

# ‘Tama Between Realms’

*Riding the Cat Train Through Rural Japan – A Cultural Study  
of Tama the Stationmaster*

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# Summary

This thesis explores the phenomenon of Tama the stationmaster, and how we can understand her popularity and story. Tama was a cat who was appointed stationmaster of a small train station, in the rural outskirts of Wakayama. Due to low ridership, the rural train line was on the brink of bankruptcy, an increasing problem for rural train lines in Japan. With the appointment of Tama the cat, however, revitalization quickly became a fact. Following the increase in visitors, the Wakayama Electric Railway company, owners of the train line, focused entirely on building their brand around Tama. During her eight years of service, the train station was redesigned to resemble a cat, as well as the trains themselves with various related themes. With her passing years after, she was enshrined and given the status of “spirit goddess”, with the title “Honourable Eternal Station Master”. In this thesis, I examine some of the prerequisites within Japanese culture that aid in explaining her national and international popularity. Through conducted field research and theoretical frameworks, I divide Tama into four sets of roles, to analyse her in different manners: 1) Her role as cat companion, 2) her role as tourist attraction, 3) her role as commodified being, and 4) her role as spirit goddess. By no means is Tama limited exclusively to these roles, and the constructed distinction between them is not necessarily realistic. In fact, during the course of the discussions in this thesis, it becomes clear that the myriad of roles Tama inhabits are all connected and intertwined. By the thorough exploration of these roles, however, I rule out Tama’s successful story as mere luck. I argue that her narrative skilfully plays on already well-established notions in Japan, concluding that Tama and her narrative functions as gateways to these.



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# 1 Introducing Tama the Stationmaster

On a warm September morning, I take my first steps towards a first-hand experience of the subject of my master thesis. Turning a corner on Wakayama Central Station, I find myself in a smaller passageway, with arrows accompanied by pawprints leading towards a flight of stairs. The walls on each side of the stairway are plastered with posters of Tama the stationmaster, the cat who saved a rural train line from bankruptcy. At the top of the stairs stands a single ticket booth, on a shorter train platform than the ones I just arrived on. As I buy my one-day ticket, I am showered in pamphlets, all adorned by images of the stationmaster cat. As I walk through the ticket gate, a whiskered, white train approaches from a distance.

## 1.1 Super Station Master Tama

Tama was born a stray, white calico cat near Kishi station in 1999, the terminal station to the Kishigawa line going from Wakayama, which was unmanned due to continuing annual deficits, sadly not uncommon for rural train lines at the time. She was taken in by a local villager, and grew up in and around the station, to both passengers' and other locals' joy, who jokingly began referring to her as Kishi's stationmaster.<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously, by the mid-2000s, the rail line's financial problems further threatened to close the tracks for good, due to low ridership. As a result, the current president of Wakayama Electric Railway, Mitsunobu Kojima, was tasked with reviving the Kishigawa line in 2006, though the decision to abolish it had already been discussed. Meanwhile, Tama's former owner had decided to leave the area, and asked the railway company to guard over and look after her, as she had always done for the station.<sup>2</sup> Luckily, Kojima fell victim to Tama's charm immediately, soon donning her in both customised collar and a stationmaster's hat. By 2007, she had been officially named "Tama the stationmaster of Kishi Station", soon to be Japan's famous cat stationmaster.

With her new title came proper working hours and an official position with the company. She would be present at Kishi station on scheduled days of the week, as well as serve as a main attraction during events and happenings. Her primary function was to be the face of the

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<sup>1</sup> Goss, «The cat who saved a rural rail line». *BBC*. 22.05.2019. <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20190522-the-cat-who-saved-a-japanese-rail-line>.

<sup>2</sup> Goss, «The cat who saved a rural rail line». *BBC*. 22.05.2019. <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20190522-the-cat-who-saved-a-japanese-rail-line>.

railway, both physically on the Kishigawa line, and in promotional material and media coverage. The line expanded, with merchandise, flyers, and her own train, the *Tama-den*, designed by Eiji Mitooka, the award-winning industrial designer, otherwise most known for his sleek bullet trains.

Throughout her employment, Tama earned several promotions, including the title of “Super Station Master” which assigned her two assistants, also feline of course. This promotion added a ceremonial gown in dark blue and white neck ruffles to her attire, which she is often pictured wearing. Admirable accomplishments and accolades for any cat, surely – but more than this, her calm demeanour and cute looks attracted thousands of tourists to the small station, resulting in a significant upturn for the company. According to a study by Katsuhiko Miyamoto of Kansai University’s School of Accountancy, Tama’s assignment as stationmaster contributed towards the amount of ¥1.1 billion to the local economy between 2007 and 2015. Wakayama Electric Railway has stated that their purrfect companion has increased their annual number of passengers by nearly 300,000 since 2006.

By the time Tama passed away in 2015, she had contributed greatly to the local economy and had become quite the national, as well as international, celebrity. This popularity became all the clearer still with her passing, as thousands of people travelled to attend her funeral, leaving flowers and cans of tuna as gifts and tokens to her memory. Following her funeral, she was memorialised with a small shrine located on the Kishi platform, and was elevated to the status of goddess, by rite of an official, religious Shinto ritual, gaining her final title as “Honourable Eternal Station Master”. Today, five years after her passing, her popularity lingers, as is evident by her Twitter account of more than 82,000 followers, which is continuously growing, not to mention the amount of people who still ride the *Tama-den* in order to visit her shrine or see her image in her successors.

Whenever I tell people of this case, the response is usually different variations of fascination or entertainment, “hows” and “wows”, as there really is no denying the popularity and the mystery of the phenomenon that is Tama the stationmaster. During her eight years of employment, she made it to the international scene, both through countless news articles, as well as features in series or documentaries, like *La Voie du Chat* by Myriam Tonelotto.<sup>3</sup> Her

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<sup>3</sup> IMDb, «La voie du chat».

fame post-mortem was even honoured by Google in 2017, when she was awarded a Google doodle on what would have been her 18th birthday, a true mark of recognition in our era, if ever there was one. Yet, though Tama's case is extraordinarily fascinating, the concept of animals as stationmasters, or animals retaining other types of positions, is by no means solely unique to Japan. For instance, many cats were appointed as official rat catchers during the 1800s, according to the Postal Museum of London.<sup>4</sup> In addition, one of the mousers, Tibs the Great, appeared in a "cats and film stars"<sup>5</sup> party, due to his hard work and service. Additionally, a cat named Stubbs served as Honorary Mayor in Alaska for more than 20 years before passing away in 2017, not long after Tama.<sup>6</sup>

Still, the extent of our loyal cat's popularity, and the effect it has borne for the railway company, as well as the local community and economy, is undisputed, and several animal mascots have been employed in Japan as a similar method of drawing attention, following in Tama's pawprints. Within the first year of her employment, passenger numbers rose by 10%.<sup>7</sup> Yet, rural train lines in Japan are still struggling, and according to *Sankei shinbun*, the Kishigawa line was still lacking 300,000 annual riders in 2017.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, the growth of Tama's Twitter-followers, if we were to see them as a simplified gauge for her popularity, is slightly diminishing in the second half of 2020, as opposed to the steady increase during 2019.<sup>9</sup>

## 1.2 Research question and area of exploration

How this case came to be so successful will be the leading question for this thesis. I investigate some of the prerequisites within the Japanese culture that I firmly believe to play a big part in the becoming of Tama the cat. By focusing on four distinct roles Tama plays, among the many she inhabits, I provide an explanation to the common reactions of humoured hows, excluding the idea of mere luck. The four different roles in question are: 1) Tama as the cat companion animal, 2) Tama as the tourist attraction, 3) Tama as a consumer goods *kyarakutā* (character), and 4) Tama as *kami* (spirit goddess). I have chosen these particular

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<sup>4</sup> Postal museum, "Post Office Cats".

<sup>5</sup> Postal museum, "Post Office Cats".

<sup>6</sup> Levin, "Honorary Alaska 'mayor,' Stubbs the cat, dies at 20". *CNN*. 24.07.2017. <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/23/us/mayor-cat-stubbs-dies-at-20/index.html>.

<sup>7</sup> McCurry, "Tama the cat". *The Guardian*. 29.06.2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jun/29/tama-the-cat-3000-attend-elaborate-funeral-for-japans-feline-stationmaster>

<sup>8</sup> Sankei shinbun, "Tama ekichou shindemo ninki".

<sup>9</sup> Socialblade, "@ekichoTAMA".

parts of her, as I believe they represent different key aspects of the “Tama experience”. This deceptively cute case is multi-layered and -faceted, and not easily picked apart. These are not by any means the only forces at play behind the apparent revival of the Kishigawa line, and defining her within these categories as isolated aspects might seem peculiar and reductive, as all layers affect each other in the creation of this story. However, in the attempt to provide a thorough exploration of the subject within the framework given here, I have deemed it necessary. It is therefore important to mention that the limitations of this thesis will never provide a full-fledged analysis of the complete phenomenon that is Tama. My goal is to provide one particular perspective, primarily focused on the cultural, historical, and religious inner workings of the case, with the hopes that it can aid and inspire others to investigate further, either through a similar perspective or beyond the scope and limitations provided here.

### 1.3 Method

In preparation for this thesis, I travelled to Kinokawa in September 2018, to conduct field studies and research. During my stay, I lived in central Wakayama city and commuted to Kishi station by riding the different trains of the Kishigawa line, now presided over by Tama’s successor, another white calico cat named Nitama, or Tama II. The first-hand experience was important, and I spent each day interviewing and talking to the people who worked there, observing the comings and goings of people, both at the train station and on the trains. I also visited one of Tama’s other successors, Yontama, at Idakiso Station, which is also located on the Kishigawa line, but closer to central Wakayama. I gathered as much local material as I deemed relevant and necessary, and have supplemented it with theoretical framework of local tourism, cats in Japanese culture, and mascot culture.

Despite Tama’s definitive position as one of Japan’s most famous cats, she has not been given much academic coverage, apart from curbed mentions in broader works, such as Zack Davissons’ *Kaibyō: The Supernatural Cats of Japan*. I write this thesis to provide that.

### 1.4 Research and theory

In order to view and analyse Tama through the aforementioned categories, theories and studies of others have been essential. Though all are not included, a short summary of the main theoretical frameworks follows.

Barbara Ambros, *Bones of Contention*

In *Bones of Contention*, Ambros investigates animals as subjects of religious rituals, from a post-mortem perspective. By exploring the growing demand for pet mortuary rites, she tackles several of the ongoing changes in contemporary Japan and its religions: family, marriage, the falling birth rate, the pet boom of the 1990s, the religious landscape following the Aum Shinrikyō incident in 1995, as well as an overview of pets in Japan throughout history. I have worked with this monograph to gain a perspective on Japanese and their relations to their animal companions, and on their relationship to these companions after their passing. Ambros provides a detailed historic overview of companion animals', and more specifically the cat's, role to humans in Japan, through folklore and mythology. It is partly through her thorough study that I gained an understanding of both Tama's role as companion to humans and her enshrinement following her passing, as the dead teach us of the living.

John Urry and Jonas Larsen, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*; Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*; and Svetlana Boym, "Nostalgia and Its Discontents"

*The Tourist Gaze 3.0* is a heavily revised version of John Urry's earlier publication, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies*. It is claimed to be "essential reading for all involved in contemporary tourism, leisure, cultural policy, design, economic regeneration, heritage, and the arts".<sup>10</sup> It provides an important theoretical framework when I define Tama as a tourist attraction, and for the viewing or gazing of her as tourism.

Marilyn Ivy's *Discourses of the Vanishing* applies the tourism lens to Japan, and more importantly, to trains in rural Japan. She discloses the anxieties of potential loss of national identity in Japan, despite the insistence that it still is intact. By delving into one of Japan's bestselling travel campaigns, "Discover Japan", she argues that "Japan (...) is haunted by the ghosts its spectacular modernity has generated".<sup>11</sup> Her exploration of the decline of rural train lines in Japan during the 1980s, and the strategies employed to revive them, allows a meticulous analysis of the appeal Tama has as a journey, and not just a travel destination.

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<sup>10</sup> Sage Publishing, "The Tourist Gaze 3.0".

<sup>11</sup> Chicago University Press, "Discourses of the Vanishing".

Svetlana Boym offers theory on the term “nostalgia”, firstly defining it as “a sentiment of loss and displacement, but (...) also a romance with one’s own fantasy”.<sup>12</sup> Further, she points at three aspects crucial to the term. First, nostalgia is not antimodern, and rather than opposed to modernity, it is coeval with it. Second, nostalgia is a yearning for a different time, or a rebellion against the modern idea of time, more than it is a longing for a place. Finally, it is not always retrospective, but rather prospective, as “[t]he fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future”.<sup>13</sup> Nostalgia as a concept is a big part of both why we travel and how local tourism in Japan, especially, is marketed. Tama is no exception to this.

### Christine Yano, *Pink Globalization*, and Deborah Occhi

Christine Yano’s book *Pink Globalization* centres on the *kyarakutā* or *kyara*, cute, anthropomorphized cartoon characters of domestic Japanese origin<sup>14</sup>, with “Hello Kitty” in the spotlight, her making, history, influence, and an in-depth analysis of her place in the capitalist system. She defines Hello Kitty as an aspect of “pink globalization”, which refers to the marketing and spread of *kawaii* (cute) goods from Japan to the rest of the world. Analysing identities and relations surrounding the cute culture that comes with Hello Kitty, Yano reveals that the cute and edgy power “can overturn, or at least challenge, power structures”.<sup>15</sup> Yano’s exploration of *kyarakutā*, and the roles they can inhabit for a human audience, enables a similar investigation of Tama as *kyarakutā*.

Deborah Occhi’s plentiful research on *yuru kyara*, “a subcategory of *kyara* that represent places, events, or commodities”<sup>16</sup>, and their effects, add greatly to Yano’s study, providing a more local perspective to the *kyarakutā* theories in this thesis. Her articles “Wobbly Aesthetics” and “Consuming *Kyara* ‘Characters’” give more insight into these *yuru kyaras*, who are *yurui*, “loose” or “wobbly”, in comparison to more well-known and polished *kyara*. Especially relevant within these theories is the effect *kyara* have on humans, and how they provide both a connection and a place of healing. These same connections apply to Tama, and her role as Kishigawa line’s own *kyara*: The calmness one feels when seeing Tama’s

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<sup>12</sup> Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Boym, “Nostalgia and its discontents”, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 110.

<sup>15</sup> Duke University Press, “Pink Globalization”.

<sup>16</sup> Occhi, «Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 109.

small figurine dangling from the strap of one's phone, and the power she can have as she transports you to Kishi station or beyond, if only for an instant.

Jolyon Baraka Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition*, and George J. Tanabe Jr.'s "Playing with Religion"

By focusing on the highly influential entertainment media of *manga* and *anime*, Jolyon Baraka Thomas investigates "religious frames of mind" through authors' and audiences' interactions with illustrated worlds. He coins the term "playful religion", and further emphasizes this sense of play as entertainment and adulteration. His research highlights the recursive relationships between recreation and religion, through this lens. With the deification and enshrinement of Tama, this theoretical view helps in understanding the effects she has as a *kami*, or goddess, and the necessity for, and impact of her becoming one.

George J. Tanabe Jr. further highlights this relationship of religion and play, more specifically through religion's connection to media. He suggests that "the connection between the two can be compressed (...) to the point at which religion dissolves into media".<sup>17</sup> This applies to our exploration of Tama post-mortem, and how it affects her already established sets of imagery and predefined roles.

In light of these texts, a scope with which to view Tama, and the different dimensions in which she plays, takes form. Throughout her lifetime, Tama light-footedly hopped between several different roles, playing with the supposed boundaries and limitations of her being. She started as a stray, became a pet, gained a job position, worked towards promotions, functioned largely as a tourist attraction herself, before finally ascending to divinity after her death. All of this whilst never ceasing to exist as both feline and female. It is on the exploration of these boundaries this thesis will centre, as we play with Tama the cat.

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<sup>17</sup> Tanabe Jr., "Playing with Religion", 96.

## 2 The Companion Animal Tama

In order to understand Tama's position and influence today, we must first understand the history of cats in Japan, and the history of their relation to humans. The craze for cats in Japan is far from unique to Tama's story. Japan is full of cats. They are the faithful mousers, lurking in the shadows and slinking around corners in alleyways everywhere, beloved companions curled up on kitchen chairs, residents of cat cafés, and even occupants of entire islands. Throughout their existence in Japan, they have served humans in a myriad of roles. A more modern addition, a quick online search will provide you with the best and most recommended cat cafés in Tokyo, where one can meet and play with groups of cats, for an hourly fee. There are hundreds of cat cafés located in Japan, as well as globally, which was a product of the "cat café boom"<sup>18</sup> starting in 2004. More than a mere mayfly, they are still extremely popular to this day, both with tourists and locals, and come in different varieties, for instance "kittens only", or a certain breed.<sup>19</sup> In some places the roles are reversed, and the feline creatures occupy larger areas, greatly outnumbering the human residents. On Aoshima, cats prowl a quiet fishing village, whilst outnumbering humans six to one.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, on another cat island, Tashirojima, the cats roam free and are being cared for by the few remaining residents there. Some claim the cats were brought to the islands in order to keep the mouse population in check and with the belief that they would bring humans good luck.<sup>21</sup> On Tashirojima, there is even a small cat shrine at the centre of the island, dedicated to a cat who was accidentally killed by a falling rock.

Still, the presence of cats in Japan is not only associated with the imagery of loving pets. According to an estimation by The Japan Pet Food Association in 2012, 5 million households, which amounted to 10,6% of all households in Japan at the time, were caregivers for 9.6 million cats in 2010. In comparison, only 150.000 cats were euthanized in 2010, and euthanization in Japan has diminished linearly during the last 15 years.<sup>22</sup> According to a veterinary study of local residents in urban Japan, more than a third answered that the bad

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<sup>18</sup> Robinson, "Finding healing through animal companionship in Japanese animal cafés", 193.

<sup>19</sup> Plourde, "Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan", 120.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, *The Atlantic*. "A Visit to Aoshima, a Japanese 'Cat Island'", 03.03.2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/photo/2015/03/a-visit-to-aoshima-a-cat-island-in-japan/386647/>

<sup>21</sup> Japan Guide, "Tashiro Island".

<sup>22</sup> Katsuji et al., "A Survey of Attitudes of Local Citizens of a Residential Area Toward Urban Stray Cats in Japan", 172.

smell of cat faeces and urine was a nuisance.<sup>23</sup> Those who considered the cats a nuisance regularly chased cats away, and tried to prevent their intrusion into both houses and land. In addition, with the popularity of the stray-filled cat islands, cat-crazed tourists are rushing in, generating tourism in residential areas. On Gaijinpot's travel guide, it is specified that "Aoshima is not designed for tourists, and there are no hotels, restaurants, shops or even vending machines on the Island. Visitors should bring their own food and drink, and take all their garbage home with them".<sup>24</sup> It is further encouraged to be respectful to the residents, as they are mostly elderly. As such, the line between pets and pests is a constant balancing tightrope for Japan's feline population.

## 2.1 Cats in Japanese folklore and mythology

The perception of cats, historically, has varied in similar manner during their time in Japan, spanning the range between vengeful spirits and loving companions. Precisely when cats arrived in Japan is a matter of dispute. The monstrous *yamaneko*, a feline breed similar in size to cougars, is thought to have gone extinct during the Yayoi period.<sup>25</sup> More likely than being descendants of these, cats were introduced through travel and high-class gift giving between China and Korea, to Japan. As in other places in the world, the practice of keeping pets first originated among the higher classes, before being adopted by the lower classes later on.

Ambros claims that "[a]rchaeologists have suggested that there are indications the culture [in the Jōmon period] was animistic and that animals were seen as mediators between the divine and the human realms".<sup>26</sup> Evidence that boundaries between the human, divine, and animal worlds were fluid are plentiful, both in Japanese mythology and folklore. Tales of animals turning into humans and vice versa are found as early as the Heian period.<sup>27</sup> In addition to being intermediaries between the here-and-now and the after-world, smaller animals, such as cats, were believed to have "the power to wreak spiritual vengeance (*tatari*) on people".<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Katsuji et al., "A Survey of Attitudes of Local Citizens of a Residential Area Toward Urban Stray Cats in Japan", 175.

<sup>24</sup> Gaijinpot, "Aoshima (Cat Island)".

<sup>25</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 19.

<sup>28</sup> Veldkamp, "The Emergence of "Pets as Family" and the Socio-Historical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan", 335.

Cats too often fell victim to these notions, which have been expressed through a variety of folkloric myths in Japan. According to Atherton and Moore, it was believed that cats attained human abilities, such as speech, by the age of seven.<sup>29</sup> These ideas usually had roots in more complex cat myths, such as tales of *yōkai*, which can translate variously as monster, spirit, or demon.<sup>30</sup> Japanese supernatural cats are often classified as *henge* (変化), translating to “shapeshifters” or “transformed animals”.<sup>31</sup> Henge are usually not born with magical powers, but acquire these with a long lifespan, which for cats might be twelve to thirteen years. If they gain these magical abilities to transform, they can take on different shapes and identities, and even become immortal. The popularity of these views came with the growing fascination with folktales, monsters, ghosts, and mysterious events, especially during the mid to late Edo period.<sup>32</sup>

## 2.2 The *Bakeneko*, *Nekomata* and *Bakeneko Yūjo*

*Bakeneko*, “monster cat” or “changing cat”, is a term often used to include all mysterious or magical cats. These tales refer to cats who are fluid shapeshifters, with the special ability to take human shapes and blend with society,<sup>33</sup> either through imitation of currently living people or the creation of new personas.



Figure 1: Ukiyo-e print of *Bakeneko*. Picture from: <https://ukiyo-e.org/image/mfa/sc167522>

<sup>29</sup> Atherton and Moore, “Speaking To Animals”.

<sup>30</sup> Foster, *Pandemonium and Parade*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: The Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 15.

<sup>32</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 45.

<sup>33</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 31.

During the Edo period, they were depicted standing on two legs with a towel on their head, simulating human behaviour. It is speculated that the common notion of cats walking hind-legged can be a result of lamps being fuelled with fish oil during the Edo period, making cats reach and stretch on two legs. Merging with Ambros' idea of cats being viewed as vengeful spirits, some stories draw on the *bakeneko*'s origin as cats who drink the blood of innocent murder victims and then carry out the victims' vengeance after taking their shape.<sup>34</sup> However, most *bakeneko* tales entail a human to "human" relationship, for instance getting involved with a lover or an enemy, who is actually a cat in disguise. The effect once the cat literally is out of the bag, revealing itself as feline all along, never ceases to shock.

A variation of this is the *bakeneko yūjo*, or the *bakeneko* prostitutes. Similar to the formerly mentioned tales, they too centre on the shock of discovery.

After enjoying the delights of one of the famed courtesans of the Yoshiwara pleasure district in Edo, a young samurai settles into his futon to sleep off his illicit encounter. But in the middle of the night he suddenly awakens. He sees his beautiful companion hunched over a rotting fishbone, stripping the flesh away with her teeth. The dim lantern light casts an inhuman, cat-like shadow on the wall. The samurai shudders with the knowledge that he has passed the night with no human being, but one of the dreaded *bakeneko* prostitutes of Edo.<sup>35</sup>

However, contrary to other *bakeneko* stories, these often inspired fascination rather than horror. Prints from the era portray men walking happily next to their feline courtesans, a clear contrast to the common depictions of *bakeneko*. Quickly rising to meet the market demand, real life prostitutes made certain to adopt names similar to the tales' courtesans and deliberately keep cats as pets, capitalizing on the trend.<sup>36</sup> Imagery of feline women as sensual beings is still present in media, and some claim cats are often associated with sensuality and sexuality in Japanese popular culture.<sup>37</sup>

Common for these shapeshifting narratives is the clear anthropomorphist scope. Within these frames, cats almost always turn into humans and revert to their non-human form after being found out. More often, cats are transforming themselves into humans, rather than humans into

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<sup>34</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 33.

<sup>35</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 71.

<sup>36</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 75.

<sup>37</sup> Daliot-Bul, *License to Play*, 69.

cats. Towards this, Ambros differentiates between occurrences of anthropomorphism and zoomorphism:

Zoomorphism occurs for a variety of reasons: as symbols of degradation, elevation to a sublime status, and for practical purposes, whereas anthropomorphism of animals (...) usually takes place for the purpose of marriage with a human.<sup>38</sup>

Buddhist ideas were central to anthropomorphic and zoomorphic narratives, especially through the Heian and Muromachi periods. The notions of transformation demonstrate the effects of karma and rebirth, though there are some differences regarding different planes and worlds for humans and animals. These previously mentioned supernatural beings, however, are more the result of the rising popularity of ghost stories and trickster tales during the Edo period.<sup>39</sup> The benefits of shapeshifting seem to tip in the humans' favour, to a larger degree. Humans can turn into animals for elevation or for practical reasons, and the cats transform to be with the human. The odds, not surprisingly, are often in our favour.

Another supernatural cat, which might have deeper running roots compared to the bakeneko who had their golden age during the Edo period, is the *nekomata*, or “again cat”. Accounts of the *nekomata* are typically from the Kamakura period, and tell of “a feared beast of the mountains, roaming the forests like a tiger or lion”.<sup>40</sup> Researchers point to *nekomata* tales as evidence of the, largely debated, prehistoric mountain lion, the *yamaneko*. Some draw parallels to the import of tigers from China, as gifts or for zoos.<sup>41</sup> Still, in similar notion to the other tales of transforming cats, the attention and popularity of the stories grew substantially during the Edo period. Pulling the beast from the wild, the tales made their way from the mountains to the living rooms of Edo, reinforcing the popular imagination of cats as mysterious spiritual forces.<sup>42</sup> Belief grew that the *nekomata* were not necessarily a separate breed, but rather transformed from your own house cats when reaching a certain age.<sup>43</sup> As the household cat becomes a feared mountain cat, the *nekomata* or “again cat” is born.

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<sup>38</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 19.

<sup>39</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 48.

<sup>41</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 48.

<sup>42</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 45.

<sup>43</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 51.

Cats have inhabited differencing and contrasting roles in Japan, through their lifespans. They have been messengers of good, vengeful spirits, and transformed lovers. Although the way they are viewed have varied, a sense of mystery seems to have been ever present.

Furthermore, however negative or dated, there are several components at play in these narratives which are applicable to the case of Tama. Suffice to say for now, just like the henge, she has become immortal through her deification as a Shinto kami. Additionally, the continual anthropomorphization of her through donned clothing, such as the stationmaster's hat or her ruffled robe, draws on the bakeneko tales. This imagery provides the strings that pull from behind the curtain of history every time we see Tama. As such, there is a certain element of intertextuality which is ingrained in the subconscious of the Japanese culture, that in one way or another affects the way we experience Tama today. Yet, cats simulating human behaviour by wearing clothes, like towels on their heads, used to stir uneasy feelings of horror. The dressing of Tama in human clothes, on the other hand, signifies her trustworthiness and accentuates the importance of her role as stationmaster of Kishi station. Consequently, we see a shift in the anthropomorphization of cats, from sparking horror to sparking joy. Still, regardless of this shift, a sense of mystery envelopes both the folkloric cats of Japan and our stationmaster.

## 2.3 The modern fictional cats' narratives

Towards the modern era, cats are generally viewed in a more positive way, and oftenmost as pets – companions to humans. With the neko café boom through the early 2000s and the ever-growing numbers of cats, both as kept pets and strays, their popularity seems to be climbing still. What we see within the fictional works of popular culture, is that the earlier ideas of their inherent roles endure. Anthropomorphized, speaking cats are found in an abundance of literary works, such as Natsume Sōseki's *I am a Cat* (*Wagahai wa Neko de Aru*), a satirical critic of the Japanese society written in 1905-1906, and *The Travelling Cat Chronicles* from 2018, of Nana who travels alongside his beloved owner.<sup>44</sup> Cats also make appearances in many of Murakami Haruki's novels, one of Japan's most exported authors, such as *Kafka on the Shore* (2002) and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1994-1995). This is but to name a few.

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<sup>44</sup> Goodreads, "The Travelling Cat Chronicles".

Several of Studio Ghibli's most popular films include speaking cats; as companions, like with *Kiki's Delivery Service* (1989); full-fledged societies, as in *The Cat Returns* (2002); or intermediaries between worlds, like the very famed *Neko Basu*, or "Catbus", from *My Neighbour Totoro* (1988). *My Neighbour Totoro* is one of Miyazaki Hayao's most acclaimed films, and object of many theories, both fan-based and academic. The story tells of two young girls, Satsuki and Mei, who move to the countryside with their father, in order to be closer to their hospitalized mother. In the nearby forest, they encounter several magical spirits, like totoro in different sizes and the Catbus. The existence of the Catbus in Miyazaki's *My Neighbour Totoro* highlights one of the core functions cats have been thought to possess, the role as intermediaries between gods and humans. However, to be able to assign this role to the Catbus, one must also define Totoro as a spiritual or godly being. Jolyon Baraka Thomas claims that "(...) spirits in *Totoro* seem to be loosely based on traditional Japanese conceptions of *kami*," and further that "[t]he *totoro* therefore represent a simultaneously new-old type of nature spirit strategically set in contrast to preexisting (...) notions of *kami*."<sup>45</sup> Additionally, in the movie, as Mei frustratedly cries over Satsuki and her father not believing she has met Totoro, her father comforts her by saying she must have met the guardian spirit of the forest (*Mei wa kitto kono mori no nushi ni attan da*).<sup>46</sup>

In the film, the Catbus is called upon by Totoro when either it or the girls need help getting somewhere, or when they simply need help. As Mei gets lost towards the end of the story, Satsuki begs Totoro for help in finding her. The Catbus is summoned, and it carries Satsuki to Mei's location. A widely popular fan theory, which has been commented and denied by the production company behind the film (primarily due to a connection drawn to a horrible murder of a young girl in 1963), makes the claim that Totoro is a *shinigami*, or a "god of death".<sup>47</sup> The theory claims that Mei is actually dead, and that Satsuki asks Totoro to lead her to her little sister, which invites the idea that the Catbus is an intermediary between the living world and the realm of the dead. Despite its public renunciation, I believe there is enough basis in the material to substantiate the theory of Totoro as *shinigami*, independent and exclusive of its claim to real life connections. Regardless of the *shinigami* theory, however, the Catbus is a faithful helper to Totoro, with the ability to journey children to different kinds

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<sup>45</sup> Thomas, *Drawing on Tradition*, 115.

<sup>46</sup> Miyazaki, *My Neighbour Totoro*, 38:50.

<sup>47</sup> Evangelidou, Manga Tokyo, "Is Totoro the God of Death?". <https://manga.tokyo/otaku-articles/is-totoro-the-god-of-death-a-dark-theory-behind-my-neighbor-totoros-story/>

of places. This is evident as Satsuki boards the Catbus, and several destinations, such as “shrine”, “graveyard” and “hospital”, scroll through on the top sign.<sup>48</sup>

In June 2020, the movie *A Whisker Away* (*Nakitai Watashi wa Neko wo Kaburu*) was released by Netflix. A story of unnoticed and unreciprocated young love between Miyo, who also struggles through a divorce and subsequent creation of new familial bonds, and her crush Hinode. Running away from her difficulties of watching her father remarry, she dons a magical *Noh mask* resembling a cat’s face, every day after school, which transforms her into a small, white cat. In her feline form, she spends every afternoon and evening with Hinode, as “Tarō”. Though she yearns to tell Hinode of her true identity and feelings, the safety of the mask and role as a cat is too comforting. This becomes ever clearer as the cat who sold her the mask turns her into a cat for good, casting away her human form completely. The rest of the movie revolves around Miyo and Hinode’s struggle to regain Miyo’s human form. The story highlights the previously mentioned trope of romantic cat transformation, but reversed, and with a happier ending. *A Whisker Away* accentuates the ambiguous boundary between human and cat, and further emphasizes the lingering presence of the folkloric stories and ideas of cats in the popular culture today.<sup>49</sup>

## 2.4 Cats as companion animals in Japan today

With the expansion of the pet industry into a trillion-yen business throughout the 1990s, the current number of pets in Japan exceed those of children under the age of fifteen.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps more important than the number of pets, is the evolution of attitudes towards them.

Nowadays, many pets share living spaces with their owners 24 hours a day, and thus become a more present and indispensable part of their lives’ rhythms. With a closer companionship comes growing attention to their health and satisfaction, and more “heart-to-heart” communication.<sup>51</sup> With the effects of urbanization, changes of the family households, delays of marriage, and the falling birth rate, the need for pets has grown stronger.<sup>52</sup> As the humans’ need transitioned from functionality to intimacy, cats found their status elevated. These changes within the human-animal relationship is visible in the way people speak of their pets.

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<sup>48</sup> Miyazaki, *My Neighbour Totoro*, 1:20:00.

<sup>49</sup> IMDb, “A whisker away”.

<sup>50</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Veldkamp, “The Emergence of “Pets as Family” and the Socio-Historical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan”, 334.

<sup>52</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 7.

More Japanese owners now regard their pets as “family members”, and 68,2% of cat owners consider them as “family members, children, or companions.”<sup>53</sup> More common usage of emotionally charged language, like calling pets “my child” and referring to oneself as “mommy” or “daddy”, further supports this shift. The increasing popularity of dressing pets in human clothes, might further accentuate the continued blurring of these boundaries between pet companion and family member. In similar notion to Tama and her work uniform, the clothing anthropomorphizes the pet, underlining this shift. The occurrence of the term “companion animal” in publications and media is also increasing. Following this trend, sociologist Ōmura Eishō saw the need to coin the term “neofamilism”, a term that includes nonhuman animals into the human family.<sup>54</sup> In addition to the emergence of the nuclear family and the decline of the birth rate, Ōmura mentions the growing society of elders in Japan as an important factor for the transition. Elderly couples purchasing pets to help fill the emptiness of the home after their children move out, is one of many examples of increasing pet kinship.<sup>55</sup>

How humans treat their pet companions also tells us of their bond with them. The wish to maintain this bond after our pets’ passing, strengthens the claims of the aforementioned shift. Posthumous rituals for pets, such as cremation or burial, has become increasingly popular in Japan. Simultaneously, animal memorial rites are not a new concept in Japanese culture. Posthumous care to avoid spiritual vengeance, or as prayer for good, draws parallels to the Japanese folklore.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, rites in relation to hunting and whaling most likely emerged during the early modern period.<sup>57</sup> With regards to whaling, we know that Buddhist memorial rites (*kuyō*) were performed in order to prevent a killed whale from turning into a ghost.<sup>58</sup> Rites included a posthumous name (*kaimyō*) being inscribed on a memorial tablet (*ihai*). Within the hunting culture, animal rites were prevalent in order to avoid and protect against vengeful spirits.

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<sup>53</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 5.

<sup>55</sup> Veldkamp, “The Emergence of “Pets as Family” and the Socio-Historical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan”, 344.

<sup>56</sup> Veldkamp, “The Emergence of “Pets as Family” and the Socio-Historical Development of Pet Funerals in Japan”, 335.

<sup>57</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 56.

<sup>58</sup> Kalland, *Unveiling the Whale*, 156.

The emerging industry of pet memorial rites, however, is centred on maintaining the already established and good relationship between owner and pet. In contrast to the utilitarian and negative association to animal memorial rites, pet memorial rites are largely individualized and personal, with kinship at its core.<sup>59</sup> This rising demand for after-death care for companion animals in Japan shows how far cats' roles in human-animal relationships have evolved.

All of these different perspectives on cats we have reviewed so far, inevitably shape how they are perceived. This includes our feline friend Tama. Simply spoken, she is a cat who saved a rural train line. However, the cat envelopes a multitude of perspectives, roles, and associations. She has never been claimed to be merely a cat, but could she ever have been “just” anything? She is a creature of mystery, feared and loved, a being of worship, a cuddly friend. All of these elements affect how she is viewed, what she means to us as humans, and consequently also affects what she can do. Furthermore, it contributes towards explaining the hidden figures and experiences behind the reinvigoration of the Kishigawa line. Finally, Tama continues to play with these boundaries, as she can be categorized in more roles still, transgressing her imagined limitations.

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<sup>59</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 88.

### 3 Cats and Trains: Tama's Local Tourism

As it comes to a halt, I board the white, whiskered train. Creaking and squeaking, the 30 minute ride feels rugged and unrefined, a stark contrast to the smoother trains in the bigger cities. The scenery of green field and rural neighbourhood areas, accompanied by the steady clicking soundtrack of metal wheels on rail, provides a sense of calm to my excited state, on my journey to witness my research subject first-hand. I am sharing cart with two children and their mother, who luckily contains none of their excitement, unlike me and my somewhat forced self-restraint, whilst they explore the cat-packed interior of the train. Tapestry, seats, and banners, all tributing our feline friend. Small lights shaped as cats, one paw raised and pointed, alert ears. "Next and final stop, Kishi Station". Their excitement flares once more, as does mine. "Do you think she will be there today?" they eagerly ask their mother, who assures them she probably will. With a breath and a smile, I step out on the platform, to bright sunlight and buzzing of cicadas.

#### 3.1 Defining Tama as tourist attraction

Following the immediate media coverage of Tama's appointment as stationmaster, people flocked to visit her and see the feline official for themselves. With new visitors came an influx of money, facilitating the revitalization of the Kishigawa line. In short, she became a tourist attraction, for both domestic and international tourists. However, to reach the depth of our discussion, tourism, and how Tama might fit into that suit, warrants some explanation. In their book, *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, John Urry and Jonas Larsen suggest numerous points and criteria characterising tourism and tourist experiences, through which they coin the titular term "gaze". To summarize, tourism and tourist relationships involve aspects of physical movement and transportation; recreational experiences contra professional, labour related, or otherwise regular or organised experiences; and how these experiences must provide encounters which are distinct from the latter. As employed by a train line, Tama, in many ways, exists in an ambiguous space between. She transports people by default, but this includes the citizens of Kishigawa, for which Tama's train line is their primary and regular means of travel. Simultaneously, the station is located in the rural outskirts, where the otherwise most common direction of travel would be from, towards central Wakayama, rather than to. As such, she is responsible for the attraction of a significant number of tourists, taking them on a journey off the beaten path of where they normally would be headed.

The more pressing question we must answer, however, is why they make this journey. A world of history of zoos and safaris can easily show us that travelling in order to witness exotic animals is and has been a popular branch of tourism – and Tama is no ordinary cat. Nevertheless, Urry and Larsen explain that objects of tourism are so chosen for what they express in terms of anticipation. They present an experience of fantasy and daydreaming, away from the everyday and what is customary, a fantasy which includes surroundings as well as main attractions. This anticipation is continuously built and reaffirmed by different means.<sup>60</sup>

Tama's media history shows she has been presented on TV, as well as in magazine and newspaper articles multiple times. Furthermore, her official Twitter account provides daily updates of videos and pictures, paired with written messages supposedly authored by Tama herself, or Nitama currently, giving followers a consistent and "direct" sense of connection. At the same time, just as Tama is no ordinary cat, neither are her vessels ordinary trains. These trains have extraordinary themes and designs, her station has ears. Thus, the train ride, the experience of the journey itself, is a constant, and perhaps the most important, anticipation builder of what awaits you upon arrival. Additionally, the rural experience of both landscape and train is an integral part of the encounter in and of itself, as an element of nostalgia takes effect, as we will explore later in this chapter.

Finally, Urry and Larsen continue, the tourist gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs.<sup>61</sup> This includes both semiotics and physical objects. Such signs in media, and the fantasy they paint us of what we hope our experience to be, build our anticipation from afar. The typical example would be imagery of a couple in the perpetually romantic atmosphere of Paris, exposure to which makes us long for the same. Likewise, the physical collection of trinkets and objects related to our attraction in question, provide us with tangible representations of these fantasies, as well as our memories of the experience once we return to the everyday. The Tama experience is rich with such signs, with the interaction with the stationmaster herself standing as the cornerstone among them, as one is exposed to images of her being held and cuddled. Souvenirs and merchandise are abundant,

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<sup>60</sup> Urry and Larsen, «Theories», 4.

<sup>61</sup> Urry and Larsen, «Theories», 4.

providing tactility among the signs, as well as a commodification of the experience, yet another aspect we will give a closer look. Meanwhile, many of these playful cues point to her being as cat companion, which bring certain connotations and hopes for the visitors' own time with her. However, these anticipations of interaction are rarely met in full, as is often the case with the fantasies of tourism. Nitama oversees the station from a locked glass room most days, and visitors do not get to make any physical contact with her.

During my days on Kishi station, I observed several tourist groups who came to see Nitama. One of the first days happened to be Autumn Equinox, which meant many would have the day off. As September month is not high season, as the station employees reported, there was more of a slow flow of visitors, as opposed to massive and sudden crowds. Autumn Equinox provided a steady stream of small groups of visitors: high schoolers, a parent with children, or adults in pairs. Similar for all of these groups were that they arrived by using one of the Kishigawa line's trains, interacted with Nitama, mostly by taking pictures of her and trying to get her attention, and bought several souvenirs before leaving the station. Visitation time per visitor rarely spanned more than an hour.

The following days were regular workdays, and the constant flow diminished as a result. However, to my surprise, more of the larger groups visited Nitama during those days. Organized tourist groups, led by a flag-holding guide, were more frequent, and seemed to come in different varieties. A few elementary school classes also came by, swooning over Nitama's cuteness. One group that caught me off-guard in particular, was the huge mass of salarymen who came in during day three. The sun was scorching that day, and they all crammed into the rather narrow space in front of Nitama's glass window. This massive wall of suited black and white was extremely enthusiastic, all vying for the perfect picture of the oblivious, sleeping cat, before rushing off with hurriedly bought souvenirs. What all these large tourist groups share, as opposed to the pairs of high schoolers, is the feeling of acute haste. Much like a whirlwind, they came, saw, and left, seemingly off to their next destination.

### 3.2 Kinokawa city and Tama's tourist gaze

A large part of a tourist experience is the act of "gazing". Urry and Larsen define the concept of gazing or "gaze" as: When we 'go away' we look at the environment with interest and

curiosity. It speaks to us in ways we appreciate, or at least we anticipate that it will do so. In other words, we gaze at what we encounter”.<sup>62</sup> This gaze is not fixed and will vary with historical periods and according to different classes, genders, ages, and ethnicities. As “[t]here is no single tourist gaze”<sup>63</sup>, both Tama and the city surrounding her, Kinokawa, provide their own unique gaze. What Kinokawa and Tama have to offer visitors, how they are gazed, gives us an idea of who their tourists are. What kind of experiences are they looking for? Do Tama and Kinokawa’s gazes coincide with each other?

Kinokawa is a part of Wakayama prefecture, in the Kansai region of Honshu, and borders Osaka, Mie, and Nara prefectures. Wakayama prefecture encapsulates big cities and areas, all renowned in different categories. The Official Wakayama Travel Guide website<sup>64</sup> encourages you to: “Escape the hectic pace of modern life. Discover Wakayama’s laid-back rhythm, unspoilt landscapes and wide range of activities”.<sup>65</sup>

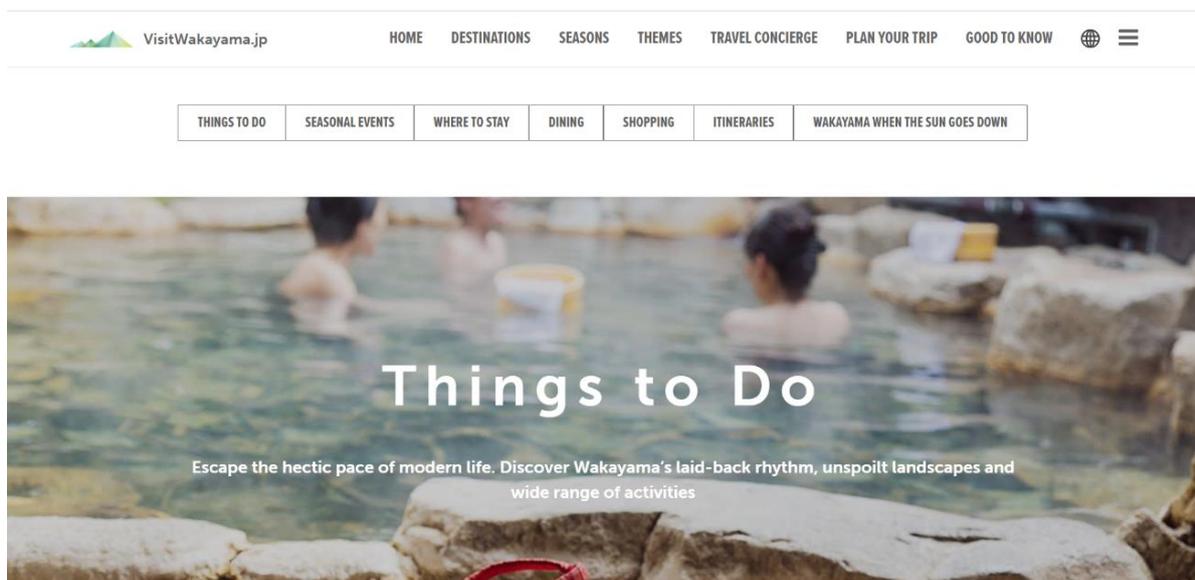


Figure 2: Screenshot of The Official Wakayama Travel Guide-website. Picture as screenshot from: <https://en.visitwakayama.jp/travel-concierge/>

Marketing strategies focusing largely on “power spots” (*pawāsupotto*), which refers to places embodying a sense of spirituality,<sup>66</sup> like world heritage sites and pilgrimage routes, have been heavily present in Japan since 2005 and peaked in 2010.<sup>67</sup> Wakayama prefecture practically breathes this strategy, and alongside local culinary exclusives, a cool and hip tourist

<sup>62</sup> Urry and Larsen, «Theories», 2.

<sup>63</sup> Urry and Larsen, «Theories», 3.

<sup>64</sup> The Official Wakayama Travel Guide, “Front Page”.

<sup>65</sup> The Official Wakayama Travel Guide “Travel Concierge”.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, “Power Spots and the Charged Landscape of Shinto”, 147.

<sup>67</sup> Carter, “Power Spots and the Charged Landscape of Shinto”, 148.

experience is just fingertips away. Though Kinokawa finds itself within Wakayama prefecture, a lot of the bigger tourist sites are not located in this city. As a result, Kinokawa has had to customize their gaze, to a certain degree. To explore Kinokawa’s tourist gaze, I have used the official tourist guide for Kinokawa city, and combined it with my own experience as a tourist when I visited Kishi station.

Kishigawa used to be a municipality of its own, but in 2005 the five municipalities Kishigawa, Kokawa, Momoyama, Naga, and Uchita merged and formed Kinokawa city. In similar notion to the Wakayama travel guide, Kinokawa city’s official tourist webpage highlights local produce and spirituality, generally through pilgrimage routes or temples. However, the aesthetics and wordings carry a different presentiment all together.



Figure 3: Screenshot of The Kinokawa City Tourism Association-webpage. Picture as screenshot from: <https://www.kanko-kinokawa.jp/>

The dominating presence of pink and colourful, thick fonts, accompanied by the illustrated mascots, the “Puru Puru girls” (*purupuru musume*), showcase a distinctly cuter aesthetic. These local mascots, or yuru kyara, each represent a piece of fruit that Kinokawa is known for. In fact, if we read through Kinokawa’s “Sweetrip” city guide, it becomes evident that fruit is a big part of the city’s marketing strategy:

Fruits grown in Kinokawa are ready for harvest all year long. Known as the land of fruits, no matter what season of the year you visit, you will find seasonal produce. Enjoy the taste of

freshly-picked fruits and savor the delicious flavor of dishes made with seasonal ingredients to feel sweet inside and out.<sup>68</sup>

The guide is packed with fruit, from background to pictures. From detailed descriptions of peaches and strawberries, to special features like “Fruit Dining”, including fruit burgers, sandwiches, sushi, and even pasta. From January through May, tourists can enjoy strawberry picking, which is deemed one of Kinokawa’s specialties. The uniquely delicious sweetness and bright red colour defines these strawberries originally grown in Kishigawa.<sup>69</sup> This famed speciality is directly connected to Tama, which is usually visible as part of most illustrations of her. Both Tama’s and Nitama’s hats, which they mostly use during events, have a strawberry pin at the front. In the pamphlet you receive with your ticket before riding the Kishigawa line, strawberry picking is part of the featured attractions. Additionally, one of the line’s themed trains is known as the “Strawberry Train” (*ichigo den*), a white and red train, with strawberry-themed seats and interior. Collaborations with the local produce is an important factor to this success story, as it ties the surrounding areas and businesses together with the tourists visiting to primarily see Tama the stationmaster. Culinary connections are made to the rest of the prefecture as well, with the unveiling of the “Pickled Plum Train” (*umeboshi den*) in 2016. Umeboshi from Wakayama, more specifically from Nanko, is considered a high-quality *ume*, an apricot-like fruit, often translated to Japanese plum, with its thin skin and plump flesh.<sup>70</sup>

Food tourism focusing on seasonal variations has a long tradition in Japanese culture, and experiences with food is considered “a must do” for Japanese tourists. Alongside seasonality comes the concept of *meibutsu*, “the idea of famous things being associated with a local place and culture”.<sup>71</sup> Kim Sangkyun and Chieko Iwashita divide current theories of food tourism within three different streams: 1) Focusing on the role of local food production as economic factor for its region, 2) food as the central or supporting experience at the tourist location, and 3) food as a marker of the cultural identity for its region.<sup>72</sup> In Kinokawa’s case all streams are applicable for their approach to food tourism. The “Sweetrip”-guide is intensely loaded with fruit experiences and activities, all found within the borders of Kinokawa, differing with the

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<sup>68</sup> Kinokawa “Sweetrip”, 01.

<sup>69</sup> The Official Wakayama Travel Guide, “Strawberry picking”.

<sup>70</sup> The Official Wakayama Travel Guide, “Umeboshi”.

<sup>71</sup> Sangkyun and Iwashita, “Cooking identity and food tourism”, 90.

<sup>72</sup> Sangkyun and Iwashita, “Cooking and identity and food tourism”, 91.

seasons. By viewing the collaborations Tama has with some of these products, such as the strawberry and the umeboshi, the economic argument gains further strength. Tama, who brought in a substantial number of tourists and money during her reign, had distinct connections to the strawberries of the surrounding community. The ichigo-den is anything but discreet, and a clear reminder of the region's local produce. The same applies to the umeboshi-den, even though it was designed after Tama's passing. Quite literally connecting the city to its prefectural specialities, while still holding on to the clear local theme of fruit, is a clever and well-executed idea.

In Tama's case, we find food to be the supporting experience on Kishi station. As a souvenir, one would perhaps bring home some Tama umeboshi, but most visitors reaching the Kishigawa line's final stop will have Tama as their prioritized motivation. Finding snacks and local products on train stations is quite common in Japan<sup>73</sup>, with the strong commuting culture. This emphasizes the ambiguous role Tama and Kishi station serves, as both tourist destination and commuting point. However, for general tourists to Kinokawa who are not travelling to see Tama, the fruit experience might be the deciding factor. Additionally, I think it is safe to say that these local fruits make up an integral part of Kinokawa's regional identity. Momoyama Local Speciality Center, *momo* meaning peach in Japanese, focuses on the Arakawa no Momo-peaches and processed products of it, such as *yōkan*, a sweet bean confection.<sup>74</sup> Further, by twisting one of Japan's most famed culinary dishes, sushi, to include local fruit instead of fish, a regional identity is formed through both ties and clear distinctions to the national identity. This is Japan, Kinokawa style. Zooming in closer, food is considered a powerful function in the constructing and shaping of one's own identity:

Issues of taste, image, freshness, experience and quality of food are now recognized as important, not only because of the role of food in the local economy, but also because what, why and how we as tourists eat, says something about ourselves, why we travel and the society we live in.<sup>75</sup>

Consequently, our food experiences tell of both the gaze with which a tourist views the destination at hand, and how we can understand the needs of each individual tourist.

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<sup>73</sup> Sangkyun and Iwashita, "Cooking and identity and food tourism", 90.

<sup>74</sup> The Official Wakayama Travel Guide, "JA Kinokawa Momoyama Tokusan Center".

<sup>75</sup> Sangkyun and Iwashita, "Cooking identity and food tourism", 91.

In addition to the seasonal freshness and meibutsu, wellness through locally produced organic cosmetics is accentuated in the “Sweetrip”-guide. Skin lotion made with peach extract and scalp massages using enzymes from fruit tie the fruit theme tighter together.

**Kinokawa Fruit Life**

Kinokawa fruits are rich in nutrients.  
Eat many fruits that contain vitamins and minerals that most people are deficient in to nourish your body and soul!

**β-cryptoxanthin Vitamin C** (from Hassaku)

**Folic acid Vitamin C** (from Strawberry)

**Catechin Potassium** (from Peach)

**Pectin Calcium** (from Fig)

**Vitamin C Potassium** (from Kiwi)

**Citric acid B vitamins** (from Orange)

**Jihenjo Chaya Karabira's Fruit Enzyme drink**  
This enzyme drink is made from seasonal fruits to offer a refreshing sweetness and mouthfeel. The consumption of enzymes before meals helps promote digestion and increase metabolism.

**Collaboration of Kinokawa Fruits Tourism and Momotani Juntentan Peach Handcream**  
Formulated with an extract from peaches grown in Kinokawa, this hand lotion has the pleasant scent of peaches. The scent and design were decided in user polls.

**Etoile's Fragrance organic Cosmetics**  
Made with organic fruits carefully grown by contract farmers of Wakayama, these plant-derived cosmetic products are gentle on the skin and surround you with the rich aroma of fruits, offering exquisite relaxation.

**Organic Hassaku Shampoo**  
This shampoo is made with hassaku oranges for which Kinokawa is known as the top producer in Japan. The extract from hassaku oranges penetrates the hair shaft to make the hair silky smooth.

**Skin Lotion Made with Arakawa Peach Extract**  
Made lavishly using the brand peach, Arakawa no Momo, without perfume, artificial colors, or preservatives, this facial toner is gentle on the skin and the environment.

**Hair Produce Alive's Scalp Massage Using Fruit enzymes**  
After applying fruit enzymes to soften the scalp, a scalp treatment with carbonated water and a massage are given to remove dirt and rejuvenate the scalp. (Reservation required.)

**Bath with Mandarin oranges Floating in the water**  
Bath with orange peels as a bath additive. A popular way to warm up and have smooth skin!

**How to make an orange peel bath**  
Tightly pack dried orange peels inside a finely-woven, cylinder-shaped laundry net (about 30 small Unshu oranges). Put the bagged orange peels in a bathtub with hot water and cover with a basin after removing the air. Leave it for about eight hours to half a day. If the bathwater cannot be reheated, fill the tub with hot water about one-third full in the morning and add more hot water at night. Please be sure to remove the orange peels after half a day and drain the bathwater on the same day because fermentation will continue to advance.

Figure 4: The Kinokawa Fruit Life, from the Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”. Photo from: [http://www.city.kinokawa.lg.jp/kanko/pdf/guide\\_english.pdf](http://www.city.kinokawa.lg.jp/kanko/pdf/guide_english.pdf)

This need for wellness connects to the healing industry, which blossomed in Japan during the 1990's. Following the Lost Decade with the burst of the economic bubble, the Kōbe earthquake, and Aum Shinrikyō sarin gas attack in 1995, Japan found itself in a precarious state.<sup>76</sup> The end of the 1980s was a short-lived period of lavish living and collective hysteria, that very suddenly vanished with the crash of the stock market.<sup>77</sup> Though the unemployment rates did not sky-rocket, the human toll was substantial. Huge mortgages on properties with plummeting value, growing suicide rates as well as numbers of homeless men, reveal a stunning degree of hardship.<sup>78</sup> As a reaction to this heightened level of stress, overwork, and impact on people's mental and physical health, the interest for products, activities, and

<sup>76</sup> Plourde, “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan”, 119.

<sup>77</sup> Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Kingston, *Contemporary Japan*, 27.

services relieving stress grew.<sup>79</sup> Responding to the high demand, the *iyashi* industry answered. Translating to “healing”, *iyashi* also carries the connotation of mental, emotional, and physical soothing and mending.<sup>80</sup> Soothing, and its associated vocabulary, is another large part of the marketing image of Kinokawa. The organic cosmetics offer “exquisite relaxation” and “rejuvenates” the scalp.<sup>81</sup> Even in the “Sweetrip”-guide’s introduction of Tama, the headline reads “Feel at ease with the stationmaster cat at Kishi Station”.<sup>82</sup> Scenery and nature are not excluded from this, and the guide provides two full pages featuring “[p]laces of healing after the sun sets”.<sup>83</sup> The mentioning of a renowned physician, Hanaoka Seishū, continues to support this healing vision. Born in 1760, when there was no way to eliminate pain during surgery, he successfully completed a general anaesthetic, composed mainly of *tsūsensan*, a type of flower.

Though we will revisit the concrete connection between Tama and *iyashi* in the following chapter, it is safe to say that healing is an essential part to Kinokawa’s tourist gaze. Although the everyday tourist journeys to see Tama through the gaze she has been narrated through, there is another important part to this story of “the cat who saved a rural train line”. Everything does not lie entirely with Tama or the cats, but also with the trains, as mentioned by Keiko Yamaki, the executive of Ryobi, the company that now owns Wakayama Electric Railway.<sup>84</sup> The need to revive or save that which threatens to disappear, in this case the train line, is an important aspect in the creation of this story.

### 3.3 The rural trains of Japan through Marilyn Ivy’s *Discourses of the Vanishing*

During the course of Japan’s history and periods, both tourism, as well as travel in general, has changed. In her book, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, Marilyn Ivy writes that “[t]ravel existed in the pre-Tokugawa period primarily as a form of religious practice or an occupational necessity”.<sup>85</sup> The Tokugawa period, and the advance of the market economy it carried with it, showed an increase in pilgrim voyages among a larger portion of the

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<sup>79</sup> Watts, “In a climate of overwork, Japan tries to chill out”.

<sup>80</sup> Robinson, “Finding healing through animal companionship in Japanese animal cafés”, 191.

<sup>81</sup> Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”, 08.

<sup>82</sup> Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”, 11.

<sup>83</sup> Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”, 21-22.

<sup>84</sup> Goss, «The cat who saved a rural rail line». *BBC*. 22.05.2019. <http://www.bbc.com/travel/story/20190522-the-cat-who-saved-a-japanese-rail-line>.

<sup>85</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 86.

population, compared to earlier periods, albeit class remained a restrictive factor. With a more robust economy, more people felt the need and opportunity for recreational travel, facilitating the improvement of the means of doing so. The Meiji period saw the construction of railroads, and Tokyo expanding to become a contemporary marvel. Simultaneously, while approaching the 1970s, the flip side of the coin saw rural areas depopulated and in ruin, struggling with the aftermath and pollution of such break-neck industrial growth and urbanization. With a concentrated view on this specific period, Ivy's book unpacks the Japan National Railway's strategy to puff new life into rural train lines by motivating domestic travel. What she reveals, of identity, journey, and nostalgia, provides the understructure of, and framework for the case of the Kishigawa line, and the story of Tama.

During the year of the World Expo in Osaka in 1970, the Japan National Railway conceived and set life to their "Discover Japan" campaign. This particular year, and the very first World Expo to be hosted by an Asian country, has by many been marked as "the peak of high-level economic growth", and "a crucial year in Japan's post-war history".<sup>86</sup> In anticipation of the expo, railway lines across the country were expanded, including local lines. The significance it had on Japan's infrastructure cannot be understated. However, the end of the expo would bring an equally anticipated and dramatic decrease of travellers. To prevent what could potentially spell a crisis for both railways and their related industries, the Japan National Railway employed the Dentsu advertising agency to design a nationwide campaign to encourage domestic travel. The result was "Discover Japan", a campaign which would run for eight consecutive years, an achievement which blows the normal six months life expectancy of advertisements way out of the water. It was followed by two similar campaigns, "Discover Japan II" and "Exotic Japan". As Ivy so eloquently states, "Discover Japan was the first highly visible, mass campaign urging Japanese to discover what remained of the premodern past in the midst of its loss".<sup>87</sup>

Unlike previous campaigns, Discover Japan forwent the iconic, famous, and "usual" travel destinations and attractions, in favour of the small, obscure, and non-famous. During their research, the advertising agency had discovered for themselves how "few people had ever embarked on a "real" trip (*tabirashii tabi*), a trip that would embody all those aspects of

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<sup>86</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 94.

<sup>87</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 90.

spiritual self-discovery implied in *tabi*".<sup>88</sup> They concluded their discovery with a redefinition of *tabi* as "everything society is not: it is the natural, the free, the rural, the humane, the non-ordinary".<sup>89</sup> What this entails, as the campaign in essence exposed an intrinsic gravitational pull towards rural Japan, is that *tabi* does not exclusively involve what we see, but includes elements of nostalgia, in the light of urbanization and westernization after the post-war era. As to what this elusive term, nostalgia, is, anthropologist Millie Creighton explains that "it involves a 'collective search for identity', which 'looks backward rather than forward, for the familiar rather than the novel, for certainty rather than discovery'".<sup>90</sup> Svetlana Boym also draws on this idea of collective identity, and distinguishes nostalgia as "the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory".<sup>91</sup>

We see this reflected in what one of the executives of the Dentsu agency realized to be at the heart of their campaign, namely, the sense of discovering one-self – Discover Japan became parallel to "Discover Myself".<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, this idea of self-discovery takes place in the Japanese landscape. In traversing it, you are to not only discover, but rediscover lost, yet genuine pieces of who you really are, and in doing so, rediscover what Japan really is, in its rustic authenticity compared to its current and everyday modernity – and vice versa. Particularly, in an attempt at recentring after the post-war American occupation and influence, this represents unearthing that which is not urban and central, or Americanized, but rather the Japanese *kokoro* (translating to heart, mind, and spirit), reflected in one-self. As a result, Discover Japan became something much larger than a mere advertisement for, essentially, trains, and rather for the rediscovery of lost elements of Japan.

With the deterioration, and fear of the ultimate loss, of the rural train lines, the Dentsu agency devised a campaign to spark travel to the rural areas. Even though the strategy and devices for marketing the Discover Japan campaign and Tama and her trains are not necessarily the same, the former's long reign has been a significant contributing factor in laying the foundations for the Kishigawa line's own popularity. During the eight years of their extremely successful campaign, people all across the country felt encouraged to make use of

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<sup>88</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 97.

<sup>89</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 105.

<sup>90</sup> Creighton, "Consuming Rural Japan", 242.

<sup>91</sup> Boym, "Nostalgia and its Discontents", 9.

<sup>92</sup> Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 105.

local railways in order to rediscover both themselves and Japan. As a result, they underwent a reforming of their individual identities through a collective identity. Through the powerful notions of nostalgia, these associations to rural train lines linger to this day, and affect how they are experienced. As Boym comments, “[t]he fantasies of the past, determined by the need of the present, have a direct impact on the realities of the future”.<sup>93</sup> When the Kishigawa train line threatened to be lost, more than twenty years after this campaign’s retirement, the associations connected to this narrative reawakened, as did the yearning need to revitalise what risked being lost forever. Consequently, the present need to save this train line, blends with the past fantasies portrayed through campaigns like “Discover Japan”, and has a direct impact on the future for the Kishigawa line. As such, the backdrop of vanishing train lines in Japan affects and motivates Tama’s narrative, “The cat who saved a rural train line”.

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<sup>93</sup> Boym, “Nostalgia and its Discontents”, 8.

## 4 The Commodified Cats of Japan

Entering the Tama shop on Kishi station excludes all possible doubt of Tama's importance to the company. The narrow shop is bursting with Tama's illustrations, from top to bottom. Pictures of the "Honourable Eternal Station Master" adorn the walls, and shelf upon shelf is stacked with Tama merchandise. Both real-life images and illustrations embellish the various goods: document folders for children's homework, a mobile strap to personalize your flip-phone, sugar cookies with strawberry print as a Tama themed souvenir treat. Here, whilst gazing upon and interacting with the stationmaster, one has the ability to bring a part of her home, in a pocketed form.

### 4.1 Commodified cat services in Japan

Historically, cats and animals have often found themselves as commodified beings, both as objects of gift-giving and pet-keeping. In addition to this, the market for buying cat services, such as through the previously mentioned cat cafés, has increased greatly during the last decade. The cat café business originally started in Taiwan in 1998, and Japan's first café, *Neko no Jikan* (Cats' Hour), opened in Osaka in 2004.<sup>94</sup> Combining cups of coffee with animal kinship was a concept made to stay for the Japanese, and the timing was just right. As already touched upon, the need for healing had increased, due to heightened levels of stress and uncertainty in the Japanese society. The iyashi boom brought forth the demand for stress relievers, such as spa trips to *onsen*, hot springs, or aromatherapy.<sup>95</sup> Some also draw on materialist terms, such as pet restrictions in many Japanese apartments, and the long working hours making pet-keeping difficult.<sup>96</sup>

The feeling of healing, or iyashi, is defined more as an affect, than an emotion: it is "a certain state of the body along with a certain mode of thinking".<sup>97</sup> As such, the feline inhabitants of the cat cafés, much like Tama, perform a kind of labour or service for the human visitors. This affective labour is deemed immaterial, and involves feelings of healing, relaxation, calmness, and excitement.<sup>98</sup> The cats evoke these sensations through being touched, gazed upon, and played with, in the various cafés. In fact, animal relationships have been proved to

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<sup>94</sup> Nijjima, "Chats, Cats and a Cup of Tea", 270.

<sup>95</sup> Plourde, "Cat Cafés. Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan", 119.

<sup>96</sup> Plourde, "Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan", 118.

<sup>97</sup> Robinson, "Finding healing through animal companionship in Japanese animal cafés", 192.

<sup>98</sup> Plourde, "Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan", 116.

reduce physical stress and feelings of loneliness and isolation.<sup>99</sup> Just like Tama, these signs of interaction and kinship seem to be the attraction for visitors. According to Nijjima's study on cat cafés in Japan, "Chats, Cats And A Cup Of Tea", most people came in looking for physical contact with the cats.<sup>100</sup> During my time at Kishi station, the shop keeper of the Tama museum mentioned Nitama rarely roams free outside her glass cage during off-season, and noted that coming to see her is not a petting session. Yet, many of the visual signs, found both on Twitter and in other media coverage, show both Nitama and Yontama out and about, with more possibilities for interactions. Of all the people who came to see her during my field research, the only outsider who was allowed physical contact with her was myself, due to the nature of my visit.

However, none of the tourists seemed disappointed in this lack of physical interaction, apart from the singular poor lady who witnessed me playing with and feeding her, but was subsequently denied the same herself. Merely seeing her and taking plenty of cute pictures seemed to suffice for most travellers. This also coincides with what Nijjima further reports from the cat cafés, that once inside, many were content with just watching the cats, and only about half of the customers actually engaged in play with the animals.<sup>101</sup> Play is an important part of leisure and stress relief, and is by no means limited to children only. *Asobi*, or play, has undergone semantic changes within the Japanese culture. At earliest appearances, *asobi* had different associations than today, as "the cultural concept of play was closely related to religious rituals".<sup>102</sup> In post-war Japan, however, play came to reflect the division between work and leisure, and in larger degree referred to all leisure activities.<sup>103</sup> As such, in addition to interactions like physical touch and viewing, play is an important factor of the *iyashi* that residents of cat cafés can provide for their human clientele.

Furthermore, this concept of play is another cornerstone of the Tama experience, and part of the imagery that envelopes her. Playfulness is of course an inherent trait of cats in general, and it permeates not only our ideas of what will meet us once we arrive, but our surroundings as well, on board the trains themselves. For instance, riding the "Toy Train", (*omo den*), an energetically red train, will provide you with a wide selection of toys to be at your disposal

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<sup>99</sup> Robinson, «Finding healing through animal companionship in Japanese animal cafés», 192.

<sup>100</sup> Nijjima, "Chats, Cats And A Cup Of Tea", 275.

<sup>101</sup> Nijjima, "Chats, Cats And A Cup Of Tea", 275-276.

<sup>102</sup> Daliot-Bul, *License to Play*, 2.

<sup>103</sup> Daliot-Bul, *License to Play*, 12.

while travelling, as well as *gachagacha* machines (capsule-toys). Accompanied by the whimsical illustrations of Tama engaged in playful activities and poses, in either her pamphlet or displayed throughout the Tama-den, the playful associations to the stationmaster are evident. Although this can all be argued to be a child-friendly and -focused experience, with play's long history in Japan<sup>104</sup>, the concept is by no means exclusive to any one age group.

Cat services, like the very popular cat cafés of Japan, draw on the persistent demand for *iyashi* in the Japanese society. Through physical touch, kinship, and play with these feline companions, humans find a sense of soothing and recentring, in an otherwise hectic and stressful life. It is important to mention that, similarly to the Tama experience, there is more to the success of cat cafés than just cats. The café itself is often marketed as a “healing space”, with a distinct focus of feeling at home.<sup>105</sup> Soft furniture, velvety blankets, and blendable background music, are all important factors in the creation of this space exuding of calmness and soothing.<sup>106</sup> Contrary to Tama, however, these various cat cafés can only provide this state of *iyashi* for a limited amount of time. Tama, on the other hand, can be brought home with you, in different shapes and forms. Due to her ambiguous being, she has the ability to function as both living cat and mass-produced *kyarakutā*, simultaneously. As a result, where your time sipping coffee in a room of felines at your service can run out, Tama's presence can stay, for as long as you need.

## 4.2 *Iyashi* through Tama the *kyarakutā*

Following her fame, Tama's being was soon commodified further, by having Jowa-Studio illustrating her into drawn, cartoony form. Nevertheless, even though both cat-Tama and her illustrated alias play the role as Kishigawa line's marketing face, they are not one and the same, and a differentiation is necessary. According to Debra Occhi, the category of *kyarakutā*, hereby shortened to *kyara*, is ambiguous and can range from nameless zoomorphic creatures, to Hello Kitty, characters of manga and anime, and even humans who serve in representative roles.<sup>107</sup> She further states that “commercially successful characters are also attributed with *iyashi*, as well as enjoyable (*tanoshimeru*) effects”.<sup>108</sup> Even though *kyara* most

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<sup>104</sup> Daliot-Bul, *License to Play*, 15.

<sup>105</sup> Plourde, “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan”, 121.

<sup>106</sup> Plourde, “Cat Cafés, Affective Labor, and the Healing Boom in Japan”, 123.

<sup>107</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 110.

<sup>108</sup> Occhi, “Woobly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 111.

easily, in terms of role, can be translated to “mascot”, I distinguish between these two terms: The full being of Tama as Kishigawa line’s mascot, and the illustrated one as a kyara. With that in mind, how can we attempt to make this distinction, and define Tama as kyara? In Christine Yano’s *Pink Globalization*, the kyara Hello Kitty goes under the lens, as world famous symbol and icon. In Yano’s definition of kyara, we find that “most kyarakutā are commodities, bought as souvenirs, collectibles, personal icons, and gifts, primarily by females. In other words, kyara circulate through capitalist realms of exchange and social relations of consumption.”<sup>109</sup> Consequently, there are some of these conditions that Tama the living being can not fulfil. None of the Tama-cats are for sale, though their affective services in a sense are, and can neither be brought home as souvenirs, nor treasured as collectibles. This is, however, very possible with Tama the kyara.

The transformation from living being to kyara is not the most common, as most kyara are original characters, but it has happened on a few occasions. The most well-known might be the creation of the kyara “Shishiro”, or Mr. Lion, for the former prime minister Koizumi Jun’ichiro.<sup>110</sup> For Koizumi, this kyarakutā-rization made him more approachable, through his new alias’ endearing appeal. This notion invokes the principle of *migawari*, or surrogacy, which argues that the kyara acts as a stand-in for the real-life being.<sup>111</sup> In simplistic terms, the *dainin* (surrogate) enhances the *honnin* (actual figure) through its own symbolic credibility, creating the effect Yano coins “emergent authenticity”. This effect affects Tama as well, as playful illustrations of her kyara enhance her association as playful being in real life.

Similarly, having a kyara as representative of a company or institution in order to gain a softer appeal, is by no means unique to Kishi station. The practice, which grew increasingly popular in Japan from the 1980s<sup>112</sup>, can involve both the creation of a new kyara, or the adoption of an already established and well-known figure, such as Hello Kitty. The kyara are most commonly used to distinguish one brand from another, as well as to increase the soft and *kawaii* (cute) sense of appeal. For formal institutions, such as governmental ones, the role of the cute kyara is to “soften(...) their image and message for the general populace”.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, kyara are considered better than humans for promotional work and advertising,

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<sup>109</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 11.

<sup>110</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 63.

<sup>111</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 64.

<sup>112</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 61.

<sup>113</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 61.

as there is no ongoing salary to be paid them. Also, with a fictional figure as the company's face, they find themselves guarded against any personal scandals, which in Japan affect business image greatly.<sup>114</sup> Here, we see the similarities to the commodified cats discussed in this chapter. Akin to the cats of the cat cafés, kyara also perform a sort of affective labour, through their softening and, in a sense, soothing of more serious businesses.

For Tama's transition, however, the case is less contrasted than between Koizumi and Shishiro, or between governmental institutions and cute kyara. Tama is already considered, at least by most, a cute being before her transformation into kyara. Whereas Koizumi in some degree undergoes a zoomorphic transformation, even though Shishiro is not actually a lion, but a man in a lion's costume, Tama merely transitions from real cat to drawn, still identifiable as "herself". Still, as with all caricatures, these images capture parts of her being through specific poses or facial expressions, such as playful or inviting. These specific images fuel the real Tama, the honnin, through migawari, as this illustrated form enhances and fuels the real-life one. Just like Koizumi and formal institutions are found to be more "graspable", kawaii, and less political through their miniaturization<sup>115</sup>, Tama was made physically more graspable through this smaller format.

This miniaturization allows for kyara to inhabit a kind of portable companionship, in what cultural anthropologist Anne Allison calls "pocket intimacy".<sup>116</sup> By simply having *kyarakutā guzzu* (kyarakutā goods) with you, this intimate relation is enhanced, bringing feelings of belonging with it:

Surrounding oneself with kyarakutā creates a nest of comfortable familiarity, both knowable and knowing (...). The convenience of their miniaturization means that that nest is as portable as the cell phone strap in one's purse. In fact, the cell phone strap offers the convenient opportunity of customizing one's surroundings with kyarakutā, turning an everyday appliance into an expression of kyarakutā-based identity. Ownership of kyarakutā guzzu holds forth the possibilities of buying into and creating an intimate relationship with some part of what the figure represents.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Occhi, "Consuming *Kyara* 'Characters'", 85.

<sup>115</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 65.

<sup>116</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 62.

<sup>117</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 62.

As we discussed Tama's function as tourist attraction and the nature of her visitors, it is clear these goods are a significant part of experiencing her. Since she is quite literally plastered all over most people's means of transportation to her, these commodified kyara images already form on the journey. To be able to bring this small portion of the stationmaster home, is an ingenious part of the kyara marketing strategy. Through a tiny pin, or a Tama decorated coffee mug, you can continue your relationship with her, whilst miles away.



Figure 5: Tama earphone jack, found in the Tama shop. Photo by thesis author, during field work in 2018.

With this relationship comes the associations connected to the rest of her being, the fantasy of what she could provide for each visitor as they come to interact with her. Additionally, the items people bring home are not just any kind of items, as “[k]yarakuta refigure the material world into a personalized one”.<sup>118</sup> Functioning as a treasured memento, the trinket brought home reminds of, and emphasizes the need she filled, such as iyashi, by being present in your everyday life. In fact, the healing powers of kyara have been studied, and were found to have psychological benefits, by relaxing the spirit.<sup>119</sup> Adding to this is the culture and tradition of gift exchange, which includes souvenirs. Sanrio, for instance, the company behind Hello Kitty and numerous other famed kyara, considers itself “a purveyor of gifting in Japan”.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>118</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 61.

<sup>119</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 111.

<sup>120</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 47.

The practice of gift giving in Japan is further described this way: “a successful transaction between customer and company is not purely a rational, economic practice; rather, it is part of an ongoing social relationship that accrues with each sale.”<sup>121</sup> Hence, as with the other products marketed by Kinokawa, one can also share this local healing, by bringing home souvenirs after trips.

However, Tama is not any kyara, she is the Kishigawa line’s mascot and Kishi’s stationmaster. As opposed to more famous icons, such as kyara like “Kumamon”, Kumamoto’s black bear mascot, or Pokémon, who’s fame can overshadow the product<sup>122</sup>, Tama as specialised kyara, or yuru kyara, has a clear association in regards of both place and product. These yuru kyara are often associated with a specific institution or location, and reflect their regional belonging. This was evident for Kinokawa city as well, with the fruity “Puru Puru girls”. Whereas Hello Kitty is often argued to be a pure product, based on brand alone<sup>123</sup>, and as such lacking any associated narrative, yuru kyara like Tama are made to be full of connotations. As we have discovered during the thesis so far, part of Tama’s attraction relies on several different aspects connected to both her being as cat, and as saviour of parts of Japanese culture deemed to be “lost”. Within her merchandise, be it a pen or a box of umeboshi, one also buys a part of her narrative and what she and this narrative represents. As opposed to blank, pure products, part of her appeal is the struggle she represents and the challenges she has helped the company and local community overcome.

Kyara loaded with hardship has become increasingly popular in Japan, which is evident through the recent creations of the country’s biggest kyara producers, Sanrio company. With the making of kyara like “Gudetama”, a depressed anthropomorphic egg yolk, in 2013, and “Aggretsuko”, the cute red panda office lady, dealing with the daily trials and tribulations of the Japanese work environment, Sanrio fulfils its marketing philosophy of mainly responding to consumer wishes, as opposed to creating new desires.<sup>124</sup> However, some have argued that the cute and softening power of kyara “glosses over economic downturns, international controversies, and other hard-core realities”.<sup>125</sup> By wrapping serious issues in cute packaging, one avoids facing the actual seriousness and ramifications of said reality. For Tama’s case,

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<sup>121</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 47.

<sup>122</sup> Occhi, “Consuming Kyara ‘Characters’”, 86.

<sup>123</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 10.

<sup>124</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 101.

<sup>125</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 259.

this is partly relevant, as the train line has reported it is still lacking large numbers of riders each year. As such, even though the Kishigawa line was saved from bankruptcy, Tama's cute narrative glosses over the lingering issues it still struggles with. Additionally, with the knowledge that rural train lines in Japan are struggling in general, Tama's success story can be argued to give a sense of false healing for this national problem.

Though her unique and ambiguous form as both living and illustrated mascot, Tama can transgress boundaries other felines can not. After spending time in her presence, one can bring her home, pocket-sized, and continue feelings of kinship and healing from afar. As opposed to purer and glossier *kyara*, Tama functions specifically as Kishigawa line's own, making her a *yuru kyara*. Consequently, both when visiting her and as she travels home with you, her, and Kishi station's, narrative of hardship is extremely present. In fact, as we have explored, it is exactly the accumulation of these narratives that make up the entirety of our stationmaster.

### 4.3 The *maneki-neko* narrative in relation to Tama

Tama's success story is connected to the narrative and imagery of one of Japan's most heavily commodified cats, the *maneki-neko*, or the beckoning or lucky cat. The lucky cat, with one lifted beckoning paw, is internationally famed, and can be found in shops and various establishments across the globe. Although lucky cats can come in a variety of colours, most *maneki-neko* have elements of a "uniform" in common: 1) They are collared, and their collar often has a bell or medallion; 2) They sit on hind legs, with at least one paw raised. Which paw can vary, and some claim left-handed ones invite money and fortune, while right-handed ones bring in customers<sup>126</sup>; 3) They sometimes hold something in the paw which is not raised, such as a coin or a small drum. Additionally, the white, and original, lucky cats are calico cats.

Referring back to the second chapter, the *maneki-neko* is another cat which has its origins in folkloric legend, and though there are variations to the story, they all share similar vocabularies: A person walking alone suddenly sees a cat sitting on its hind legs, waving and beckoning the person towards it. As the person follows out of curiosity, they barely escape an immediate, life threatening danger. The person then bestows riches on the cat's place of

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<sup>126</sup> Davisson, *Kaibyō: The Supernatural Cats of Japan*, 115.

belonging, and continues to carry a small figurine of a waving cat, as a protective charm. A temple in Tokyo, Gōtoku-ji, claims to be the birthplace of the original lucky cat, and has dedicated entire parts of the temple to abundances of figurines.<sup>127</sup> Though the story bears folkloric roots, as recently as 2016 an updated and illustrated version of the myth was published by Wendy Henrichs, under the title *I am Tama, Lucky Cat: A Japanese Legend*.<sup>128</sup> This particular version tells of the stray calico cat Tama, who is taken in by a monk. Tama describes that the monk had many worries, as “[h]is temple was falling apart”.<sup>129</sup> In the midst of pouring rain, a weary samurai warlord approached the temple, and peculiarly found Tama beckoning at him. Following the cat’s cues, he escapes certain death as lightning strikes in the tree he was resting under. Grateful, he becomes a faithful patron to the temple, restoring it to its glorious condition, soon attracting more people of wealth.

This story might ring a bell, as it is quite akin to our stationmaster’s own narrative. This is hardly accidental. The similarities are plentiful, and, though some might very well coincide, others are deliberate tools of storytelling. First, both cats are strays, taken in by a local, and gaining a newfound association with a certain place. Second, both cats are calico cats, which refers to a tricoloured pattern in the fur, named Tama. Now, Tama is a common cat name in Japan, but the decision to subsequently name all other cats associated with the Kishigawa line and Wakayama Electric Railway company Tama II, Tama III and so forth, is a deliberate choice made by the company themselves. For instance, Tama’s former assistants were not calico cats and were named Miko and Chibi<sup>130</sup>, but neither of these cats succeeded Tama after her passing. As such, the decision to appoint Nitama and Yontama instead, who are both calico, and giving them equal names, emphasizes the image and “spirit”, so to speak, of one particular cat being passed down. In addition, visually she is often posed with one paw raised, like the maneki-neko. Illustrations of her on the Tama-den, as well as on merchandise, includes versions of her beckoning. Further still, on each side of her shrine stand two small, metallic figurines of the beckoning stationmaster, paw raised and medallion around her neck.

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<sup>127</sup> Live Japan, “Gotokuji Temple: Tokyo’s “Lucky Cat” Temple”.

<sup>128</sup> Henrichs, *I am Tama, Lucky Cat*, 2.

<sup>129</sup> Henrichs, *I am Tama, Lucky Cat*, 10.

<sup>130</sup> Tomoaki, *Ekichō tama: Mikeneko tama, densha ni naru*, 5.



Figure 6: Tama featured with one paw raised. Photo by thesis author, during field work in 2018.

Another aspect to this maneki-neko narrative of Tama the stationmaster involves vocabulary, the choice of words with which she is written about, both by media and the company themselves. Most media coverage choose to employ words like “saved”, and even literature published by the company themselves follows this trend, as is evident from one of the titles, “The cat stationmaster Tama: The cat who saved the poor train” (*neko no ekichō tama: binbō densha wo sukutta neko*).<sup>131</sup> Consequently, Tama’s narrative draws intertextually on the maneki-neko narrative, bringing clear connotations from the lucky cat into her story. Even with the cats’ roles as stationmasters, the similarities to Henrich’s retelling becomes more evident:

Each spring, when the cherry trees flower once again, I sit in the grand doorway of our beautiful temple and watch their blossoms dance to the ground. With my paw upheld, I proudly beckon to all who come to worship. I am Tama, Lucky Cat.<sup>132</sup>

Whether you exit the platform next to the late Tama’s shrine, or through the station itself, Kishi’s lucky cat is present, inviting you in.

Finally, the lucky cat narrative draws heavily on some of the notions of cats of mythology we have explored in chapter 2. The mystery revolving the hind legged cat evokes the same ideas

<sup>131</sup> Kojima, *Neko no ekichō Tama: Binbō densha wo sukutta neko*.

<sup>132</sup> Henrichs, *I am Tama, Lucky Cat*, 28-29.

of anthropomorphized cats. Additionally, there is something supernatural to this beckoning cat. How the cat knows that mortal danger, the kind that would have you leave the world of the living, will occur exactly at the spot you are standing, draws parallels to the ideas that cats were seen as messengers of gods. Following this divine intervention, the person who barely escapes with her life carries a small figurine of the beckoning cat with her, as a lucky talisman of sorts. As we have discussed earlier, the buying of small Tama figurines is an important part of her tourist experience, and it is not unthinkable that they function as similar tokens of luck, as well as items for healing.

As commodified beings, cats have the ability to provide healing services to humans. Through their playful demeanour and physical kinship, they function as stress relievers in many cat cafés across Japan. Tama, with her ubiquitous form as both living being and illustrated kyara, can provide a constant connection, through the miniaturization of kyara. This small, pocketed healing can be brought along to all activities and places. As such, she, as opposed to the feline inhabitants of cat cafés, never has to leave your side. Similarly, as tourists are accompanied by her healing powers, her narrative is brought with her as well, and is thus constantly reaffirmed. Her story, and the struggles of the Kishigawa line, are essential parts of her appeal, as opposed to pure product kyara. To purchase Tama merchandise is in effect also to purchase the narrative of the cat who saved the rural train line. In similar notion as with the previously mentioned narratives, the clear connotations to the lucky cat narrative affects Tama and how she is perceived. Just like Henrich's Tama, she watches as the deterioration of her associated home, Kishi station, grows ever more evident, causing grief for the local community. Through her beckoning, and inviting nature, she promotes the revitalization of this home, and functions as the bringer of both people and money. Finally, because of her branding as a lucky cat, trinkets of her are carried with connotations to fortune, similar to charms of good luck.

## 5 Honourable Eternal Stationmaster Tama

On my final day at Kishi station, I enter the Tama shop to buy my *ema*. These small wooden plaques, inscribed with the prayers and wishes of previous visitors, fill the *ema* stand to the brim. After writing my message, I exit the shop and find my way to the platform. Further down, under a cherry tree, stands a modest structure underneath a small *torii*, or wooden gateway. Tama's shrine is surrounded by loose gravel, with stone steps leading under the *torii*, which is adorned with a sign that reads "Tama". On top of a stone pedestal stands the rather small shrine, still traditional and similar in structure to bigger ones. Under its roof are another set of miniature stairs, leading up to a tiny bell and an offering box. On each side of the stairs, two metal figurines depicting Tama stand guard: one paw raised, hat equipped, and medallion around her neck, with a serious look on her face. As I am hanging my *ema*, wishing for the health of my own dog and aid in the writing of this thesis, my departing train arrives. As the train leaves the platform, sending me back towards central Wakayama and eventually home, I get one last look of the eternal stationmaster's final resting place.

### 5.1 From cat companion to kami

With Tama's passing in 2015, she ascended to her final role in her work for Wakayama Electric Railway company: her role as goddess, or *kami*. A shrine was placed on the platform of Kishi station, serving in her memory, and she received the title "Honourable Eternal Stationmaster". The shop of the so-called Tama Museum next door provides both *ema* plaques and Tama *omamori*, small amulets or charms, for sale. These items function as means of connecting to Tama the *kami*, either by writing her a wish or message on the *ema*, or through carrying the small *omamori* with you. This final exploration of Tama the stationmaster focuses on her becoming *kami*. However, rather than to delve into the intricate technicalities of Japanese religion, we turn our gaze towards what this deification does for her already well-established narrative. By 2015, she had served as stationmaster for 8 years, and her playful being had contributed massively to the local economy. Yet, this final apotheosis would be the last and concluding piece of this intricately constructed story. This chapter highlights how this act is a compounded continuation of the other elements of Tama's story we have explored so far, as we decipher the last playful dance of Tama the cat.

As was mentioned in chapter 2, the post-mortem treatment of animals and pets is a convenient indication of how they were viewed and the roles they played during their living lives. With the growing popularity for pet memorial rites, we can understand the deepening bonds between humans and their pets. This is no exception in Tama's case, whose memorialization is a product of the service she did for individuals, the local community, and the railway company. Memorial rites for performing animals, such as zoo animals, is not uncommon in Japan. Ian Miller notes that zoo animals are "live animals [who] embody both labor and commodity"<sup>133</sup>, which is similar to the liminal space Tama finds herself in. According to Ambros, this memorialization enables the animals to continue their performative and educational labour also after their passing.<sup>134</sup> This continuation is evident through several means with Tama. As mentioned in relation to the maneki-neko narrative, Tama's spirit and roles are passed down to her successors, extending her presence even after her death. Additionally, in the illustrated novel "The cat stationmaster Tama: The cat who saved the poor train", published by the railway company themselves in 2016, the final chapter, "Always at this station" (*itsu made mo kono eki de*), is dedicated to Tama's passing.<sup>135</sup> The chapter, partly narrated from the already passed Tama's point of view, depicts the sorrowful president Kojima and Tama's friends struggling with the loss of their stationmaster. After her shrine is raised, on the spot under the *sakura* trees (cherry blossoms), where she can overlook both trains and the station, Kojima and Tama's friends ask her "to please look after them" (*kyō mo watashi tachi wo mimamotteite ne*).<sup>136</sup> Ambros has commented that the shift from vengeful spirits to loving companions, as we saw in chapter 2, has raised the status of pets in Japan.<sup>137</sup> Tama's elevation to divinity emphasizes the great service she has done, as well as the lingering need to maintain both a connection to her, as well as a continuation of her services. Ambros continues that "[o]ne could argue that even though pets are viewed more positively, the shift has diminished the agency attributed to them".<sup>138</sup> That is to say, even after the death of a pet, it remains in its function primarily as companion to humans, as opposed to becoming an autonomous agent. Similarly with Tama, her role as overseer and caretaker, and token of good endures, as we see further highlighted

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<sup>133</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 83.

<sup>134</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 83.

<sup>135</sup> Kojima, *Neko no ekichō Tama: Binbō densha wo sukutta neko*, 130.

<sup>136</sup> Kojima, *Neko no ekichō Tama: Binbō densha wo sukutta neko*, 148.

<sup>137</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 184.

<sup>138</sup> Ambros, *Bones of Contention*, 184.

by the final chapter “Always at this station”. Tama’s watch as stationmaster and serviceable asset for humans does not end post-mortem, but rather it is elevated and emphasized instead.

## 5.2 Tama as pilgrimage destination

Following her death and enshrinement, many travelled to see Tama and pay their respects. As such, even as a non-living entity, she assumed her role as a drawing element for tourists for Kishi station. Adding to the merchandise of the Tama shop, one could now buy ema, and express one’s wishes to Tama as a deity. My own research confirmed that a majority of the smaller groups of tourists took the time and opportunity to purchase and write ema.



Figure 7: Ema-plaques hanging next to Tama's shrine. Photo by thesis author, during field work in 2018.

As a result, she enters the domain of pilgrimage tourism, adding yet another dimension to her tourist gaze. Ian Reader has found that “growth in pilgrim numbers often correlate with the periods of mass media interest in the subject”.<sup>139</sup> With the media coverage that followed the death of Japan’s beloved stationmaster, there is certainly a distinct connection to the many thousands who came to visit the station and her shrine afterwards. Alongside Kinokawa’s and Wakayama’s focus on power spots and pilgrimage routes, Tama’s newly erected shrine fit right in. As opposed to the rest of the world, the popularity and media coverage of power spots in Japan grew throughout the 1990s, despite the backlash following the Aum Shinrikyō incident. Caleb Carter explains this by pointing to the “broad interest in notions of spirituality

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<sup>139</sup> Reader, “Positively Promoting Pilgrimage”, 15.

and the “spiritual realm” and its connotations to “spiritual care”.<sup>140</sup> As evident through the “Sweetrip”-guide, the focus on healing through spiritual means is an essential element to the Kinokawa marketing strategies. A visit to the Kokawa Temple is phrased as an “[e]nd-of-life trip with a 1300-year history in Japan – the Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage to visit thirty-three temples has been certified as a Japan heritage”.<sup>141</sup> Further, following a visit to Kokawa Temple, one can even enjoy “pilgrimage sweets”, elegantly tying together two of the biggest elements of Kinokawa marketing: Food and spiritual healing. Reader also supports us in our claim that the “Discover Japan” campaign was a considerable contributor in the promotion and marketing of pilgrimage travels, adding religious notions to Tama’s railway narrative.

The discourse on spirituality and the impact of power spots has been heightened by what can be described as “the selling of spirituality”.<sup>142</sup> As previously mentioned, this is evident through the promoting of Kinokawa’s goods, including a visit to the stationmaster, as the “Sweetrip”-guide encourages you to “feel at ease” with her.<sup>143</sup> By now being able to share thoughts, wishes, and troubles with Tama as a kami – whilst visiting her shrine, as opposed to her as “just” a cat – a sense of divine ease is achievable.

### 5.3 Tama the pocket-sized kami

When it comes to Tama’s role as kyara, this is also affected by the transition into kami, providing new layers to her already established image. Combining the playful images of her kyara with the religious aspects of a kami, she enters yet another arena of the Japanese culture: The playfulness of religion. Jolyon Thomas introduces the idea of religious play, or *shūkyō asobi*, suggesting it is a fusion of religion and entertainment. George Tanabe Jr. supports this, claiming that “[r]eligion and entertainment, shūkyō and asobi, share the ability of enabling audiences to escape familiar territory and enter into fantasies”.<sup>144</sup> Occhi draws on this relationship as she explains the increase of kyara omamori sold at shrines.<sup>145</sup> Tama’s ascension to divinity adds a new aspect to her own omamori, which we recently connected to her status as lucky symbol for the Kishigawa line. Although the lucky cat narrative already brings otherworldly associations to Tama, becoming a kami outright thoroughly solidifies it.

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<sup>140</sup> Carter, “Power Spots and the Charged Landscape of Shinto”, 150.

<sup>141</sup> Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”, 19.

<sup>142</sup> Carter, “Power Spots and the Charged Landscape of Shinto”, 152.

<sup>143</sup> Kinokawa travel guide, “Sweetrip”, 11.

<sup>144</sup> Tanabe Jr., «Playing with Religion», 98.

<sup>145</sup> Occhi, “Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message”, 114.

There is no longer any question regarding the divine capabilities of lucky cat Tama, and as a result her omamori carries added leverage in its miniature form. The concept of migawari can also apply here, Yano informs us, as anthropomorphic figures can serve as surrogates, and not mere decoration.<sup>146</sup>



Figure 8: Tama omamori, which can be bought inside the Tama shop. Photo by thesis author, during field work in 2018.

Thomas argues, through a lens primarily directed towards manga and anime, that it is not media itself that makes use of, or creates religion, but rather people, like authors, directors and, at the receiving end, audiences.<sup>147</sup> This is relevant for Tama as well, as they, in practical means, are the “human beings who transform spirits into kami, by recognition, veneration and enshrinement”.<sup>148</sup> The Wakayama Electric Railway is a large part of the storytelling of Tama the stationmaster, through promotions and decision making. Another part of this is the audience: the people who are gazing on Tama and her associated narrative. In the audience’s need for healing, through play or spirituality, Tama’s role as provider of these aspects is strengthened further, in a continuously reaffirming cyclical process.

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, the deification of Tama serves as the crowning of all her aspects, in the elaborate creation of her narrative. It holds the gate open for a

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<sup>146</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 66-67.

<sup>147</sup> Thomas, “*Drawing on Tradition*”, 109.

<sup>148</sup> Occhi, “*Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message*”, 115.

continued story, while simultaneously inviting new parts in, as her successors pick up her mantle. Her role as kami accentuates and heightens her already well-established gaze, through the playful ability religion can inhabit. Yet, this also prevents her from being put to rest. The continuous need for her narrative and presence keeps her in service as the “Honourable Eternal Station Master”, even after her passing, as she is bereft of agency. From godly realms, or at the very least through abstract devices of story, she continues to provide sensations of healing, through her surrogate products. As Yano asks, “[i]magine the “pocket intimacy” of a politician in one’s purse”<sup>149</sup>, I will retort: imagine the “pocket intimacy” of a kami.

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<sup>149</sup> Yano, *Pink Globalization*, 65.

## 6 Final Conclusions and Closing Remarks

As my stay visiting Tama and Kishigawa has come to an end, I spend my final morning in the Kansai area traversing the trails of Fushimi Inari Taisha, the famed shrine in Kyoto, which path is guided by thousands of torii. The two-hour long trek provides some time and calm to process my days with Tama. As we draw closer to the top, a white calico cat suddenly stands slightly off the main route, between the myriad of fox statues. As it turns and darts away, off the beaten track, I cannot help but follow. Its speed and nimbleness outdoes mine, and by the time I step into a clearing, it is nowhere to be seen. Slightly disappointed and out of breath, I turn to make my way back. At that moment, seemingly out of nowhere, she leaps down from behind some nearby statues and slowly paces towards me. As I greet and gently stroke her fur, she purrs at me, and I cannot help but laugh.

In this thesis, I have investigated Tama the stationmaster, and the prerequisites present within the Japanese culture that have cultivated her vast success. By exploring her multi-faceted being through some of her significant roles, we have seen how her narrative plays on already well-established ideas and themes in Japan's cultural landscape. She is anthropomorphized cat, companion to humans, tourist attraction, the face and saviour of the Kishigawa line, and a pocketed feline kami. She is a narrative focused on success and prosperity, while simultaneously being rooted in economic struggle and loss of identity in Japan.

As I set out to draw final conclusions from my thesis, the field before me is both broad and complex, rich with depth of cultural weight. Yet, with a train line at the brink of bankruptcy, and opportunity playing at the door, could it all not be viewed as merely an economically motivated stunt? A carefully constructed ploy to manufacture a popular character to attract and draw new customers in, specifically chosen to cater to the needs of Japanese modern life. While the answer to this could surely be "yes", what I set out to do was to find the cogs turning underneath this machinery, and the discoveries I have made have unearthed something more profound. For, pondering this question, I find myself unable to answer another: What came first? The case of Tama the stationmaster, adopted, employed, sold, and ascended, is steeped in, to sum it all up, lore. However, do the economics motivate the lore, or does the lore motivate the economics? Was she chosen to fit like the hand in a pre-existing fairy-tale glove, or did the subliminal echoes of Tama's legend and background subconsciously beckon Kojima to follow in the footprints of stories and ancient ancestors?

The truth, of course, exists somewhere in the ambiguous and unknowable space between, as does Tama herself. Repeating my statement from chapter 2, Tama could never be “just” anything. Granted, much of her situation is deliberate and constructed, but with it comes the multitudes of dimensions that are beyond control.

Tama’s playful dance between multiple realms lies at the core of this thesis. Just like her folkloric forebears, her function is that of an intermediary, between the many worlds of her case. She is the gatekeeper of these worlds, and just like the famed Catbus of Totoro’s, she has the fantastic ability to transport you between them, both literally and figuratively. As you travel to, and meet with the famous stationmaster, she transports you somewhere, someplace, sometime else. Echoing what the Dentsu agency found at the essence of the Discover Japan campaign, discovering Tama is equivalent to discovering and rediscovering yourself, and, by extension, Japan. Her role as saviour of rural train lines invokes the powers of nostalgia in much the same way, with the added weight and context of everything cat. The Kishigawa line is not a mere route to the famed cat at Kishi station, but rather beckons you towards the discovery of Kinokawa as a whole. Despite serving as the main attraction, she is, however, just that – an attraction, and not the main event. By discovering what lies beyond the borders of modern Japan, the area and local community surrounding Tama highlights yet another of her gateways, the attainment of *iyashi*.

As such, her narrative is not the result of a lucky strike, or exclusively a mere marketing stunt for economic favour. It is the collective accumulation of deep-set culturally and historically charged ideas and concepts. However, as mentioned in my introduction, this thesis was never intended to provide a complete analysis of Tama in all her aspects, and hence, there is much still left unexplored. Rather, I hope my chosen perspective and areas of investigation will inspire further discovery of Tama the stationmaster, or the worlds in which she travels.

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