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Cicadas and Culture: What the Insect Means to Japan

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 @TeamAlphaBCN
games.thisisalpha.com

If you have watched enough anime, played enough video games, and engaged with enough Japanese media, eventually you'll come across some tropes, common motifs or clichés.

In Japanese media, one of these tropes is the cicada. A cicada is a type of insect, of which there are over 3,000 species. Generally speaking, cicadas have short antennae, eyes set wide apart, and large, transparent wings. Their most distinctive feature isn't their appearance it's their sound. Cicadas have a loud, prominent sound. They spend most of their lives underground, only to emerge briefly as adults to mate, hence their cicada "song." Cicadas are found worldwide, and on every continent except Antarctica. Japan is no exception, being the home of several Cicada species. But why has Japan latched onto cicadas in a way other cultures haven't?

Summer, Youth, and Cicadas

In Japan, cicadas are the sound of summer. They're often used in media to indicate the hot, humid Japanese summers, similar to how cherry blossoms represent the beginning of spring. The western equivalent of Japan's cicadas would be the sound of frogs croaking, a similar trope found in many forms of media.

Cicadas also play an important role in the lives of Japanese children. Insect catching is a common hobby for children. They often catch fireflies, beetles, and of course, cicadas, so their fascination with insects is instilled at a young age.

Cicadas as a Symbol of Rebirth

Cicadas have life cycles ranging from two to seventeen years. Cicadas spend most of their lives underground, only emerging to molt their shells and become adults, ready to mate and die. As a result of spending most of their lives underground, most people will only see a quick snapshot of a cicada's life. For the Japanese, seeing the cicada's life cycle is a reminder of the passing nature of all things.

However, Japan's connection with cicadas goes even deeper and is tied to centuries of Buddhist influence. Japan's history with Buddhism dates back to at least the fifth century B.C. when it was introduced from China via Korea. In Chinese culture, cicadas were long considered a symbol of rebirth. Rebirth is also considered an essential tenet of Buddhism. Naturally, Japanese Buddhists would have seen the cicada as a constant reminder of rebirth.

Cicada representations in Japanese Media

Where the cicada casts her shell
In the shadows of the tree,
There is one whom I love well,
Though her heart is cold to me.

- *Murasaki Shikibu, The Tale of Genji, 11th Century*

Cicadas have been represented in Japan's art for centuries. Even modern Japanese media regularly references them. Cicadas have been portrayed in tons of Japanese anime, often as ambient background noise to indicate the anime is taking place during hot, humid summer months. The hugely successful Dragon Ball manga features the character Cell, whose design is reminiscent of a cicada. The live action Ultra series features Ultraman facing the villainous Cicada Humans, an insectoid alien race.

Cicadas have also been featured in many Japanese video games. In Nintendo's Animal Crossing series, cicadas can be heard during the summer season. Pokémon has a bug type pokémon called Nincada, which can evolve into Ninjask and Shedinja, all heavily inspired by the look of cicadas. The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword allows you to catch San Cicadas, a desert-dwelling cicada. Final Fantasy XIV's Heavensword expansion introduced the Gnath, an insect-like race heavily inspired by cicadas. Game developers continue to seek inspiration from nature, and cicadas are no exception to this rule.

Cicadas are more than just background noise. They're an important part of Japanese culture. The next time you hear or see cicadas in Japanese media, you'll have a better understanding of their importance.

Are there any cultural tropes or clichés in media that you would like to see Alpha investigate? Let us know.

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