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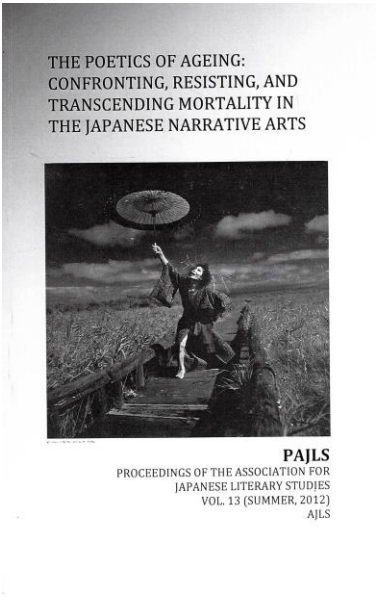

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The Ageless Voice of a Doting Body: Taima Kataribe no Uba in Orikuchi Shinobu's *Book of the Dead*

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To survive in the
Borderlands
You must live *sin fronteras*
Be a crossroads.[1]

Gloria Anzaldúa

It has often been pointed out that women in general live longer than men. In this sense, as the Japanese medical doctor who has written extensively on elderly people's health and care, Yoshida Sumio wrote, the issues of elderly people are also the issues of women. Yoshida's work caught the attention of the ethnologist Kamata Hisako, as she was trying to re-address the issue of old people from the perspective of women folk. By focusing on the role held by old women in various areas within Japan, she aimed to fill the gap she felt Japanese Folk Studies (*minzokugaku*) had left in failing to take into consideration the minds of old people, albeit acknowledging their presence from a very early stage.[2]

In her article, Kamata argues that there are societies where the elderly people are deemed as unnecessary and others where they are, instead, highly considered. In Japan's rural areas, for example, they tend to have an important role. Examining different regions of the archipelago, Kamata emphasises the pragmatic and ritual functions peculiar to old women, in relation to both Buddhist and Shinto practices. Many of these functions are patently

[1] Gloria E. Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera : The New Mestiza* (San Franciso: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 195.

[2] Kamata Hisako, "Rō no minzoku: josei minzoku no tachiba kara," *(*老の民俗 ： 女性民俗の立場から), *Nihon jōmin bunka kiyō* (日本常民文化紀要) 17 (1994): 141-172.

connected with the deceased, or, more in general, with the sphere of death, such as the use of old women's *nenbutsu* during a village wake, aimed to keep the fire of candles (placed at the bedside of the dead) from getting too high.

From Kamata's article it appears clear that it is rural Japan—as well as the Ryūkyū islands—where old women seem to keep exercising important ritual functions for the community. Earlier *minzokugaku* authors like Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) and Orikuchi Shinobu (1887-1953) also wrote about old women, reporting and interpreting stories related to them. They concentrated their research on rural areas and on Okinawa.[3] They devoted some attention to the development of the most famous characterisation of old women in Japanese folklore, that of the *yamamba* or *yamauba*, the old woman of the mountains. Yanagita mentioned the *yamamba* in several works, such as *Tōno monogatari* (The Legends of Tōno, 1910), *Yama no jinsei* (Life in the Mountains, 1925) and *Mukashibanashi oboegaki* (Notes on Tales of Old, 1943), emphasizing her usual portrayal as a lonely creature with demon-like features and cannibalistic habits. However, the *yamauba* can also be seen as a demigod: Orikuchi, for example, in his *Okina no hassei* (Origins of *Okina*, 1928) stated that originally she was a virgin consecrated to a mountain deity, to whom she would eventually get married, and that such women of the mountain came to be assimilated as women of old age (*rōnen no onna*) because of their longevity.[4]

Within Japanese folklore and folk beliefs, the *yamauba* seems to be characterised by an ambiguous nature—as half demon, half deity, as both nourishing and devouring. An elderly woman who had magical powers, together with powers of the spoken word was mentioned by Yanagita in his *Tōno monogatari*. Her name is Ohide and she comes from the village of Tsuchibuchi, in the rural area of Iwate prefecture. Ohide is the great aunt of Sasaki

[3] On the approach of *minzokugaku*, and in particular of Yanagita, to rural Japan and rural women, see Mariko Asano Tamanoi, *Under the Shadow of Naxxxtionalism. Politics and Poetics of Rural Japanese Women*, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998).

[4] Orikuchi Shinobu, "Okina no hassei," in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* vol. 2 (Chūō kōronsha, 1965), 387.

Kizen, the young man who acted as the rather untalented but honest storyteller for Yanagita. A storyteller herself, and probably more skilled than her nephew, she is said to be a master of witchcraft, able to cast magic spells. [5]

The connection between oral transmission and women goes back a long way in Japan. Yanagita and Orikuchi insisted on the importance of oral transmission in the making of the country, and believed that storytelling in Japan had been related to (old) women since antiquity. Orikuchi slightly changed his position when, in his *Nihonbungaku no hassei: sono kisoron* (Origins of Japanese Literature, 1932), he dealt once more with storytelling as a profession and wrote the following.

> There are cases in which males are accepted as the main protagonists of storytelling, but women can be thought of as those who protected the very core of the storytelling profession. … My *senpai* [Yanagita Kunio?] and I thought that storytelling was a woman-only occupation, but we were mistaken. Rather, and this is indisputable, it was mainly a profession carried out by women.[6]

It is not the place here to assess how scientifically accurate Orikuchi was in stating that the guild of storytellers (*kataribe*) was constituted mainly of women, or when he pointed out that the task of the Sarume *uji* consisted in telling stories related to Ame no uzume no mikoto, believed to be Sarume's ancestral *kami* (see *Kojiki* I, XXXV).[7] Rather, it is worth emphasizing that Orikuchi showed a very early interest in storytelling, also thanks to the historian Shigeno Yasutsugu, and that he connected it to Japanese epic poetry (*jojishi*). In his *Kataribe to jojishi to* (On Storytelling and Epic Poetry), he pointed out that:

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[5] Yanagita Kunio, *The Legends of Tono*, trans., Ronald A. Morse (The Japan Foundation, 1975).

[6] Orikuchi Shinobu, "Nihon bungaku no hassei: sono kisoron," in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* vol.7 (Chūō kōronsha, 1966), 29.

[7] Basil Hall Chamberlain, *The Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters* (North Clarendon: Tuttle Publishing, 2005), 136.

> There were probably places where the official functions of the storytellers extended to all sorts of *kami* affairs, but historical and genealogical transmission was no doubt their principal occupation. *Monogatari* as historical transmission took the form of verses and might have been accompanied by a tune. Those who were possessed by the *kami* and fell in a state of trance characterised by rhythm came to undergo, along with physiological effects, also psychological ones. … This oral form of historical transmission in verses represents the tales of the *kami* and so is not bound to dissolve in time, but will be transmitted by the mouths of the people with the appearance of *kami* [*jinnin*]. [8]

Thus, Orikuchi believed that the history of *kodai*, or archaic Japan, was not the result of the recollection of facts, but was born out of the epic poetry recited by *kami*'s mouthpieces, the *jinnin*. The first form of Japanese history was poetical and was entrusted to the oral narration of
the *kataribe*, the professional people (mainly women) whose task was transmitting the *monogatari* of the *kami* belonging to different villages and countries.[9]
While developing theories related to oral narration, Orikuchi embarked on a journey that led to the fabrication of a visionary archaic Japan inhabited by mystical and shamanistic women. He translated his 'scholarly' explorations into a fictional work that he chose to call *Shisha no sho* (*The Book of the Dead*, 1939) and gave an old woman storyteller (*kataribe no uba*) the sacred power to

[8] Orikuchi Shinobu, "Kataribe to jojishi to," in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* vol. 4 (Chūō kōronsha, 1995).
Online version: http://www.aozora.gr.jp/cards/000933/card47179.html.
[9] Orikuchi Shinobu, "Saiko Nihon josei seikatsu no kontei," in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* vol. 2 (Chūō kōronsha, 1965), 145.

create and narrate a story able to connect and meld together past, present, and future.

For those unfamiliar with the book, a brief synopsis might be useful. *Shisha no sho* develops through three different narrative strands. The first consists of a monologue by Prince Ōtsu, wrongly sentenced to death fifty years earlier, in the late seventh century. The prince awakens, as he desires Mimimo no toji, a young attendant from the southern branch of the Fujiwara family with whom he had fallen in love just before dying. The second strand focuses on Fujiwara no Iratsume, a young aristocrat who has been confined in a little hut of Taima Temple on the same Futakami Mountains where Prince Ōtsu is buried. Here she is forced to do penance for having crossed the temple's threshold. Iratsume, we are told, has escaped from Nara in pursuit of a vision of a Buddha flying towards the west. While expiating her sin, she listens to the old storyteller of Taima, who tells her the story of Prince Ōtsu. He is the Buddha that Iratsume sees in her visions, and for whom she is weaving a lotus-thread cloak. The third narrative strand is set in eighth-century Nara, where the poet Ōtomo no Yakamochi wanders lamenting the changes which have occurred in his society.

Orikuchi sets the story in Nara Japan, a significant period in Japanese history according to the author, in which society has begun to change dramatically, and people have lost faith in the words of the storytellers, whom they come to ridicule:

> Already the mind of people had become excessively sagacious. There was hardly a soul who would listen to the stories told by one storyteller with faith. Society had turned into a place where people, sensing the presence of somebody grumbling, would approach a forest where there was no human ear who could listen, only to be told, as if it were a funny story, that the voice heard probably belonged to someone from the house of a *kataribe*. [10]

[10] Orikuchi Shinobu, "Shisha no sho," in *Orikuchi Shinobu zenshū* vol. 24 (Chūō kōronsha, 1967), 254-55.

It is in this unfriendly environment that the old woman from Taima speaks her lonely words as in delirium. Having lost pleasure in performing, and unable to taste whatever food she happens to eat, her body shows the signs of emaciation and she seems determined to die. Rather than suffering the problems of old age, the storyteller seems to be suffering the problems of a new age, where the reference parameters have changed from magic to rationality, from sacred stories to history, from passionate faith to suspicious criticism. It is easy here to draw a parallel between Nara 'modernization' and Orikuchi's contemporary cultural practices: what is the author aiming at when he laments the advent of a society unable to live and believe the dream? Who is responsible for this sad shift, which has relegated the shamanic old woman, who transmits myth and enacts mythical time, to the realm of a grotesque *waraibanashi*? Since Orikuchi was the co-founder of *minzokugaku*, or native Folk Studies, and an explicit admirer of the late Edo *kokugaku* (National Learning) scholar Hirata Atsutane, one is drawn to suspect that China, or rather imported knowledge, might have something to do with it.

Orikuchi insisted that the origins of Japanese literature, emerged from sacred pronouncements, such as the *norito,* and thus tightly connected the Japanese with the divine. In Orikuchi's formulation, women storytellers, just as the *miko* attendants of a shrine, used to be at the service of *kami*, and the stories they told held spiritual efficacy because theirs was a voice inhabited by the supernatural entity by which they were being possessed. In *Shisha,* the old woman of Taima, a more rural version of Shii no uba, the Nakatomi's storyteller who entertained a somewhat playful relationship with Jitō tennō according to the *Man'yōshū,*[11] also falls into a

trance, trembles, her mouth unties, she speaks solemnly, often in verses, and, once finished, looks exhausted. She is a shamaness, protecting in solitude through a soliloquy the old and divine profession of storytelling, performing for only one person, the aristocratic Fujiwara no Iratsume, who, we learn, had never been taught to doubt people's words, let alone those spoken as if they were the unquestionable truth.

[11] See poems 236 and 237 in the third *maki* of the *Man'yōshū*.

The old storyteller can speak abruptly and ceaselessly, as a stream that flows into another stream. She is, as James Fujii has pointed out, addressed by the narrator in *Shisha* as a stubborn, decrepit old woman (*katakuna*/*furubaba*).[12] Decrepit though she may be, her knowledge is much wider than the one available to the narrator. The old woman performs, while the narrator describes; she knits Ōtsu/Amida and Mimimo no toji/Iratsume into a meaningful *maṇḍala*, overcoming the barriers of time and space, while the narrator is forced to remain within those barriers. The storyteller represents the traces of an archaic Japan, marked by sacrality and with a highly ritualised social life, but it also embodies the traditional literary practice of *monogatari* as it was, at least according to Orikuchi, in its emerging moment. If the literary form of the *monogatari* is as decrepit and obsolete as the old storyteller from Taima, then the narrator is similar to a more modern, 'younger' genre, perhaps easily accessible, but surely much less creative and evocative.

The *uba* from Taima embodies the powerful *poiesis* of Japanese antiquity, for it is through her divinely inspired storytelling that Japan can be (re)created and continued. However, by dint of soliloquy, the storyteller, who is first and foremost a performer, albeit a shamanistic one, has run out of energy, and her reviving qualities are bound to remain *in potentia* without someone eager to listen and able to first revive her. If on a meta-textual level it is Orikuchi himself who attempts to revive and rejuvenate the forgotten and decayed practice of storytelling and *monogatari* (out of necessity via the written word), within the text the reviver, but simultaneously the one who is given meaning by the storyteller, must be Iratsume, her audience. She is the only one who acknowledges the old woman and accepts to be guided through her tales into a world full of possibilities, far from the clear-cut facts of history and utterly enveloped in the truths of dream. Iratsume welcomes the journey evoked by the old storyteller, who knows the tales from long ago (*mukashigatari*) and the destinies of the Nakatomi- Fujiwara household.

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[12] James A. Fujii, *Complicit Fictions: the Subject in the Modern Japanese Prose Narrative* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 248.

The spiritually charged element in the appearance and performance of *Shisha*'s storyteller, and in the sacred nature of her tales, is an important aspect, insofar as it provides the old woman—and her tales—with a higher authority, and shows her role as medium between the supernatural and the natural, the living and the dead. The storyteller finds herself at the crossroads of different realms, and indeed becomes the very crossroads.

Orikuchi's stress on orality and storytelling certainly finds its roots in his passionate love for *kodai* Japan, but *Shisha* is not merely a more or less visionary reconstruction of a remote Japan, freely based on ancient sources, but also a literary experiment written in and belonging to the 20th century. Within modern and contemporary fictional works, the presence of old women as storytellers is far from being sporadic, and seems to be particularly fertile in postcolonial fiction. In her article on contemporary postcolonial literatures, which focuses on women writers, Monika Gomille wonders what old women storytellers remember and tell, in order to understand why they are so precious within the novels she analyses. The answer, drawn from Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, is that "they tell, first of all, myths and stories of communities and families." [13] Bearing in mind the obvious differences, both geo-cultural and gender-related, the above-mentioned statement addressed to women writers from the diaspora can apply to Orikuchi, a man whose familiarity with relocation was pretty much confined to the formula of the *kishu ryūri* (ancient nobility in exile), but who did seem to share the idea that (old) women represented a privileged vehicle in the transmission of myth, through which identity can be formed and the cultural survival of the community ensured.

In *Shisha*'s ritual frame of narration, young Iratsume, whose naive relationship to the storyteller is controlled by her interest in retaining what she is told, [14] acts as the keeper of traditional forms of knowledge, for to listen carefully is to preserve; while the old storyteller, able to cross borders between

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[13] Monika Gomille, "Old Women Storytellers in Postcolonial Fiction," *Journal of Aging, Humanities, and the Arts* 1 (2007): 204.

[14] Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 97.

everyday life and the mythical past, acts, thanks to her "lifelong relationship to the tale,"[15] as the transmitter of what the Malian ethnologist and writer Amadou Hampâté Bâ called “total knowledge.”[16] Such a knowledge is made of fragmented threads woven into a totality through the ritual energy of the old storyteller, who makes things and her own self exist through her performative narration. It is indeed this performative aspect related to the oral setting that generates a special relationship between speaker and listener, even when the audience is made of one single person, and creates in real-time a culture of experience.

In many of his writings, Orikuchi emphasised the necessity for direct experience and actual feeling (*jikkan*), lamenting how Japan had evolved into a society rich in facts and information, but impoverished as regards imagination: a society, to use Walter Benjamin’s words, where experience had fallen in value.[17] Insisting on the experiential and creative nature of oral narration, Orikuchi hoped to contribute in converting his country into a more dynamic culture. Through the assumption that it had been a sacred and common practice back in a remote Japanese antiquity, he turned storytelling into something ordinarily extra-ordinary and quintessentially native. Unfortunately, in his effort to ‘materialise’ the sacred root of language, Orikuchi, defined as the man of sound by Nakagami Kenji for his belief in the mantra-like acoustics of words, ended up, quite ironically, focusing on the written *kanji* and minting unlikely and fixed etymologies for them.[18]

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[15] Susan Willis, *Specifying: Black Women Writing the American Experience* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), 66.

[16] Amadou Hampâté Bâ, “The Living Tradition,” in *General History of Africa: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. Amadou Hampâté Bâ (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press and Unesco, 1981), 167.

[17] Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” 84.

[18] See Nakagami Kenji, “Oto no hito Orikuchi Shinobu,” in *Jidai ga owari, jidai ga hajimaru*, eds. Nakagami Kenji, (Fukutake shoten, 1987), 419-37; Anne McKnight, “Crypticism, or Nakagami Kenji's Transplanted Faulkner: Plants, Saga and *Sabetsu*,” *The William Faulkner Journal of Japan*, 1 (1999), http://www.isc.senshu-u.ac.jp/~thb0559/anne.htm.

In spite of his shortcomings, from a literary perspective Orikuchi, as Nakagami acknowledged years after,[19] succeeded in casting a new light on the genre of the *monogatari*, and in exercising the employment of storytelling within fictional writing. Assumed to be "a force latent in suppressed groups and indeed parts of our own selves, capable of disrupting writing with all the force of a resurrection,"[20] orality has been advocated by many authors from the diaspora, but also, with different implications, by Orikuchi, who feared that the rise of the modern novel might coincide with the fall of the storyteller, and was willing to resuscitate sacred voices from antiquity in order to re-enchant Japan as a whole. However, Orikuchi himself, if with some dissatisfaction, could not come up with a different label from that of *shōsetsu* for his *Shisha no sho*, implying that, to use Ivan Kreilkamp's words, the storyteller had eventually come into being as a fiction within the very medium accused of having killed her off. [21]

The storyteller in *Shisha* is old, forgotten and ridiculed by a society which has come to conceive of imagination as falsification, defined as a decrepit woman by a narrator who, however, still seems to need her. As the story unfolds, this old woman who is bound to longevity finds someone to perform for: she guides the young aristocrat towards new levels of spiritual awakening and the achievement of a sublimated, hierogamous union with an autochthonised Amida, who is in fact the transfiguration of Prince Ōtsu's restless spirit.

If seen through the 'modern' eyes of Nara society, *Shisha*'s old storyteller is not perceived as active agent in the making of knowledge, nor does her longevity keep her from being the target of techniques of exaggeration, pathologization, and parody. Depicted by the narrator as a lonely old person, who is free to speak, but whose voice remains unheard, when it is not judged as the voice of a fool, her sad destiny of bodily and mental decay is such that she seems to be better off dead. Perception

[19] Nakagami Kenji, *Nakagami Kenji zenshū* vol.15 (Shūeisha 1996).
[20] Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.
[21] Ibid., 2.

changes radically when the reader realises how powerfully productive the old woman's words can be, once they are received as sacred truth by young Iratsume. In *Shisha*, Orikuchi did not merely attempt to extend the lifespan of the practice of storytelling, whose prolongevity might still suffer the effects of aging. Rather, he aimed to call for a collective act of faith, the necessary condition through which the womanly performative tradition of storytelling could live on as a meaningful, divinely inspired creation.