



**“WAS ONE OF THE CORPSES SPEAKING?”: THE POWER OF THE ‘DEAD BODY’ IN
THE ANCIENT GHOST STORIES FROM KOREA**

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Stories that focus on supernatural beings and events in many cultures usually fall into the genre of folktales that disseminate themselves via oral transmission, and in the present age, the printed page and social media. Owing to the inevitable fact that folktales are narratives that have a mass appeal (‘the word ‘folk’ carries such connotations) compared to specialized texts like literature, there is a tendency among scholars to avoid focused studies of folk speech acts. Yet, folktales are not born in or do not operate in a vacuum, in the words of a folklorist, they are “autobiographical ethnography” (Dundes, 2007) of a group of people, or a group of people’s description about themselves. Using this theoretical perspective, this study attempts to re-read a selection of folktales from Korea, titled *Eerie Tales from Old Korea* compiled by Brother Anthony of Taize which were collected during the period 1901 to 1905. Using a folkloric mode of reading and analysis this study focuses on the most feared motif in the tales, ‘the dead bodies.’ By locating the ‘folk ideas’ embedded around the dreaded ‘dead bodies’ in the tales, this study attempts to understand how the popular folk imagination in Korea viewed the notion of ‘death’ and how such imaginative streaks could reflect the material reality of the world outside the tales.

Keywords: Folktale, Folk ideas, Supernatural tales, Oral transmission, Narratives

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INTRODUCTION

Stories that involve supernatural beings or ghosts, spirits, apparitions—are floated in various cultures across the world usually as folktales, in the sense that they are narrated to an audience by a storyteller who has preserved the tale from posterity. Take the case of Lankan folktales. In the oldest collections of southern folktales, collected and compiled by the colonial (British) irrigation engineer Henry Parker under the title *Village Folk Tales of Ceylon*, feature 27 stories that could be categorized as ghost stories—though they are not necessarily classified so by the compiler.¹

Folktales are usually stories about people (kings, common people and villains), animals, and supernatural beings usually “handed down from generation to generation either in writing or by word of mouth” (Thompson, 1977). It is this preservation across time and space that offers a folktale its validity: “(h)e usually desires to impress his readers or hearers with the fact that he is bringing them something that has the stamp of good authority...” (Thompson, 1977). In addition to its ability to persevere itself against the tide of time, a folktale also transmits the rooted cultural traditions of a society in fact they mirror the culture in which it is born. In the words of a folklorist, they are “autobiographical ethnography” (Dundes, 2007) of a group of people, or a group of people’s description of themselves. In the light of these theoretical stances, the folktales that depict the workings of supernatural beings attain a cultural significance: that they represent how people in a specific culture view their ‘dead.’ Like birth, death is not perceived as a single phenomenon in different cultures. “Irrespective of how death is defined,” suggests the scholar Gire (2014), “each culture has notions of how death ought to occur”.

It is the mode of occurrence of death that the present paper seeks to locate through a sample of folktales from Korea, titled *Eerie Tales from Old Korea* compiled by Brother Anthony of Taize. This extraction of tales featuring supernatural beings from Korea during the period 1901 to 1905 was undertaken by western missionaries, prior to the invasion of Korea by Japan. The modern publication brings these supernatural tales into a single space, thus making a parallel study of them possible. This study wishes to reread the stories to locate how dead bodies are represented in the tales and what such representation tells us about the social aspects of death in that social setting. How did the ‘old Korea’ view the idea of ‘death’ in their imaginative fiction? What do such ideas tell us about the way ordinary Korean people perceive death in their lives? This study attempts to answer these questions from the folkloric reading of the eerie tales of Korea.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It should be noted that since this research is on Korean folktales conducted by non-Korean researchers, the researchers do not have access to relevant studies of the tales undertaken in Korean. Even though anthropological studies on the representation of death in the Korean culture have been conducted, studies have not been conducted using folklore as its research angle. Further, studies conducted on Korean folklore focus on mythical creatures and way of life of ancient Korea. For instance, Jae-On Kim’s research (1977) titled *The Idea of Chastity in Korean Folktales: A Study of a Popular Ideal and Its Social Implications* focuses on the relationship between chastity and social and cultural values in Korea. There are comparative studies on Korean folktales and Greek myths. Thus, the present study opens

¹ Henry Parker categorizes his folktales according to the caste of the teller in the period that he collected them, the late 18th century.



a fresh area of research by focusing on the notion of ‘death’ via representation found in a sample of imaginative folkloric speech acts.

METHODOLOGY

One of the important characteristics of a folktale is the notion of ‘folk idea.’ Folk idea is an implicit unit of narrative which demonstrates the assumptions and conjectures a story creators/narrator/listener commonly agree upon. According to the folklorist Dundes, ‘Folk Ideas’ are “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of humanity, of the world, and of life in the world” (Dundes, 2007). However, Dundes also argues that ‘folk ideas’ need not be openly apparent in folkloric material, and they could be “unstated premises” (Dundes, 2007) which could underlie thought and action of individuals— the present study takes this argument into consideration when rereading the eerie tales for embedded ‘folk ideas’ concerning dead bodies. The objective is to isolate and locate the postulations that construct narratives around corpses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The ideas associated with corpses are categorized thematically as follows for ease of reading:

Treatment of dead bodies

Two stories located the treatment of corpses in a systematic manner. Immediately after death, bodies are wrapped in straw, and tied to tree branches “to let the evil humors of the disease dry up” (from the tale *A Hunter’s Mistake*). And in the story *Necessity, the Mother of Invention*, two men who were quickly preparing to get rid of a dead body from their luxury residence inserting the unwanted body in a bag of straw. This treatment is closely connected to the idea of facilitating the decay of the body with ease. The underlying ‘folk idea’ here is the methodization of the process whereby the body blends into nature with ease because any snags in this process will cause the dead body to react violently against the living.

Dead go home

In the tale *Necessity, the Mother of Invention*, the two men who desperately attempt to get rid of a body in a bag straw hope that “(t) he bag will be opened and the people there will recognize the dead man and take him to his house.” Once again, there is the underlying idea of methodizing the journey into after life, where a dead body, regardless of its violent engagement in the sphere of the living, is returned to its home.

Extension of life to the realm of death

If methodization of the process of death and decay does create a smooth transition from life to death and beyond, the violation of this process creates serious disturbances in the sphere of the living. “Listen! Brothers, we have our revenge on the wicked hunter,” boasts a dead body in the dead of the night to an inebriated man. The dead bodies have unleashed a series of revenge attacks upon a hunter who needlessly killed geese and this same dead body thus encourages his companion dead bodies to “(s)leep quietly, brothers, our work is done.”

A dead body is an extension of the life lived by the body as a living entity, and if there are snags in life, the dead body won’t be quiet. Thus, in the tale *Necessity, the Mother of Invention*, the man who attempts to get rid of the dead body is keen to insert money into the straw bag because just before his death, the man had wanted money.

Offending the dead

In the tale, *Cats and Dead*, a coffin of a dead man escapes the funeral procession and takes refuge in a scholar’s house. The cause of the incident is a cat who has jumped over the coffin thus



offending the dead body. The underlying ‘folk idea’ is the notion of the sacrosanct nature of the state of dead, a state that takes a potential offense very seriously.

Corpses defying nature

In the tale, *A Brave Governor*, the dead body of a female who was murdered over a property issue haunts a senior state official. This official is brave enough to withstand the effects of haunting, and his confidence grants him the opportunity to locate the truth behind the long-standing haunting. He instructs his subjects to dig up the body of the wronged female from her unmarked grave behind the house. “The body, being disinterred, was found to be perfectly preserved,” the people notice.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The above events extracted, involving dead bodies have the underlying theme of a dead body seeking a narrative. Whether it is the mode of burial or its treatment at the funeral, a dead body requires a culturally defined systematic approach of respect. Behind this mode of respect is the idea that death is a state that requires more precise handling than life, a sort of sacrosanct state, which is governed at several stages. These folk tales offer the notion that to be dead is a state more serious than to be alive.

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