromachi period Japan. This creates a contrast with her surroundings that is remarked upon even within the movie. Lady Eboshi is strong in the face of adversity and always has her eyes on her target. As Miyazaki recounts in an interview:

> I like Lady Eboshi as a character. She's the epitome of a twentieth century person. To people from earlier periods, modern people must seem like the devil. They clearly distinguish between their aims and means and will use any means to reach their goals, while at the same time holding on to something pure. That is like the devil, isn't it? The devil is so dashing in the way he strides about. (Miyazaki 2014, 57)

Lady Eboshi is visually coded to be exceptional: she is tall, dressed in a blue silk kimono, self-assured "like the devil" and a character of action. Contrastingly, unlike the forces of the forest or the hidden Emishi, Lady Eboshi's isolation is self-imposed. Strengthening her claim to social independence beyond the norm. Her characterizing strength and presence is found in her cause and her belief that what she is doing is right, even if it means angering the *kami* themselves. Furthermore, it should be noted that when the monk Jigo, a servant to the emperor visits Irontown to deliver a request from the emperor to kill the Shishigami, she carries it out, not to help the emperor but to secure the position of Irontown and to save it from the neighboring warlords that throughout the movie have tried to besiege the fortress.

She finished the job of beheading the Shishigami by blasting it off with a shot from her musket. Moro the wolf *kami* had been beheaded just before the Shishigami's death, but her disembodied wolf head moves one last time and bites off Lady Eboshi's arm. The defiling killing of the Shishigami cannot remain unpunished; something Lady Eboshi reflects upon at the end of the movie. At the end of the movie, it is said that Lady Eboshi was carried by a wolf back to Irontown's lake; however, this is not depicted in any scene.

Lady Eboshi's character is the complex embodiment of human ambition and instinct to survive by whatever means possible. Many of her actions throughout the movie might in the eyes of some audiences mark her as the villain of the story, but as the narrative comes along, such a conclusion proves to be hasty. For example, like many of her actions throughout the movie, the shooting of the boar *kami* Nago was motivated by her desire to protect the Irontown community. Her hubris and ambition make her act in ways that might have dire consequences, but within the heat of the moment might seem rational. This characterization of human hubris is already present in her introductory scene. We see her for the first time in a narrow and slippery mountain pass with her ox drivers and soldiers, trying to transport goods back to Irontown while heavy rain

is falling. This is the opportunity Moro, San, and their wolf pack take to attack the oxen carts. And against these odds, she is fighting, fighting with hand canons, presumably made in her own Ironworks, fighting against nature to carve out a piece of its land for herself and her people.

Miyazaki's characterization of Lady Eboshi, and through her, the community and spirit of Irontown as the embodiment of twentieth-century ambition is present in every action taken by her throughout the movie. Irontown is a utopia, a dream realized by Lady Eboshi, a woman with self-acquired power, using said power throughout the movie to tame her surroundings. With her hubris and her over-confidence in both her ideals and her technology, one cannot help but think of how much humanity will change nature as well as its own nature in the future. Nature is against Lady Eboshi both physically and spiritually. For Lady Eboshi, nature is something to be tamed, claimed, and brought to its feet. But in the end, like everything in this world, such acts of hubris have their price. Lady Eboshi's price was her arm and her pride. Miyazaki seems to ask us: how much is humanity willing to pay to be able to bend nature to its will?

Fear and Fury in the Forest of the Shishigami

Throughout the movie, it is shown that the residents of Irontown fear the forest, despite wishing to tame it. To explain this dichotomy, let us return to a part of the quote in the introduction of this chapter. Here Miyazaki laments to Satō that "I think we [the Japanese] have always been cruel toward nature," going against the commonly held notion that the Japanese as a people have a distinct relationship with nature. Miyazaki's lament is reminiscent of an observation made by anthropologist Arne Kalland regarding nature in Japanese culture:

> The Japanese have, like most people, an ambivalent attitude toward nature, in which their love for nature is only one dimension. But they also fear nature. They have learned to cope with natural disasters caused by earthquakes, erupting volcanoes, typhoons, and floods. But the threat of nature goes beyond this. Many Japanese seem to feel an abhorrence toward "nature in the raw" (*nama no shizen*) […] and only by idealization "taming" (*naruse*)— e.g., "cooking" through literature and fine arts, for example—does nature become palatable. (Kalland 1995, 221)

This dichotomy of humanity's relationship to nature is what Miyazaki tries to portray throughout the movie, be it in Japan or elsewhere, humans

might love nature while at the same time fearing it when it appears in its most sublime and raw form. Lady Eboshi embodies the twentieth-century view of nature as something to be conquered and tamed. When she is about to fire and kill the Shishigami, the embodiment of raw, untamed nature, she exclaims: "Now watch closely, everyone. I'm going to show you how to kill a god. A god of life and death. ..."

Raw nature, untouched and unwilling to be tamed, is always present in *Princess Mononoke*, while simultaneously, its taming and destruction are major points of conflict throughout the plot. The hands of humanity in the form of Irontown have influenced the whole ecosystem of the Forest of the Shishigami. The disturbance reaches as far as Ashitaka's village where the boar *kami* Nago, turned *tatarigami*, with terrible scars and black phantom-like worms protruding out of its body, attacks the Emishi. Raw nature is represented by the different *kami*: the wolves, led by Moro; the boars, led first by Nago, and later by the Okotto; and the elusive *kodama* (tree spirits) that accompany the Shishigami, the deer-like kami, of the forest. This somewhat un-organized group of characters can be named the third community of the movie: the Forest.

The Shishigami, the mysterious, deer-like ruler of the forest is portrayed as an elusive yet powerful being. Its face is eerily reminiscent of an old man, its antlers are like tree branches and its mane is like a long beard. A shapeshifter, during the day it is in its deer-like form, while at night it changes into an enormous, transparent giant, the Daidarabotchi. Throughout the movie, it is shown that the Shishigami has healing powers, and upon every step it takes, flowers bloom and then wither away, foreshadowing its power over life and death.

While Moro, the wolves, and the boars are the most active, anti-human force in the movie, the Shishigami for a long time does nothing, representing nature's apathy towards human affairs and morality. Via apathy, the Shishigami throughout a majority of the movie embodies the sublime, the fearful beauty and majesty of nature with a mind unknown to mere mortals. None of the inhabitants of the forest, neither Moro, Okotto, or the *kodama*, know what the Shishigami is thinking. Why doesn't it act or seem to care that the forest is dying or being attacked? It is not until its head is cut off that it starts to move, rampaging through the forest, killing everything in its wake. The Shishigami when it loses its head loses its natural state of tranquil apathy and becomes a cruel, dark and headless Daidarabotchi that kills indiscriminately, much like a volcano erupting and destroying its surroundings, with no thoughts behind these actions, as if the anger of the Earth itself is enacting punishment upon its surface.

Throughout the movie *kami* who turn into *tatarigami* become dark, and black phantom-like worms crawl out of their body. Likewise, Ashitaka's wound turns black and oozes out these worms. When asked about this choice of visualization, Miyazaki explains: "When I am suddenly struck by a sense of vehement fury, I feel like something black and viscous is oozing out of my pores and other holes of my body" (Miyazaki 2014, 52). The boar Nago turned *tatarigami* at the beginning of the movie, whispers as he dies that "You shall know my hatred and grief." Hatred and grief turn into fury. This fury is another main theme throughout the movie: every character has some fury in them and how they deal with it symbolizes their relationship with nature.

Lady Eboshi's fury is one of ambition, self-determination and social justice for the unrightfully marginalized. Ashitaka's fury is one of grief and sorrow, both the grief for himself, his future death from the *tatarigami's* curse and the sorrow that is part of his village and his people's history. The third fury is the raw and unbridled fury of nature embodied by San, more widely known under the moniker Princess Mononoke (*Mononoke-Hime*, literally "vengeful spirit-princess" in Japanese). *Mononoke* (lit trans: "mysterious things") is in Japanese literature and folk tradition a word used to describe a wide variety of mysterious and harmful occurrences. Later it became the name used for malignant and vengeful spirits with a will to cause strife, disease, and hardship to others (Foster 2015, 14–15). As the forest's vengeful spirit personified, San truly embodies her namesake.

Throughout the movie San is portrayed as a rough and ferocious person. She was as a baby abandoned in the forest to be eaten by wolves. But instead Moro the wolf adopted her, bringing her up as her own daughter. San and her mother are the second and third female leaders in the movie, both fighting against Lady Eboshi and her Irontown. Regarding her characterization, Napier notes that San's femininity is subdued, and the character's design is rough and animalistic, but not wild and monstrous. She is untamed like the nature she inhabits (Napier 2001, 481).

A shallow analysis would have claimed that San is by design the thematic opposite of Lady Eboshi, but this would be false, for Lady Eboshi, despite her visual beauty, is also untamed by civilization. Both San and Lady Eboshi protect the abused and feel a strong sense of justice in response to the destructive ways of human nature, whether social injustice (Lady Eboshi) or human destruction of nature (San) (Vernon 2018, 121). However, unlike Lady Eboshi's restrained clothing, San's clothing is loose and suggestive. Napier suggests that San's design invokes intense

sexuality; the fur in her coat around her neck suggests genitalia, her movements and actions signifying animalistic activities that have an odor of wild "primitive sexuality". The blood that often is smeared on her face, suggest "menstrual blood and aggressive sexuality" (Napier 2001, 481). I find this interpretation interesting, yet I would argue that rather than sexual themes, San's design is Miyazaki's way of visualizing San's fury; they are signifiers of her animalistic bloodthirst, her unbridled anger toward humans, embodying the fury of nature. Anger that consumes her.

The ending of the movie can therefore not be seen as a happy one. As Kristen L. Abby notes, even when San and Ashitaka want to be together (their union would symbolize the ultimate union between untamed nature and tamed humanity), San is unable to forgive humanity: "In *Mononoke-hime* there is no hero to rescue humanity, the natural world is both with and against us, and our best attempts at social justice depend on degradation of another" (Abbey 2015, 118).

Ashitaka's relationship with nature is displayed more clearly in discussion with the other two main characters. Throughout the movie Ashitaka is shown to feel close to nature, but unlike San's wildness, his relationship is one of understanding and cohabitation. The curse put on him was not to the result of him wanting to hurt the boar *tatarigami* but because he wished to protect his village, paying whatever price necessary. Ashitaka was following the logic of nature and is likewise following it to its logical conclusion as he tries to find the source of the curse. When Lady Eboshi moves to kill the Shishigami, Ashitaka tries to persuade her to try and live together with the forest. But in the end, no one listens to him, and their fury overtakes their reason. Ashitaka's character embodies the sympathetic and non-ambitious side of humanity, while the curse mark that scars his body symbolizes humanity's cruelty and desire to bend nature to its will, for its cause is the very ambition that drove Lady Eboshi to shoot the boar god.

Princess Mononoke depicts the dangers of human ambition and how it courses through history like a *tatarigami* cursing everything it touches. The movie shows that the ideas that started the industrial revolution in Europe during the 1700s, starting the greatest project of man's destruction of nature are not a isolated example of historical hubris. Humanity's fear for nature and taming of both nature and this fear in the name of progress have been a leitmotif throughout human history. Miyazaki seeks to tell us that humanity's fear of nature is nothing new and that it is this fear that has brought industry and progress to us, but at the same time it

has created a lot of grief and sadness. Here the movie is less historical fiction and more a mirror to history.

One can possibly "listen" to the movie's three conflicting relationships with nature via the lens of Gunlög Fur's concept of *concurrences*. This concept allows us to "listen" to complementary, competing, or conflicting occurrences in history and unearth different voices of both those in power, the furious and the dispossessed, thereby allowing all "sides" to have a voice when these different voices encounter each other (Fur 2017, 39–40). If Lady Eboshi is the voice of the ideal historical twentieth-century person, the ambitious and nature-taming human, whose claim to authority and historicity is a given, and San voices the violent fury of those who do not wish to be tamed; Ashitaka embodies the concurrent voices of the marginalized and dispossessed whose calls for change and empathy have been ignored by those in power.

Concluding Thoughts on Miyazaki's Environmental History

Since humans are so cruel, I have tended to depict nature in a gentle way, but nature itself can be brutal. It can be irrational. It can be very capricious as to why one organism stays alive and another organism dies. Nature is totally indifferent to the good and evil of individual organisms—Miyazaki Hayao interviewed by Fujiki Kentarō, 1997 (Miyazaki 2014, 39)

When the head of the Shishigami is severed by Lady Eboshi's musket shot, the *kami* turns into a headless Daidarabotchi, a malformed and hideous giant, mindlessly destroying everything in its path, invader and forest life, everything gets destroyed. Similarly to how it ruled the forest indifferently, it now destroys it with the same indifference, endangering both those who wished to kill it and those who wished to save it; all must perish. This change in nature is the culmination of the movie's historical environmentalist philosophy: that humanity has always been cruel and nature indifferent. For, in summary, Miyazaki's environmentalist story telling is one of cruelness, and brutal, unforgiving fury that unrelentingly courses through the veins of history.

Miyazaki's movie goes against the historical assumption often proselytized by *Nihonjinron* and less radical movements, who often seek to promote what Ugo Dessì calls Japan's "eco-nationalism," the appropriation of environmental causes by Japanese institutions to rebrand both historical

and current pollution and create an "updated image of themselves" and appeal to a more eco-conscious international audience (Dessì 2017, 92–93). *Princess Mononoke*'s historical framework and its fictional setting are a conscious attempt by Miyazaki and his team to combat and discuss these historiographies head-on.

A major theme and historical lesson found in the movie is that no history is environmentally friendly, no culture, no nation, no country, and no people have lived together with nature in the way romanticized nativist ideologies would have us believe. The Japanese throughout history, like people elsewhere, have polluted and destroyed nature as much as any other major group of people. This incorporates a dimension of Miyazaki's own environmental historiography: that humanity has always been cruel and brutal to nature, and nature has been cruel and brutal back. The mark of the *tatarigami*, the spirit of hatred and grief, vengeance and fury, might never truly fade away: its shadow will haunt humanity till the end of times.

But, like Ashitaka, who leaves everything behind to find answers and gives everything up to help strangers in need; just because things might look hopeless does not mean we should just let things be and accept the status quo. Fear and fury might be two of the most primal emotions humans embody, but Ashitaka shows us throughout the movie that these emotions do not define us, as he does not let his cursed mark define his actions. Despite the cruelty and brutality of our own nature and the nature around us. Despite the indifference of nature's spirit. The Shishigami makes flowers bloom.

Notes

1. This conversation, first published in a special edition of Kinema Junpōsha entitled "Miyazaki Hayao to Mononoke Hime to Studio Ghibli" ("Miyazaki Hayao and Princess Mononoke and Studio Ghibli") is translated into English and available in a collection of essays, interviews, and articles by or with Miyazaki Hayao in Miyazaki 2014, 42–59. Throughout this paper, most dialogues and interviews with Miyazaki Hayao are quoted from this book. The talk is in this translation titled: "You Cannot Depict the Wild Without Showing Its Brutality and Cruelty: A Dialogue with Tadao Satō." This paper's title is inspired by this title.

2. Research on Miyazaki Hayao's work exists in abundance, to the extent that scholars have lamented that the works by Miyazaki overshadow scholarship on other Japanese animation (see Thomas 2012; Berndt 2018). Beyond the

books and articles used in this paper, let me highlight some studies that might be helpful for further research: for an overview of the history of anime, with a chapter especially on *Princess Mononoke* see Napier 2005. For a collection of current scholarship, see Denison 2018. For a comprehensive study on the overall audience reception of the religious elements in Studio Ghibli movies, amongst these *Princess Mononoke*, see Ogihara-Schuck 2014.

3. *Kami* is an elusive concept best not translated as it then may gain connotations that it does not historically carry. For a short summary of what might fall under this concept, see Brian Bocking (1995, 84): "Kami may refer to the divine, sacred, spiritual and numinous quality or energy of places and things, deities of imperial and local mythology, spirits of nature and place, divinized heroes, ancestors, rulers and statesman."

4. The name "Shishigami" is curious. The silhouette of the character is reminiscent of a deer (*shika* in Japanese) and in the English translation its name is translated into "deer god/spirit," but its name is not "Shikagami" in Japanese. "Shishi" means lion but can denote the ruler of the whole animal kingdom in general in older contexts. According to Ōta Tetsuo, an explanation for this word choice is that the word "shishi" in older times meant beasts of the forest in general, thus counting deer, boars, and other beasts under the same word. Therefore, a more apt translation might have been "beast god/spirit". For a more throughout speculation on the "beast" naming choices made by Miyazaki, see Ōta 2005. Another possible connection can be to the *kagura* (a dance performed at shrines and festivals) *Shishi-odori*, the "deer dance" from Iwate prefecture, where the masks the performers wear look less like deer heads and more like the traditional *shishi-mai* ("lion dance") mask.

5. Interestingly the text in the intertitle of the movie is very folkloresque and ahistorical in its construction. The original Japanese intro starts with the following phrase: "Mukashi, kono kuni wa fukai mori ni ōware, soko ni wa taiko kara no kamigami ga sunde ita" which can be translated as: "In olden days, this country was covered with deep forests where the *kami* of ancient times lived." Thus, setting the movie in the frame of a legendary tale and not a historical account.

6. In the original Japanese version, his official name in the movie is *Ashitaka-hiko*, "hiko" in this context meaning "next leader," translated as "prince" in the English translation. As John Tucker suggests, Ashitaka's character and journey are comparable contrast to the legend of Yamato no Mikoto, a pseudo-historical figure in the Yamato hegemony's historiography, turning Ashitaka into an anti-Yamato, for a more throughout analysis of Miyazaki's possible intentions with this comparison, see Tucker 2003.

7. Her name *Gozen* is most likely a double reference, both to famous *onna-musha* ("female warrior") such as Tomoe Gozen (c. 1157–1247) and Fujishiro Gozen (sixteenth-century), thus adding another layer to her character as a warrior; and to famous noble ladies and courtesans who also bore this name, such as Tokiwa Gozen (1123–c. 1180) and Shizuka Gozen (1165–1211), adding to her beauty and connection to warlords.

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