

A Forest Shamans: The Sacred Tree and Narratives of the Folk History

Aki Tokumaru, University of Tsukuba, Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the oral narratives of a female shaman and the people involved in her religious practices in modern Japan. Narratives are told and retold, ultimately becoming traditional oral histories that are closely related to local people's lives. This paper discusses the ways in which such narratives make and can be read as folk history. As a case study, I consider the narratives of female shaman in a village in Yamaguchi Prefecture, where a small hermitage called Chigusu-An (千楠庵) was built and in which hundreds of carved wooden dolls were housed. I collected the narratives of the female shaman and other locals who were involved in the construction of this hermitage. Focusing on the multidimensional structures of their narratives, I will probe into the ways in which the traditional worldview centered on the sacred tree is linked to the people's lived experience and even their "pre-life," that is, the time of their ancestors.

Keywords: Folk History, Narratives of the Informant, Life History, Lived Experience, Pre-Life

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Introduction

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Kusun-no-Mori and the Female Shaman



Figure 1: Kusu-no-Mori (楠の森)

In folklore studies, an oral narrative given by an informant is considered to be a text. Such a text is malleable, influenced by contexts, both narrow and broad. It is a text shaped partly by the context [Dundes 1980] in which the informant speaks and converses with the researcher, which can be called a synchronic context [Fish 1992]. It is also shaped by the broader, diachronic context of the informant's personal history—biological and psychological—which is in turn informed by inherited tradition.

¹ Morigami (森神: Forest God) are enshrined in forests which are understood as sacred places in various areas of Japan. In folklore studies, Morigami are understood as a primitive form of Yashikigami (屋敷神: Residence God). They have also been discussed as part of a reconstruction process of the traditions related to the folk gods involved in the rituals of the founders and spirits [Tokumaru 2002].



Figure 2: Shiroyama (城山)

As a case study, I will consider the narratives of a female shaman in Dai Village (台集落) in Yamaguchi Prefecture, where a legendary, 1,000-year-old tree called Kusu-no-Mori (楠の森), is said to be the burial place of warhorses that fought for the local lords in the 16th century. In the early 1990s, a small hermitage called Chigusu-An (千楠庵) was built and hundreds of carved wooden dolls were housed in it. Made by a female shaman, these wooden dolls were regarded as children and places where the souls of dead samurai warriors dwelt.

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Figure 3: Kusu-no-Mori's Child



Figure 4: Inside of Cigusu-An (千楠庵内部)

Dai Village is famous for a Shiroyama-legend (城山伝説) about the fall of the lord, Ouchi Yoshitaka (大内義隆 1507~1551), who ruled the area in the 16th century. The legend goes that the lord's fallen warhorses² and samurai were buried at Kusu-no-Mori, a large camphor tree. This legend, as I shall demonstrate, has been significantly reconstructed by a modern female shaman. Since childhood, this woman has possessed mythic power or shamanic qualities, predicting, for instance, the occurrence of fire. She has gone through a number of spiritual experiences, but she did not become a professional preacher.³ Instead, she married and became the mother of two children. At the time of my fieldwork, she was a housewife and engaged in non-profitable religious activities. She visited Kusu-no-Mori in 1986, where she saw the spirits of the dead who were killed in battle. Subsequently, she cut off twigs from the camphor tree and began carving wooden dolls. She named them "Kusu-no-Mori's Children," and enshrined them. She regarded the act of making dolls out of the camphor tree as an act of giving a form to the dead spirits.⁴

² The names of two beloved horses are Ikezuki (池月) and Surusumi (磨墨). It is said that a camphor tree was planted on the tomb to mark where the horses were buried. However, every night, the spirits of the horses appeared and afflicted the villagers, so they enshrined the spirits of the horses as gods.

³ Later, Mrs. A visited the Tendai Sect Temple (狗留孫山修験寺: Kurusonsan Suzenji) and practiced religious acts related to the sacred mountains, shrines, temples, Morigami, etc. in the surrounding area.

⁴ Mrs. A was always conscious of the history of the region. In Mrs. A's perception, the spirits of the samurai who died in the fall actually existed and had a strong influence on herself and the families living here. She was born outside of Dai Village and lives her daily life, but sees herself as a servant, so to speak, of Kusu-no-Mori. The reason for her calling is also linked to the the "Innen"b(因縁: Fate) shouldered by the ancestors of her family. The reasoning for religious behavior in Mrs. A's real life is interpreted retroactively to the time her ancestors lived. The living time of her ancestors is also deeply related to her perception of the history of the region.



Figure 5: Jijin Moso (地神盲僧)

One day, when she exhibited Kusu-no-Mori's Children, a couple came to visit it. At that time, the husband (Mr. C) of the couple was inexplicably suffering from ill health, which even a doctor could not cure. Curiously, the woman noticed that Kusu-no-Mori's Children were all staring at the couple. The wife (Mrs. C) asked the woman about the cause of her husband's illness who interpreted that it was due to the spirits of the dead at Kusu-no-Mori, which was located close to their home. She proposed a memorial service for the dead spirits as a solution. The couple agreed and built a small hermitage called Chigusu-An, which was dedicated to Kusu-no-Mori's Children. In due course, the woman had a spiritual vision of the tree bleeding sap down onto the ground and chose this spot as the place to build the hermitage. She also had a vision of the Earth God, Jijin Moso (Mr. B:地神盲僧)⁵, who had performed a ritual for Kusu-no-Mori. She had a vision of this monk giving his Kesa (袈裟: his robes) to her. Such visions made her realize that she had been granted the qualification to enshrine Kusu-no-Mori. She thus became a shaman. I happened to participate in the ceremony of the establishment of this hermitage, and began to interview this female shaman, the couple and other people in the community intermittently for 10 years to collect their narratives about Kusu-no-Mori.

Kusu-no-Mori's Children were enshrined in the hermitage, where the shaman routinely performed memorial services with the assistance of the couple. The husband regained his health, and a strong bond of trust developed between them and the shaman. Subsequently, other residents in the village who experienced tragedies such as family suicides and accidents came to the shaman for help. They all participated in religious practices at Kusu-no-Mori, and with the shaman and the couple at the core, a religious group was formed, and a stable relationship

⁵ Jijin Moso (地神盲僧: Blind Monk), is a religious figure who once played the biwa and chanted Butsusetu Jijin Kyo (仏説地神經: Sutras for Jijin). Enshrined Kenro Jijin(堅牢地神: the god of earth) and Uchi Kojininn (内荒神: the god of fire enshrined in the fire place) were also thought to be active in this area. One Jijin Moso also lives in the Jijin Do (地神堂: a hall dedicated to the god of earth) in Dai Village. Jijin Moso was an acquaintance of Mrs. C and Mrs. C's husband, but did not know Mrs. A. At Jijin Sai (地神祭: a festival of the god of earth) dedicated to Jijin Moso, the "Chu-Ou" (中央: center of the world) was set up at the root of Kusu-no-Mori, and the place was envisaged by god's blind monks and Dai villagers as the center of the settlement. Figure5 is Jijin Moso who was active in another area (2004).

continued thereafter for 6 years.⁶ However, following the deaths of the couple, this religious group disbanded, and the shaman suspended her rituals in the hermitage.

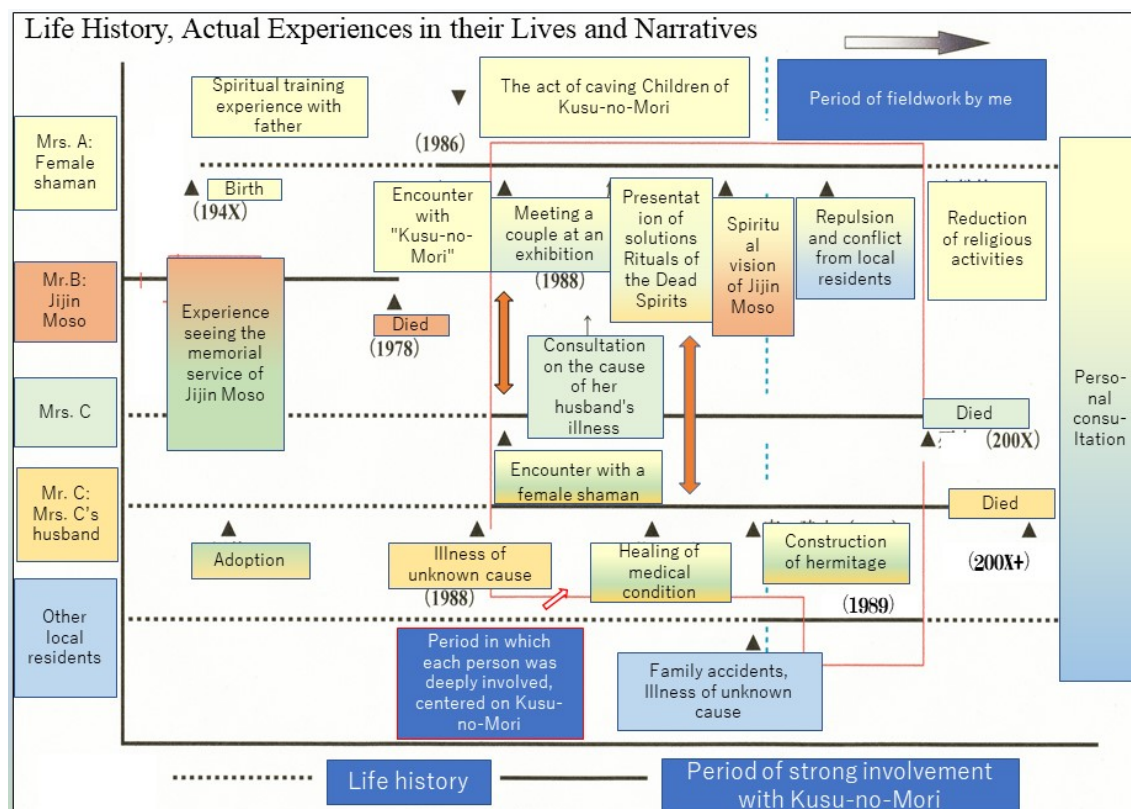


Figure 6: Life History, Actual Experiences in their Live and Narratives

The narratives about the origins of Kusu-no-Mori, which I collected, were informed by different interpretive frameworks that different storytellers—the shaman, the couple, and others—each had. The framework that the shaman had was based on a worldview related to a war in the 16th century. Her act of carving and giving birth to Kusu-no-Mori's Children out of the dead twigs of the camphor tree was a religious act – the purification of the impurities of the earth. The camphor tree was at the center of the village, and the dead in the ground would be raised up into the tree and purified by being given the form of a wooden doll. In her framework, the spirits of the dead samurai warriors from the 16th century did not disappear into thin air but remained and had a strong influence on both the region and her own personage in the present world. The couple understood Kusu-no-Mori to be the god of the entire village, and they decided to enshrine the god on their property for the well-being of the husband. The shaman identified the cause of the husband's inexplicable illness, which was karma from the dead spirits of the women in the grounds of the couple's house. Building the hermitage was an important event for the couple, and Kusu-no-Mori had an impact on their family life.

⁶ Mrs. C, said at the time of the construction of Chigusu-An, "My ancestors also wanted me to build a hermitage. I think my ancestors are pleased with this. Muen-Sama (無縁様: a spirit without a shrine) in the forest will also be delighted". Mrs. C believes that the memorial service for the unsung dead in Chigusu-An was what her ancestors spirits wanted, and linked the living time of her ancestors with the founding of Chigusu-An. In other words, the history of the castle, its legends, and the murder of samurai that once occurred in this land are not seen only as old events that ended in the past. They are still regarded as a "living" events that are directly related to the events of linked to living individuals and families.

The historical legend behind Kusu-no-Mori is related to the demise of Lord Ouchi, who ruled the region almost 470 years ago. By contrast, the personal and family narrative of the couple—the illness and recovery of the husband and their building the hermitage—is about their life story in the present time. Nevertheless, events that occurred in the life of the couple are linked to the history of Kusu-no-Mori across time.

Although the events surrounding the demise of Lord Ouchi took place in the past, they were regarded as “living” events that were directly related to the personal and familial events that were taking place in the present. Such understandings of the connection of otherwise seemingly unrelated events were informed most obviously by the shaman but also by the process of the couple’s interactions with other residents living in the village.

Conclusion

Finally, I want to chart the three elements that are important in the creation of the oral narrative history of “Kusu-no-Mori’s Children.”

The first is the process of joint interpretation and reflective understanding. Initially, a crisis emerged in the life of the couple, followed by their encounter with the shaman, resulting in their re-interpretation of their life experience against the backdrop of traditions related to local history and in a reflective understanding of it [Oyama 1987].

The second is the subject-formation of the housewife into the shaman who reigns in Kusu-no-Mori and practices religious rituals for people in the village.

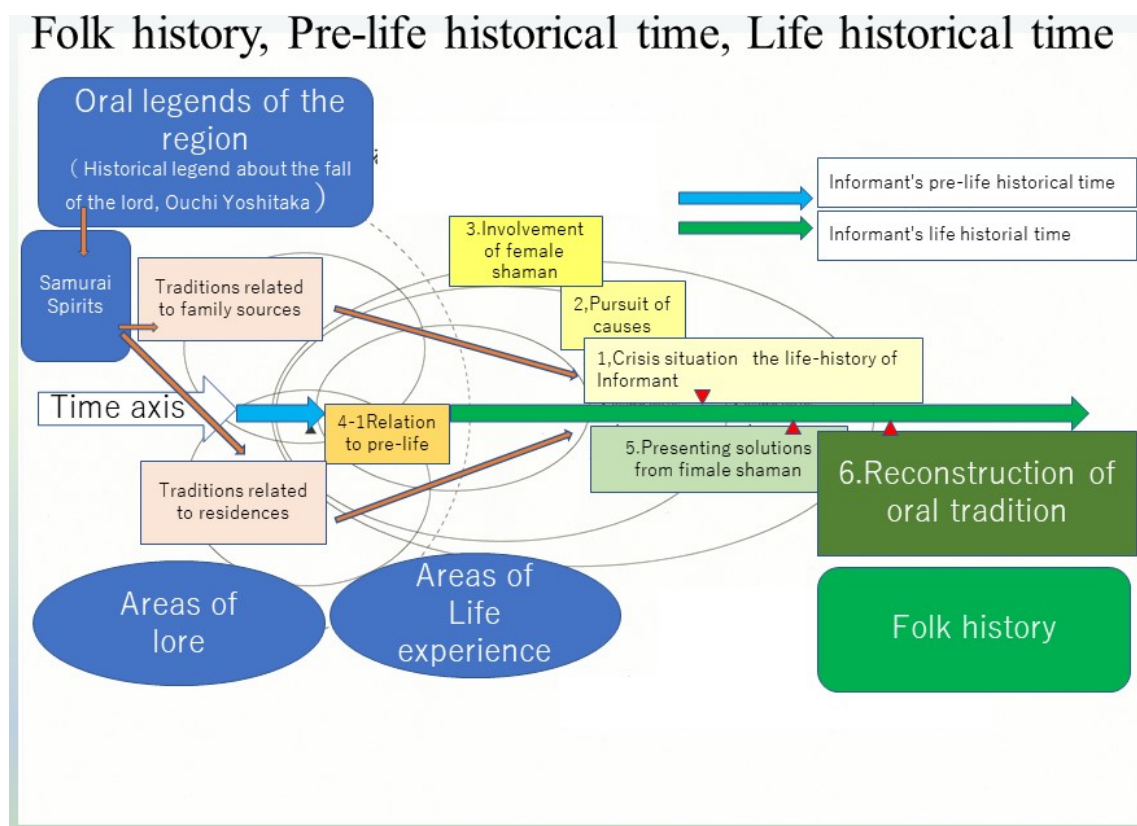


Figure 7: Folk History, Pre-life Historical Time, Life Historical Time

The third is the negotiation between narratives, time frames, and contexts. The life experiences of local people are mutually related and are integrated into the oral legend of Kusu-no-Mori. The actual experiences in their lives are woven into the events that occurred in a time period before they were born, and they are connected to this pre-life historical time. The spirits of the dead are seen as existing in this world and as working within the temporal dimension of the world of the living (a life historical time). The past that exists outside of the perception of the informant is imagined as being actual and real in the context of the region, inviting the informant to negotiate with the existence that is the past. Memorial services are practiced, and the life experiences of the informants are further accumulated. Even if it is a story told by a single informant, its composition is multi-voiced, and its tense goes back to the past before the informant is born.

Through such a process, a close link is formed between the internal world of the individual informant and the historical and collective consciousness of the family and the community. In the end, the story of the informant is an expression of the folk history transmitted and inherited while integrating the life experiences of the informant and others across time.

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Contact Email: tokumaru.aki.fb@u.tsukuba.ac.jp