**The History and Cultural Symbols of *Demon Slayer***

Starting in April 2019 a well-known Shounen Jump manga got its first anime season adaptation, Demon Slayer. While the story has a simple plot, a young boy whose family has been murdered by a demon must find a way to turn his sister back into a human all while surviving all of the other demons that want his head. Demon Slayer has become immensely popular not only in Japan but across the globe as well. This rise in popularity was enough for Demon Slayer to receive a movie in April of this year which became the highest-grossing Japanese animated film in theatres beating Studio Ghibli’s Spirited Away after making a whopping 500 million dollars worldwide. With a second season already announced and expected to come out early in December, Demon Slayer has a long road ahead. While it would be fun to just talk about what makes Demon Slayer a great animated series; there are many cultural symbols hidden in the many episodes of Demon Slayer that deserve to be looked at. However, before we can dive into the symbols of Demon Slayer, we need a good grasp of the era Demon Slayer is set in.

While Demon Slayer has a lot of fantasy elements, the period Demon Slayer is set in was a real era and was depicted quite accurately. The period the series is set in is regarded as the Taisho period in Japan. This period lasted from 1912 to 1926 and is commonly associated with the reign of the son of Meiji, Yoshihito. The Taisho period followed the Meiji restoration and had many changes we can see in Demon Slayer. While the period generally was making the Japanese people wealthier according to Britannica, “Rural Japan did not fare as well as urban Japan, and an economic depression at the end of the Taisho period caused much suffering” (Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica). We can see this effect happening in Demon Slayer very early. In the first episode, we meet Tanjiro, the main character, as he leaves his home to sell charcoal at a nearby village which he does frequently. While the village does not look impoverished many of the people living in it live rather simple lives, Tanjiro’s family themselves live in a small cabin up in the mountains. This is a huge difference from later in the 1st season where Tanjiro arrives in the city of Asakusa. Asakusa is a home for the wealthy which seem to have more western clothes and commodities. They have cars and western suits along with movies, food stalls, and even trains. Tanjiro himself is shocked at how different the city is compared to all of the other places he has been and almost seems lost. During the Demon Slayer Movie, Tanjiro galls at a train he is boarding to meet a fellow demon slayer they are assisting. Only one of his companions has enough knowledge to tell Tanjiro a little about trains and how they work showing that knowledge about trains isn’t common yet.

While it isn’t shown much in the anime during the Taisho period the political state in Japan was changing. Due to Emperor Yoshihito’s illness and inability to consistently be a political leader, a lot of his power went to the Diet of Japan, the elected representative officials (Taisho Democracy in Japan). This led to “greater openness and desire for representative democracy. Literary societies, mass-audience magazines, and new publications flourished; major cities like Tokyo witnessed a burgeoning culture of European-style cafés, with young people donning Western clothing, and music, film, and theater culture grew” (Taisho Democracy in Japan). This relates to the city of Asakusa which I talked about earlier. This era was Japan’s roaring twenties and we see the prosperity in Demon Slayers scenes in Asakusa but like America’s roaring twenties there was a massive crash. After the Great Kanto Earthquake which decimated Tokyo and destroyed the port city of Yokohama, the Japanese Imperial Army began to arrest and detain those they deemed radicals (Taisho Democracy in Japan). Due to an assassination attempt on Hirohito, Yoshihito’s son, and other types of repression and violence, the government passed the Peace Preservation Law of 1925 (Taisho Democracy in Japan). This law threatened 10 years in prison and also limited personal freedoms (Taisho Democracy in Japan). Emperor Yoshihito would pass away a year after the law and his son, Hirohito would officially become Emperor. This would bring an end to the Taisho era and into the Shōwa. This era would be more focused on Japanese Imperialism rather than modernization, which the Taisho period was mainly about, which would lead Japan into World War II.

With history out of the way, we can now start to look at some of the symbols presented in Demon Slayer. The first Symbol we will talk about is the Kitsune masks in the show. Kitsune in Japanese folklore are “shapeshifting fox spirits that can either be benevolent as guardians or malevolent tricksters and bringers of bad omens” (Yamatomagazine). The Youtuber Hiding in public, who also did some quick research on Japanese symbols, also adds onto this point by adding some theatrical history to the mask itself; “in some old plays from Japan where masks were present, it was common when an actor with a kitsune mask was on stage the other actors did not wear their mask showing the power and respect for the kitsune” (Hiding in Public). Kitsune come into the anime in the form of masks made by Tanjiro’s master as a way of bringing him good luck and protection. It also was the way his master sent off all of his students. This is related to how good kitsune, zenko, are shown to be guardians and in some cases messengers of the gods. However even Tanjiro’s mask cannot escape the dark sides of the kitsune. Yako, or field foxes, are bad kitsune that are seen as mischievous entities that cause chaos and even bad omens. Tanjiro’s mask is a mix of these two forms of the fox because even though his mask is a sign of protection, two fellow students of the same master show it to be a bad omen as well. Those two students train Tanjiro so he can take his final test and they both wore similar masks. Unbeknownst to Tanjiro, these two students are already dead. Later on, he learns that a demon had actually killed them both and had hunted “the foxes” as a way of getting back at the man who had captured and trapped him, Tanjiro’s master. Luckily, Tanjiro manages to live up to the hope of his master and the dead students before him by literally cleaving through his bad omen.

The Second Symbol is a different style of mask, the Tengu. The word Tengu is usually related with the Chinese demon Taingou but in most cases, tengu are related to birds of prey and were very avian-like. The most famous of the tengu mask is a red face with a long nose similar to the images of goblins in other countries. Originally seen as a trickster and evil spirit Tengu are now seen as protectors of forests and mountains and many are worshipped as Japanese Gods called Kami. According to research by Yamato Magazine, “as the story of the tengu developed a few were given certain names with the main three being Soujoubou, Taroubou and Jiroubou with Soujoubou and Taroubou being associated with Kyoto and Jiroubou being associated with the Hira mountains” (Yamatomagazine). The tengu come into Demon Slayer in the form of masks, more specifically the mask of Tanjiro’s master, Sakonji Urokadaki, whom I have referenced multiple times. Urokadaki’s symbolism with the mask comes in three forms. Urokadaki is a retired demon slayer but still protects the area he lives in just like how Tengu are shown as protectors. The second which is noted by Hiding in public is less innocuous. According to his research on Japanese myths, he found that “some myths state that the first ninjas in Japan were trained by tengu” (Hiding in Public). This would make some of the myths about ninjas, such as ninjas walking on water, appear like ninjas were given powers by the tengu much like how Tanjiro is taught many techniques by Urokadaki. Urokadaki’s final symbolism also relies on an old myth. In myth “tengu, more specifically Soujoubou, were responsible for teaching the great Japanese commander and swordsmen Minamoto no Yoshitsune” (Yamatomagazine). This relates heavily to Urokadaki training Tanjiro in swordsmanship as well as all of the other techniques he teaches him. Urokadaki fits into the protective and benevolent tengu that in many myths protect the mountains and forests across Japan.

The final symbols in the show are the swords of the demon slayers. The katana is the weapon of choice for most of the demon slayers in the show and relates to the history of warfare in Japan. Before the firearm was introduced to Japan, the katana was the weapon for the samurai and with the code of Bushido, the way of the warrior, ruling over a samurai’s life the katana wasn’t just a weapon, it was an extension of the samurai’s soul. The loss or the breaking of a sword for the samurai was a dishonor only suicide could fix. According to Mike Bitanga, “the sword had both a physical and spiritual level and those who don’t understand the intricacies were considered uncultured. The physical aspect comes from the samurai’s training. Taught by a master a young samurai would learn everything from how to draw the blade efficiently and how to manipulate it in a battle to prevail. The spiritual comes from the mindset of a samurai which was rooted deeply in Zen Buddhism. In terms of sword mastery, the goal of the Zen Way was to allow a warrior’s thought and action to be one, making their movements instantaneous” (Bitanga). These lines are very similar to the things we see in Demon Slayer but what we do see similar to this is the spiritual aspects. There are physical aspects such as training or the symbolism of the swords revealing the styles of the characters, but most are not that deep to talk about.

The two spiritual aspects we see are when Tanjiro loses his sword over and over and the dream sequence we see in the Demon Slayer Game. As stated in the last paragraph, the loss or breaking of a sword meant the dishonor for the samurai, this motif did not make it into Demon Slayer, however. Tanjiro in many instances of the series either loses or breaks his sword each showing his figurative “death.” As each time, Tanjiro overcomes a hurdle in his quest and gets stronger. The second spiritual aspect involving the swords is one of the best sequences in the Demon Slayer Game, the dream sequence. In the game, as well as the movie, one of the top demon slayers, Rengoku Kyojuro dies saving Tanjiro and his friends as well as 200 passengers on the Mugen Train, but he manages to give Tanjiro his will, advice for the future, and words of encouragement. In the game, the story doesn’t end there for Rengoku. He appears in Tanjiro’s dream afterward and challenges him to a swordfight. During the fight, Tanjiro feels as if Rengoku’s soul is telling Tanjiro how to move forward even with incredible loss, and at the end of the swordfight, the final symbol comes into play. After the engagement, Rengoku gives Tanjiro the flame-shaped tsuba on his sword. The tsuba is a crossguard used for decorative purposes as well as protecting the sword wielder's hand. The spiritual aspect shows that the memories and “fire” of Rengoku now will live on in Tanjiro who has taken on his spirit.

The symbols In Demon Slayer lie in wait everywhere from the historical context to the characters and even the items that you stare at constantly while they are on screen. This essay was written to explain some of these symbols in context as well deeper insight into the culture they represent. Like any Japanese work of art, Demon Slayer takes heavy inspiration from Japan’s culture of myths and legends as well as Japan’s history to craft a brilliant tale of family love and adventure with themes of loss and hope for the future. Demon Slayer has a lot more symbols that are worth watching for and hopefully, in season 2 there will be even more culture that we can experience even if we have to unpack it.

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