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The Mythic Experience: The Audiovisual Spectacle of the Biwa Hoshi Narrative and Performance in Ghost of Tsushima

Abstract

The Mythic Tales side quests in Ghost of Tsushima (2020) explore folkloric and supernatural narratives using the themes from legends and lore surrounding Tsushima Island. However, as a historical video game that reimagines a thirteenth-century medieval Japanese society during the events of the Mongol invasion of Japan in 1274, careful examination of its represented form is necessary since it can tell us how a player is instructed to play with the reimagined past or what about the past is deemed important (Chapman; Balela and Mundy; McCall). Furthermore, the side quests provide a deeper exploration of the game-world setting, which can provide a historical and sociocultural understanding of the represented past through gameplay. In line with this, this paper examines the Mythic Tales experience by exploring the representations of the in-game version of a Japanese traditional performance art called the heikyoku, performed by a medieval storyteller known as the biwa hōshi. This includes a discussion of the tradition and how it translates into a video game format, highlighting the special audiovisual spectacle that relies on familiar Japanese imageries such as the sumi-e and ukiyo-e, which are unique to this part of the game. A case study of one of the Mythic Tales, “The Curse of Uchitsune,” will serve as critical analysis toward the kind of in-game mythic narrative and experience the game provides.

Keywords: Ghost of Tsushima, Mythic Tales, side quests, representations, biwa hōshi, medieval Japanese culture, tengu, historical video game, game studies

1. Introduction

Ghost of Tsushima is a historical video game known for its realistic representation and reimagination of thirteen-century Japan during the 1274 Mongol invasion. While part of its appeal is rooted in providing realistic scenarios and gaming experience, there is a section in the game that explores a different facet of medieval society, such as the belief systems, folklore, and myth. These are the Mythic Tales, one of the two types of side quests featured in the game that focus on the folkloric and supernatural narratives, using the themes from legends and lore surrounding the island of Tsushima. In all seven Mythic Tales, there is the interaction between the game's protagonist, Jin Sakai, and both benevolent and malevolent supernatural beings, thus providing space within the narrative where the player can learn about the position and importance of cultural beliefs in medieval Japanese society. Although they are optional, their inclusion can provide a different layer of narrative and gameplay experience that enriches the main narrative of the game while also rewarding the player by increasing Jin's prestige as a warrior protagonist (Beyond! 30:40-31:30; Griffin; N. Hallford and J. Hallford 185).

As a historical video game that seeks to take the player to an immersive, reimagined world of medieval Japan, Ghost of Tsushima can act as an entry point and representative video game for this rarely explored cultural past; hence, it is worthwhile to examine the game design choices that would form as the basis for the game's representations (Beyond! 0:00-55:43; Game Informer 0:00-36:12; PlayStation 0:00-46:50; Scullion; Tapsell). An inquiry into the game's form and structure is necessary to understand the kind of history that it seeks to present, as this plays "[an] integral role in the production and reception of historical meaning" (Chapman, "Privileging Form Over Content" 42). This view is echoed by scholars Balela and Mundy, who argue that historical video games can become spaces for cultural heritage, in which the gamers will be interpreting the representations as they experience them (5).

Following this line of academic inquiry, this paper will focus on elements found in the Mythic Tales side quests, particularly the role of the biwa hōshi (the storyteller), the tradition, and the translated experience from one medium to another in the video game format. This study aims to provide a critical examination of how game design portrays historical and sociocultural representations that the player can interact with. This is especially true as the form or structure of a historical video game is what allows playful engagement, configuring, and experiencing discourse about the past

(Chapman, “Privileging Form Over Content” 42-44), which is significantly important as historical video games can work and are treated as history by the audience that uses them as one of the resources for their understanding of the represented history (Chapman, Digital Games as History, ch. 2, ch. 6, ch. 8).[1] Similarly, McCall urges for an awareness of the design of historical games as they “communicate their designers’ understandings of the past, not only in terms of what the designers think about the past, but also in terms of what they think is important to know, engage, and remember” (46). One such concern addressed in this paper is the anachronistic representation found in the game, such as the depiction and usage of the ukiyo-e and the gosuko type of samurai armor, which were, according to historical documents, developed centuries after the events portrayed in the game. Although one could argue that these representations are still within the boundary of what is considered medieval Japanese material culture, their inclusion in the game risks generalizing any cultural development that can span centuries and are either innovations or responses to previous iterations of material culture and pigeonholed into a simplified category. Therefore, if game design allows interaction with misrepresented artifacts, it has the potential to inform player interpretation during gameplay experience and may even form part of newly attained knowledge if the player treats the historical elements as natural occurrences within the represented society of a specific historical past. This is explained in more detail in the case study analysis of one of the Mythic Tales in the later section of this paper, which aims to determine how the biwa hōshi is implemented into the game and how cultural representations are woven into the narrative and gameplay.

2. The Heikyoku and the Biwa Hōshi Traditions

A brief discussion on the heikyoku and the biwa hōshi is necessary to understand their significance in the Japanese storytelling tradition. According to Japanese historian William E. Deal, the heikyoku was a form of storytelling practice composed of an oral recitation or chanting of the biwa hōshi (“lute priest”), along with the accompaniment of the musical instrument called the biwa (264, 269). The name heikyoku comes from the fact that its principal subject matter is the narrative of the Heike monogatari (“Tale of the Heike”),[2] thus alluding to the pervading warrior aesthetics and sensibilities that dominated the Kamakura period (1185-1333). This led to the genre of warrior tales

(gunki monogatari). While the Heike monogatari is accepted as a standard for what a warrior tale should be, the specific values of honor, bravery, and loyalty are often the themes, resonating with the then-ruling warrior class while also providing a premise for the aspirations of the common folk. As these values and narratives are deemed important by the warrior society of the time, they are visible in other warrior tales expressed and documented in varying traditions, such as in written histories, oral traditions, scroll paintings, and performance arts.

The role of mediator between these narratives and the audience is taken up by the performer called the biwa hōshi. Japanese studies scholar Allison Tokita traces the earliest depiction of the biwa hōshi to an iconography in the late Heian period (796-1185), in the Shin Sarugaku-ki;[3] written by the courtier Fujiwara Akihira (60). In addition, she cites the work of Sunagawa to describe the role of the biwa hōshi before they began to recite the heikyoku, which they regarded as "all-rounder entertainers of song and poetry, tellers of stories, and, most importantly, were involved in rituals to prevent plague, the placation of dangerous vengeful spirits, and the purification of polluting influences" (Tokita 61).

Tokita also points to the collective understanding amongst historians of Japanese performing arts regarding the function of the biwa hōshi narratives as "[relevant] to the old cult of goryō shinkō, a ritual which served as a requiem for the dead warriors to placate their potentially malevolent spirits" (64). This aligns well with the concept of the biwa hōshi as priests since their narrations of the heikyoku can be seen as a form of ritual performance. As priests of the time were considered both learned men and religious entities, they provided guidance to the people while also giving lectures and sermons about the sacred teachings of the Buddhist texts. However, many of these priests were not ordained. Thus, while these narratives serve to contain certain teachings, it is likely that they also held varying interpretations depending on the performer. Similarly, Deal explains that "[t]here existed in Japan a tradition of chanting Buddhist texts as a way to pacify the souls of the dead that might otherwise wreak havoc on the living. The chanting of the Heike text may have been intended to pacify the souls of those who had died in the Gempei War" (253). This is important to keep in mind when dealing with the in-game narratives of the Mythic Tales, for while these tales are recounted as stories by the in-game biwa hōshi, they can also be considered forms of veneration or moments of learning for the protagonist.

Not all biwa hōshi were monks. In other historical depictions, they were referred to as blind performers. In the later period, the biwa narratives were conducted by sighted performers, which eventually inspired the art of jōruri;[4] wherein the narratives were performed by professional women (Tokita 69). It is in this stage of the tradition's history that the purpose of the biwa narratives may have been catered toward the performative aspect of storytelling as opposed to ritualistic veneration. In addition, this performance art would also be instrumental to the development of other theatrical forms, such as nōh, kyogen, kabuki, and bunraku. Furthermore, Heike monogatari, having a large extant collection of fifty variations, whether performed or written, could no longer be contained within a single performative medium, and so, by the mid-Edo period, it was adapted into other genres. As such, the use of its plot is evident in other performance arts and even in modern cultural forms such as novels and films, which make it prevalent in popular culture (Tokita 60). This proves that there was already a tradition of adapting the biwa narratives into different performing art genres, wherein the delivery of the heikoyoku performance relied on the dominant characteristic of these genres, such as the kind of music utilized in the performance, dramatization, illustrations, puppetry, etc. With this in mind, the video game format of presenting an audiovisual experience to a biwa narrative is not in any way novel; however, its own unique characteristics, such as active player performance and gameplay via console or the kind of interactive technology, may contribute to how it can provide a different and more accessible experience.

3. In-Game Biwa Hōshi and the Mythic Tale Narratives

In the video game, the island of Tsushima is divided into three zones that become accessible as the game progresses. Accordingly, the locations of the Mythic Tales are spread across these zones, making the in-game biwa hōshi (named Yamato) a wandering priest found in places such as the refugee camp, along the roadside, or in small villages.

There are two visual markers for his presence – a yellow bird that acts as a guide to the specific location, and the presence of a crowd![5] There is also an aural marker of a distinctive sound of the biwa instrument that becomes audible upon approaching the said location. In addition, when

viewing the quest description on the menu screen, there is no marker on the map indicating Yamato's location, aside from clues such as the name of a village or road. In fact, it is only when the player interacts with other NPCs who disclose information about the traveling priest or when the player has already found Yamato's location that a marker appears on the map. These are the subtle ways of game design choice that projects a sense of naturalness to these occurrences by allowing player exploration and interaction with the game world to unravel mysteries and chart the in-game map for relevant knowledge.

Yamato is depicted in the customary guise of a biwa hōshi – shaved head, simple clerical robes, and a short-necked biwa.



Figure 1. Yamato on an elevated platform performing the Mythic Tale "The Curse of Uchitsune" (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).

When found, he is often on an elevated platform or behind a low table that divides his area of performance and the crowd. Upon approaching, Yamato will acknowledge Jin while playing the biwa. As an optional feature, the player can choose to walk away without interacting with Yamato, therefore avoiding the side quests. It is only by choosing to interact with Yamato that the Mythic Tales can begin, triggering a brief cut scene of Yamato inviting Jin to listen to the tales. This interaction between the two also depicts an important detail regarding social hierarchy, with Yamato always addressing Jin in a reverential manner, owing to his status as a samurai. Thus, the

player's choice to interact with Yamato is reflective of the samurai giving permission to a lay person. This is also reflective of another common scene in early medieval Japanese literature – a person with authority, usually of military rank, visiting a monastery or specific monks to ask for counsel.

The Mythic Tales that Yamato recites play out as a cinematic cut scene that depicts the narrative, after which the screen returns to Yamato's performance as he provides an interpretation of the tales in relation to the current Mongol invasion and Jin's duty as a protector of Tsushima, like the heroes in the tales. Because the narratives entail supernatural connections, these tales provide knowledge of divine weapons and godly intercessions that, narratively, provide the people with hope, and gameplaywise provide the playing mechanics and character growth that empower the player for more difficult challenges in the game. Furthermore, in response to these challenges, the scripted dialogue depicts Jin as emboldened, dismissing any threat of otherworldly curses and willingly appointing himself as the tale's warrior who rises to the challenge.

Therefore, the in-game biwa hōshi serves as a catalyst for character growth and for expanding the game's narrative through an exploration of lore supposedly found on the island. In an interview for the Game Informer, Sucker Punch Production's creative director Nate Fox explained the concept of the Mythic Tales and how it fits into the overall in-game narrative. According to Fox, despite having elements of fantasy, most of the narratives of the Mythic Tales are based on the folklore that the people of the island would have believed in. One example is the creation myth known to the people of Tsushima Island, which describes the appearance of lightning dogs that came down from the sky, which turned the sand of the beach black. This real-life creation myth was utilized as one of the myths explored in the game (Game Informer 10:50-12:26). Similarly, the use of supernatural entities derived from Japanese folklore is evident, but the representations and interpretations of these elements may defer to the developer's creative license. However, a closer look into these Mythic Tales can show us how the developers incorporated the ancient belief systems and island folklore to enrich the gameplay experience.

In all seven Mythic Tales, there is always the interaction between the warrior protagonist and either a benevolent or malevolent supernatural being.[6] It is important to understand that the warrior protagonists being referred to here are the mortal characters described in the narratives of the

Mythic Tales as recounted by the in-game biwa hōshi Yamato, and it is their feats, made with either good or ill intentions, that often act as catalysts for interaction with the supernatural entities. These warrior protagonists should not be confused with Jin, the player's character, and in most cases, they serve as the final bosses of their respective Mythic Tales side quests. Furthermore, this recurring theme of the supernatural co-existing with humans has long been part of the belief system in medieval Japan, and more often than not, people attributed the inexplicable phenomena, such as lightning, storms, death, fertility, harvest, and so on, to kami (spirits or gods).[7] On the one hand, this allows for a way to provide a sense of sociohistorical experience that was the norm during the represented past in which the game world is set. On the other hand, the visual and aural representations of such experiences derive from historical documentation, ancient literature, and modern-day interpretations through the game developer's creative choices. Thus, the representations are contextualized for a contemporary audience. Below, I have organized a chart based on the narratives shown in the cinematic sequences of the Mythic Tales, which will help us understand the thematic structure the developers used for recreating the structure of a folkloric narrative.

In this chart, the seven Mythic Tales are listed in the middle column and can be categorized based on two factors: first, through the interaction between the warrior protagonist and the supernatural being found in the left column, and second, by the theme of the narratives indicated in the right column.

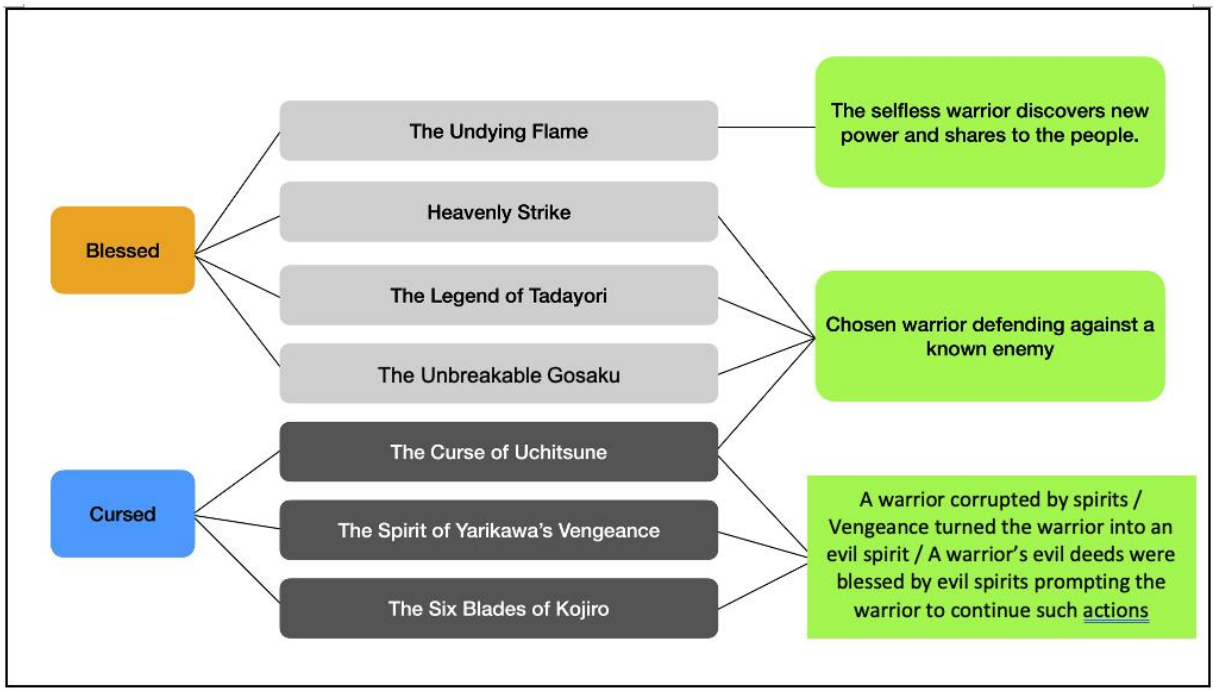


Figure 2. Mythic Tales categorized according to the relationship with the supernatural entities, and the recurring themes in their narratives.

The first four Mythic Tales, listed in the light grey boxes in the middle column, are the side quests wherein the narratives depict the supernatural beings conferring a blessing onto the warrior protagonist, who is thus chosen as the defender who will overcome an enemy that threatens the people of Tsushima. The last three Mythic Tales, listed in the dark grey boxes in the middle column, are those in which the warrior protagonist depicted in the recited narratives was either cursed by the supernatural entity (or blessed with the strength to continue their evil deeds as in the case of the spirits of the dead who find enjoyment in the act of killing) or turned into a vengeful spirit as karmic retribution. From this, we can gather that the narratives presented in the Mythic Tales are both inspirational and cautionary tales.

These narratives become even more significant when we consider that they draw parallels to the ongoing concern about the Mongol invasion and the islanders' need for a hero. This being the case, there is a messianic tone present in the call to action that Jin performs in these side quests. Specifically, in the recited narratives of the first five Mythic Tales listed in the middle column in figure 2, the depicted enemies (whether a group of bandits, pirates, or another evil entity) become analogous to the Mongol Empire as they become invaders of the peaceful lands, bringing death and destruction. In these narratives, there is also a warrior protagonist depicted as the protector of

the islanders. This acts as a prophetic interpretation of Jin's role as the sole survivor of the Battle of Komoda Beach, seen at the beginning of the game, to become the island's defender. In addition, the inclusion of supernatural beings described in the mythic narratives adds a divine element to the tales, similarly endowing Jin with divine right or charging him with sacred duty. On the other hand, another parallel can be found in the warrior protagonists depicted in the last two Mythic Tales listed in the middle column in figure 2, whose greed for power and influence or thirst for bloodshed had attracted malevolent entities to curse them, which can represent those islanders who betrayed the people of Tsushima to curry favor with the Khan, and whom Jin sets out to subdue or kill.

Although these Mythic Tales are optional and therefore not integral to the completion of the game, they served the purpose of enriching the gaming experience by locating the player in the reimagined world and society of Tsushima during the 1274 Mongol invasion by means of the lore and narratives of the island which would not have been experienced in a linear playthrough (Beyond! 30:43-31:30; Game Informer 10:50-12:26). Furthermore, an integral part of the Mythic Tales experience are the rewards the player receives, often a mythical or divine weapon associated with the specific narrative, or a special combat technique associated with the tales' warrior heroes. Most importantly, Jin's accomplishments become myths in their own right within the in-game society, thus propelling Jin's influence as a warrior throughout the island![8] This is how the developers connected the Mythic Tales (though they are independent) to the main narrative and achieved a cohesion between the narrative and gameplay design,ultimately creating a satisfying gaming experience.

4. Case Study: "The Curse of Uchitsune"

The Mythic Tales side quest experience can be summarized in two points: the biwa hōshi performance that recounts the tale, wherein both the player and Jin become an audience member (passive player experience); and the side quest portion wherein Jin must accomplish specific objectives (active player experience). Firstly, we control Jin to locate the in-game biwa hōshi and then relinquish control just as Jin is prompted to sit in the audience with the crowd. This role of the audience is duplicated when the game screen changes into a cinematic sequence where we no longer see the characters and are treated to the visual narrative of the Mythic Tale. Here, we are

the player as a viewer, not the controller. Traditionally, the performance ends after the biwa hōshi's recitation; instead, the player regains control of Jin and becomes the performer who is to accomplish objectives analogous to the narrative that was just recited. In this way, the entire Mythic Tale side quest becomes our own heikyoku to perform.

"The Curse of Uchitsune" is among the first three Mythic Tale side quests the player can experience, accessible in act 1 after completing the opening missions.

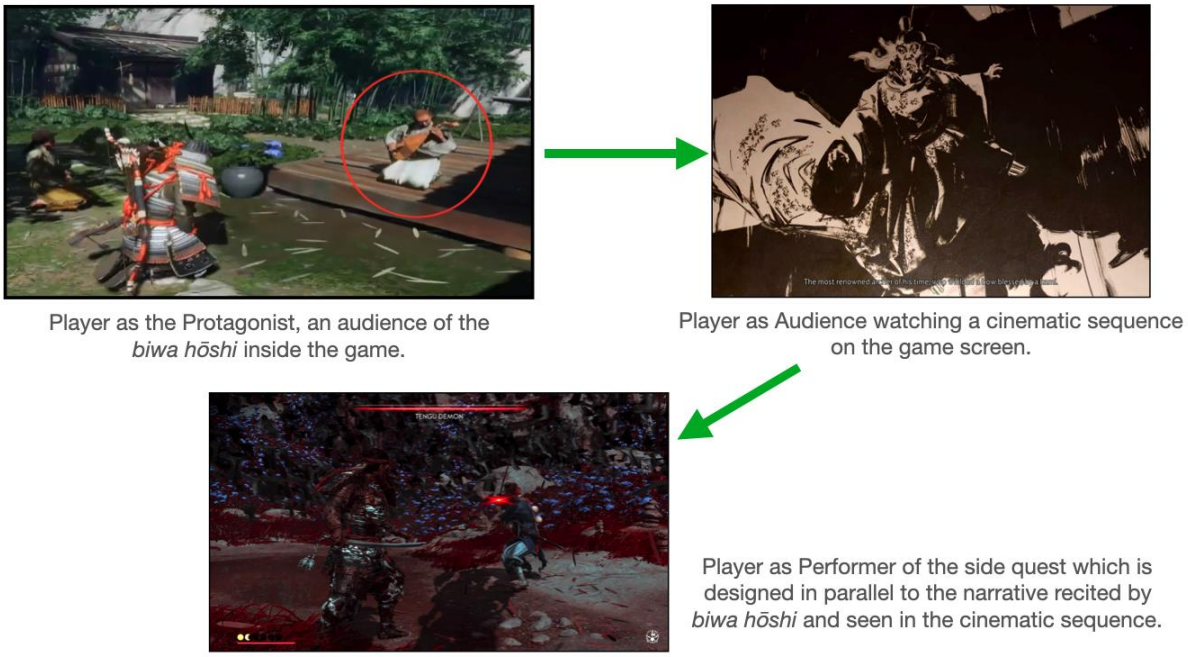


Figure 3. Diagram of the player's shifting role (passive to active).

Being optional, the player can choose when to trigger the side quest, but due to its in-text description, it may seem as though it is essential to the main narrative, thus prompting them to complete it. This happens in spite of the fact that in the menu interface, the side quests are listed separately from the main story quests and have their own unique map marker once discovered.

To summarize, this Mythic Tale begins when the player finds Yamato at Hiyoshi Springs in the Izuhara region. To provide some context, at this point in the game, Jin is searching for more allies, liberating towns, and temples along the way. At this point, the player can enhance Jin's capabilities by acquiring new equipment, combat techniques, and influence as a warrior. This fits well with the opportunity provided by the Mythic Tale. The in-game text description of this Mythic Tale: "The musician in Hiyoshi is reciting the myth of Uchitsune's longbow. I should hear this tale" (Ghost of

Tsushima) suggests that Jin's motive is geared toward the acquisition of said weapon. This is confirmed when the objective of the side quest is indeed to search for the legendary bow. Unique to this Mythic Tale is the presence of monk-tengu that would serve as the detractor and final boss. Upon completing the side quest, Jin is rewarded with Uchitsune's longbow, unlocking the future upgrades to the weapon (both in stats and cosmetic) and prestige as a warrior.

To navigate this case study, I will divide the analysis into three parts. The first will discuss the audiovisual spectacle of the Mythic Tale experience, such as cinematic sequences, visual artifacts, and music. The second part will explore the supernatural entity found in Mythic Tales, more precisely the tengu, analyzing both scholarly findings and creative interpretations in the game, and the last part will look at an intertextual reading of this experience.

4.1. Transforming Sumi-e and Ukiyo-e Paintings

A defining feature of the Mythic Tales, not found in any other part of the game, is its unique cinematic sequence made entirely of monochromatic images with which the side quest begins. These images do not move in the traditional sense, but the game uses a transition effect that follows the movement of ink across the screen, resembling brush strokes, which also provides dynamic movement in unveiling the scene. I argue that this choice in representation is modeled after sumi-e paintings, especially performative sumi-e, where the artist gives a live demonstration, and the audience can see the developing scene from the brushstrokes across the canvas. By portraying the scenes in this manner, the Mythic Tales are made to look ancient just like a Japanese scroll. This is a visual narrative device that transports the gaming experience to medieval times when such scrolls were the prevalent means of documentation and an example of material culture characterized as ancient.

In the later Mythic Tales side quests, when the player controls Jin to accomplish the objectives, there is another Japanese artifact used as a visual representation.

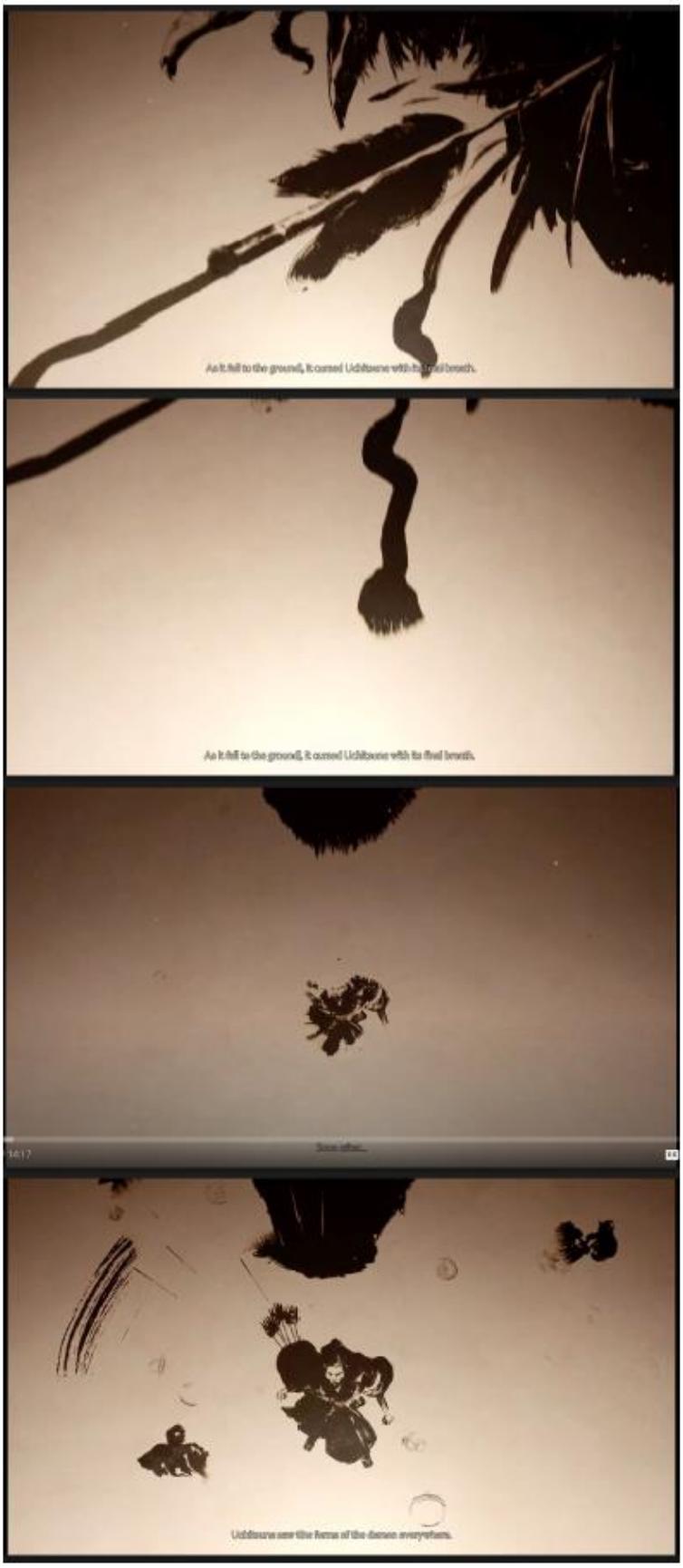


Figure 4. Screenshots depicting the flowing ink as seen in the cinematic sequence of “The Curse of Uchitsune” (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).

In the later Mythic Tales side quests, when the player controls Jin to accomplish the objectives, there is another Japanese artifact used as a visual representation. In this side quest, the ukiyo-e paintings are used as landmark clues to find a specific location, in this case, where the Uchitsune’s longbow is hidden. Throughout the side quest, Jin discovers two ukiyo-e paintings (one in Uchitsune’s tomb, and another on a small island). Uchitsune is associated with the hydrangea flower, and Jin’s in-game dialogue implies an assumption that the locations depicted in these paintings were important sites, thus directing the player to investigate said locations. This feature complements the minimalist UI (user interface) design and, with the absence of an on-screen map, compels the player to absorb the visual spectacle of the reimagined game world. A swipe on the PS4 controller’s touchpad allows the ukiyo-e to appear onscreen, which can then be compared to the surrounding environment. This action resembles the physical act of opening a scroll with your own hands and visually comparing what you see on the scroll with the world around you.

By doing this, the ukiyo-e, as cultural artifact, is introduced as part of the game design that utilizes visual representations to convey Japanese culture, history, and tradition.



Figure 5. Ukiyo-e painting as landmark clue used to compare with the immediate environment (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).

Interestingly, it also serves as a reference to the tradition of using landscape as a subject matter for this type of painting and that they depicted real locations. The most iconic of these landscape ukiyo-e collections is Utagawa Hiroshige's The Fifty-Three Stations of the Tōkaidō (1833-34). However, it should be noted that the use of landscape ukiyo-e is anachronistic to the historical time in which the video game is set. The landscape ukiyo-e rose to popularity toward the latter half of the Edo period (nineteenth century), which means that the act of Jin searching for locations using an ukiyo-e as a landmark map during that time was highly unlikely. Despite this, the art form is intrinsically woven into the Japanese identity in the modern day and popular culture; thus, this choice is one of the many creative licenses that the developers undertook in their representation of medieval Japan. Another example of anachronistic representation is the depiction of the gosuko type of samurai armor that can be equipped by the character of Jin, which was used during the latter half of the Sengoku period (1467-1615).[9] Just like the ukiyo-e, the gosuko type armor is popular in modern-day visual representations of medieval Japanese culture, specifically of the samurai culture that uses the Sengoku period as its popular subject. By having these examples readily accessible and implemented through the game design of a historical video game, it can spread misinformation on the types of material culture present at this specific point of history. This is especially true since the game features a glossary list of attainable artifacts, which is accessible in the menu, alluding to a carefully researched and curated historical representation of medieval material culture. This poses a risk of generalizing all the represented material culture found in the game despite the problem of anachronism. Furthermore, if the player is unaware of such anachronisms, and if these representations are prevalent in other accessible media representations of medieval Japan, it can solidify their understanding of the represented history they are interacting with.

4.2. Translating the Oral Tradition Experience

The biwa hōshi performance is an oral tradition, translated to the video game experience as a voice-over narration delivered throughout cinematic sequences. This is provided in both Japanese and English versions, depending on the language of the player's choice. In both cases, the game offers captions. However, the tone of the voice-over has the cadence of a modern storyteller, as

opposed to the singsong or lyrical recitations of a traditional biwa hōshi performance![10] Furthermore, traditionally, there are two components that the audience hears – the voice of the biwa hōshi and the biwa instrument. In the cinematic sequence, what accompanies the voice-over of Yamato is a light orchestral sound along with other traditional Japanese instruments such as the shakuhachi ("bamboo flute"), shamisen ("lute"), and taiko ("drum"). Interestingly, one of the two musical composers for the game, Ilan Eshkeri, tapped the Satsuma-biwa master Junko Ueda to perform Lord Shimura's theme in the game, which was inspired by the Heike monogatari (Yang). This shows an awareness of the biwa hōshi performance and tradition, but it was not used for the experience of the in-game biwa hōshi performance.

4.3. Imagining the Supernatural: The Tengu in Ancient Accounts and in the Game

As mentioned, the narrative of the Mythic Tales provides a space that explores sociocultural beliefs through told or enacted stories within the game's setting. In this Mythic Tale, the narrative explores the supernatural beliefs that were common during this period, particularly the co-existence of supernatural entities and the natives of Tsushima island, and how these entities were regarded by society. Below are the official captions of Yamato's voice-over narration during the cinematic sequence:

> *YAMATO. (Voice-over narration) Long ago … an emperor and his palace were plagued by a winged demon. The emperor sent for Uchitsune. The most renowned archer of his time, who wielded a bow blessed by a kami. When the demon next came, Uchitsune was ready. Longbow in hand, his aim was true and his arrows flew farther than any archer's in Japan. Uchitsune loosed a single arrow. It pierced the demon's heart. As it fell to the ground, it cursed Uchitsune with its final breath. Soon after … Uchitsune saw the forms of the demon everywhere. His legendary bow never missed. But each arrow that hit its mark was met with a very human scream. The trail of bodies led to his capture. Though many called for Uchitsune's death, the Emperor felt pity for him. Uchitsune was banished to Tsushima Island. He died years later… alone and forgotten by all but a few. The demon slaying longbow has remained hidden here since his passing. Some say it awaits a worthy master. Others believe it still holds the demon's curse. (Ghost of Tsushima)*

Here, the supernatural experience is the focus of the narrative. While the identity of the winged demon is not clearly described, the image in the cinematic sequence shows a bird-like creature. In addition, during the side quest, Jin encounters a monk wearing a red-faced tengu mask. These clues associate the identity of the winged demon from the recited tale with the supernatural entity of the tengu.

Before analyzing the figure of the tengu, let me first explain the significance of this imagery to the game.



Figure 6. The winged demon shot by Uchitsune's bow in the cinematic sequence (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).



Figure 7. The monk-tengu during the final duel with Jin (Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).

Firstly, by incorporating a visual representation of the supernatural entity into the in-game narrative (particularly the cinematic sequence and side-quest boss design), it gives a physical form to a belief that was prevalent at the time. When looking at historical accounts of the early medieval period, the tengu was among the recurring supernatural entities, to the point that numerous visual depictions and accounts were made.[11] As such, this attempt to materialize the entity could reflect the imagination and belief of the society of the time. Secondly, because the imagery is rooted in medieval Japanese culture, it augments the visual and narrative representations of 1274 Japan that the video game aims to depict.

4.4. The Tengu in Ancient Accounts

The game draws upon two iconic depictions of the tengu: the winged demon and the monk-tengu. According to yōkai studies scholar Kazuhiko Komatsu, while the earliest description of the tengu can be traced to the Nihon Shoki (Chronicles of Japan),[12] most of the description we know of today find its origin in accounts and imagery prevalent toward the end of the Heian period (794-1185) and beginning of Kamakura period (1185-1333). In these narratives, the tengu is always framed in terms of Buddhism and described as a monster:

[They are] yokai whose purpose is to interfere with the religion's spread. They had the ability to take on various guises, but the bird of prey known in English as the kite was viewed as their original form, and as such most illustrations of tengu from this period depicted them in this way … They were also believed to possess humans and spread diseases and death. (Komatsu 120)

Applying this description to the image in the cinematic sequence, we find similarities with the winged demon, as seen in figure 6, such as having bird-like features and its presence causing a deadly plague in the palace. Furthermore, when it cursed Uchitsune upon its death, Uchitsune became blinded from seeing the truth (possessed) and killed people around him until he was captured and exiled.

The second imagery – the monk-tengu – was more prevalent during the medieval period through depictions of the yamabushi (the warrior monks who lived in mountain temples). Yōkai researcher Mitsuhiko Shibata describes them in Nihon Zenki densetsu daijiten ("Encyclopedia of Strange Tales and Legends of Japan"):

Mythical yokai that live deep in the mountains and are capable of flight … They dress like yamabushi and have wings and superhuman powers. Otengu (great tengu) have red faces with long noses and carry feather fans. Kotengu (lesser tengu), also known as karasu-tengu (raven tengu), have bird-like faces. (qtd. in Komatsu 116)

This imagery of the red-faced tengu is one depicted in the game, though instead of the feather fan, the monk-tengu that Jin confronts uses a bow and a katana. Similarly, the red-faced tengu mask is also how this yōkai is cast in nōh performances, thus referencing another form of traditional Japanese performance arts. Looking at the official concept art illustration for the in-game tengu in figure 8, we also see other identifying markers of a Buddhist monk, such as the tokin (a small black hat), and the yuigesa (a vestment with pompoms).

These two imageries of the tengu (the winged demon and monk-tengu) derive their origins from Buddhist teachings, particularly the teachings about rebirth.



Figure 8. Concept art for the monk-tengu by artist Yinang Kuang (Ghost of Tsushima Digital Art book, Sucker Punch Productions, 2020).

Cultural historian Haruko Wakabayashi has done extensive work on tengu and noted that the typical depiction of a mixture of man and avian can be seen in old picture scrolls, such as the warrior-monk tengu, abbot-tengu, plain monk-tengu, costumed bird-tengu, crow-tengu, and kite-tengu (234-41). Cultural scholar Elizabeth Horton Sharf points out that these representations of the tengu are closely associated with the Buddhist rebirth discourse, particularly of the animal realm (152).

In addition, Wakabayashi explains that by attributing the tengu depictions to prominent figures who lived during the medieval period helped society understand their importance and express reverence (in fear), expanding the lore surrounding the tengu and inevitably resulting in its transformation into a mythical creature. Most of these prominent figures were fallen Buddhist

monks;[13] and the inclusion of two prominent sovereigns, such as Sutoku and Goshirakawa;[14] whose lives were documented, helped shape the myth surrounding their tengu identity.

> *They appear either as vengeful spirits that seek to disturb the Buddhist Law and thereby bring chaos to the society, or as enemies of Buddhism that harass the monks and delude the people with their magic tricks. Monks who failed to attain enlightenment could also become a tengu, as they were sometimes believed to fall into the "realm of tengu" because of their conceit and worldly attachment. (Wakabayashi 234)*

4.5. The In-Game Representation of the tengu

To understand the relationship between the two in-game imageries of the tengu, the winged demon and the monk with the red-faced tengu mask, let us consider the tengu's curse, after which the Mythic Tale is named: "The Curse of Uchitsune." Applying what Wakabayashi has argued – that the human who is led astray by the tengu (the winged demon), ultimately becomes a human-tengu after death – the monk-tengu that Jin fights during the side quest is undoubtedly Uchitsune. As recounted by Yamato, the famous archer Uchitsune was cursed (possessed) upon defeating the winged demon and, as a result, killed many innocent people before he was captured and exiled to Tsushima until his death. Cursed and possessed, he was reborn as the monk-tengu (wearing a red-faced tengu mask) as his karmic punishment.

There are several instances that confirm this speculation. First, whenever the monk-tengu detracts Jin in his search, he uses the bow and arrow to fire warning shots. The conventional item that a tengu is depicted to carry is a feather fan, but in these encounters, the monk-tengu's choice weapon of a bow is what Uchitsune is famed for. Interestingly, for the final duel with Jin, the monk-tengu uses a katana. This change of weapon may have to do with the dueling system feature the game is known for, which the developers admitted was inspired by samurai duels in Akira Kurosawa films (PlayStation). Another instance is the monk-tengu's persistence to stop Jin, often with a warning of a deadly curse, which can be understood as Uchitsune's warning based on his own experience. Below are the official captions of one of their brief dialogues while dueling:

MONK-TENGU. Do you not fear the demon's curse?

JIN. First, I'll drive the Mongols from our home. After that, I'll worry about curses. (Ghost of Tsushima)

Throughout all Mythic Tales, including this one, Jin always responds without fear about potential supernatural risks. Specifically in this Mythic Tale, it is the only narrative that involves a demonic curse that could be placed on an individual.

It should be noted that the entire duel is alluded to have happened in a dream-like state. When Jin found the altar where the longbow was kept, smoke engulfed him, and a ripple effect transition moves across the game screen before fading to black. The next scene shows Jin waking up, drenched in blood, and facing the monk-tengu while a murder of crows encircles them. Here, the monk-tengu declares that Jin has now fallen into the curse. When Jin defeats the monk-tengu, the murder of crows swarms toward him until the game screen fades to black once more. This is followed by a scene of Jin waking up in front of the weapon altar, and it is suggested that Jin has defeated the curse. In this context, upon defeat, the monk-tengu that represented Uchitsune disappears as the curse was released and he finally achieved enlightenment. This also coincides with the ritualistic function of the Heikyoku that pacifies vengeful spirits or curses.

4.6. Familiar Narrative: The Tengu Encounter from Another Literary Work

The narrative of a hero obtaining new power with the help of a supernatural entity can be traced to the Hero's Journey or the monomyth, which makes the narrative of the Mythic Tales familiar. However, for the purpose of this paper, I would like to point out a similarity to another medieval Japanese tale that also includes the tengu, which thus gives the Mythic Tale's narrative an intertextual quality beyond its structure.

The climax of the side quest – Jin's duel and victory over the monk-tengu, which results in the in-game prestige and a new arsenal that will help him attain his goal of defeating the Mongol invaders – can potentially be read intertextually with the episode of Yoshitsune learning from the tengu in Mt. Kurama.[15] Japanese studies scholar Pat Fister describes Yoshitsune's fate as "spared by

Taira no Kiyomori during the Heiji rebellion in 1159, on the condition that he become a priest and be educated at the temple of Kurama-dera" (105). While the rest of the Minamoto Clan were sent into exile as punishment, it was during Yoshitsune's stay in Mt. Kurama that he met the tengu king Sojobo, and it is suggested that he trained under him: "The reason Sojobo agreed to instruct Yoshitsune was to incite a battle, and indeed tengu came to be regarded as harbingers of war" (Fister 105). This episode, depicting Yoshitsune's training with the tengu in Mt. Kurama, is also mentioned in some of the chapters in Heike monogatari to explain Yoshitsune's unnatural martial ability as a warrior that helps defeat the Taira Clan.

In parallel to the in-game narrative, Jin is similarly displaced as the sole survivor of the Battle of Komoda Beach at the beginning of the game. The rest of the gameplay explores Jin's journey to rally allies, obtain power, and defeat the Mongol invaders. In addition, in all encounters with the monk-tengu throughout the side quest, such as when he warns him and tests both the strength of his body and mind in the final duel, it appears that the monk-tengu's intentions were not to kill Jin but to challenge him. Upon proving himself worthy, Jin is rewarded with Uchitsune's longbow (narrative-wise) and new combat skills and prestige (gameplaywise), which are instrumental to his mission to defeat the Mongol invaders. Lastly, the famous ukiyo-e of Yoshitsune's training with Sojobo depicts the use of swords (though Sojobo appears to be holding a branch as a sword,) and Sojobo the Tengu King is printed in bold red color![16]

5. Conclusion

Each Mythic Tale, while adding depth to Tsushima Island's in-game lore, also espouses warrior aesthetics and sensibilities, thus romanticizing the life of an honorable samurai. The inclusion of supernatural entities and their relationship with the inhabitants of the island depicts the beliefs of medieval society, which also play into the "destined warrior" identification placed on the protagonist. In this way, Mythic Tales serve to supplement and complement the main narrative of the game so the players would not feel as though their actions are irrelevant. This form of experiential learning toward a represented society's belief system can also promote deeper understanding or transcultural discourse. However, as with all forms of representation, we should

proceed with caution, particularly with representations aimed at engaging players with sociocultural interpretation.

There are two potential concerns I have detected. First, the side quests are rife with historical and cultural representations in the form of tangible and intangible artifacts;[17] and some of these representations are anachronistic (ukiyo-e and gosuko), which suggest they were chosen to promote a specific Japanese identity by supplying something familiar to modern-day Japanese popular culture audiences. This can be problematic as reiteration of any representation, whether historically correct or not, serves to assert its position within the collective imagination and understanding of the audience. Furthermore, since the developers were inspired by old samurai films (works by director Akira Kurosawa), although historical research was undertaken, the bulk of the gaming experience was designed to create a thrilling audiovisual spectacle and engaging narratives comparable to films. This means creative decisions were made for the sake of commercial success and tailored to fit public expectations influenced by popular culture or the already established representations. Hence, the choice artifact representations are those closely linked with an already established medieval Japanese culture that continues to be perpetuated in media representations.

This, then, connects to the second concern – the risk of naturalizing the experience. By incorporating cultural artifacts and tradition in an organic way (natural way) into the game setting, their uniqueness may be overshadowed or altogether disappear. In the examples of the traditional performance arts of the Heikyoku and the biwa hōshi, their significance in the represented game setting (as historically documented elsewhere) may be lost. Have players come to understand Yamato as a biwa hōshi, or the significance of his role and the kind of narratives he recounts? Or will players regard him as another generic quest giver? Will there be transcultural comparisons with other storytellers from different cultures? The change to the method of how the traditional practice is performed and received by the audience may become the pervading understanding or risk losing its identifying markers specific to its craft. This is evident in a survey conducted on thirty-four non-Japanese player respondents: while they engaged in a game that explored historical matters, their view on the storyteller of the Mythic Tales is not different from other quest-giver archetypes in other video games they have played, nor were they able to decipher the biwa instrument from the other

Japanese traditional instruments that played in the background (Abela 86-90). On this stance, the Heikyoku tradition may as well have not mattered to the average player.

While the Mythic Tales may not be a perfect gaming experience, it serves as a great in-game feature that expands the diegetic narrative and potentially welcomes players to a deeper relationship with the in-game society. These side quests play to the player's familiarity with Japanese cultural cues and concepts while still being relevant to the overall gaming experience. This is because supernatural elements and lore have always been part of every culture in the world, therefore providing another point of universal acceptance and interpretation from the player's perspective. This is to say that beliefs about entities such as spirits, kami, tengu, etc. are likely believable to have been part of a historically represented society as seen in the game because similar supernatural entities can also be found within the history of the different societies the players belong to. It does not necessarily deny the uniqueness of the Japanese experience and interpretation of the supernatural since the entities may vary in shape, origin, purpose, etc.; rather, it promotes a sense of familiarity and acceptance as opposed to being dismissed as merely fabricated and fantastical for the purpose of the game. Such was the case when the majority of participants echoed familiar or relevant folkloric beliefs and celebrated cultural identity they know or are a part of (Abela 86-89). In this sense, learning, transcultural discourse, and interpretation can take place in the process of the gaming experience, which makes the implementation of game design choices significant as it is what creates representations and the rules through which players can interact with said representations.

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[1] Coincidentally, in Ghost of Tsushima's Director's Commentary video, Japanese Historian Kazuto Hongo praises the gameplay experience as a potential resource for history students to discover the depicted historical era (Concept Player One 43:15-43:54).

[2] An epic that recounts the rise and fall of the Taira Clan and their conflicts with the Minamoto Clan near the end of the twelfth century. There is no single author attributed as the tales were a consolidation of different versions and interpretations, passed down as oral traditions by the biwa hōshi.

[3] An eleventh-century fictional account that depicts the sarugaku plays in Kyoto that the military official Uemon-no-jō attended. Most ancient texts focus on important personages, so a large section is devoted to the family of Uemon-no-jō, but it also talks about the sarugaku plays that explored the social life of the time, such as an ideal farmer, insights into trading goods, sumo wrestling, etc.

[4] The traditional chanting narrative music that accompanies the buranku but emphasizes the lyrics and narration as opposed to the music itself.

[5] A game design choice for alerting the player that there is an event within the vicinity is the use of animals to function as guides.

[6] In the case of the Mythic Tale called "The Six Blades of Kojiro," the game narrates that the spirits of death were so amazed by Kojiro's feat that they blessed his armor to grant him a tireless sword arm. This version of Kojiro would become the final boss the player must defeat in this particular side quest.

[7] See Konjaku Monogatarishū (Anthology of Tales from the Past), which is a Japanese collection of over one thousand tales written during the late Heian period (794-1185), wherein its subject matter mostly derives from Buddhist texts and popular folklore depicting encounters between humans and supernatural entities.

[8] One example is when the enemies tremble at the sight of Jin once his prestige as a warrior is well-known, and he is feared by the common foot soldiers and bandits.

[9] This is not to be confused with the armor set that is given as a reward in the Mythic Tale "The Unbreakable Gosaku," as the rewarded armor set in that side quest is a yoroi type samurai armor (made of layers of scales and often decorated), which was widely used during the thirteenth century. Ironically, it is the iconic Ghost Armor in the game that traces its design to the gosuko type samurai armor, noted for having solid iron plating, as opposed to layered scales, which developed during the sixteenth century as trade routes allowed for new materials to enter Japan, as well as providing better defenses against newer weapons, such as the arquebus, brought in by European traders.

[10] See the biwa performance of Kumakawa Kamori with the piece titled "Nasuno Yoichi" for reference of the traditional experience, accessible on YouTube at youtu.be/bnt4CSZVJy8.

[11] For examples of visual depictions, see the hand scrolls Tengu zoshi, Zegai-bō emaki, and the hanging scroll Karasu Tengu, to name a few. For accounts written during the medieval period, see Collection of Tales of Times Now Past, Uji shūi monogatari, and Koko chomonji.

[12] A book from the eighth century, it is considered the second oldest book of classical Japanese history.

[13] Such as Ryōgen or Jie Daishi, the eighteenth abbot of Tendai Sect, and Ippen, the founder of the Ji School of Pure Land Buddhism.

[14] In the case of Sutoku, calamities were often attributed to his vengeful spirit, and "[i]n the Taiheiki, he appears as the golden kite and the chief of tengu and demons" (Wakabayashi 239).

[15] Yoshitsune is a famous medieval warrior from the Minamoto Clan whose participation in the Genpei War helped the Minamoto Clan defeat the Taira Clan. The myth surrounding his prowess as a warrior originates from training with the tengu.

[16] See Tsukioka, Yoshitoshi. The King of the Tongues Teaching Martial Arts to Yoshitsune. 1886. 35.5 x 46.7 cm. Color woodblock. National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/54133/.

[17] According to Balela and Mundy, tangible artifacts refer to examples of material culture,

landscape, specific locations, and people, whereas intangible artifacts refer to language, music, folklore, climate, behavior, religion, customs, and traditions (3-4).



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