

*Analysis of Storytelling in Folklore Studies: Japanese Emigrants to Geomun-do
(Port Hamilton), Korea, and Their Psychic World*

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Abstract

The storytelling of informants that researchers encounter in fieldwork serves as an important research material in folklore studies. This paper addresses knotty questions that emerge in using storytelling and vernacular narrative as materials in folklore studies: that is, how to analyze stories without reducing them into pieces of objective information that are valuable only to researches; and how to recover the internal psychic world and subjective thoughts from an oral or vernacular tradition. This paper examines as a case study Port Hamilton, or Geomun-do, where Japanese fishers began to emigrate in the end of the Edo (Tokugawa) period and formed Japanese settlements till World War II. I consider the ways in which women's stories afford an insight into their psychic world that was formed as Japan underwent rapid changes in the prewar, wartime, and postwar periods.

Keywords: Folklore Studies, Narrative, Psychic World Of Informant

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Introduction

When researchers encounter storytelling by informants during fieldwork, the narratives serve as important research materials in folklore studies. Storytellers are by no means simply informants who provide indigenous information to researchers who come from outside. Rather, they are themselves mobile subjects, accumulating lived experiences while moving temporally and spatially across communities and relocating residences over time. This paper addresses the knotty questions that emerge when we use storytelling and vernacular narratives as materials in folklore studies: that is, how can we interpret stories without reducing them into pieces of objective information that are valuable only to researchers? And how can we recover their internal psychic worlds and subjective thoughts from oral or vernacular traditions?

In this paper, I choose as a case study Port Hamilton, or Geomun-do, a small group of islands in the Jeju Strait off the southern coast of the Korean Peninsula, where Japanese fishermen began to emigrate at the end of the Edo (Tokugawa) period and formed Japanese settlements, which remained in place until the end of World War II. I will examine the storytelling and narratives by women who were born and lived in Geomun-do until they were repatriated to Japan after the war. I consider the ways in which women's stories give us insight into their psychic worlds that were formed as Japan underwent rapid changes in the prewar, wartime, and postwar periods. By doing so I will make a case for interpreting storytelling by informants as a process, where we must examine the complex interplay between the informant and the narrative, and between the personal and the public.

How can we analyze people's psychic worlds through narratives, in particular oral narratives, which are gathered as materials in folklore studies?¹ In this paper, I am using the term "narrative" to mean an outward expression of the internal process through which otherwise distinct or seemingly mutually unrelated life experiences of oneself and others are integrated into a story. The act of narrating one's life is an act of connecting the present to the past, integrating these temporalities into subjective reality, and reconstructing experience into a story or what Noboru Miyata terms "folk facts" (Miyata, 1990 259) in order to convey it to others. Narrative is not detached from context, but constitutes part of the historical, social, and political situations surrounding those who narrate. In addition, the act of speaking connects the present time to the past time, integrates it, and reconstructs it as a story (Iwamoto, 2003) based on "subjective reality" (Gurjewitsch, 1990 13). The above point is important for the purposes of my paper. Traditionally, folk studies have analyzed narratives on the premise that the relationship between informants and the space that they inhabit is stable and fixed throughout their lifetime. However, this is not always the case. Informants are often mobile subjects crossing borders, moving between different living spaces, different social groups, and different nation-states (Shinohara, 2003). Indeed, this was the case for the late Reiko Hori, the informant I take up in this paper whose life was marked by movements back and forth between Geomun-do,² a group of islands off the coast the Korean Peninsula and Japan.

In what follows, I will analyze a narrative by Reiko, a granddaughter of the first Japanese fisherman, who settled in Geomun-do in 1905, emigrating to the islands with his family from Yutama village, Yamaguchi Prefecture, on the main island of Japan. Many other Japanese fishermen followed in his wake, migrating to the islands

to form a Japanese settlement. Reiko was born and grew up in Geomun-do before going to school on mainland Japan for several years. She spent the bulk of her youth living in Geomun-do, occasionally visiting Yutama village, her grandfather's hometown, until she was permanently repatriated to Yamaguchi Prefecture at the end of World War II. Later on, she made several visits to Geomun-do.

The spiritual world in Narrative

The trajectory of Reiko's life was marked by mobility, and her stories also underwent multiple stages of reflection and development as a result of her interactions with others, including folklore researchers like me. I conducted over 50 interviews with Reiko in Yutama village, over about 100 hours, in order to collect her narratives. This paper focuses on one of her narratives. As Reiko told me, it was a ghost story about the captian of a carrier ship in Geomun-do, which was told and retold to children on summer nights in Yutama village after the war ended. Reiko herself heard this story from her father, who had integrated fragments from various people's experiences into the narrative. Present the purposes of the study and provide background for your work.

The elements in the beginning of Reiko's narrative are primarily taken from the real-life experiences of the (unnamed) wife of a captain of a small carrier ship in Geomun-do, whom Reiko did not know personally. Reiko's oral story begins with the death of the captain whose wife, left alone, thinks that she will go back to her hometown on mainland Japan with the cremated bones of her husband. However, due to the low temperature of the fire in the open-air crematorium, the corpse was not completely burned. The wife leaves parts of this half-cremated body behind, taking a box containing only the bones with her to her lodging at an inn on the island. She puts the box in a bay window in her room on the second floor. Later, when she finally does board the ferry bound for mainland Japan, she leaves the box behind for some unknown reason.

From this point on in Reiko's narrative, the wife disappears and instead the box takes center stage, propelling the narrative forward. In addition, Reiko's narrative also begins to integrate the stories of other people—sons or cousins of the inn owner, who were not directly related to either the wife or the captain. Here, I will reproduce this part of her narrative as it was told to me, which I have translated in English:

On a summer day, the inn owner's family thought of sleeping in that room. The sons or cousins of the owner hung a mosquito net and slept in it. In the middle of the night, they heard a clicking sound. It was a sound like someone scratching a tatami mat with their nails. The men in the room disregarded it and tried to sleep. There was a spooky atmosphere, and they started to say, "Something is strange." ... The sound moved.... Then they thought, "Ugh! It's at our feet." Suddenly they were unable to move. When their body became free of whatever was gripping them and they looked toward the bay window, they dimly saw a charred captain sitting there. They screamed and ran away.... But their parents didn't believe them....

The narrative's integration of other voices and people do not end here. Reiko's narrative then incorporates the story of her own father, who saw the box at the Inn on Geomun-do. As Reiko narrates it, her father, having heard the foregoing story of the

box from the sons or cousins of the inn owner, sought to confirm the truth. Reiko continues her narrative thus:

So, this time my father went there with older men. Nothing happened in the daytime. There was only a box containing bones in the bay window. Then, at night, when they went to sleep within the mosquito net a clicking sound started and it moved around the net. The sound stopped when it reached their feet. They were unable to move, when something came inside the mosquito net. It was obviously a ghost.

Reiko finally incorporates even herself, a speaking subject, into the community that the story creates—a community that is indicated by the pronoun we. She says:

For the captain's soul, we thought we had to hand the remains over to the wife who had fled to Japan, but since her whereabouts were unknown, I took them to a temple in Geomun-do and asked a priest to chant a sutra....

Reiko's narrative begins and ends with the wife, who was the originator of the personal story that eventually became a collective narrative. As she finishes her narrative, Reiko even changes its theme and tone from a haunting spiritual story to an entertaining story with a laugh that she shares with listeners. By way of ending, she says:

The wife, by the way, was not weak-hearted but a free-spirited woman. She must have thought, "I can't live with such a ghost," and left for Japan all alone.

Reiko thus ends her story with laughter. Her narrative contains a wealth of social, historical, and cultural information. Yet the most interesting and instructive thing about the story is what it says about folk narrative. Reiko's ghost story is the epitome of folk narrative. It is composed from experiences of many people, such as the inn owner, young men, relatives, and a priest, and her own father, all of whom come into contact with the dead captain and/or his wife. The captain is dead and yet is said to cohabit the islands with living people on Geomun-do; his existence is interwoven with people's life experiences, and as a result his and his wife's experiences are mixed with the experiences of others and integrated into a single story. This narrative became an oral tradition and was inherited by the descendants of the generation of Japanese who had first come to the islands. This tradition is not something handed down by society in a fixed location, as the narrative becomes mobile when the informants or storytellers eventually leave the islands and move across space and time.

Conclusion

From the example of Reiko's case study, several key points about folk narrative become clear. Folk narrative is polyphonic, containing life experiences of multiple people. The formation of narrative entails not only those who lived together in a certain community, but also informants who had relationships with them in the past, and even dead people whose presences are felt and recognized in the present living space. In such narratives, the existence of previous generations and of the dead is affirmed by the living, and these figures affect the lives of the living, creating new experiences and practices. The spirits of the dead are recognized as inhabiting the

same space-time as the living, thus linking the past to the present. Through such processes, a personal story tells the story of an entire community, and hints at its relationship with the larger society (mainland Japan) that it is a part of. Such stories can be seen as introspective narratives in folklore.

Folklore studies must involve the unfolding of such relationships. If this ghost story were interpreted only as information, it would have little to offer us. However, if we understand the storyteller's relationship to the narrative as I have demonstrated in this paper, we can begin to recover part of the psychic world of the story and see a more complex interplay between the personal and the public in the telling of the narrative. In Reiko's narrative, the unburied bones of a dead sea captain that were left behind on Geomun-do function as a symbol of an important part of the life that Reiko and the other residents of the islands left behind—the life that still haunts them—as they were repatriated to Japan after World War II and forced to leave their homes. In the end, what is important in folklore studies is not so much what the storyteller has to say. Instead researchers need to understand the position of the storyteller and how personal relationships and public events are integrated into narrative.

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Footnotes

1 The people who live in the changing times of prewar, wartime, and postwar are called "Traditional Subjects" (Takakuwa, 1994 33)

2 Geomun-do is located 127 degrees east of the Korean archipelago and 34 degrees north latitude. For historical researches on Geomun-do, see Nakamura (1994), and Choi (1994).

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