

# BUDDHISM, FOLKLORE, AND JAPANESE SOCIETY IN THE PROSE WORKS OF MIYAZAWA KENJI

Vesna KURAICA<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the life and work of Miyazawa Kenji, emphasizing his humanist ideals and efforts to alleviate poverty in his native Iwate. Influenced by the region's harsh climate and frequent natural disasters, Miyazawa became a devoted Nichiren Buddhist. The paper analyzes his distinctive interpretation of Buddhism, his syncretic use of Shinto motifs, and his incorporation of local folklore into his writings. It explores his deep connection to nature, a recurring theme in his stories. The paper concludes that harmony with nature is the only force capable of saving and calming the human mind. In Japan, balance with the universe has been promoted through various religions, making the country's religious landscape highly integrated, resilient, and profoundly compelling.*

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**Keywords:** Miyazawa Kenji, Nichiren Buddhism, nature, wild life, harmony, folklore.

DOI: 10.24818/SYN/2026/22/1.06

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## 1. Introduction: Miyazawa Kenji

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Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933) was a Japanese writer, poet, and author of children's stories. He lived during a period of profound transformation – the Meiji period (1868–1912) and the Taishō period (1912-1926). Miyazawa was born in Hanamaki, Iwate Prefecture, in northern Honshū, from a family of five siblings and was the eldest son. In 1918, he graduated from the Morioka Higher School of Agriculture and Forestry (now the Faculty of Agriculture at Iwate University) and spent a brief period in Tokyo studying chemistry and soil science before returning to spend most of his life in Iwate.

At the time, residents of Tokyo considered Iwate a remote and impoverished region – an assessment that was largely accurate. Two months before Miyazawa's birth, a major earthquake measuring 8.9 on the Richter scale (the Meiji Sanriku Earthquake) struck approximately 150 km off the Sanriku coast, triggering a tsunami that devastated the coastline and claimed the lives of more than 22,000 people in Miyazawa's home prefecture (Nakao, 2023). In addition to natural disasters, harsh winters severely affected agricultural yields and rice cultivation was particularly difficult, as cold northern winds damaged crops even in summer. As noted by Moritoki (2013: 19), the years 1902, 1906, and 1913, as well as the period from 1931 to 1935, are remembered for severe famine and rural poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Vesna, Kuraica, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, vesna.kuraica@fil.bg.ac.rs

On the other hand, Miyazawa's family business was a pawnshop, which his father managed very successfully, expecting, according to tradition, that his eldest son would continue the family profession. However, Miyazawa was deeply troubled by the fact that his parents' wealth was based on loans to impoverished farmers. Inclined toward Buddhism, he devoted much of his short life to a passionate struggle to improve the living conditions of poor agricultural workers. He conducted extensive research on the composition and quality of soil in Iwate and never sought financial compensation for his work. In 1926, he founded the *Rasu Chijin Association*, conceived as a kind of free evening school for farmers, where he educated villagers not only in new methods of land cultivation and the use of fertilizers, but also in fields such as music and painting.

Miyazawa greatly appreciated classical music, especially Beethoven's works, and played the cello. In his literary works, sensory perceptions merge so that sounds have fragrance and colors resonate with sound. He loved mountaineering, conducted extensive fieldwork in forests and fields, collected plants and stones, drew inspiration for his stories, and delighted in the nostalgic beauty of the natural world. Miyazawa's works are rich in precise scientific terminology related to various types of rocks (obsidian, mica, topaz, sapphire), trees and plants (ginkgo, plane tree, aspen, alder, gentian, pampas grass, dahlia), and celestial bodies (the constellations Lyra, Scorpius, and Centaurus, and the star Vega). In this way, science and nature are intertwined and mutually complementary, grounded in the fundamental belief that science should serve nature rather than exploit it. As Miyazawa (2016: 226) writes, "Nature seems to be just as alive as human beings." His protagonists converse with natural phenomena and different beings (mountain people, spirits of the wind, lynxes, foxes) and are portrayed as inseparable from the universe, offering a subtle critique of modern humanity's relationship with nature and the cosmos. Miyazawa himself could not separate from nature; he therefore left his position as a teacher, lived from agriculture, and died as a farmer in his home in Hanamaki at the age of thirty-seven, suffering from tuberculosis.

Miyazawa Kenji's works were not widely recognized during his lifetime. Only two books were published before his death: a collection of stories titled *The Restaurant of Many Orders* and the first volume of his best-known poetry collection, *Spring and Asura*. The rest of his children's stories and poems were compiled and published posthumously and are now widely read and highly regarded in Japan, even being included in school curricula. Miyazawa's works have also inspired numerous contemporary animations; the first animated film based on his story *Kaze no Matasaburō* [*Matasaburo of the Wind*] was produced seven years after his death. This demonstrates the enduring influence of Miyazawa Kenji's work on contemporary society, which now recognizes the values he originally expressed in his writings.

Today, next to Iwate University, stands the Miyazawa Kenji Museum, which is actually his former house, relocated to this site. The message personally written by Miyazawa remains on the entrance door: “Shita no hatake ni orimasu”, which means “I dwell in the fields”<sup>2</sup>.

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## 2. Miyazawa Kenji and Nichiren Buddhism

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*Those who see with true eyes would not compare even the riches of Solomon to a single wild lily. They have regarded the prosperity of men as so much scheming and divided from true power and life without end. But in the light of truth, even a speck of the dust rising mysteriously like a cloud from human pride is not less precious than a sacred lily praised by the son of God. (Miyazawa 2016: 228-229)*

During the Meiji period, the newly established government abolished the syncretic combination of Buddhism and Shinto (known as *shinbutsu shūgō*), which had shaped Japanese daily life for centuries. Emperor Meiji promoted state Shinto and minimized the influence of Buddhism. However, as Moritoki (2013: 92) notes, Buddhism remained close to ordinary people at the time, and Buddhist priests were gladly listened to.

Miyazawa’s father, Masajirō, was a follower of the *Jōdo Shinshū* [Pure Land] sect, which teaches that ultimate happiness is attained through rebirth in the paradise of Amitabha Buddha after death. In contrast, and despite his father’s opposition, Miyazawa rejected the focus on a post-death paradise and embraced the teachings of Nichiren Buddhism (*Nichirenshū*), which holds that by living in accordance with the Lotus Sutra, people can experience relief and profound joy in this world. In line with Nichiren’s doctrine, Miyazawa believed that peace should be sought in the present through compassion, empathy, and benevolence toward others. As Moritoki (2013: 95) observes: “The concept of true, happy, and earthly living lies in dynamism and strength, not in the static paradise of the Pure Land”.

It seems Miyazawa understood Nichiren’s teachings through the concept of constant change and the belief that the essence and beauty of life are found in its continuous and unpredictable movements. Symbols of transformation, such as the motifs of wind and water bubbles in *The Wild Pear* (Miyazawa, 1993), or the fleeting rainbow in *The Porcelain Vine and the Rainbow* (Miyazawa, 2016), reflect this dynamic worldview. Even the geographical features of the Japanese archipelago are transformed over time: in *Kenju’s Forest* (Miyazawa, 1993), the protagonist Kenju<sup>3</sup> dies of tuberculosis, yet the grove he planted endures as the sole remnant of old Japan

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<sup>2</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>3</sup> Miyazawa Kenji’s childhood nickname was Ishiko Ken-san [Ken, the little stone boy], as he loved collecting pebbles in his neighborhood. This may be a parallel to the protagonist in the story *Kenju’s Forest* (Moritoki, 2013).

in a now industrialized settlement where many forests have been cleared – except for Kenju’s forest beside the schoolyard, where children still play.

At the same time, Kenju represents Miyazawa’s ideal hero, forgiving his tormentors and leaving behind an enduring forest. Similar motifs of self-sacrifice appear in *The Life of Budori Gusukō*<sup>4</sup>, where Budori dies by triggering a volcanic eruption to save his village from famine, “smiling as he presses the button”<sup>5</sup> (Miyazawa, 1994: 90-91). Both figures reflect Miyazawa’s devotion to the benefits of science and hard work. Rooted in the Buddhist ideal of self-perfection and the constant pursuit of knowledge, their lack of regret shows deep fulfillment in serving others within the eternal cycle of rebirth (samsara). Although both characters sacrifice their lives for others in Miyazawa’s works, there is no sense of regret. Neither Kenju nor Budori mourn their lives, as they are truly and profoundly fulfilled by doing good in this life and in all those to come.

While the concepts of karma and the cycle of rebirth are common teachings in Mahayana Buddhism, which Japan adopted, Nichiren Buddhism’s 13th-century appeal was rooted in the social shifts of the Kamakura period (1185-1333). A divide emerged between state clergy (*kansō*) and independent hermit monks (*tonseisō*). Matsuo (1997: 180–181) notes that *kansō* focused on state welfare and avoided “defiling” contact with the sick or women due to their political ties and their need to pray regularly for the welfare of the emperor and the state.<sup>6</sup> This distanced them from the public, making independent monks more appealing because they devoted much more attention to individuals<sup>7</sup>. As the official Shingon and Tendai doctrines became overly complex and court-centric<sup>8</sup>, a more practical Buddhism emerged to serve the rising social and economic needs of the commoners.

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<sup>4</sup> The tale *The Life of Budori Gusukō* (*Gusukō Budori no denki*) was adapted into animated films twice, in 1994 and 2012, both directed by Gisaburō Sugii, who is also known for adapting *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (*Ginga Tetsudō no Yoru*), another of Miyazawa’s works

<sup>5</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>6</sup> *Kansō* wore white robes symbolizing purity, while independent monks avoided white stoles (Takehara, 2012).

<sup>7</sup> While *kansō* prayed for the imperial office, some emperors, such as Go-Shirakawa (1127-1192), Go-Toba (1180-1239), and Go-Saga (1220-1272), commissioned hermitages to seek personal salvation. This created a space for independent monks to pray for both individual and state welfare.

<sup>8</sup> Sueki (2016: 116), for example, explains the specific interpretation of “original enlightenment” (*hongaku*) in the Tendai sect. He notes that “original enlightenment” was understood as the principle of enlightenment inherent in all living beings, while also representing enlightenment as a goal in itself. In contrast to this awakened state is the unawakened state of ignorance or sin, and once enlightenment is realized, further enlightenment is no longer necessary. The distinctions between the concepts of awakening and enlightenment were among the confusions that made the Tendai sect less appealing to the broader public.

Free from bureaucratic constraints and state support, hermit monks adapted their teachings to the needs of commoners to attract followers. Most founders of Kamakura Buddhist movements followed this path, leaving official institutions to establish independent orders. To explain this phenomenon, (Sueki, 2016: 118) introduces a new type of Buddhist figure from the 12<sup>th</sup> century – the *hijiri*. Etymologically, the name derives from *hi* [sun] and *shiri* [to know], signifying the knowledge of the wisest, likened to the spreading of sunlight. The term originally referred to “people’s monks” or anchorites (the first of whom was Kūya, 903-972) who lived in seclusion outside the state system, most often following the Pure Land tradition or the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Among others, Hōnen (1133-1212) and Nichiren (1222-1282) were considered *hijiri*.

Hōnen, a representative of the Pure Land sect (*Jōdo-shū*), simplified its rituals and advocated the nenbutsu mantra – reciting the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu* [glory to Amida Buddha] - as sufficient for salvation for people with various sins, even prostitutes (Takehara, 2012: 3). While both Hōnen and Nichiren viewed their era as the apocalyptic *mappō*, the five-hundred-year age of the decline of the Buddha’s law, a kind of Buddhist apocalypse<sup>9</sup>, Nichiren rejected Hōnen’s passive stance. He argued that it conflicted with the Mahayana ideal of a unified universe where no distinction exists between ordinary beings and the Buddha, or between the world of illusion and the Pure Land paradise (Takehara, 2012: 8). Since the “self” and the universe are equally illusory (Borhes, 1999: 80-81), Nichiren sought happiness in the present life. This aligned with Zen monk Dōgen (1200-1253), who frequently cited the Lotus Sutra (1971: 18): “If you say that this is an age of suffering and misfortune, and yet do not awaken the mind that seeks the Way in this life, in what life do you expect to attain it?”.

Stone (2009: 211) discusses the “nonduality” of this world and the Pure Land, arguing that the awakened person perceives the tangible world as the Buddha’s realm rather than as a place of suffering. This highlights the present world as a potential paradise on earth. Nichiren’s concept of *ichinen sanzen* [three thousand worlds in a single moment] further asserts that mind and universe, subject and object, good and evil, all interpenetrate within a single moment. As Stone notes (2009: 213-214), in the Japanese interpretation of the Lotus Sutra, awakening is not a goal but a state that exists inherently; however, those who are deluded fail to perceive it.

Like Miyazawa, Nichiren focused on improving reality, advocating the mantra *Myōhō renga kyō* [I take refuge in the Lotus Sutra] to awaken the inherent “seed of Buddhahood,” presenting this phrase as superior to *Namu Amida Butsu*. This practice emphasizes awakening in this life rather than rebirth in paradise and is notably

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<sup>9</sup> The Heian period's end brought a pervasive sense of sorrow as the aristocracy declined. Sansom (1974: 224) attributes this to societal anxiety and the Buddhist concept of *mappō* (the degenerate age) from the Lotus Sutra.

inclusive of both men and women (Takehara, 2012: 10-12). Miyazawa was deeply inspired by the Lotus Sutra's sixteenth chapter, where the Buddha declares: "I do not die; I am always here... how to enable all living beings... to swiftly attain Buddhahood" (Toda, 1984). The Lotus Sutra thus appears to encourage its followers to be socially engaged in creating a better present, an endeavor to which Miyazawa was likewise devoted<sup>10</sup>.

Miyazawa joined the *Kokuchūkai* society [Pillar of the Nation; the name alludes to Nichiren's words, "I shall be the pillar of Japan" (Stone 2009: 225-226)], founded in 1914 to popularize Nichiren Buddhism beyond temple settings and through everyday language. His activism, including his evening school for farmers, likely drew police scrutiny due to government fears of Marxist influence on proletarian movements (Oshima, 2018: 19), while Nichiren himself had not been favored by the shogunate in his time<sup>11</sup>. His story *Ozbel and the White Elephant* (Miyazawa, 1993: 41-49) combines a critique of capitalist exploitation with Buddhist compassion. Ozbel is a factory owner who smokes an amber pipe and enjoys steak while six threshing machines and sixteen peasants work incessantly. Slowly and cunningly, Ozbel lures a naive white elephant into working for him, gradually imposing ever greater demands until he finally chains the elephant. The motif of the elephant is characteristic of Buddhism, as, according to legend, the Buddha's mother Maya dreamed before conception that a six-tusked elephant touched her side. Miyazawa's story ultimately ends with a rebellion and the liberation of the good-natured elephant, revealing both vehemence and a revolutionary impulse in Miyazawa's temperament, but above all his humanity and Buddhist compassion for suffering beings. Miyazawa's work represents a practical and spiritual quest for universal happiness, as expressed in his final wish for copies of the Lotus Sutra to be distributed among his friends.

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### ***3. Buddhist Motifs in the Prose of Miyazawa Kenji***

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Buddhist motifs in the works of Miyazawa Kenji are sometimes highly pronounced and explicit, while in other cases they permeate the text subtly and almost imperceptibly.

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<sup>10</sup> The Lotus Sutra's significance in Japan dates to Emperor Shōmu (701-756), who mandated its recitation in provincial temples to centralize the state. This legacy endures at Mount Hiei and Kunisaki, where temples and valleys correspond to the Sutra's twenty-eight chapters.

<sup>11</sup> Kamakura-period hermits often resisted state pressure. Nichiren was exiled twice for criticizing Tendai and Amida doctrines. In his 1260 treatise, *Risshō Ankoku Ron* [*Establishing the Correct Teaching for the Peace of the Land*], he warned Regent Hōjō Tokiyori that natural disasters were divine punishments for "false doctrines", urging adoption of the Lotus Sutra to prevent foreign invasion. Sentenced to execution ten years later for his continued defiance, he was reportedly saved by a miraculous celestial light (for further details, see Kallander, 2024).

In the Buddhist doctrine, consistent with the Lotus Sutra, beings cycle through six realms – the realm of hungry ghosts, the animal realm, the realm of warlike gods (*asura*), the human realm, and the realm of heavenly beings (*deva*) – based on karma. In *The Restaurant of Many Orders* (Miyazawa, 2004: 11-22), two hunters pass through six rooms, which can be interpreted as these realms. By avoiding the “seventh door” they break the wheel of *samsara* and reach Nichiren’s “paradise on earth”. Their salvation by dogs mirrors the *Legend of the White Dog*, in which a dog sacrifices itself for Nichiren by eating poisoned food instead of him. Abe (Abe et al., 2023: 72) suggest that Miyazawa used this motif as a symbol of salvation rooted in the Lotus Sutra.

The motif of salvation is evident in *The Shining Feet* (Miyazawa, 1997), though here salvation is portrayed as more spiritual and profound. Here, the author directly uses the Lotus Sutra as the means by which the protagonists escape from hell and critiques a society in which impoverished villagers are forced to perform hard physical labor to feed their families (similar motifs appear in *The Bears of Mount Nametoko* and *The Fourth Day of the Month of Narcissus*). When Ichirō and Narao are caught in a snowstorm – a common Iwate motif – Narao dies, guided by the “Boy of the Wind” (*Matasaburō*). In the Buddhist hell where they arrive, many barefoot boys walk in a column and are whipped by black demons whenever they falter. When Ichirō pleads for his younger brother to be spared the beatings because he is too young and completely innocent, a demon replies, “Sin is not only from this life” (Miyazawa, 1997: 27). However, Ichirō’s recitation of the *Nyorai Juryōhon Dai Jūroku* [Chapter Sixteen of the Lotus Sutra] summons the Buddha. “Do not worry, children. The virtue of goodness in this world is great; your sins are like a drop of dew on the thorn of a thistle compared to the radiance of the sun, which represents goodness”, says the savior (Miyazawa, 1997: 39-40). In the end, all the boys find themselves in the Buddhist paradise, where nature is multicolored, pagodas are adorned with ornaments, and chocolate is abundant. Although the protagonist of *The Shining Feet* dies, the author leaves no room for pathos. Miyazawa thus shows that suffering is a mental construct that vanishes when desire is relinquished.

The motif of a psychological journey to paradise and a return to earth is also characteristic of the story *Night on the Galactic Railroad* (Miyazawa, 1991), with the difference that in this work, Miyazawa presents the journey through paradise as a journey through the galaxy. Miyazawa was interested in astronomy and was familiar with the movement of celestial bodies, and the story is permeated by the author’s inner conflicts between scientific knowledge and various religious traditions (Holt, 2014: 307-308). Specifically, the boys with non-Japanese names, Giovanni and Campanella, travel through a “galactic paradise”, encounter the constellations Lyra and Cygnus, see a Christian cross in the distance, and meet Japanese Christians who perished in a shipwreck. Meanwhile, in the town, the Milky Way Festival is taking place, and lamps floating on the river “shine like the light of the Dragon Palace at

the bottom of the sea” (a Shinto motif; Miyazawa 1991: 24), resembling the Obon festival. At one point in the story, the protagonists criticize the religion of the Christians on the train, stating that “the Christian God is a false god” (Miyazawa, 1991: 71). Holt (2014) interprets this episode as an allegory for Miyazawa’s inability to persuade his parents and close friends to accept the teachings of the Lotus Sutra. Later, the story emphasizes self-sacrifice, echoing the jataka tales, by introducing the motif of a scorpion that wished to offer its own body to the weasel. In the end, its body begins to shine, and it becomes the constellation Scorpius - an allusion to the awakening the scorpion experiences, after which it ascends to the heavens and breaks the “wheel of life”. While teaching at an agricultural school, Miyazawa took his students swimming in the Kitakami River. In *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, Campanella drowns in a river and then travels with his friend along the galactic river of the Milky Way. As a symbol of flow and constant change, the river also serves as a fluid boundary between life and death (Holt 2014: 316), which is a typical folklore motif. Giovanni’s journey through the galaxy is circular: Campanella disappears from the train, but Giovanni returns to his starting point. Both the journey and time flow cyclically, causing different temporal layers to overlap. In the seventh chapter, a professor of archaeology examines walnuts that are several million years old, then shells from the Tertiary period, and beneath them discovers the remains of a large bovid (Miyazawa, 1991: 37-40). This perception of time – the fusion of times and worlds – serves as a metaphor for the concept of “three thousand worlds in a single moment”. Another striking motif is the red-bearded bird catcher, who mysteriously enters and exits the train carrying a bundle of captured and pressed birds. According to Holt, each departure from and return to the train symbolizes the hunter’s death and rebirth (Holt, 2014: 338). His occupation of killing birds seems to form an unbroken loop of the Buddhist wheel of life, a kind of perpetuum mobile, since his sins never end. The boys feel a sense of guilt when they taste a captured celestial bird that has meanwhile turned into chocolate. The sensitive Miyazawa was a vegetarian.

In *Night on the Galactic Railroad*, the boy Giovanni is mocked for his humble background, a motif of discrimination also reflected in *The Night Hawk Star*. The Night Hawk<sup>12</sup> is rejected by his community because of his appearance and is threatened by a stronger hawk. “The Night Hawk is truly an ugly bird. Its face is smeared with soy paste... Other birds feel disgusted as soon as they see its face” (Miyazawa, 2004: 45). The harassment culminates in an explicit warning from the

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<sup>12</sup> The night hawk lives in various parts of the world. Because of its unusual and unattractive appearance and its dark coloration, it has been the subject of many superstitions. The French also call it the “flying frog” and the “bird that feeds on goat’s milk”. In England, the night hawk is also known as the “night disturber”, while in Germany it is associated with witches. In Brazil, the night hawk is known as the “bird that cries for the moon” because it usually calls in the evening when the moon rises in the sky (Kimura, 2007: 62).

Hawk, who threatens the Night Hawk (*yotaka*<sup>13</sup>) because they share the same name: “If you do not change your name by the day after tomorrow, I will catch and kill you on the spot” (Miyazawa, 2004: 47). This reflects Miyazawa’s exploration of the oppression of the powerless. Historically, the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, was a prince who abandoned luxury after witnessing poor ascetics, the sick, and the dead in the streets, demonstrating through his own example a humanistic philosophy of equality among all beings. The Night Hawk also becomes aware of the painful and violent nature of the world when it kills a bug while flying through the sky: “Ah, the bugs, flies, and many other insects I kill every night, and now the Hawk itself will be killed” (Miyazawa, 2004: 49). A similar motif appears in the story *The Crows and the Great Bear*, when the crow captain says: “Ah, star of Majeiru,<sup>14</sup> if I could live without killing enemies for whom I feel no hatred, if such a world would soon come to be, would I not regret that my body, my all, might fall apart a thousand times?” (Miyazawa, 2004: 32). According to Professor Kimura of Iwate University, for Miyazawa Kenji this world is *shuradō* – a Buddhist realm of constant conflict (Kimura, 2007: 53). Like the Buddha and Emperor Ashoka (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE), who renounced violence and spread Buddhist ideals after the Kalinga war (Wangu, 2002: 31-34), the Night Hawk recognizes the suffering of existence and chooses to ascend to the heavens as a star. By embracing nonviolence and refusing to kill others for survival, he preserves his integrity and name. This transformation symbolizes an aspiration toward higher ideals and self-sacrifice. The Night Hawk’s attainment of nirvana reflects Miyazawa’s vision of a Buddhist utopia where altruism and selflessness are the paths to true happiness.

In contrast to altruism, self-centeredness and greed drive human desire, and in Buddhism, desire is a major obstacle to awakening. In Miyazawa’s *The Fire Jewel*, the rabbit Homoi receives a magical jewel after saving a lark, granting him authority in the community. However, Homoi fails as a compassionate ruler, mocking moles and exploiting squirrels under the influence of a cunning fox (Miyazawa, 1997: 28). As a result, a dark cloud engulfs the jewel, which shatters due to the bad karma of his misdeeds. This narrative reflects the Indian concept of the “Wheel-Turning King”, an ideal sovereign who rules with justice and possesses seven treasures (a wheel, elephants, horses, jewels, women resembling jewels, learned ministers of finance, and extraordinary generals) that depart if he loses virtue (Soka Gakkai, 2024). Inspired by this legend, Miyazawa shows how Homoi’s malice clouds his judgment, much like the darkening jewel. The story ends with the jewel exploding and injuring Homoi’s eyes, serving as a karmic consequence. Although his future is uncertain, the care of his parents offers a glimmer of hope, emphasizing the consequences of selfishness versus the ideal of just governance.

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<sup>13</sup> Although the bird species *yotaka* can also be translated as “nightjar”, the translator has retained the literal translation of the species name from Japanese, namely “night hawk” (Miyazawa, 2004: 45).

<sup>14</sup> The constellation Ursa Major.

The Lotus Sutra values all living beings equally. Miyazawa's works, such as *The Fire Jewel*, feature anthropomorphic animals and an animated natural world, expressing empathy for their fears. Sociologist Kilpatrick (Kilpatrick, 2009: 260) argues that Miyazawa's contemporary relevance lies in his deconstruction of the modern order's "metanarrative of final truth" that emerged in post-Meiji Japan, moving beyond anthropocentric individualism and consumerism. In other words, Miyazawa's literature is not anthropocentrically focused on the individual. *The Wild Pear* (Miyazawa, 1993: 208–212) exemplifies this by depicting two crayfish traumatized by a kingfisher, who later mistake a floating pear for the predator. The story explores the paradox of life feeding on life, while also celebrating the world's design and the food chain's balance, reflecting Buddhist harmony (Kilpatrick, 2009: 261). The crayfish's fear prevents them from appreciating the beauty of *the other* and the unknown, serving as a metaphor for the rejection of social cohesion and human alienation. At the same time, the story celebrates the pleasure of the pear wine, which is available to the patient, who can wait for it to sink and dissolve, or to those who know where to find beauty.

Buddhism views reality and the "self" as illusions without independent identity. The concept of "three thousand worlds in a single moment" unites interdependent forms through emptiness, allowing individualism to be overcome by achieving unity with nature (Kilpatrick, 2006: 2). This transcendence of anthropocentrism is central to *The Lynx Judge and the Acorns* (Miyazawa, 2004). The story follows Ichirō, a boy who assists a lynx judge in a dispute among competitive acorns. In this "modernized nature", animals mirror human traits such as arrogance and rivalry. Ultimately, at Ichirō's suggestion, the lynx rules that "the most respected acorn is the one who is a fool, in chaos, not quite himself, as if struck on the head" (Miyazawa, 2004: 19). Ichirō comes to understand that nature's vitality lies in the equality of all beings and the rejection of ego, realizing Miyazawa's ideal of communal unity.

In Japanese, the term for "nature" is *shizen* (a word that spread throughout Japan from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward), although earlier the same ideograms were read as *jinen*. The concept of *jinen* is of Taoist origin, dates back to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, and carries the Buddhist meaning of "unadorned" or "things as they truly are" (Siercks, 2015: 4), that is, spontaneous, fundamental, and natural. In *Festival Night* (Miyazawa, 1993: 171-176), the boy Ryōji helps a "mountain man" (*yamaotoko*), a folkloric figure forced into the modern system of commodification and the use of money. As in *The Lynx Judge and the Acorns*, *Festival Night* also presents a confrontation between nature and a civilized environment. Miyazawa creatively depicts the dissonance in the coexistence of a mysterious being from nature and the human urge to name and identify him (Siercks, 2015: 4). The author contrasts the human-defined concept of nature (*shizen*) with the Buddhist idea of the natural as essential and sincere (*jinen*). While the mountain man suffers human violence, his own power is expressed through natural phenomena: when the *yamaotoko* brings his gifts to express gratitude, violence is transformed into movement - the earth trembles

and the wind extinguishes the lamp, yet the moonlight is enough to illuminate the landscape. This reflects the Buddhist ideal of correlation, where human fusion with the spontaneous, sincere natural world enables a full experience of cosmic unity.

The Buddhist flow of life and the chain of nourishment are to be accepted as inseparable parts of the universe, a view Miyazawa also expresses in the story *The Bears of Mount Nametoko* (Miyazawa, 1993: 59-68). No mountain by this name exists in Japan, which serves to generalize the story's setting. Kojūrō hunts bears and sells their livers to support his family, although he earns very little. The shopkeeper is stingy and cunning, perhaps alluding to the pawnshop run by Miyazawa's family and the difficult position of peasants in early 20th-century Japan. Throughout the story, a quiet sense of affection develops between Kojūrō and the bears. Kojūrō has grown fond of both the bears and the mountain, and the bears, in turn, have become accustomed to their hunter. He addresses the bears: "Do not think that I killed you because I hate you. I must earn a living, just as you had to be shot. I would like to do a different job, a job without sin, but I have no fields of my own, and they say that my forests belong to the authorities... Fate made you a bear, and it is fate that compels me to do this work. Try not to be born a bear in your next life" (Miyazawa, 1993: 62). Though Kojūrō is eventually killed by a bear, his lifeless body is illuminated by moonlight, and "on his frozen face a cold smile could be seen, as if he were still alive" (Miyazawa, 1993: 68). In painting and visual art, the Buddha is often depicted with a gentle smile – much like the way Miyazawa's hero meets his death.

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#### 4. Folkloric Motifs in Miyazawa's Works

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Both the bear and the mountain are motifs closely linked to folklore and the Shinto tradition, which holds that mountains are special, sacred places (*kannabi*) inhabited by deities (*kami*). It was common for clans to adopt a mountain's *kami* as their ancestral deity to establish religious authority and legitimize their power in the provinces they controlled<sup>15</sup>. The bear motif is particularly interesting when considered in the context of the cultural heritage of the Ainu, the indigenous people of the Japanese archipelago from the Jōmon period (10,000 BCE-300 BCE), who were gradually pushed from the central provinces of Honshū to Hokkaidō in the north. The displacement process of the so-called Emishi tribes, mentioned in the *Kojiki*, Japan's first official collection of myths, began as early as the Nara period (710-794), largely because these tribes maintained their distinct language and customs and resisted submission to the central administration of the dominant clan. The term "Ainu" began to be used only at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and debates continue over whether the Ainu and Emishi are the same people<sup>16</sup>. Ainu oral

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<sup>15</sup> The religious prestige of the Miwa family arose from their claim of descent from Omononushi, the rain deity of Mount Miwa.

<sup>16</sup> Japanese linguist Kyōsuke Kindaichi argued that the Ainu and Emishi were the same people, noting that the Ainu used the archaic self-identifier "Emchū". He provided

literature began to be systematically recorded and studied only from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onward. Until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Ainu inhabited the then-province of Mutsu, part of which is today Iwate, the birthplace of Miyazawa. Although the Ainu later lived primarily on Hokkaidō, cultural exchange and blending of customs between the Japanese and the Ainu continued for several centuries, likely including intermarriage<sup>17</sup>. The Ainu valued Japanese metal tools and lacquered objects and enjoyed sake, while the Japanese bought bear livers from the Ainu, believing them to have medicinal properties. In *The Bears of Mount Nametoko*, Kojūrō hunts bears out of necessity, showing respect and compassion that reflect Ainu traditions. Ainu folk epics (*yukar*, Philippi 1979) describe rituals, such as the specific treatment of the eyes and brain and the use of *inau*<sup>18</sup> sticks, to honor deceased animals. This demonstrates a reciprocal cosmology in which animals offer themselves voluntarily and humans express gratitude through offerings. In Ainu cosmology and folklore, the relationship with nature is deeply reciprocal: the Ainu believed that all hunted animals offered their bodies voluntarily as a sign of goodwill, and that their souls returned to the world of the gods, while humans were obliged to give thanks by offering *inau*, food, and sake in return. Similarly, Miyazawa portrays both hunter and prey as non-villainous, integral parts of the natural order, aligning with Ainu beliefs in the sacred flow of life.

The Ainu considered the bear an earthly deity and protector of the mountains (*kimun kamui*). They also hunted deer, as numerous *yukar* (epics) attest. In Ainu folklore, the deer was regarded as the supreme god of wildlife. In *The First Deer Dance* (Miyazawa, 1993: 50-55), a boy hidden behind a rock and surrounded by black pampas grass, witnesses a magnificent deer dance and becomes so entranced by the spectacle that he gains insight into their silent language. In the villages of Iwate Prefecture, the deer dance, *shishi odori*, has survived various historical periods in Japan, from the feudal era through World War II and into the period of rapid industrialization, and it remains a traditional form of public performance even today. As Thompson notes (2004: 131-132), in *shishi odori*, the ritual movements and gestures of the anthropomorphized deer gods narrate a story of the connection

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linguistic evidence showing that the words “Emishi” and “Emchui” share a common root (Kindaichi, 2004: 113-114).

<sup>17</sup> Populations in Tōhoku and Hokkaidō show significant cranial and physical similarities to the Ainu, including longer faces and greater height (Hanihara, 1990: 38-39). Genetic research (Omoto, 1978) and ABO blood group distributions in northern prefectures such as Iwate further confirm that these inhabitants are genetically closer to the Ainu than to the rest of the Japanese population. These findings strongly support the hypothesis of extensive racial and cultural intermixing between the Japanese and the Ainu in northern Honshū and Hokkaidō.

<sup>18</sup> An *inau* is a carved willow stick with spiral patterns and bark decorations, serving as a ritual intermediary between humans and *kamui* (deities). Used in hunting, fishing, and healing, it functions similarly to Shinto *gohei* strips as a symbol of ritual purity and divine mediation, despite differences in craftsmanship and specific use.

between the earthly and spiritual worlds<sup>19</sup>. Until the mid-20th century, dancers from rural communities visited households at various times of the year: during spring planting, Bon Festival, and New Year celebrations. In earlier periods, such performances were also held for occasions such as childbirth, weddings, and funerals.

The dance remains part of Shinto ritual and is still performed today by female priests (*miko*) at Shinto shrines. Given the connection between religion, folklore, and myth, motifs from ancient beliefs also appear in Miyazawa's works. The boy with the Italian name Giovanni compares the sight of a glittering city at twilight to a dragon's palace at the bottom of the sea (*Night of the Milky Way Railway*, Miyazawa 1991). In Japanese folk tales (*mukashibanashi*), there is a motif of a magnificent dragon castle under the sea (*ryūgū*), from which a boy is sent as a gift to a noble married couple (*Mr. Slime*<sup>20</sup>; Vasić, 2016: 137-139). The *Kojiki* (2008) recounts the myth of the god Hoori and his marriage to Toyotama-hime, the daughter of a dragon who lives in an underwater palace. Similarly, *The Woman from the Dragon Palace*<sup>21</sup> (Vasić, 2016: 211-215) features a gift to the sea god, echoing the 15th-century legend of Urashima Tarō. In that tale, a hero saves a turtle and is rewarded with a three-day visit to the dragon palace; however, when he returns to the surface, he finds that three centuries have passed in the human world.

In the tale *The Bell from the Dragon Palace*<sup>22</sup> (Vasić, 2018: 131-132), a dragon invites the skilled samurai Avazu no Kanda to its sea castle, which is attacked daily by a giant snake and its followers. After heroically defeating the snake (reminiscent of the god Susanoo killing the eight-headed monster in the *Kojiki*), the sea dragon gives the hero a bell from its temple<sup>23</sup>. In Miyazawa's story, the motif of the dragon palace serves as a metaphor for a city illuminated by moonlight and streetlights, seen from a hill as the hero falls asleep. It is unclear whether the hero actually sees the reflections or dreams them, which can be connected to the personal and collective unconscious, and thus to folk heritage and folklore<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Tradition holds that the Buddhist priest Kūya (903-972), created a dance to pacify a deer's spirit after witnessing its killing near Mount Hiei. This devotional ceremony to Amida Buddha was later popularized by his disciples in Nara during the 10<sup>th</sup> century. By the late 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Fujiwara clan introduced the dance to the Tōhoku region as a means of extending their cultural influence (Thompson, 2004: 133).

<sup>20</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>21</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>23</sup> The tale is further imbued with elements of an etiological legend, explaining that it concerns a bell still preserved today at Koko Temple in the town of Avazu (Ōmi Province).

<sup>24</sup> According to Jung (Jung, 2003: 14), archetypal content consists of elements from the unconscious that have entered the conscious sphere, becoming an integral part of tradition and ritual practice. He argued that collective content originates in the unconscious and that archetypes are most clearly manifested in myths and fairy tales, which are remembered and transmitted across generations.

In addition to animals and natural phenomena, folkloric elements in Kenji Miyazawa's work also include human characters. In the story *On the Fourth Day of the Narcissus Month* (Miyazawa, 1997), Miyazawa introduces the motif of *Yuki Bango*, the snow old woman, who continues the playful games of a delighted boy in the snow and commands her followers – snow boys and wolves – to create cold winds and snowdrifts through their dancing. Miyazawa's *Yuki Bango* has pointed ears like a cat (perhaps giving her keen hearing) and white hair that flutters like cold mist. Japanese folklore tells of the Snow Woman, *Yuki Onna*, who, according to legend, encounters lonely travelers on mountain passes and drains their life energy. In ancient times, it was likely believed that those who perished in heavy snowstorms from deadly cold had actually been claimed by *Yuki Onna*. Tsunoda (Tsunoda, 2023: 298) describes this Japanese *yōkai* [demon] as a tall, beautiful woman with long, flowing black hair, dressed in a formal white kimono. Lafcadio Hearn (1868-1912) translated *yōkai* stories he heard in Japan, including the tale *The Snow Woman* (Hearn, 2012) featuring a father and son, Mosaku and Minokichi, stranded in a ferryman's hut during a snowstorm. A "white fairy", the Snow Woman, kills Mosaku with her icy breath but spares the boy. Years later, the survivor and the spirit fall in love and marry. In *mukashibanashi*, the Snow Woman motif often depicts a character who is both beautiful and deadly, a nurturing mother and a merciless executioner. Several decades after Lafcadio, the renowned Japanese folklorist Seki Keigo recorded the folk tale *The Snow Wife* (Seki, 1963: 81-82). This tale, collected in Aomori Prefecture in northern Honshū near Iwate features motifs of marriage to a supernatural being, the Snow Woman, whose health declines with the arrival of spring, ultimately causing her to disappear (melt). In Seki's version, only *Yuki Onna*'s face and long hair are visible, while the rest of her body merges with the whiteness of the snow until she assumes a fully human form and becomes mortal. Similarly, in Miyazawa's writings, only the upper part of the Snow Woman's body "protrudes" from the snow, but there is no description of mercy or tenderness. On the contrary, the author presents her as an enraged mistress of winter, intent on killing the boy wrapped in a red blanket (red possibly symbolizing blood and life), prompting readers to visualize a striking poetic contrast of colors. The Snow Old Woman serves as a folkloric personification of a cruel winter storm that harshly takes lives, while Miyazawa seems to forgive nature by introducing the motif of the snow boy, who first "teases" the young hero with a sprig of mistletoe and then hides him in the snow until *Yuki Bango* departs, thus saving his life. Miyazawa combines his personal perspective on elemental hazards with mythical imagination and a unique sensitivity to nature, as suggested by the story's title. *The Narcissus Month* likely refers to the period when narcissus blooms, usually in December or January in Japan, though in the Tōhoku region, narcissus can bloom as late as April, signaling the arrival of spring that will overcome winter. In the end, *Yuki Bango* fails to take the life of the innocent boy.

In addition to the Snow Woman, Japanese folklore features a variety of *yōkai*, such as the mountain witch *Yamauba*, who can be a helpful ally, as in *Nukafuku* and

*Komefuku* (Vasić, 2016: 143-147), or a cannibalistic demon, as seen in *The Horse-driver and Yamauba* (Vasić, 2018: 204–205). The motif of the wooden box in which she sleeps highlights her connection to the otherworldly. Seki Keigo (1966: 219) identifies various mountain beings, including *Yamaotoko*, *Yamachichi*, and *Yamabiko* (male demons), and *Yamauba* (female demons), noting that they can be friendly or hostile and often appear with red faces, tall statures, or only one leg (evidence of their subterranean origins). Miyazawa employs the *Yamaotoko* motif in *Night of the Festival* (Miyazawa, 1993: 171-176), depicting him as a powerful, red-faced being unfamiliar with the concept of money. After being helped, he returns the favor with gifts of firewood and chestnuts, illustrating a creature of nature existing outside urban consumerism.

While depicting the alienation between the urban and the natural, Miyazawa pays particular attention to animals, which in his stories often display human traits, speak, and behave like people, a hallmark of folklore. The main characters are often identifiable from the titles of his stories, such as *The Spider, the Slug, and the Raccoon* (Miyazawa, 1993: 126-138), *The Great Bear of the Crows* (Miyazawa, 2004), and *The Ungrateful Rat* (Miyazawa, 1993: 164-170). A particularly interesting motif is Tokkobe Torako from the eponymous story (Miyazawa, 1993: 92-97), which features two short narratives with different plots and characters but a shared chronotope: both events occur at dusk on the bank of the same river. Miyazawa first introduces Tokkobe Torako, a fox who deceives passersby using the power of transformation and manages to steal fish, soy cheese, and other goods from travelers. The stories include elements of satire and comedy: in the first narrative, Tokkobe Torako transforms into a samurai and successfully tricks a greedy moneylender; in the second, she appears as a white fox who outwits clumsy guests at a village festival. Japanese folklore recognizes the white fox with unusual powers, known as *kitsune*. As Lutz (2021) explains, the name of this *yōkai* originates from a folk tale in Mino Province, in which a young man marries a beautiful woman who is later revealed to be a fox. Nevertheless, she continues to visit her husband occasionally, and her ability to change form and return reflects the symbolic meaning of the *kitsune* and the etymology of the word, which can be interpreted as “come and sleep”. In the *mukashibanashi The Fox Woman*<sup>25</sup> (Vasić, 2018: 116), the motif of marriage with a supernatural being and the element of a broken taboo are also present: when she realizes that her children have seen her tail, the fox-mother must leave the home, yet she regularly returns as a benevolent spirit, blessing the rice field so that it yields abundantly while hiding a grain in the stalk to avoid high taxation on the harvest. This element contains a critique of feudal society, a theme Miyazawa often addressed. In Shinto, Inari, the god of rice and harvest, can take the form of a fox. However, in Japanese folklore, foxes are not always benevolent. Japanese folk heritage includes motifs of foxes as *yōkai* who can transform into humans or women to deceive lonely travelers. A particularly striking folk tale is *The One-eyed Old*

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<sup>25</sup> Translated by the author.

*Man*<sup>26</sup> (Vasić, 2018: 194), in which a fox “steals the identity” of a one-eyed old man but makes an error in disguise, leaving the left eye unharmed instead of the right, which leads to its discovery.

Miyazawa was clearly well acquainted with folk tradition, from which he also drew inspiration for his stories. The tale *Tokkobe Torako* may be a particularly good example of this unusual blending of sources, since, in addition to containing folkloric elements, it criticizes social injustice through motifs of authoritarian samurai, humble peasants, and greedy moneylenders, while also incorporating Buddhist elements. Specifically, Japanese Buddhism recognizes Dakini, a female deity often depicted semi-nude and accompanied by a white fox, regarded as a messenger or servant (Vredeveld, 2025). This aligns with the Japanese perception of the fox as a creature of magic and sharp wit. However, Dakini was not originally a benevolent deity in Buddhism, but quite the opposite. As Meyer (Meyer, 2025) notes, in Buddhist cosmology, Dakinis were initially portrayed as beautiful and feminine yet wrathful demons of heavenly origin who consumed human flesh, until they embraced Buddhism and became protectors of agriculture and human prosperity<sup>27</sup>. In Miyazawa’s works, nothing is one-sided; he persistently juxtaposes different aspects of reality. While valuing Japanese discipline and “distinctiveness”, he also criticizes social injustice in Japan. He portrays the fox as a trickster, a hero of unusual charm who engages in mischief and ultimately celebrates nature both as a harsh force and as an elusive harmony that generates life. Perhaps this very complexity accounts for the appeal of Miyazawa’s oeuvre, as he found beauty in every, even seemingly contradictory segment of a nation’s identity - in religion, culture, the natural environment, and folklore.

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## 5. Conclusion

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Who was Miyazawa Kenji and what inspired his stories? His works reflect the identity of a Japanese man born into a poor environment in northern Honshu, who grew up (unconsciously) absorbing folk traditions and followed Nichiren’s ideas of awakening as something woven into everyday life. Just as General Son Ba Yū from the story of the same name (Miyazawa, 1993: 26-40) was a person of integrity who fought for the emperor, riding for years through a windswept desert, Miyazawa also remained true to his ideals: he helped farmers while continually educating himself through scientific research and studies of celestial bodies, despite the low standard of living in his hometown and other pressures from society and family. Similarly, the boy Ichirō from the story *The Judge Deer and the Acorns* refused to make a hasty judgment about the acorns, instead seeking to reconcile them and teach unity, much

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<sup>26</sup> Translated by the author.

<sup>27</sup> In the Middle Ages, both the shogun and the emperor revered and prayed to the Buddhist deity Dakini to ensure the prosperity of their rule. Today, rituals dedicated to Dakini worship remain part of the Japanese emperor’s coronation ceremonies.

as Miyazawa himself tried to bridge and balance the divide between higher and lower social classes. Such a Shinto approach to nature and the living world, which strives for harmony with the universe, may be one reason why Miyazawa equates animals with humans and endows them with human traits. In *The Night Hawk*, the protagonist, a hawk, forgives his tormentors and, despite painful falls, resolutely reaches the sky. This is an excellent example of how, in Japan, the Buddhist idea of enlightenment coexists with nature-oriented Shinto. It is also interesting to draw a parallel between the boy Kenjū in the story *Kenjū's Forest* and the author. They share similar names and fates: both died of tuberculosis. Marginalized, beaten, different, and misunderstood, the boy Kenjū nevertheless resists his surroundings and succeeds in planting a grove of cedar trees, the only ones to survive the construction of buildings and infrastructure in the village. Today, children play among these cedars and call them “Kenjū’s Forest”. Miyazawa Kenji’s works were not widely read by his contemporaries, yet today they are widely read and viewed in animated adaptations by people throughout the Japanese archipelago. Contemporary Japan is, in many ways, one vast “Kenjū’s Forest” of Miyazawa Kenji, a landscape that preserves the memory of this writer quietly, naturally, and spontaneously, just as children play, and in the way Miyazawa Kenji himself would have wished.

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### ***The author***

Vesna Kuraica, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Department of Oriental Studies, Group for Japanese Language, Literature, and Culture. Teaching assistant in courses on Japanese culture, history, and literature. Doctoral student; research area: Japanese folklore and society. Some published works: "The Non-Human World in the Japanese Earthquakes: from the Mythical Cause to the Real Victims", in *Studia Ethnologica Croatica*, 36(1): 89-105 (2024); "Cultural Heritage and Identity of the Ainu People Based on Folkloric Memories and Motifs Recorded in Yukar Epics", in *Многоликата наука – Disciplina Variabilis*, 6(1), 2025.