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Special Feature

Kagura Dance: The Musicality of Ritualized Dance as Historical Imaginary in *Kimetsu no Yaiba* and *Kimi no Na wa*

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In "Hinokami," episode 19 of *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, Tanjiro remembers his fath er's Hinokami kagura dance, which offers him unexpected strength in battle. This worldbuilding, character building sequence places the action amidst localized rituals of Shinto belief, a practice that Jolyon Thomas notes in *Drawing on Tradition, Manga, Anime and Religion in Contemporary Japan*, offers a fecund site for historical imagination.[1] Historical imaginary as a concept allows memory and real elements of a shared, cultural past to mingle with imaginary, or fictional elements. Kagura dances, as an element of Shinto, are historically localized and regionally unique, offering modern anime fertile cultural space—a potent location for both soft power constructions and modern narrative reconstructions. Kagura dance ceremonies, both through their modern manifestations and popular representations, are not uncomplicated sites of Japanese Shinto traditionalism. As State Shinto mediated kagura ceremonies from the 1880s to 1945, however, their modern reception within Japan is mainly understood as that of an older Japanese traditionalism.[2]

Kamado Tanjiro's family Hinokami ritual can be grouped with the representation of kagura dance in the recent anime movie *Kimi no Na wa* (*Your Name*) by Shinkai Makoto.[3] Both dances reference essential aspects of Japanese traditionalism, residing in narrative spaces connected with memory. In *Kimi no Na wa*, Mitsuha's kagura dance contains powerful but forgotten regional memories that combine with the *kuchikamizake* ritual to create the pivotal narrative time distortion upon which the remainder of the story rests. Hinokami Kagura ties the memory of Tanjiro's father to the power of regional ritual, the memory of which reveals a forgotten breathing method that amplifies Tanjiro's "water breathing" technique. In both anime, the kagura dance rituals occupy a central role in the families, the regions, and ultimately the cultural memory of Japan.

While both anime employ traditionally-influenced dance movements and music to

depict kagura ceremony, the scenes are quite different from one another. The storyline and setting of *Kimi no Na wa* conspire to minimize the ritualized moment of the Miko Mai Kagura dance, shifting focus instead to the critical voices of teenage onlookers. While the dance is dynamic with an almost rotoscoped quality, the scene de-emphasizes the music by showing that it is recorded, rather than live.[4] Despite her integral role as shrine maiden, Mitsuha is embarrassed to be involved in the ceremony. In contrast, Hinokami kagura in *Kimetsu no Yaiba* (episode 19) is foregrounded in Tanjiro's memory as an essential aspect of his childhood and his late father. The solemnity of the scene is enhanced by its music, which mirrors the innocence of Tanjiro and Nezuko's younger forms with the high, childlike vocal production of Nakagawa Nami and punctuates critical moments of the longer memory sequence with precisely-timed musical entrances. The theme music, "Kamado Tanjiro no Uta" by Go Shiina, underscores the shifting diegesis throughout the scene, changing timbre from soft lyricism to heroic orchestral dynamism, which aurally impacts the critical moment when the narrative switches from memory to the climactic present.[5] While the Miko Mai scene in *Kimi no Na wa* was accompanied by new music based on traditional Shinto ceremonial music, "Kamado Tanjiro no Uta" offers a type of historical imaginary in that its simple, stepwise melody recalls Japanese folk song.[6] Musically, however, it is more closely related to another famous anime theme song "Kimi o Nosete" ("Carrying You") from *Laputa: Castle in the Sky* (1986).[7]

This connects to several concepts that were discussed in the course of the Waseda University *Kimetsu no Yaiba* symposium, "Suspensions of Concentration: *Kimetsu no Yaiba* and Blockbuster in the Age of the Global Pandemic" (March 18-19, 2021) concerning the success of the series in its effective reuse of popular tropes and materials in both innovative and aesthetically appealing ways. In particular, stasis was discussed as an idea that described the motivic recycling of mythological Japanese anime tropes toward the creation of the narrative universe of *Kimetsu no Yaiba*—a stasis that creates comforting predictability and expectations for the audience that the series' creators generally do not challenge. This then, especially in a period of pandemic and uncertainty, may be a conceptual locus to understand the overwhelming popular response to this anime. This relative stasis may also be heard in the soundtrack, which creates its unique sound through a combination of familiar film score techniques, efforts toward aural verisimilitude in its diegetic musical aspects (including a portion of the Hinokami scene), and its reuse of popular musical anime themes or tune fragments, recombined to evoke a familiar sound. The kagura dances and their musicality, however, represent a conscious use of Shinto ceremony as a form of identifiable Japanese heritage, which may connect to the quality of stasis in its recollection of past practices, but seems to be a more active element in these two anime as a means of linking cultural memory toward the goal of an engaged,

informed present.[8] The balance of this study considers kagura in contemporary contexts and then compares these two kagura scenes, using comparative musical-visual analysis, evaluating their effectiveness in translating these ritualized elements of traditional Japanese culture into historical imaginary that builds powerful modern narratives of Japanese identity.

Kagura: Historical and Contemporary Contexts

Kagura or "God entertainment" is Shinto ritual ceremonial dance and is considered to be one of the oldest performative traditions in Japan. As a living tradition, however, the relationship between modern performance of these rituals versus ancient performative practices—even the site of kagura as an on-going relic of traditional Japan—is an apt question. This has been fruitfully problematized by Terence Lancashire's 2002 study of Iwami Kagura, in which he notes: "For the student of kagura, the dance of the miko in her red and white garb seemingly opens a window to a disappearing world of ancient Japanese tradition. In some cases, this may be so. In others, once the surface has been scratched, the work of the Shinto revivalists is clearly evident."[9] That Shinto rituals, including kagura rituals were initially revised beginning in the 1880s up to the 1940s, reflects the objectives of the State Shinto, constructed as a reassertion of pre-Shogunate, Shinto-oriented state structures. Although this problematizes the idea of the antiquity of kagura, it does not dismiss it entirely as distant regions were more likely to keep older traditions in place and, as a living tradition, change over time can occur. Kagura can thus be understood as both ancient and changeable, traditional and porous.

As a living tradition within Japan, kagura Shinto rituals are currently practiced throughout mostly rural and western Japan with a clear distinction between the kagura rituals associated with the Imperial Court, known as *mikagura*, and those performed elsewhere, known as *satokagura*.[10] In many kagura rituals, the presence of the god is achieved through a possession-trance process wherein the shaman embodies the god; this allows for oracular divinification. There are two prevalent movement types: Odori and Mai, which are represented in *Kimetsu no Yaiba* and *Kimi no Na wa*, respectively.[11] Hinokami kagura from the Kamado tradition is an odori style with quick, swirling leaps—very much the fiery quality that gives Tanjiro his traditional style and which allows him to incorporate his father's gift into his learned "water breathing" technique. *Kimi no Na wa* depicts a miko mai kagura in which shrine maidens enact a bell and streamer dance that solemnly depicts the fall of the Tiamat Comet—the central agent of change in the movie.

Although the kagura dances in this study are fictitious, as representations of real kagura ritual, portrayed in both cases with careful verisimilitude, the issue of antiquity or

continuous tradition and of *what* exactly is being represented is important. The "Miko Mai" Kagura featured in *Kimi no Na wa* narratively predates the political shift of the later nineteenth century as Mitsuha's grandmother informs the audience that the ritual is well over 200 years old. Given the supposed remoteness of Itomori in the Gifu prefecture, its Miko Kagura is likely unchanged. This imagines an essential, mystical connectivity to the past that is also reflected in the trope of the red thread of fate (unmei no akai ito) used throughout the narrative and even in the name of the town itself, Itomori, written with the kanji "糸守" meaning "thread" and "guard." The Hinokami Kagura in *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, as remembered by Tanjiro, dates to the Taisho period and may be either ancient or revisionist. Here, however, the dance is primarily the vehicle that conveys the breathing technique that is the familial legacy. This, along with Tanjiro's Hanafuda earrings, mark him as different and even "other" in a way that connects him to an older tradition of his region and family. The main antagonist, Kibutsuji Muzan, notes the earrings as a marker of Tanjiro's identity and his importance, implying a known powerful connection; however, it is the kagura rather than the earrings that reveals that inherited power.

Kimi no Na wa / Your Name

Kimi no Na wa is an anime film created by Shinkai Makoto and considered to be a "full blown phenomenon" in the world of Japanese animation.[12] Following his earlier films including 5 *Centimeters per Second* and *The Garden of Words*, *Kimi no Na wa* was first released in August of 2016 in Japan and in short order became the highest grossing anime film until *Kimetsu no Yaiba: Mugen Train* (2020).[13] *The Japan Times* has jokingly called the movie, "Freaky Friday for the Otaku set," a slice of life with a supernatural twist.[14] If *Kimi no Na wa* could be classified so easily, however, it would not have captured the attention of audiences the world over. The plot is boy meets girl, but with an enigmatic body-swap, time-travel twist that has driven many fans to theorize about the plot's labyrinthine structure. In short, Taki is a high school boy living in Tokyo and Mitsuha is a shrine maiden living in the fictional countryside town of Itomori. Although they have no connection to each other, they swap bodies for several weeks, which then inexplicably ends. Taki searches for Mitsuha, only to find that her town had been destroyed in a natural disaster three years before. He manages to mystically reconnect with Mitsuha through a ritual that saves her life, but that requires the sacrifice of *that which is most dear*, causing the protagonists to forget each other. Left with a nagging sense of loss, the characters are drawn to each other at the finale, closing with the question: "Kimi no Na wa?" (What is your name?")

The success of *Kimi no Na wa* is due in part to its soundtrack, which Shinkai notes

had a deliberate role in the narrative of the film.[15] An important instance of this is the placement of the Shinto ceremony fifteen minutes into the movie, centering the kagura dance and emphasizing the endurance of tradition, even after the forgetting that was caused by the Great Fire of Mayugoro 200 years before. Mitsuha performs the Miyamizu shrine ritual, a Miko Kagura dance with her younger sister, dancing with the musical accompaniment of bells, shakuhachi, and drum. This is the only diegetic music of the entire film and the only music not included in the soundtrack. Shinkai approached Murayama Jiro to compose the piece entitled "Miko Mai" long before the animation or storyboards—Murayama's choice of instruments determined both the look and feel of the scene.[16] This Hōgaku musical style features the shakuhachi and an irregular percussive beat, likely on a shime-daiko like the one Shinkai held in a Twitter photo with both Murayama and Nakamura Ichitaro.[17] This is punctuated by the sacred bells (kagura suzu) at moments when the dancers reach a defining stance or pose in their ceremony.

While this dance resembles traditional Miko Kagura in its use of bells and paper streamers, it was newly choreographed by Nakamura Kazutaro, a prominent Kabuki actor, to represent and depict the lost memory of the shrine: the memory of the falling comet.[18] The dancers move in unison with carefully controlled steps, with practiced swirling patterns that allow the red streamers to spiral around their individual bodies. Moving together, they occasionally mirror each other, especially at the conclusion where the motion of the streamers stops, pulled taut at the finale to demonstrate the final descent of the comet. After the dance the music continues and the ceremony culminates in the creation of kuchikamizake, sake created through the fermentation of saliva, a key plot element later in the film. "Miko Mai" thus ties to tradition, but also functions to defamiliarize and "Orientalize" Mitsuha, which she rebels against, screaming afterward that she wishes she could come back in her next life as a Tokyo boy.

Importantly, Shinkai downplays the ritualized moment, allowing characters to speak over the diegetic, ceremonial music and over the event itself with a strong odor of teenage disdain. Ironically, while the shrine scene is of central importance, the audience is meant to dismiss it, just as Mitsuha's schoolmates do. Apart from the grandmother, almost no one seems engaged with the ritual and even the music is shown fleetingly to be recorded, playing on a boom box style stereo system, on a tape recording, see figure 1. This adds a further layer of the mundane and dated quality to the ritual: no one has cared to update the music to a more recent recording format like compact disc or mp3. The dance has been learned rote, likely from their grandmother's instruction, without the crucial understanding of its connection to the kami of the land. This represents a cultural amnesia that has for Japan and many other parts of the world created a disconnect with important past cultural traditions and events.[20] For Shinkai, however, this does not

Figure 1. Stereo system for the musical reproduction of "Miko Mai" in *Kimi no Na wa*.[19]

matter, because the care inherent within the living tradition and those who perpetuate the Miyamizu ritual allows the spirit of the ritual its power to communicate. This allows Mitsuha to embody the god to create the kuchikamizake in which, the grandmother notes, she has left a part of herself. Like the taut streamers which connect Mitsuha to the ritual and to the comet, this connectivity closes the looping red thread that connects Mitsuha to Taki.

This teenage love story becomes the stage for much larger issues about memory, loss, and identity, which have globalization—*mukokuseki*, or nationlessness—at their core. *Kimi no Na wa* juxtaposes opposites of modernity and tradition, reality and dream, science and magic, throughout. Cultural memory rises to the fore in this narrative as an answer to the malaise and precarity of the modern world. Music, as part of kagura dance and ritual is part of this cultural memory. The musical and aural soundscapes of this film intensify this message, sharply contrasting the calm of Itomori against the musical freneticism of Radwimps' piece "Zenzenzense" which depicts and accompanies scenes of modern Tokyo.[21] Aurality and specifically the musicality contribute to worldbuilding and characterization, simultaneously heightening both the magical and the realism of this magical-realist movie.

Kimetsu no Yaiba / Demon Slayer

Kimetsu no Yaiba incorporates many aspects of its Taisho landscape to tell a larger story envisioned by Gotouge Koyoharu, noting the rapid westernization of Japan and related loss of traditional culture. In this, the use of memory, both personal and social,

embedded in the portrayal of Tanjiro's father's kagura dance is a pivotal moment in Tanjiro's development and to his survival. This crucial memory scene is consciously placed into an arc concerning the idea of family as negotiated and even perverted by the spider demon Rui, one of the members of Kibutsuji's elite group, the Twelve Kizuki. The fight on Mount Natagumo begins in episode 15, slowly revealing the number and power of the formidable spider demon group. In episode 18, "A Forged Bond", Tanjiro is thrown across the forest and lands near Rui, a young spider demon boy tormenting another demon he calls his sister. Rui claims that his sadistic behavior is "a family's bond," to which Tanjiro responds negatively and the fight ensues. As a spider demon, Rui fights with his razor sharp "threads" that he likens to many other things including power and family. Nezuko attempts to save Tanjiro, surprising and delighting Rui, who claims and suspends her in the air with his deadly threads.

As the battle continues in episode 19, Rui reveals mid-episode (10:50) that he is a member of the Twelve Kizuki, which increases the seriousness of the fight considerably. Rui continues to defend his idea of "family" through his deadly threads until Tanjiro unleashes his "perfect" final form cutting through them. Rui strengthens his threads with blood and bids Tanjiro, "sayanora" (17:00). As the deadly cage of threads closes around him, Tanjiro realizes that death is imminent. Under the weight of this realization, his consciousness fractures and his life flashes before his eyes in a myriad, kaleidoscopic collage, followed by a completely white screen. Unexpectedly, the white resolves to a scene from Tanjiro's childhood memories as he and a young Nezuko imitate their father's kagura dance with bells and a toy drum (den-den daiko). Tanjiro's father is shown dancing his protective kagura dance with a wooden version of the seven-branched sword,[22] revealing throughout the memory sequence that Tanjiro must remember this special breathing technique, as it is his legacy: "Tanjiro. This kagura and these earrings, ensure that nothing will stop you from inheriting them. This is what I promised." [炭治郎。この神楽と耳飾りだけは必ず途切れさせず継承していってくれ。約束なんだ。][23] This triggers the return to the present, where Tanjiro incorporates this new element into his water breathing and manages, with some help from Nezuko's newly-developed blood art, to cut off Rui's head, ending the episode.

Kimetsu no Yaiba's kagura scene is centered in the spotlight of fatal intensity, as Tanjiro's life flashes before his mind's eyes *and* ears. The musicality of this scene is multilayered and shifting, amplifying in dramatic power as the underscore of the episode gives way to the insert song "Kamado Tanjiro no Uta". While Tanjiro hears the diegetic musicality of the bells and drum (starting at 17:30), the piano has started its haunting, non-diegetic, melodic arc.[24] The focus shifts to Tanjiro's father and the cello is meaningfully heard as an aural representation of his masculine influence. Before he speaks,

however, the piano sounds a high, dissonant interval, reminiscent of the Okawa drum played at the beginning of a kabuki scene. Nakagawa enters with the lyrics of the first verse and piano, accompanying the dynamic memory of his father's kagura dance in the snow. This is the first verse of what will develop instrumentally into a strophic variation, gathering force and momentum through the end of the episode. The focus shifts to Tanjiro asking about his father's dance, musically accompanied by the flute—both high in timbre and, importantly, a wind (breath) instrument. Tanjiro's father explains Hinokami to young Tanjiro, ending with the exhortation that Tanjiro *remember*. At this moment the piano hits the same high, dissonant interval that started the memory sequence, triggering the return to the present.

Tanjiro has remembered now and as he begins to incorporate his father's lesson into his fight, Nakagawa begins the second verse with piano, strings and, importantly, martial percussion and brass. These martial elements emphasize the heroism and sacrifice of this moment while expanding the musical texture. As the verse reaches the end of its penultimate phrase at 20:15, the ping of the "Opening Thread" sounds. The bridge between verses features flute and percussion over which their mother's spirit urges Nezuko to help her brother. The lyrics and full orchestral accompaniment enter with Nezuko's blood art. As Tanjiro's sword connects with Rui's neck, the strings flutter in wild arpeggiations, which ornaments the melody but also musically signifies that the strings/threads have been cut. The credits begin and the final verse enters with the fragmented strings, resolving to piano and then full orchestra for the full family portrait. The soundscape of this climactic sequence functions non-diegetically throughout the entire scene but also meta-diegetically as a function of Tanjiro's memory, and finally extra-diegetically as the music continues through into the final credits.

The shifting of the musicality throughout the temporal shifts and the action of the climactic battle scenes highlights the role of the music in this critical moment of character development. The creative team wants the audience to stop the frenzied pace of the series narrative to focus on this important moment—full stop to a white screen. While this features the essential role of memory, cultural as well as familial, this scene first acknowledges the forgetting, as Tanjiro has forgotten his father's legacy until this fatal moment. Tanjiro's father's kagura dance, with its cultural and practical import, fills the scene and functions as a foil to the westernized city scene in which Kibutsuji, masquerading as a human father, was first encountered. Hinokami functions as both cultural memory and as a weapon against the westernized, modernized alterity that Kibutsuji embodies.

Interestingly, while "Kamado Tanjiro no Uta" is an entirely new musical piece, the music borrows certain elements and structures from earlier works. In its solo piano opening, the piece evokes what *TV Tropes* calls the "Lonely piano piece": "Is the hero in a

losing battle against the villain and on the receiving end of a No-Holds-Barred Beatdown?...Cue the lonely piano piece."[25] This evokes "Will of the Heart" an instrumental piece from *Bleach OST* 1 (no. 10), which starts with a very similar harmonic structure and the same opening melodic character, distinct in its high, dissonant piano line. Another work with a similar structure is "Carrying You" ("Kimi o Nosete") from *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*, which, in piano reduction, appears to have a close melodic pattern. In all of these instances the pieces follow a stepwise, descending bass line for the first full phrase. The musical semiotics of the descending bassline in western music from the 16th century forward has revolved around death, but often linked with aspects of extreme heroism or sacrifice. "Kamado Tanjiro no Uta" connects with these earlier anime pieces and larger history of musical tropes, semiotically recalling other heroes and their struggles against impossible odds. The connectivity of this music to the scene, to Tanjiro's character development, and to other anime music echoes the cultural connectivity of the kagura dance itself, not as cultural stasis, but as living memory.

Conclusions: Connecting Threads

Kimi no Na wa and *Kimetsu no Yaiba* are not unique in depicting aspects of Shinto ritual, or even kagura ceremonial dance, in anime. There are many other instances, including anime featuring supernatural depictions of the dances' efficacy against demonic forces, such as those found in *Kamisama Kiss*, *Red Data Girl*, and *Nurarihyon: Rise of the Yokai Clan*. The examples in this study are both recent and similar in the magical-realism of their narrative framework. These kagura rituals may not shoot lightning from the dancers' fingertips nor force flowers to bloom, but rather highlight their role as a marker of cultural identity. Although the kagura scenes in *Kimi no Na wa* and *Kimetsu no Yaiba* are quite different from one another, visually and musically, it is important to note that the kagura ritual and what it conveys for both anime is central, acting as a defining moment linked to the furtherance of the action. This is true narratively, in the sense that each kagura ritual, knowingly or unknowingly communicates meaning, allowing the characters to connect to the past and advance in their life goals. Additionally, this is also true in the larger sociocultural sense as well, in that kagura represents a quintessential and recognizable aspect of traditional Japan. Fictionalized kagura dances function in these instances as a locus of sociocultural memory and meaning, capable of healing the precarity and cultural insecurity of the present with the traditions of the past.

The kagura dances in these anime also connect to another similarity between the two stories: the thread. The thread is an ancient narrative concept, which in *Kimi no Na wa* is the red thread of fate and in *Kimetsu no Yaiba* is the opening thread that allows Tanjiro

to successfully connect to the target of his attack. Taki and Mitsuha share their thread, woven by Mitsuha, and Tanjiro perceives the thread in battle. The thread connects through time and space, straight or spiraled. Shinto dance and musicality, through its passage across time may be understood as one manifestation of this cultural thread—a divine connection with Japan's mystic and embodied spaces, which both Shinkai and Gotouge highlight in their stories. Kagura can thus be understood as a critical, sociocultural thread to reimagining a historically-connected Japan that can move forward with both a renewed sense of identity and hope.

Endnotes

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2 Yoshio Sugimoto, *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Japanese Culture* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), 172.

3 *Kimi no Na wa*, Blu Ray, directed by Shinkai Makoto (Tokyo: Toho/Comix Wave, 2016).

4 The lifelike quality of the dance scene comes from the fact that kabuki actor, Nakamura Kazutaro, who choreographed the dance was filmed performing it and this performance was then painstakingly traced; see, Phil Wheat, "Makoto Shinkai talks 'Your Name'," *Nerdly*, November 25, 2016, http://www.nerdly.co.uk/2016/11/25/makoto-shinkai-talks-your-name/.

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18 "Interview with Makoto Shinkai, Director of Kimi no Na wa," *Manga Tokyo*, August 26, 2016. https://manga.tokyo/report/interview-with-makoto-shinkai-director-of-kimi-no-na-wa/

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22 Miyazaki Ichisada, "The Strangeness of Ancient Japanese History," *Sino-Japanese Studies* 16 (2009): 78-86.

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24 Technically the sounds that Tanjiro remembers are classified as meta-diegetic as he is the only entity in his current world who can hear these sounds.

25 "Lonely Piano Piece," *TV Tropes.* https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/LonelyPianoPiece