

**Miyazaki's Mononoke-hime:  
The Analysis of a Myth**

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### *Abstract*

In this paper the uses of Japanese mythology in Hayao Miyazaki's MONONOKE-HIME will be analysed. Several themes that are central in the *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan* are isolated and consequently compared to the narrative in the film. As a theoretical background the studies of both Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss are used.

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# 1 Introduction

Hayao Miyazaki is the subject of much scholarly research. His vision on nature and its relation to mankind, his fearless heroines, his imaginative settings, they all seem to be of universal appeal. Hence, the stories and beliefs that serve as a basis for these stories are another field of interest, especially as Miyazaki tends to deny conclusions drawn by various critics. Claims on Shinto-ism or the assumed origin of a story element are dismissed, and instead Miyazaki builds a web of worldly influences and contemporary thoughts to support his narratives.

What then remains Japanese? In making MONONOKE-HIME, Miyazaki takes a contemporary position on an era that is based on the imagined ancient. Thus, in looking at the myths described in a historical retelling of the ancient Japan, the *Nihongi*, I will try to analyse the use of Japanese mythology in MONONOKE-HIME.

Vladimir Propp and Claude Lévi-Strauss are both important figures when talking about myth. However, they differ in their approach. Where Propp is focussing on structure, Lévi-Strauss is aiming at meaning, a far more hazardous enterprise. The two seem to complete each other, and both will be used in the analysis of Japanese myth and Miyazaki's movie.

The following chapter will give an introduction on MONONOKE-HIME. Subsequently I will go into the main themes that can be detected in both MONONOKE-HIME and the *Nihongi*, focussing on the depiction in the latter. Chapter four deals with a Proppian structure of *dramatis personae*, based on an analysis of the functions existing in MONONOKE-HIME. Thereafter, I draw on this Proppian structure as it analyses the different story elements that can be detected in both the *Nihongi* and MONONOKE-HIME. In the final chapter I will go into the theory as proposed by Lévi-Strauss, in analysing and comparing a sequence of MONONOKE-HIME with a part of the *Nihongi*.

I hereby want to stress that this study does not pretend to be all-encompassing in reviewing the aspects of myth in MONONOKE-HIME. In using one source as the basis of my analysis I realise that I am bound to overlook certain aspects, or possibly place more emphasis on a theme than otherwise could have been justified when using more sources.

## 2 Mononoke-hime

MONONOKE-HIME is Miyazaki's sixth feature length film produced by Studio Ghibli.<sup>1</sup> On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July 1997 it premiered in Japan. Subsequently, it was shown in eight other countries besides Japan, and another five showed MONONOKE-HIME as a festival entry. This movie was the most expensive anime production at that time, costing approximately 2.35 billion Yen, and it accordingly became the number one movie in Japan of all times.

### *Proposal*

In 1995 Hayao Miyazaki wrote a proposal for the movie that was going to be called either Princess Mononoke or The Legend of Ashitaka. It would be set in a time where the unproblematic living of the old days would collide with the change toward the modern era. Miyazaki chose for this the Muromachi era, which is according to him as confusing as the changes happening towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and he thus draws a parallel to show that the basis of mankind remains unchanged throughout time.<sup>2</sup>

In wanting to produce a period drama, Miyazaki is trying to dodge every cliché normally depicted in this genre. If there should be any samurai, farmers or lords in this movie, they would play a minor role, in favour of characters that aren't usually seen in genres like this one. Not only personages are different, but the setting as well, as castles, towns or rice fields were not to be depicted, and if necessary only in the background. Instead, nature here is getting the most important role. Reason for this particular setting was according to Miyazaki to depict the characters more freely, without the constraints of the usual portrayal of the existing limitations of the mind.

### *The story*

Ashitaka is a descendant of the Emishi, a tribe that has been near-eliminated by the Yamato government. He is cursed when slaying a raging Boar God, and sets out to find the source of the hatred the God was infected by. Carried by his yak-like travelling companion Yakul he reaches a land in the west. Here he encounters a fortress where iron is produced, and meets the girl that seems to be the arch-enemy of the people living in the fortress, Tataru Ba. The girl is Princess Mononoke, a possessed princess that has been raised by the Wolf God Moro. San, as she is also called, is now fighting with the Gods of the mountain to keep Eboshi-gozen, the leader of Tataru Ba (iron-making town), from taking over the mountain and killing off the Gods.

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<sup>1</sup> MONONOKE-HIME. Dir. Hayao Miyazaki. Studio Ghibli: 1997.

<sup>2</sup> McCarthy, Helen. *Hayao Miyazaki: Master of Japanese Animation*. Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 2002.

The Hayao MIYAZAKI Web. *Nausicaa.Net*. Weekly update. 07/01/07.  
[http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/mh/story\\_proposal.txt](http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/mh/story_proposal.txt)

Ashitaka tries to help where he can, but cannot choose sides. Meanwhile, the battle that goes on between Eboshi-gozen and San, representatives of the Tatara-people respectively the Mountain Gods, is complicated when a group of hunters starts working together with Eboshi-gozen in order to get the head of the Shishi-gami, the God of the forest, and a group of samurai that try to overthrow Tatara Ba.

Mountain Gods turn into merely wild animals as they throw themselves at their opponents, blinded by rage. The Shishi-gami is lured into an ambush and subsequently decapitated. Everything seems to come to an end, the forest is dying, when at the last moment San and Ashitaka liberate the head of the Shishi-gami and give it back to its dying body. One world is saved, but will never be the same, and the two worlds represented by two young people, are still incompatible.

### 3 Origins and influences

There exist two distinguished records of mythology in Japan. One is the *Kojiki*, the other the *Nihongi*. Both are based on Chinese-Japanese mythology, and are written under the authority of emperors. The *Kojiki* is dated A.D. 712, the *Nihongi* was finished in 720.

Here the *Nihongi* is chosen as a frame of reference for no other reason than that the translation on numerous occasions refers to the *Kojiki*, and to what is stated differently between the two. In addition the *Kojiki* has no chronology, while the *Nihongi* provides dates and years, giving a seemingly complete genealogy of emperors and their relation to certain deities or gods.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to stress again, that in choosing between the two I am bound to overlook certain aspects, for instance where the *Nihongi* disregards certain myths in favour of others the *Kojiki* for his part neglects. Again I would like to emphasize that this paper will make an analysis of Japanese myth based on the *Nihongi*: it does not pretend to be complete in this aspect.

Below an account is given of the most important themes in respect to MONONOKE-HIME that are to be found in the *Nihongi*.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Women in Japanese history*

On numerous accounts there are tales of women involved in warfare or in making decisions at a governmental level. Although a woman can't become an Empress by just blood relations, there are some instances where a woman became an Empress through special circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Here are some examples of women in both high and low positions.

The first Emperor was Kami Yamato Ihare-biko. His mother being the daughter of the Sea-God, he was a direct descendant of the gods that inhabited the country. In claiming his emperorship he sets out to subject the land to his will. On his journey he comes to Mount Takakura, where he oversees the land. He discovers eighty bandits on a hilltop, an army of women at an acclivity, and a force of men on another slope. On yet another hill burning charcoal was placed. There seem to be two more groups, each containing again eighty bandits, one named after the village they are stationed in, Shiki, and one named the 'red metal' (copper) bandits. It is clear that the Emperor is victorious on all accounts, as he has the Gods at his side, but no further mention of for instance the army of women is made.<sup>6</sup> There is one more account of an opposition force led by a woman in the first part of the *Nihongi*: she and her husband rebel against the Emperor, and she and her army are slaughtered.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Nihongi: Chronicles of Japan from the Earliest Times to A.D. 697*. Translation by W.G. Aston. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1956.

<sup>4</sup> A small frame of reference is offered in Appendix II.

<sup>5</sup> I am keeping to the notation employed in the *Nihongi*.

<sup>6</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.119-124 (Book III, Jimmu Tennō)

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.156/157 (Book V, Sūjin Tennō)

The Emperor Oho-tarahsi-hiko-oshiro-wake had eighty children in all. The *Nihongi* states: “Now the children of the Emperor, male *and female*, from first to last, numbered eighty in all” (my italics).<sup>8</sup> With the exception of the successor and two other male children, all the other descendants were granted fiefs of provinces and districts. This is the first account where female royalty is granted power. There are other claims of women in a leading position, for instance holding the position of chieftains throughout the country.<sup>9</sup>

Book eight of the *Nihongi* narrates about the Emperor Tarashi-nakatsu-hiko. In disregarding the advice of the Gods, he gets killed in his ninth year of reign. The Empress, grieving because the Emperor didn't follow Divine instructions, decided to find out which God placed the curse on the Emperor. After approximately two years (apparently there is no counting when no Emperor is officially appointed) she is assigned the title of Grand Empress, and becomes the ruler of the country. She reigns for 69 years.<sup>10</sup>

In the first part of the *Nihongi* there is one other case of a woman holding court. When the Emperor dies, his sons Kume no Wakako (the to-be Emperor) and his elder brother Shima no Wakako both say the other sibling has a right to the position. As the position of Emperor is not occupied, their elder sister holds Court until she dies ten months later.<sup>11</sup>

#### *The extinction of the Yemishi*

In the *Nihongi* there exist several tales about a barbaric tribe called the Yemishi, which is being hunted after and eventually exterminated by the Yamato government. Yet, what is called Yemishi throughout the collection of stories might not be one and the same tribe. There is no distinction made between the Ainu or Aino, and the Yemishi or the Yebisu. In a footnote, the translator of the *Nihongi* states the following:

The Yemishi are the Ainos, or more correctly the Ainus, of whom a remnant of some ten thousand souls now inhabit the island of Yezo. [...] Yemishi or Yebisu is also applied to barbarous tribes generally, and this is probably its primary meaning.<sup>12</sup>

This group of collective barbaric tribes is a returning theme in the *Nihongi*.

In the seventh book the Yemishi are for the first time depicted as savages that need to be subjugated. In the 40<sup>th</sup> year of Emperor Oho-tarashi-hiko-oshiro-wake, there is talk of an unquiet state in the east, and of turbulent Deities springing up. The Emperor's son Yamato-dake no Mikoto is sent off to restore peace. The Emperor is giving him the following information:

Amongst these Eastern savages the Yemishi are the most powerful, their men and women living together promiscuously, there is no distinction of father

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<sup>8</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.191 (Book VII, Keikō Tennō)

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* p.193/194 (*Ibid.*)

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* p.224-253 (Book IX, Jingō Kōgu)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p.383 (Book XV, Kenzō Tennō)

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* p.124 (Book III, Jimmu Tennō)

and child. In winter they dwell in holes, in summer they live in nests. Their clothing consists of fur, and they drink blood. [..]<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, suspicion seems to be the basis of their relationships, and they are without honour, for they flee and hide when pursued. However, luckily the Yemishi surrender to Yamato-dake no Mikoto without resisting, for they marvelled at the splendour of his ship, and know that they could not defeat such a force.<sup>14</sup>

After the Yemishi are subordinated, they show no respect for the shrine they had been presented to, and as they are replaced near Mount Mimoro, it didn't took them a long time before they had cut down all the trees of the sacred mountain, and threatened the inhabitants of nearby villages. As they had 'hearts of beasts' they could not stay in the inner country. Accordingly they were replaced once more, and spread out over the remote provinces.<sup>15</sup> In the same period there is one more account of the subordination of Yemishi.

Under Emperor Oho-sazaki, in his 55<sup>th</sup> year, the Yemishi rebel again. The army that is sent to defeat them is slain. After that the Yemishi dig up the tomb of the defeated leader, and are attacked by a serpent that rises up from the tomb. They all die of the snake poison, except for one or two.<sup>16</sup> On one other account Yemishi are slain, as a punishment of their uprising.<sup>17</sup>

### *The killing of Gods*

In the *Nihongi* there are some accounts of the killing of a God. One is very clear in its depiction of a Mountain God who has the appearance of a deer. It is once again Yamato-dake no Mikoto who, after defeating the Yemishi, goes on to slay some more barbarians. He is travelling over a high mountain, and as he reaches the top, he gets hungry. The God of this mountain however, plagued the Prince, and stood before him after he assumed the appearance of a white deer. "The Prince, wondering at this, took a stick of garlic, and jerked it at the white deer, striking it in the eye and killing it." After then losing his way, a white dog led him until he found his way again.<sup>18</sup> This also goes to show that Gods are not necessarily good, but that good and evil is equally distributed among the Deities.

### *Princesses and Deities*

There are a number of records on Imperial Princesses attending to shrines and taking care of the worshipping of the Gods. The most important one is the shrine at Ise, where the Sun-Goddess is worshipped. She was brought there by Yamato-hime no Mikoto, the first daughter of the second Empress during the reign of Emperor Iku-me-iri-hiko-i-sachi. To her the task was given to take Amaterasu no Oho-kami from the place she rested for 87 years, in order to enshrine her some place else.

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<sup>13</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.203 (Book VII, Keikō Tennō)

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p.206 (*Ibid.*)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* p.211/212 (*Ibid.*)

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.296 (Book XI, Nintoku Tennō)

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* p.371/372 (Book XIV, Yū-riaku Tennō)

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* p.208 (Book VII, Keikō Tennō)

Now Ama-terasu no Oho-kami instructed Yamato-hime no Mikoto, saying:  
'The province of Ise, of the divine wind, [...] is a secluded and pleasant land.  
In this land I wish to dwell.' In compliance, therefore, with the instruction of  
the Great Goddess, a shrine was erected to her in the province of Ise.<sup>19</sup>

Hereafter one record states that Yamato-hime no Mikoto sacrificed herself to the Goddess. She becomes a priestess B.C.5, and is still taking care of the shrine A.D.110. She was the first Imperial Princess to be appointed to this shrine, and after her every now and then a new Princess was allotted to take care of the Deity.

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<sup>19</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.176 (Book VI, Suinin Tennō)

## 4 Mononoke-hime's *dramatis personae*

In order to understand the relations that occur between the *Nihongi* tales and MONONOKE-HIME, I will first look at the structure of the stories as proposed by Vladimir Propp, before I can focus on meaning produced through the structure. The analysis given below is rooted in a Proppian analysis of functions.<sup>20</sup>

From the analysis made of MONONOKE-HIME it springs that this is no ordinary fairy tale. In leaving home, Ashitaka is dead to his own people, knowing that setting out erases the possibility of return. Moreover, in showing a hero that seems to be in between a fight without choosing one side over the other, this is no clear-cut narrative. Villains of flesh and blood seem absent, and the hero is practically nowhere in the story acknowledged as one.

I want to stress that this is just one perspective, although the most palpable one, and that it would enrich the understanding of the story if the analysis was to be broadened. MONONOKE-HIME has an ambiguous narrative, which leads to possible contradictory *dramatis personae* even from one perspective. However, here it will suffice to keep in mind the bipartite nature of the story, complicated through and emphasized by the impartiality of the third party, Ashitaka.

### *Introduction to the theory*

Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale* is choosing a syntagmatic approach to myth.<sup>21</sup> He is proposing to study a tale by looking at the functions of its 'dramatis personae', or agents, as they are usually called.<sup>22</sup> However, there is a difference between the two terms. The *dramatis personae* that Propp uses can't be seen out of the context of its functions it fulfils, and the number of *dramatis personae* is limited. An agent however, is not necessarily bound to any functions, and has no restrictions in being defined. Accordingly, *dramatis personae* can be subdivided into 'villain', 'hero', 'donor' et cetera, whereas an agent can for instance be a witch, but this makes no claim on the functions ascribed: either good or bad, the agent is still regarded a witch.

The number of functions that can occur in a story are constant, and the question in examining those functions is not how or why an agent is doing, but what. Functions are accordingly understood as a performance of an actor. Propp suggests four conditions for a tale:

1. Functions of characters serve as stable, constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of a tale.

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<sup>20</sup> The analysis of functions on which this chapter is based can be found in Appendix I.

<sup>21</sup> Propp, Vladimir. *Morphology of the Folktale*. Transl: Lawrence Scott, revision & ed. Louis A. Wagner. Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1973.

<sup>22</sup> Barthes, Roland. "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narration" from Barthes, Roland. *Image – Music – Text*. Transl. Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1999: p.105-109.

Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press, 2004: p.114-132.

2. The number of functions known to the fairy tale is limited. [...]
3. The sequence of functions is always identical. [...]
4. All fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure.<sup>23</sup>

Propp's analysis consists of a list of units a tale can encompass, and he goes on to clarify the different interpretations those units provide. From the functions that can be carried out by agents, there springs a structure of *dramatis personae*, forming a superstructure of the narrative.

### *Dramatis personae*

According to Propp, a tale accords for seven *dramatis personae*, among who the various functions are distributed. These are, in order of appearance: the villain, donor, helper, princess (and her father), dispatcher, hero and false hero.<sup>24</sup> In defining the hero it already becomes clear that there are multiple perspectives to choose from in analysing this movie, and accordingly there are various *dramatis personae* that can be assigned to one character. Here the most obvious perspective is taken as a starting point in trying to define the various complications occurring throughout the story. The *dramatis personae* will be discussed in agreement with the order Propp proposed.

#### 1. The villain

The first villain that can be pointed out is the Boar God that has transformed into a demon. He is fighting with Ashitaka because the latter won't let him reach his village. He is accordingly cursing Ashitaka by touching him, thus making way for the real villain. This is the hatred Ashitaka is infected by, a curse he is fighting throughout the tale. In the story there are two main goals (the saving of San is the same aim of overcoming hatred, as she is swallowed by hatred in the form of Okkoto-nusi). As the curse at first cannot be lifted, Ashitaka and San set out to save the head of the Shishi-gami. In this there is another villain, who previously seemed minor compared to the blind rage. Jigo is not a villain literally fighting Ashitaka, but is an obstruction, and has early in the story appeared as deceiving Ashitaka, which makes the villain-claim a bit stronger.

It could be argued that the hatred-villain has a source, namely Tatara Ba, and more specific Eboshi-gozen who seems to cause the hatred with her 'iron balls'. Yet, MONONOKE-HIME is not about villains, or a good/bad distinction. Miyazaki stresses in an interview given after the release of MONONOKE-HIME that "it's not bad people who are destroying forests".<sup>25</sup> It is thus the hatred rooted in nearly every agent in the story that serves as a central villain, which means Eboshi-gozen serves as a mere catalyser for the hatred, just as for instance San does.

#### 2. The donor

In one respect the first detected villain is a donor as well. As the Boar God infects Ashitaka, he also provides him with the strength necessary to fulfil his quest. It can however be argued that the Shishi-gami is a stronger donor, as he not only has neglected to cure the cursed Boar God, but also cures

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<sup>23</sup> Propp: 1973, p.21-23.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p.79/80.

<sup>25</sup> The Hayao MIYAZAKI Web: [http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m\\_on\\_mh.html](http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m_on_mh.html)

Ashitaka from a shot wound, and again doesn't cure the hatred. This causes Ashitaka to linger in the forest, and it conserves his strength to fulfil the pursuit of a cure. 'One' donor remains, and these are the *kodama*, leading Ashitaka to the magical open space in the woods, where he first lays eyes on the Shishi-gami, and where he and his wounded men regain their strength.

### 3. The helper

This function is not at all unambiguous, as Ashitaka finds himself in between two parties that aren't consistently helpful. Therefore, there is only one true helper, Yakul, the red elk Ashitaka rides (G), who stays by his side no matter what. The Shishi-gami is a helper as well, in recovering the shot wound and lifting the curse (K). San can also be described as a helper. She rescues Ashitaka when he nearly dies (K), and assist him in the rescue of the Shishi-gami's head (N).

### 4. The princess and her father

This needs some further explaining. The princess, as defined by Propp, can be otherwise described as 'a sought-for person'. Her father is the one ascribing the difficult task.<sup>26</sup>

The princess in the story, San, does not directly accord with the princess as a *dramatis persona*. Ashitaka sets out to see things he has no knowledge of yet. Furthermore, there is a possibility to lift the curse for Ashitaka. Thus, the character he sets out to find, who can be defined as the princess, is either the Shishi-gami, or, in a less materialistic form, the lifting of the curse, which basically comes down to the same. In this respect, the 'princess' is simultaneously her father, as the Shishi-gami is the one who indirectly sets the difficult task for Ashitaka, as argued under 'the donor'.

However, as soon as Ashitaka encounters San, he feels the need to rescue her from whatever danger she looks for. Her being a princess, it is not hard to argue that indeed her father is the Shishi-gami. She is an offspring of Moro, the Wolf God, who has a strong allegiance with the Shishi-gami, in them both being Gods. Shishi-gami, in being literally in charge of life and death, is a sort of father figure to the agents living in the forest. He is thus a father figure to San, who grew up without her biological parents.

### 5. The dispatcher

This is the one unambiguous *dramatis persona* in MONONOKE-HIME. It is Hii-sama, the wise elder of the Emishi village, who tells Ashitaka what the future holds for him, and how he can rise to meet his fate. She however gives him a choice, and it is his probably his latent education and pride that make him decide to go.

### 6. The hero

Ashitaka is not quite put down as the unambiguous hero towards whom everyone in the tale looks at the end. Although he prevents excessive killing, wins over the heart of a girl, protects where he can who he can, and uses his persuasive powers to give the head back to the Shishi-gami, he is often not recognised as a hero. Nevertheless, this doesn't block his hero function. Moreover, his actions cause a

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<sup>26</sup> Propp: 1973, p.79/80.

change in Eboshi-gozen, who does seem to realise what Ashitaka has done. This might indicate the future harmony that can exist between mankind and nature.

#### 7. The false hero

This is an unfulfilled *dramatis persona*, as there is no one in the story who claims to have done the deeds Ashitaka does. The only way in which this *persona* can exist, is through looking at the claims of righteousness. As Miyazaki states in an interview in *Animerica*, he doesn't like "a society that parades its righteousness. [...] [The societies] all claim to be righteous but they all try to coerce others into complying with their own standards."<sup>27</sup> The acclaimed righteousness is an important theme in *MONONOKE-HIME*, and this is where the false hero finds its niche.

San, as descendant of a Wolf God, is fighting for the preservation of her forest. In trying to protect her clan, she is putting herself in the line of fire, and tries to kill her opponent Eboshi-gozen. This is not, as Susan Napier argues in her article on the de-assurance of Miyazaki-movies, an act of individualization or a mix of Western courage and heroism as she so self-righteously claims, but can be seen as a typical act of self-sacrifice, pursuing an ambition that extends San's own world in order to save something she might barely comprehend: the savour of nature.<sup>28</sup> In maintaining that she and the Wolf clan are right, she is committing to an unjust claim of acts of heroism.

Eboshi-gozen is convinced she has done the right thing in taking over Tatara Ba and making it a successful enterprise. She is seemingly altruistic in her treatment of the less fortunate in society, be it brothel girls or lepers, and thus obtains the respect she herself is giving them. However, Eboshi-gozen is extreme in her right versus wrong depiction. She feels that nothing should stand in her way in the chase after success and power. She does not take notice of the call for help from her own people, in pursuing some sort of heroic status in killing the Shishi-gami.

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<sup>27</sup> McCarthy: 2002, p.185.

<sup>28</sup> Napier, Susan J. "Confronting Master Narratives: History as Vision in Hayao Miyazaki's Cinema of De-assurance". *Positions: East Asia Culture Critique*. Vol.9, no.2 (2001):p.474.

## 5 Mononoke-hime rooted in myth

In looking at the *Nihongi*, it becomes clear that the way of narrating is unlike the ‘usual’ story format of myths. The thirty books together have the prime function of providing an accurate history of Japan, the Eight-Island-Country. There is for the most part no quest for a princess or the branding by a villain, although the first books are more myth-like than the latter. The history doesn’t have the structure, but does have the story elements of a myth as proposed by Propp, and could be regarded as myth.

Focussing on various *dramatis personae*, the different narrative aspects will be compared according to the aspects mentioned in the fourth chapter, in order to attain what could be regarded as the basis of MONONOKE-HIME. In this aspect I would like to bring up the article written by Susan Napier, as this article can be both supporting and critiqued in looking at the differences between a myth created and recreated over several centuries, and a fictional period drama that seems to base its themes on a story it simultaneously is taking down.

### *Women in Japanese history*

Napier in her article is claiming that one of the most important aspects of the in her eyes unfamiliar nature of the movie, lies in “the film’s outright subversion of conventional female characterization”.<sup>29</sup> However, as shown in the former chapter, women in ancient Japan have on more than one occasion taken a leading role in either government or combat.

Both in book III and book V of the *Nihongi*, women leading an army occur. Even though not being very detailed, the link still can be drawn to the army that Eboshi-gozen controls. As in the myth the Emperor’s troops fight the army of women, in the movie the position is filled by rivals who prey on the land that contains iron. In the *Nihongi* there is no clear account of what happens to the force of women, just like there is no decided outcome in the battle between the Tatara-women and the men that are after their fortress. In the myth the army of women serves as a donor: with a multitude of armies the Emperor cannot proceed, and this can thus be seen as a test, wherein especially the armies that are not mentioned in the later massacre, serve as mere donors. However, the army Eboshi-gozen leads is previously defined as a fake hero, and does not have a donor- or villain function. Hence, the parallel is there, but the perspective is twisted as to deform the myth.

Another parallel can be drawn to San in her assistance to Okkoto-nusi. In order for him to see she rushes to his rescue, to help him guide his army of raging boars. In the myth the whole (male) army with the woman as commander is murdered, just as the boar army in MONONOKE-HIME is completely slaughtered. However, in a differentiation from the myth San escapes with Okkoto-nusi. Also, she is not portrayed as villain, but especially in this segment San is merely a helper.

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<sup>29</sup> Napier: 2001, p.480.

The basis of MONONOKE-HIME in Japanese myth seems to exist in the condition that the perspective from where the spectator relives the story is drastically changed. Where the *Nihongi* seems to be guilty of exactly the attitude Miyazaki resents, righteousness, MONONOKE-HIME is a display of minorities disregarded by Japan's 'official' history. Women armies were present in the old days, but weren't successful. In the movie it is not the opposite direction that is chosen, but a more contemporary attitude: not right and wrong as a negative of the version the *Nihongi* proposes, but a grey field that negates the history told in the *Nihongi*.

#### *The extinction of the Yemishi*

In *Cinema of De-assurance* Napier shortly touches on the subject of the Emishi portrayed in MONONOKE-HIME, referring to promotional material that connects the Emishi with the extinct Ainu.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, there exists more and more controversy around this claim. Some say the Emishi are precursors of the Ainu, others claim they are the same. This being said, I will stick to the description that is made in the *Nihongi*. Here, no distinction is made between the Yemishi or Yebisu, and the Ainu or Aino. Although there may be recent studies showing otherwise, this is of no influence on the analysis.

The reference to the Yemishi seems obvious. In the beginning of MONONOKE-HIME it is stated that some five hundred years ago the Emishi were wiped out, and the remnants expelled to the eastern parts of the country. The time of the movie, the Muromachi era, starts about 750 years after the last record of the Yemishi, made in the *Nihongi* is A.D.648. This being not quite accurate, the last record in the *Nihongi* doesn't describe a Yemishi massacre, but is briefly mentioning them in explaining defence-measures being taken.<sup>31</sup>

In the first part of the *Nihongi* the Yemishi are said to be living in nests and dwelling in holes. This pair is also depicted in the movie. The first image we get from Ashitaka's culture is a high watchtower, the planks fastened between a tripod of wooden poles. Moreover, the house where the men gather to learn Ashitaka's future is also built on poles. The rest of the houses seem exceedingly low to the ground, their thatched roofs even touching the earth. This is a reminder of the definition that is given for a *muro* in the *Nihongi*. It is stated that a *muro*, as opposed to an *ihe*, an ordinary dwelling, was a rectangular pit about four or five foot deep with a heavy thatched roof over it.<sup>32</sup> Although the houses or *muro* depicted in MONONOKE-HIME seem to be of sufficient height to not be sunken into the ground, the resemblance is still there.

The Yemishi are also mentioned as the strongest of barbaric tribes. Previous to the curse laid on Ashitaka, this is shown with the killing of the Boar God. In the *Nihongi* (and possibly still in the Chinese language) there exists an expression, mainly uttered in relation to Emperors that have an

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<sup>30</sup> Napier: 2001, p.478.

<sup>31</sup> *Nihongi* II: p.231 (Book XXV: Kōtoku Tennō)

<sup>32</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.71 (Book II: Age of the Gods)

exceptional strength: “his strength was such that he could lift a tripod”.<sup>33</sup> After appearing the Boar God crashes into the watchtower consisting of a huge tripod, and lifting and crashing it, goes off to the village. Ashitaka, in slaying the Boar God, thus is of exceptional strength in killing a beast that himself has enormous strength.

Furthermore, the *Nihongi*'s portrayal of the systematic killing of the Yemishi is granted a strong thematic rebirth in the first scenes of MONONOKE-HIME. Although the perspective still differs, the Emishi are here too symbolically killed off. In letting the last prince of the Emishi die a symbolic death previous to the birth of any offspring, MONONOKE-HIME recreates an ancient tribe in order to recreate; they are reliving what they have experienced some five centuries ago.

As shown in the analysis of women with power, the Miyazaki movie seems to consist of perspectives that are twisted in relation to the myth that it builds on. There are two other aspects of Yemishi mentioned that apply not to the Emishi, but to other parties.

It is stated in chapter three that the Yemishi wear fur coats and drink blood, and on another occasion that they would have the hearts of beasts. This couldn't be more applicable to San. The first shot we see of her is the following: wearing a white fur coat, San takes to her mother Moro and sucks and spits out the blood from her wound. In belonging to the Wolf tribe she has the heart of a beast, and thus answers to the description of the Yemishi-tribe. The Emishi depicted are nothing like the representation in the *Nihongi*, yet there is a strong connection between the tribe described as barbarous, and the girl acting barbaric. The Gods that are infected by hatred accordingly become nothing more than wild raging beasts, stripped of their every divinity. Furthermore San is depicted as a clay doll figure from the Jomon period, and is thus a stand-in for ancient times when farming wasn't yet applied.<sup>34</sup>

Yemishi are believed to be disrespectful. The tale where they are replaced after defiling a shrine, narrates that they cut down every tree on a divine mountain, and threaten the villagers from surrounding settlements. The people from Tatara Ba complain multiple times about the women. They supposedly are disrespectful towards men, and as they are women who previously dwelt in brothels they could be regarded as promiscuous, the Yemishi alike. In addition, the people from Tatara Ba are responsible for cutting down the trees on a mountain where the Gods of the mountain live.

All three parties depicted in the movie seem to have the traits of a barbarous tribe portrayed in the *Nihongi*. Above it is pointed out that the claim of righteousness also accords to the *Nihongi*, and it is hence a possible deconstruction of ancient tales that leads to this distribution of barbaric traits. In not only making the one descendant of the supposed barbarians the most self-conscious and the least prejudiced, but in also ascribing assumed barbaric traits to the other parties, a claim about intolerance is made. The people who seem the most adjusted to the new era accordingly get the traits of the

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<sup>33</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.189 (Book VII: Keikō Tennō)

<sup>34</sup> Wright, Lucy. “Forest Spirits, Giant Insects and World Trees: The Nature Vision of Hayao Miyazaki”. *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. Vol.X (summer 2005): §31.

primitives, whereas the girl that is closest to the Gods, but who judges creatures on their exterior ('I smell human') gets the appearance. The unbiased boy gets merely the name. Hereby every characteristic of a certain party seems counterweighted by the claim that every people is of the same nature.

### *The killing of Gods*

One tale is very clear in its depiction of a prince killing a God, as is shown above. In the killing of a Mountain God who is appearing as a white deer, a stick of garlic is stuck through his eye. In MONONOKE-HIME there are two accounts of the slaying of a God by human hands. The first is similar in the representation of the actor and method, the second in the God.

When Ashitaka, the sole remaining prince of the Emishi, fights the Boar God, he at first shoots an arrow through the eye of the God. This doesn't immediately kill him, in order for the curse to take place. After the killing, the boy is dead to his own people, and loses his way even further when the ambiguity of the life in the west gets a hold of him. However, it could be argued that he, as Yamato-dake no Mikoto, finds his way again with the help of a white Dog, in this respect San, who is a member of the Dog- or Wolf clan, and who wears a white fur coat. She guides Ashitaka first out of ambiguity. She attempts to do this in leaving wrapped food at his bedside in trying to make him leave when he is cured, just like Yamato-dake no Mikoto is led out of the forest by the white dog. After Ashitaka again is lost in trying to reach Eboshi-gozen, he once more is assisted by a member of the Wolf clan, one of San's siblings, in reaching San in time to rescue her.

The second time a God is slain is less similar to the tale stated in the *Nihongi*. There only exists a similarity in the creature depicted, since the Mountain God as a deer, and Shishi-gami are the same. Shishi-gami, above used for all his appearances, is his daytime manifestation, a deer-like body with a human-ish face and extensive antlers. During the night he becomes the Nightwalker, Detara-bochi, and in this form he looks like a giant human, but with the head of a deer, his antlers transformed into mane.

Where in the *Nihongi* Yamato-dake no Mikoto is met with gratefulness in slaying a God that blocked the mountain, Ashitaka is cursed with hatred when killing the Boar God. Furthermore, Eboshi-gozen loses an arm to the dead Moro after separating the head of the Detara-bochi from its body. Again; where the *Nihongi* gives out rewards, in MONONOKE-HIME the actor receives punishment.

### *Princesses and Deities*

There is a record of Princesses attending to the shrines of important Gods. This could only be done by Princesses as they are in blood related to the Gods. Accordingly, in taking San to be her offspring, Moro makes her into a descendant. It is through this that San gains the name Mononoke-hime. Hime means Princess, hence designating her acquired royal status, and Mononoke points to her being a

human belonging to a divine Wolf clan.<sup>35</sup> In being royalty, San is now able to attend to Moro when she is in need, and she tries to protect her with her own life from time to time.

A direct claim is not made here, although in the *Nihongi* there is to my knowledge nowhere talk of adoption in the royal line of descendants. San not being of royal birth, but acquiring her status might be a latent critique on the sovereign system, as choosing blood over competence is another form of the righteousness Miyazaki so despises.

*Other references: unambiguous similarities*

There are other references to the *Nihongi* that are more direct in their relation. One of them is the presence of the underworld, or *yomi no sekai*. In the *Nihongi* the underworld is sometimes designated as ‘Netherland’, but mostly as ‘the land of Yomi’.<sup>36</sup> *Yomi* in this respect is equal to Hades, the Greek god of the underworld. In the *Nihongi* there exists no description of the Land of Yomi, but it is said that it is unlucky to visit there.<sup>37</sup> In *MONONOKE-HIME* the underworld is present in the little island in the middle of the open space in the woods, still waters surrounding it. This is first indicated when San says to Yakul that he knows better than to set foot on the island, when she is taking Ashitaka there to await Shishi-gami. The water itself seems to already serve as a medium to the underworld, as Ashitaka is under water twice in the floating between life and death. This water, however, is not a reference to the *Nihongi*, as there is no talk of water there. It might draw more heavily on the notion of the Styx as appearing in Greek mythology, as this water needs to be crossed in order to get to the Land of Yomi as well.

In the beginning of *MONONOKE-HIME*, when Ashitaka is leaving the town, he is approached by a young girl who calls him ‘older brother’, *anisama*. This is not to indicate a close family bond, but is rather a sign that he is an older boy in the clan.<sup>38</sup> Miyazaki thinks of Kaya as a girl that is destined to marry Ashitaka. Marriage among blood relations, for there probably is one between Kaya and Ashitaka, was common in Japan. In the *Nihongi* it is shown that when an emperor marries a consort, she must have some blood connection to the royal line. In order to become an Empress, one must be a Princess by birth.<sup>39</sup>

In Shinto beliefs purification is the one existing dogma, besides respect for the Deities and nature.<sup>40</sup> A number of records show that purity is important, as when Emperors are honouring the Gods, and prior to the honouring go through a purification rite.<sup>41</sup> This is shown in *MONONOKE-HIME*, in the open space in the woods where everything seems undisturbed by human hands, and the water is

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<sup>35</sup> As it is not of direct importance here, I will not go into the question of San’s name. There are numerous explanations, not one according with another, but they are all pointing to some sort of spirit, either inhabiting an agent or not, and either human or not.

<sup>36</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.20/24 (The Age of the Gods)

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* p.31.

<sup>38</sup> The Hayao MIYAZAKI Web: [http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m\\_on\\_mh.html](http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m_on_mh.html)

<sup>39</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.110, 141-146, 148 show eight Emperesses blood related to the Emperor. (Book III & IV)

<sup>40</sup> Wright: 2005, §5.

<sup>41</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.152 (Book V, Sūjin Tennō), 316 (Book XIII, Ingiō Tennō)

pure. The same claim holds for the colour white, in the *Nihongi* often connected to divine things. The white deer and dog under ‘The killing of Gods’ are an example, and there are examples of worshipped white birds, although this doesn’t only concern animals.<sup>42</sup> There is a record of the worshipping of a white stone, that later on changes into a beautiful maiden.<sup>43</sup> The white fur coat that San wears thus makes the claim that she is a royal descendent or member of a divine clan stronger, and diminishes the earlier made statement that San is dressed as a barbarian girl. She could just as well be dressed as a divine god, as she herself is switching appearances. One moment she is a wild wolf fighting for her forest, the other a caring offspring or friend in nurturing the harmed. Yet, as argued with ‘Princesses and Deities’, Miyazaki here makes his statement stronger by ascribing divinity to a normal girl, who is by birth not in any way blood related to either Gods or royalty.

Ashitaka is regarded as dead to his own people, in cutting his hair and setting out to meet his destiny. This seems an ancient tradition ascribed to the Emishi, as it is a known tradition of ancient Japan that in cutting one’s hair he becomes dead. It is not, as Helen McCarthy claims, a mere symbol of leaving his old life behind, as this is a decision forced upon Ashitaka.<sup>44</sup>

### *Conclusion*

The story depicted in MONONOKE-HIME has a firm basis in the ancient tales of Japan. However, every root that goes back to the *Nihongi* seems consistently twisted in the perspective of the hero. In looking at the structure of *dramatis personae* Propp has provided, a structural shift can be noted.

The villains portrayed in the *Nihongi* simply don’t exist in MONONOKE-HIME. Where in ancient myths they are the second most important aspect, in the movie the villain is near absent. As shown, the most important villain agent is not human but emotional, and this makes a strong contrast with the *Nihongi*, where emotions are rare and often disregarded. The shown agents that would function as villains in the *Nihongi* are here translated into hero’s and false hero’s.

In the case of the hero in the *Nihongi*, there exists a remarkable absence of sovereigns in MONONOKE-HIME. No Emperor or relative makes his appearance, and the only instance wherein the hero of the *Nihongi* could be detected is in a letter from the Emperor that is to keep misfortune from happening to Jigo.<sup>45</sup> He is working for the Emperor, but neither of their actions or requests are depicted as bad, merely as unknowing and self-righteous.

No conclusions can be drawn on most of the *dramatis personae* in the two media, for the myths are too diverse to regard as one instance, but in looking at the positions of villain and hero, there seems to appear the de-assurance Napier based her article on. She is right in pointing out that there is de-assurance at hand in at least this movie of Hayao Miyazaki, but is off with her argumentation. Both the fantastic and the notion of strong women appear in the *Nihongi*, therefore this

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<sup>42</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.218 (Book VIII, Chiuai Tennō)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* p.168 (Book VI, Suinin Tennō)

<sup>44</sup> McCarthy: 2002, p.194.

<sup>45</sup> The Hayao MIYAZAKI Web: [http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m\\_on\\_mh.html](http://www.nausicaa.net/miyazaki/interviews/m_on_mh.html)

is not the de-assuring aspect Napier feels is present. However, the way character functions are exchanged among the agents in the two stories could be described as de-assuring. In portraying no material manifestation of the villain, ambiguity seems to be the main emotion represented. This is strong enough to let the audience feel the same way, and that is where the enfeebling aspect lies in relation to the *Nihongi*. In the adjustment to hegemonic structures of myth, narrative and in particular the period drama, and in the habituation of possible villains, lies the discomfort felt when regarding this as a narrative true to history.

## 6 Lévi-Strauss: a comparison between tales

In Lévi-Strauss' claim that a myth is the same in all its forms as long as it is felt as such, there rises a problem in the intention of doing a myth comparison according to Lévi-Strauss' theory. I could argue that for instance the extinction of the Yemishi is comparable to the portrayal of the Emishi, as I *feel* that these are similar representations. Yet, leaving aside the highly biased nature of this statement, I propose the following. In testing the theory I will regard the Yemishi/Emishi pair as a basis. As the Yemishi in the *Nihongi* do not form a coherent narrative, I will choose one of the tales in which they occur, hereby pointing to Lévi-Strauss' claim that it would make no difference which story is selected. Furthermore, I will not use MONONOKE-HIME as a whole. The movie is dealing with too many themes, and hence won't provide useful information as the implication would be a vast distortion of meaning. Therefore I will compare the first sequence of the movie, up till the moment Ashitaka is leaving, and Kaya is staying behind alone.

### *Introduction to the theory*

According to Lévi-Strauss myth has one distinct element, and that is language. It serves as a sort of meta-structure, uplifted from its base in language.<sup>46</sup> Meaning from myths can only be deduced when looking at combinations of the different elements. This leads Lévi-Strauss to the conclusion that a myth consists of 'gross constituent units' that are comparable to the phonemes and morphemes language is thought to consist of. A unit like this will always consist of multiple relations in order to exist, as a singular relation is not capable of producing meaning:

[T]he true constituent units of a myth are not the isolated relations but *bundles of such relations* and it is only as bundles that these relations can be put to use and combined so as to produce meaning.<sup>47</sup>

These relations that exist in the same bundle are diachronic, but as there exist parallels between different myths, relations can also be grouped in a synchronic manner, giving way to a "two-dimensional time referent": both synchronic and diachronic the myth is similar to language, specifically through the linguistic notion of *langue* and *parole*.<sup>48</sup>

This leads to the conclusion that myth is built up through different units that stand in special relation to one another. Later on Lévi-Strauss adds that these relations are caused by a "double process of opposition and correlation", i.e. binary pairs.<sup>49</sup>

Lévi-Strauss furthermore claims that a myth, even corrupted through different uses, will always have the same meaning, independent of its place in time and culture, and that every version

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<sup>46</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth". *The Journal of American Folklore*. Vol.68, no.270 (Oct.-Dec. 1955): p.430/431.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* p.431.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* p.432.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.* p.440.

that belongs to the same myth is to be drawn into the equation, but will not change the meaning of the initial myth. He adds that “a myth remains the same as long as it is felt as such”.<sup>50</sup>

In later writings Lévi-Strauss further clarified his theory. In 1979 for instance he published the third volume of his *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*, stating that myth can help us understand culture.<sup>51</sup> In 1977 Lévi-Strauss partook in a series of lectures, which has been brought out in print, and in which he further stresses the importance of binary oppositions, and the relation between myth and music.<sup>52</sup>

### *Comparison*

In comparing the two I will start out with an analysis of the prior myth, stated in the *Nihongi*. In making clear the myth of the Yemishi I shall give a rough draft of the story.

In the fourteenth book the reign of Emperor Oho-hatsuse Waka-take is described. In the twenty-third year of his reign he dies. Led by Yamato-general Oshiro in an expedition, a group of 500 Yemishi hears of the death of the Emperor. They decide that this is an opportunity they should take, and they get organised in order to invade neighbouring districts. General Oshiro finds out, and meets them at Port Saba, to fight them. He attempts to shoot the Yemishi with his arrows, but “some skipped and others lay down, thereby succeeding in avoiding the arrows.”<sup>53</sup> As Oshiro is unable to shoot the Yemishi, he throws his empty bow down by the sea-side, and accordingly shoots two companies of the Yemishi who skipped and skulked (in Chinese legends there exist archers that have such skill that they don’t need arrows to shoot animals). Now two cases of arrows were used, so Oshiro asks some boatmen that are nearby for arrows. They however do not respond out of fear, and Oshiro proceeds in setting up his bow and, taking it by the end, making the following song:

On the way he met them,  
The Boy of Oshiro!  
It is in Heaven only that  
Unheard of he will be,  
For on Earth at least  
He will be heard of.<sup>54</sup>

After finishing his song he slays many of the Yemishi, and pursues the living until they are all massacred.

According to the theory of Lévi-Strauss, the separate elements in the story should be rearranged into a chart that could for instance look like this:

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<sup>50</sup> Lévi-Strauss: 1955, p.435.

<sup>51</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The origin of Table Manners: Introduction to a Science of Mythology*. Transl: J.&D. Weightman. New York: Harper & Row Publicers, 1979.

<sup>52</sup> Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *Myth and Meaning*. New York: Schocken Books Inc, 1979.

<sup>53</sup> *Nihongi* I: p.371 (Book XIV, Yū-riaku Tennō)

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p.372.

Emperor dies		
Oshiro leaves Yemishi	Yemishi fight people	Oshiro doesn't kill
Yemishi flee	Oshiro shoots Yemishi	
Oshiro asks for help		Fishermen don't reply
	Oshiro kills all the Yemishi	

The themes of the first and second column seem quite easy to grasp. The dying, leaving, fleeing and asking for help are all units that accord to helplessness or impotence. The fighting and killing are then the opposite, namely independence and competence. The third column then can be seen in contrast to the second and could mean incompetence. The tale would thus be about overcoming incompetence and helplessness by competent action.

I have sought out another version of the myth dealing with the extermination of the Yemishi, in this case the Emishi. For the sake of this analysis the two are regarded similar, as one emerges from the other. Thus, according to Lévi-Strauss, the two narratives will have the same meaning. Lévi-Strauss states the following in relation to the myths: “For each of them a similar chart should be drawn, and then compared and reorganized according to the findings.”<sup>55</sup> In short, my analysis of MONONOKE-HIME should fit my previous analysis, and if not, I will make it fit.

The story starts out with Ashitaka riding on Yakul, heading to the watchtower. He warns three girls to head back into town, and then goes up to the tower. When the Boar God appears he shoots an arrow at Yakul to make him move, and saves the watcher in jumping to a tree when the God destroys the watchtower. He then catches up with the God and tries to distract him and lead him away from the town. As one girl trips and the other is prepared to fight, Ashitaka can do nothing else than shooting at the God, and subsequently he is touched in a counterattack. The Boar God crashes after a second arrow, and Hii-sama is preying to the God. He curses the people and dies. In a meeting Ashitaka is informed of his destiny. He cuts his hair and is thus dead to his people. Kaya gives him a talisman to remember her by before he rides out to meet his destiny.

The following chart should be made according to the myth of the Yemishi:

Girls flee	Ashitaka distracts Yakul	
Yakul flees	The Boar God destroys watchtower	
	Ashitaka distracts Boar God	Girl trips
	Ashitaka shoots the Boar God	
	The Boar God attacks	

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<sup>55</sup> Lévi-Strauss: 1955, p.435.

Ashitaka shoots the Boar God  
again  
The Boar God curses the  
Emishi

Ashitaka dies in cutting his  
hair (no choice)

Kaya gives the talisman

The chart can be made almost similar to the chart concerning the Yemishi. Again, the first column concerns the impotence of agents. The second portrays competence, and the third incompetence. Kaya giving the talisman for remembrance is also a form of incompetence, as Ashitaka is dead to his people, and he is no longer their concern.

The oversimplified notion of competence over incompetence is thus the same, as it probably would be for every myth that is not related to these ones. They are notions concerning life, no doubt, but in trying to find a common denominator issues at hand are bound to be found. The *Nihongi* tale is difficult in providing a more specific meaning, as the story is not very detailed, but for MONONOKE-HIME a more suiting analysis can be easily found. There is for instance the notion that every action is exuding the avoidance of violence. Ashitaka does not aim at the God but saves Yakul. He doesn't shoot but distracts as long as he can. Only as he sees Kaya preparing for battle the necessity exists to shoot the God. Hence, it is not just the competence that is put forward, but the competence in avoidance. This makes the two tales in nothing alike, for the slaughtering of the Yemishi does not reveal any compassion for a fellow human. With the Yemishi it is not the competence of avoidance but the competence of confrontation. The dichotomy is strengthened by the death of Ashitaka as a consequence of his competence of confrontation, and the fleeing agents that all remain unharmed.

*Critique*

Lévi-Strauss bases his theory firmly on the belief that myth and accordingly language is something that can be objectively divided and rearranged in order to discover the true meaning. In claiming this he draws a parallel to a series of numbers. Put in random order, 263167291243587 can be rearranged into a chart where the true structure is visible.<sup>56</sup> However, myth, or the 'gross constituent units' of myth are not undisputedly true. Accordingly, there is no reason why one unit should accord to a '2' instead of a '5', and in this respect it differs greatly from the concept of numbers. It seems Lévi-Strauss is either not realising this, which I doubt, or disregarding the possibility that myth or language can never be considered as a branch of the natural sciences.




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<sup>56</sup> Lévi-Strauss: 1955, p.432/433.

In a critique on the theory of Lévi-Strauss, Thomas, Kronenfeld and Kronenfeld touch upon the same problem I encountered. The oversimplification that I noted above is states as follows: “[...] problems of arbitrariness exist in his conceptualization of the levels and in his correlation of the levels of the story with levels of experiences.”<sup>57</sup> The danger in trying to find a structure in meaning that encompasses every possible variant is that claims become meaningless.

Another objection to Lévi-Strauss’ theory is his impudent claim that, in the case of the Asdiwal myth, latent structures that are supposedly the true meaning of the myth cannot be detected by the native mind.<sup>58</sup> With this claim Lévi-Strauss makes all his statements about culture crumble, for there can be no understanding of culture if the understanding of meaning is in accordance with the theoretician instead of with the natives that are subject to the study.

Furthermore, there exists a danger in overlooking certain structures when analysing a myth. When one account has been rounded off, one is eager to find the same meaning in another myth, instead of reviewing that tale independent of the other. New structures that serve as a distinction of a tale might be disregarded in their disturbance of an earlier analysed structure. Also, the perspective taken in a story can at forehand tell something about social constructions that might have changed, thus changing the myth accordingly. As with MONONOKE-HIME it would not have been desirable to see the Emishi killed off, or a triumphing Yamato-government, as the story wants to induce a new social attitude.

In this aspect I would like to bring up one last critique against Lévi-Strauss, uttered in the same article mentioned above. Lévi-Strauss is accused of gross oversimplification, which as I pointed out can not be avoided in trying to find overall structures. Thomas and the Kronenfelds state the following:

Whether they are useful simplifications, useful in that they support interesting theoretical assertions, depends in part on how often they are necessary, to what degree they distort the sense of the story, and to what degree, even in the absence of clear criteria for their application, they are intuitively compelling.<sup>59</sup>

The danger of appealing dichotomies is hence stressed. In a theory that has a strong basis in binary pairs, those couples are bound to be found and stressed, even when they don’t deserve the emphasis. In searching for latent meaning that in some cases the concerning natives are unable to find, the question is to what extent the search for a meaning that seems overly subjective has meaning itself.

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<sup>57</sup> Thomas, L.L., J.Z. Kronenfeld, D.B. Kronenfeld. “Asdiwal Crumbles: A Critique of Levi-Straussian Myth Analysis”. *American Ethnologist*. Vol.3, no.1 (Feb. 1976): p.150.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p.151.

## 8 Conclusion

MONONOKE-HIME has a firm basis in the ancient mythology depicted in the *Nihongi*. This basis is Janus-faced, as the theme of the movie seems to be ambiguous as well. In one respect MONONOKE-HIME refers straightforward to myths, using notions of the underworld, blood-relations and Shinto-beliefs that are hardly altered. In another respect MONONOKE-HIME is, as Susan Napier expresses, de-assuring in its depiction of antiquity. The army of women is not defeated, and the Emishi are not barbaric. A girl that has no connection by blood to the Gods or the Emperor is taking care of a white thus pure Deity.

Miyazaki, in trying to make a period drama that would have none of the aspects of the conventional version, has succeeded in the alternative portrayal of history. It is not the different elements that cause the alteration. Although it would slightly diminish the status of MONONOKE-HIME, a samurai hero could have done the work of Ashitaka, and would be possibly even more discomfoting: a samurai that would rather flee than fight is not usual. Where elements can still be replaced, the remarkable change lies in the shifting of *dramatis personae*.

In the *Nihongi* the villain is an often recurring phenomenon, always depicted in a material form. In MONONOKE-HIME however, the one true villain that is depicted is a raging anger that cannot be seized or defeated, only dodged. The villains that are transferred from ancient myth are subsequently not depicted as villains, but merely as false hero's, sometimes acting as helpers or donors. It is the structural change of perspective that is de-assuring.

Whereas Vladimir Propp's theory proves highly functional in the analysis between these myths, the theory provided by Claude Lévi-Strauss appears to have its flaws. In without question placing myth in the same line as the natural sciences, Lévi-Strauss claims that there is true meaning to be found in applying a theory that is just as subjective as any narrative analysis.

In applying this theory to the *Nihongi* and Mononoke-hime, it is not only shown that the two most similar accounts of narration are incommensurable. There is also a vast diminution of meaning occurring in incorporating MONONOKE-HIME, and other myths that are put through a comparative analysis, in the straightjacket of enforced structure.

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## Filmography

Film	MONONOKE-HIME
Country	Japan
Theatrical release	12 July 1997
Original story/screenplay	Hayao Miyazaki
Director	Hayao Miyazaki
Supervising animators	Masashi Ando Kitaro Kosaka Yoshifumi Kondo
Art directors	Nizo Yamamoto Naoya Tanaka Yoji Takeshige Satoshi Kuroda Kazuo Oga
Color design	Michiyo Yasuda
Music	Joe Hisaishi
Producer	Toshio Suzuki
Chief executive producer	Yasuyoshi Tokuma
Executive producers	Seiichiro Ujiie Yutaka Narita
Production	Studio Ghibli
Actors	Yôji Matsuda Yurido Ishika Yûko Tanaka Kaoru Kobayashi Masahiko Nishimura

## Appendix I      Proppian structure of Mononoke-hime

In writing a Proppian analysis of MONONOKE-HIME, I want to stress that this is by no means a complete analysis. In the movie there exist three perspectives worth investigating, due to the objectivity assumed by Ashitaka. However, only one perspective is taken here, as from this analysis a clear division of ‘dramatis personae’ can be made, and this may accordingly be used as a counterweight to the here neglected perspectives.

$\alpha$	Initial situation	The lands lays covered in forests where the spirits of the Gods dwell. Man and beast live in harmony. Yet, forests are destroyed, and Mononoke guard the remainders, pledging allegiance to the Shishi Gami. In the east, there lives the remnant of the Emishi.
$\beta^3$	Absentation	Ashitaka, the last Prince of the Emishi, rides his red elk to find out what the disturbance is that made Hii-sama order everyone back into the village.
$\gamma^1$	Interdiction	Ashitaka is told to not let the invader touch him, for it is a cursed God.
$\delta$	Violation	In defending the village, Ashitaka is touched and subsequently cursed when slaying the Boar God.
$\varepsilon^1$	Reconnaissance	Priest Jigo follows Ashitaka ad tries to get on his side by pointing to thugs that intent to rob him. The reconnaissance takes place within the story but outside the plot, and is implied by the following function.
$\zeta^1$	Delivery	Ashitaka feels free to tell Jigo the priest about the Boar God, and the iron ball that was found within.
‘ $\eta$ ’	Trickery	Jigo withholds information about the Tatara and claims to have never seen an iron ball like the one Ashitaka carries. This is a weak form of trickery, and is further weakened by giving some information.
- $\eta$		However, Jigo does tell Ashitaka about a forest that is guarded by huge animals.
‘ $\theta$ ’	Complicity	Ashitaka’s kindness and seemingly objective position at first seems to miss the effect he needs, but is not strong enough to serve as complicity.
$A^{6/11}$	Villainy or lack	As Ashitaka is cursed by the Boar God, he will die and cannot but meet his destiny.
$B^3$	Mediation, the connective incident	Hii-sama tells Ashitaka: “You cannot alter your faith, however, you can rise to meet it if you choose”, and “It is your fate to go there and see with eyes unclouded by hate. You may find a way to lift the curse.”
C	Beginning counteraction	Ashitaka cuts his hair, thus implying that he consents in the proposition Hii-sama uttered.

↑	Departure	Ashitaka's departure means that he will be dead to the villagers, and every hope of return is out of the question.
D <sup>5/8</sup>	The first function of the donor	Ashitaka finds out that through his curse he has gained a new strength to help him reach his goal. However, this is in no way a test of the donor, as he already decayed. There is a test, but it is put on Ashitaka by himself. He can use his power, but he is not to give in to the anger and hate that come with it. In this case it is either a request for mercy he puts on himself, or a hostile creature (being rage) attempting to destroy Ashitaka.
E <sup>5</sup>	The hero's reaction	In fighting against the 'pounding anger', first present when the Mountain God is present, later when he is facing Lady Eboshi, he shows mercy and restrains himself. In this instance it would be more appropriate to regard the pair of functions D/E as the request and showing of mercy.
F <sup>2/5</sup>	Provision or receipt of magical agent	Ashitaka encounters the open space in the forest that has healing powers. He is led there by Kodama, little tree spirits that show the health of the forest. It is thus a combination of pointing out and encountering, as Ashitaka had no knowledge of the sanctity of the place through the Kodama.
G <sup>2/4</sup>	Spatial transference between two kingdoms, guidance	Through Jigo Ashitaka gains knowledge of a forest to the west, but he already knew this through Hii-sama. Accordingly, after finding the forest and its inhabitants, he is led to Tatara, Iron Town, where the origin of the iron ball lies. Ashitaka travels on Yakul's back, but the route to Tatara is (implicit in the story) partly shown to him by Kodama, and in part by the wounded men he carries.
H <sup>1/2</sup>	Struggle	The struggle started out with the Boar God, but lasts throughout the story, as Ashitaka needs to get rid of his curse, and it is senseless hatred that he is fighting. The former part of the fight thus takes place in an open field; the latter is a competition between Ashitaka and the hatred that is consuming him.
J <sup>1</sup>	Branding, marking	The branding happens directly after the killing of the Boar God, but continues throughout the story, as the branding gets worse when Ashitaka is losing the fight.
I <sup>2/6</sup>	Victory	In the case of the temporary goal of returning the head of the Nightwalker, Jigo is persuaded in opening the container that holds the wanted head. When the aim is to lift the curse, which seems secondary at this time, the curse is banished by the touching of the Nightwalker.
K <sup>10/4</sup>	Liquidation of	In returning the head, a captive is freed from its cage. When the lifting of

	lack or misfortune	the curse is obtained, this is done so by a direct consequence of previous actions of both San and Ashitaka.
↓	Return	No return is possible, although from the perspective of San and Ashitaka, he is returning to a new home, to help rebuild Tatara.
Pr. <sup>6</sup>	Pursuit, chase	Ashitaka is pursued on a number of occasions, always by samurai.
Rs.	Rescue	He is the one rescuing himself, albeit with the help of his red elk Yakul.
o	Unrecognised arrival	In trying to be objective Ashitaka is not recognised as a helper by both Lady Eboshi and San.
L	Unfounded claims	They think him to be an accomplice of the enemy. Some people of Tatara see him as a spy for the Mountain God, while San sees him as ‘a human’ (spoken with disdain) who is trying to help her arch-enemy.
M	Difficult task	Ashitaka has to get out of Tatara with San while being shot, and he has to stop the killing of the Mountain God and thus convince San.
N	Solution	Ashitaka opens the gate no man could open by himself. Later on, he and San return the head to its owner.
Q	Recognition	Ashitaka is looked upon with admiration by the Tatara. San recognises him as the good being he is, and they arrange to meet as often as possible.
Ex.	Exposure	There is no exposure, as the villain was known to Ashitaka from the start of his journey.
T	Transfiguration	This is in combination with the lifting of the curse, although Ashitaka does not undergo a complete change of appearance, and it is in no way resembling the accounts described by Propp.
U	Punishment	There is no other punishing than the villain either disappearing (the raging anger) or Jigo not getting what he was set out to attain. This is not a very strong punishment, as the real villain has no life form to punish. It is however strongly driven off by the new restored balance between San and Ashitaka.
W	Wedding	Here the change in San could be noted, although the two are still from different worlds, and will not be living together. It is not a very strong bond as the movie ends with departure.

*The overall structure of Mononoke-hime*

$$\alpha \beta^3 \gamma^1 \delta A^{6/11} B^3 C \uparrow D^{5/8} \varepsilon^1 \zeta^1 (\eta \theta) E^5 F^{2/5} G^{2/4} H^1 \quad \begin{array}{c} \text{---}J^1\text{---}Pr.^6/Rs\text{---}o/L/M/N/Q\text{---} \\ \text{---}H^2\text{---} \\ I^{2/6} K^{10/4} \end{array}$$

## **Appendix II      Frame of reference for the Nihongi: The Age of the Gods**

In the first two books of the Nihongi the age of the gods is narrated. Although not immediately of use, it becomes clear that in everything there exists a deity. This starts out with a male and female deity, who are asked to bring a country in order. As they do so, they produce in all ten offspring, of which the first two were considered not to be regarded, thus leaving eight islands that formed the country Japan (once mentioned as 'Great-Eight-Island Country'). Later on there is mention of an eight-forked serpent who each year devours one of the eight children of two deities, and who is slain by a god banned from heaven.

After producing Japan the two Deities, Izanagi no Mikoto and Izanami no Mikoto, decide to produce a lord of the universe, and they give birth to Ama-terasu no Oho kami, the Sun-Goddess. After that they produced among others the Moon-God, a cruel Deity that is sent off to the underworld, the Fire-God, Earth-Goddess and Water-Goddess. From them there spring again a number of Deities.

Throughout the rest of the Nihongi the number eight is stated on numerous occasions, most notably in the number of deities existing on earth. Without naming the exact numbers, there are seemingly 'eighty myriads of deities', which would mean eighty different kinds of deities that are otherwise uncountable.

From the age of the Gods springs the first Emperor. Accordingly every succeeding sovereign descends from the Gods, and is thus not only the head of the government, but in addition the highest religious figure in the country.