The Haunted Mansion and <Woman>: Otherworldly Apparitions in the Modern Cities of Japan

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1. A Synopsis of “Sarayashiki” (aka “Dish Mansion”) Folklore

Okiku, the heroine in Bunko Baba (1718-1759)’s *Sarayashiki Bengiroku* (aka “Sarayashiki” or “Dish Mansion”) (1758), along with Oiwa from Nanboku Tsuruya (1755-1824)’s *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan* (aka “Ghost Stories of Yotsuya”) (1825), Kasane and Otsuyu in Encho Sanyutei (1839-1900)’s *Shinkei Kasanega Fuchi* (aka “The Ghost of Kasane”) (1888) and *Kaidan Botan Doro* (aka “Tales of the Peony Lantern”) (1861), are all regarded as typical portrayals of Japanese ghosts. The folklore on which *Sarayashiki Bengiroku* was based is roughly summarized below.

A young girl has entered a samurai house as a maid. The girl is commonly known as “Okiku”(1). Okiku’s master was bewitched by her beauty even though she continued to turn down his advances. Feeling rejected, the master grew hateful toward Okiku and decided to take vengeance on her with his equally jealous wife. One day, they accused Okiku of breaking one of the ten dishes which, as a set, had been a valuable family heirloom. As a punishment, the couple first gave her a violent beating then tossed her into a well in the garden after slashing her to death. From that day, the ghost of Okiku would rise from the depth of the well at night-time, counting “one dish, two dishes…” before disappearing again while shrieking the words “nine dishes!” The haunting drove the master and his wife to madness, and others to scatter. Eventually, the house became nothing but a deserted ruin.

The essence of this folklore is inarguably embodied by the very scene of a brutally murdered ghost maid who appears nightly from the well to count dishes. Such depiction can be found in many Ukiyo-e (color paintings) from the Edo period, and has since become a conventional way of personifying Japanese ghosts(2).

Sarayashiki, the Ghost of Okiku *by*
Yoshitoshi Tsukioka (1839-1892)
from *Shinkei 36 Kaisen, 1889-1892*

2. The Propagation Pattern of “Sarayashiki”

As evident in “Bancho Sarayashiki” from Tokyo and “Banshu Sarayashiki” from Hyogo, a number of regions in Japan have also conceived their own versions of the “sarayashiki” story(3).

This nationwide propagation could have been spurred by the word “sarayashiki,” which had originally meant “a brand-new house.” In other words, these ghost stories may have been inspired by the idea of an ominous or cursed house that people created based on the fact that houses built on damp and barren lands do not last long.

As Japan is indeed a country with an abundance of damp lands, such reasoning does appear to justify the wide dissemination of haunted mansion folklore. However, it offers no insight into why the image of a “dish-counting girl”(4) was also popularized. Hence, this presentation will focus on establishing a conceptual link between a <woman> and a <house> in an attempt to fill in this theoretical void.

3. An Analysis of “Sarayashiki” Folklore – <Woman> and <House>

First, it should be noted that almost all of these stories are set in a samurai house. During the 17th century when “sarayashiki” folklore emerged, it was common for a samurai house to employ young girls from rural villages as maids. These girls were made to observe strict etiquette while carrying out a variety of laborious household and personal chores for the master. The resentment felt by a maid toward her master as a result of such class division and gender inequality has most likely given rise to “sarayashiki” folklore.

Second, a well is a product of modern cities(5). It was a means to extract underground water on private or community land so that livelihood could be preserved in a densely populated urban area where the river had been contaminated. Therefore, by setting “sarayashiki” folklore in a samurai house, which is normally located in a city, a symbolic reference to urban civilization can be drawn.

Furthermore, history has shown that, before the 8th century, ancient society performed rituals at wells, believing they were passages for Gods/Goddesses. In this sense, “sarayashiki” folklore could also be seen as a variant of “human pillar” tales. This so-called “human pillar” is a form of human sacrifice in which a person is buried alive at the foundation of a bridge or a house to prevent collapse. Traces of such black magic can be found throughout the ages in many different countries. For instance, England’s popular Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme, “London Bridge is Falling Down” has been thought to contain “human pillar” connotations. In other words, in order to safeguard the prosperity of the samurai house, a maid must be offered as a sacrifice on its ground along with a piece of heirloom. It is only unfortunate that, in this particular case, the intended “guardian angel”

turned into an “evil spirit.” Also, when wells were used as ritual grounds in ancient society, people would also toss in some pieces of earthenware as sacred treasures. The use of a “family heirloom” in “sarayashiki” folklore is perhaps an apparatus to bring resonance to this distant memory.

In any event, folklore in the form of a ghost story can be seen as the manifestation of a rebellion against class division and gender inequality, and the idea of “offering up a woman as sacrifice to house Gods” found in Japanese folk culture could very well be echoing the concept of “ritual sacrifice” described by René Girard. This prominent local pattern can be seen as manifesting what Girard defines as “a close relation between sex and violence, which is a common heritage of all religions” (56).

Seiu Ito (1882-1961) “Nihon Keibatsu hu-zoku zushi,” 1951. Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai, 2010

4. “Sarayashiki” Folklore and the Haunted Mansion

One might consider “sarayashiki” folklore, in which a ghostly voice counting “one dish, two dishes…” may be heard throughout the household, to be a variant of poltergeist tales. This is because the presence of a young woman is an essential element in popular depictions of a house haunted by poltergeist events. Young women are thought to possess hidden spiritual power which has the ability to conjure up spirits of the land. This supernatural undertone is made even stronger by “Okiku,” a name feared and avoided in pre-modern Japan as it can be shortened to “Kiku” (same pronunciation of “to listen” in Japanese language) and carries the meaning of “listening to the voice of Gods.” Hence, “sarayashiki” folklore is a justifiable form of poltergeist tale as it portrays a young woman with strong spiritual power being thrown into the passage to the Gods, who then comes back as a ghostly medium to haunt the entire household with her voice.

Incidentally, another example of poltergeist tale can be found in a Tokyo urban legend, “Women of Ikebukuro,” which circulated up to the 1960s. The legend claims that whenever an investigation is carried out in a haunted household, one of its occupants was always a female from Ikebukuro. Haunting would be said to cease as soon as that particular female occupant is driven out of the house. The name “Ikebukuro,” meaning a “pocket-shaped pond” in Japanese, immediately lends itself to the imagery of a damp land. Even though it is now a busy metropolis, Ikebukuro was only a small town on the outskirts of Tokyo up until the 1960s. Having to struggle for survival in a big city like Tokyo, people believed that the hardship endured by these young women from a rural town may have unintentionally woken the spirit of the land and led to poltergeist events. As such, “Women of Ikebukuro” can be

regarded as a modern version of “Okiku” from “Sarayashiki.”

In recent years, haunted mansions have become a popular attraction in amusement parks across Japan. Themes from “Sarayashiki,” for example, the visual effects of a ghost appearing from a well or the sound of the ghost counting dishes are still widely utilized in these haunted mansions, as they represent a deep and fundamental horror to most Japanese people. It is also a reflection that this tale of resentment, in which a <woman> is sacrificed in a violent manner to the <house>, can still find sympathy among the general public today.

Notes

1. Apart from “Okiku,” names such as “Kame,” “Omasa,” and “Hana” were also used in other similar stories across Japan. The name “Okiku” had only garnered more recognition after Bunko Baba’s *Sarayashiki Bengiroku* (1758), which was set in Bancho in Edo, had become famous. See Yokoyama et al. and Ito. (back)
2. A common depiction being a young beauty without feet rising from a well or a pool of water surrounded by ghost fire. This imagery is still used in modern sub-cultures. (back)
3. An “Okiku Ido” (“The Well of Okiku”) can also be found in Himeji Castle, which is a World Heritage site, but this well is considered to have no actual connection to the “sarayashiki” folklore. (back)
4. Some regional versions of the “sarayashiki” folklore do not involve a ghost that counts dishes. However, in order to explore the most typical portrayal of a Japanese ghost, this presentation has limited its scope of discussion to “Sarayashiki” with a “dish-counting girl.” (back)
5. See Akita 169. (back)

Works Cited

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