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Of Tengu and Slayers

Within the last few decades, the creation of media entertainment has exploded; with television, movies, books, games, etc., there is hardly any solely unique concepts within modern media. Further, many forms of media entertainment model detail off of ancient tales and legends of its own, and other, cultures. These ancient tales are spun to create a new story, without having to create brand new content. An example of this is a popular Japanese manga series adapted into an anime, *Kimetsu no Yaiba*. Within the manga and anime, released in 2016 and 2019 respectively, there are many referenced to Japanese folktales and lore, including the representation of Tengu: a type of yokai. *Kimetsu no Yaiba*'s representation of Tengu in its character Urokoaki Sakonji spins a different narrative to the story of the anime through subtly explaining Urokoaki's past and implying the power of good and evil a demon slayer hold. Additionally, this content potentially offers a unique perspective of the characteristics of Tengu by implying spirits can be inhabited by men and there is an alternate path in life for those troubled through the path of Tengu.

The Tengu are part of the Yokai, a sort of Japanese monster. These Tengu were goblins who mainly lived in the mountains. They, like many yokai, are primarily depicted as being evil beings, who burn down buildings and harass people, but can occasionally be depicted as good. Coming in two forms, the crow and red long-nosed, the Tengu are also seen to possess substantial martial arts skills (LaRocca). Tengus are often the creatures who take upon them

training heroes and warriors. The Tengu's most represented form is the ko no ha mask, the red long nosed Tengu. People wore these masks in battle, celebration, and in honor of the Tengu spirit (LaRocca). The Buddhist's natural enemy, ma, is allied with the Tengu; this created the realm of the tengu, which is "a realm reserved for Buddhist practitioners who had failed to overcome the temptations of evil." (Foster). The Tengu are overall considered to be malicious creatures who possess immense skills in combat, and who seem to favor their individual desires over others.

Kimetsu no Yaiba is a manga adapted into an anime about a young boy named Tanjiro Kamado who trains to become a demon slayer after his family is murdered. After he returns from selling charcoal, Tanjiro comes back to find his family dead and his sister a demon. He vows to change her back by becoming a demon slayer and killing the most powerful demon, Muzan. Tanjiro seeks training from Urokoaki Sakonji, who is a former Water Hashira dwelling in the mountains. He trains with Urokoaki for a couple years before leaving to take the final selection. After passing and becoming a full-fledged demon slayer, Tanjiro begins seeking out Muzan while helping others in need.

In Kimetsu no Yaiba, the Tengu is represented through a red long-nosed mask, a common representation of Tengu, worn by Urokoaki. In relation to the story of Kimetsu no Yaiba itself, this Tengu representation changes the narrative by potentially providing context for Urokoaki's personal past. There are not many details regarding Urokoaki's background; all that is known is he was a former Water Hashira who trained the current Water Hashira and Tanjiro, among other students who perished in the final selection. Without specifically said details of his past, the appearance of Urokoaki could be the explanation for his past. In reference to the various tales of Tengu, Urokoaki could wear this mask to represent he has committed evils and to warn

people of this. A demon slayer commits many sins in order to keep the peace: killing, destruction, etc. Additionally, he as a person could have done unspeakable actions, similar to how the Tengu torment. Urokodaki also acts very similarly to the Tengu: he resides in the mountains, he trains the main protagonist with his immaculate martial arts skills, and he shows sides of both kindness and harshness. With this in mind, Urokodaki could have committed some form of sin in his past he feels he cannot make up for, and to reflect that, he could wear this Tengu mask to caution people away.

Including this Tengu mask to the character of Urokodaki could also add more depth to what being a demon slayer means. Similar to how Tengu can possess qualities of good and evil, the demon slayers hold that same potential. When any creature possesses as much power as the demon slayers do, it is only natural that this power could be corrupted and be used for evil. Many of the characters in *Kimetsu no Yaiba* possess negative qualities, such as being overly aggressive or greedy; this shows just because demon slayers are mainly depicted to be positive, there is the potential to be negative. This is exactly similar to how the Tengu are seen are mainly malicious creatures that have the potential to be good. This is further proved by the fact that Urokodaki is the one directly influencing the audience's and Tanjiro's initial understanding of demon slayers because he is the one training Tanjiro on how to be a demon slayer. Through having a man who embodies this yokai, it becomes clear that the path of a demon slayer has many potentials, not just for the benefit of others. This subtle warning through Urokodaki's character creates a slight foreboding effect.

Regarding the tales of Tengu, using the tengu mask in the story of *Kimetsu no Yaiba* creates an additional perspective to this yokai, and potentially yokai in general. With the context of the story, the yokai Tengu could represent an alternate path for those who cannot find true

peace. As discussed in the Book of Yokai, the Tengu realm is a path for those who could not conform to the Buddhist path (Foster). Essentially, this is a path for people who could not give up sins or who have committed evils and are not allowed to find enlightenment. However, this does not have to represent a path of damnation. Urokodaki, and potentially the entire demon slayer corps, could have to take the path of the Tengu realm/chose to take the path. As addressed previously, being a demon slayer means committed evils for the greater good. However, from a Buddhist perspective, this would cause someone to be unable to walk down the path of enlightenment. Though, even with this perspective, it does not appear that Urokodaki is living a life of damnation; he is seen to be happy where he resides and in what he does. Instead, he adopted the Tengu realm as a way of living. Urokodaki could not seek this enlightenment after retiring from being a demon slayer; instead, he felt a connection to the Tengu spirit and chose to live his life out accordingly. What exactly the Tengu realm contains is more unknown, but it can be implied as living an independent live style, knowing one may not see the afterlife. This path takes on a bitter-sweet tone; knowing one can accept their mistakes and shortcomings and live out life relatively happy, but there is some sadness in knowing one cannot reach the enlightenment. This could be why Urokodaki wears the Tengu mask at all times because he knows there is no other life for him.

In addition to implying that Tengu holds a unique path for those who cannot follow the Buddhist, including Tengu representation through Urokodaki argues that humans can be the embodiment of spirits or yokai. Instead of thinking yokai and humans are separate beings, *Kimetsu no Yaiba* implies that they can be one. Through the usage of Urokodaki's characterization, with the context of Tengu, the audience can see how Urokodaki embodies a Tengu. Not only does he present himself similarly through wearing a *ko no ha* Tengu mask, he

also, as discussed earlier, behaves similarly to a Tengu: he resides in the mountains, where he trains young demon slayers. He is seen to be both harsh and warm-hearted at the same time, and Urokodaki possess a remarkable amount of martial arts skills, so much so he was one of the top demon slayers. With this, the story effectively shows how Urokodaki embodies the Tengu spirit. This is important because throughout history humans and yokai were separate entities, so to imply they are one in the same is blurring the line of the legends. This can be applied to other yokai and spirits too; it shows people can take inspiration from yokai and infuse it into themselves.

Kimetsu no Yaiba possesses some interesting qualities, one being this Tengu representation through Urokodaki. Not only does including it develop the anime/manga through providing backstories and deeper analysis of good and evil, but it also adds to the overall legend of Tengu and yokai in general. By implying the Tengu represent a path for troubled people and arguing that people can embody spirits, Kimetsu no Yaiba's representation of Tengu adds a unique take of the yokai. Including ancient tales in modern works is important because it gives insights to cultures, allows for modern media to adapt the legend in a new, and potentially more relatable way, and allows for these legends and lessons to live on through younger generations. More popular medias being consumed means more stories that need to be created, and infusing ancient tales, such as yokai, into them is a way to spin a unique story from previous resources.

Annotated Bibliography

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