Wives, Lesser Wives, and Ghosts: Supernatural Conflict in a Korean Village

By

LAUREL KENDALL
American Museum of Natural History, New York

INTRODUCTION

When Korean shamans summon a family's ancestors and ghosts, a particularly unsettled and unsavory ancestor might appear. Speaking through the shaman, she moans, " Why did I have to die? Why did I die before my time? "

" Well then, why did you die? " the sponsoring housewife offers a tart retort.

The ancestor flings open the cabinet door as if she would ravage the tidy pile of quilts inside. She frowns at the sponsoring housewife and shakes a first in her direction. The ancestor hurls some of the housewife's garments to the floor and stops just short of trampling them. She wails, " Why couldn't I live like this? Why can't I meet my husband anymore? "

" Who's this? " I would ask. " *K'ŭn manura,*" someone would inform me in a stage whisper, " the husband's first wife."

I was struck by the frequency with which spiteful first wives appeared in shaman rituals. I found them again in the work of other ethnographers (Beuchelt 1975; Dix 1980: 65). Equally surprising was the kinship term used to indicate these spiteful apparitions. The *k'ŭn manura* is the " big wife," or " major wife," who is distinguished from the *chagŭn manura*, the " little wife " or " concubine " (also called *ch'ŏp* 妾). Insofar as the dead first wife's emotional existence persists in the restless ancestor, the ancestor bears the grief and malice of a supplanted living wife. As we shall see, the haunting presence of the dead first wife is consistent with Korean religious beliefs and with Korean women's perceptions of social experience. The powerful image of the jealous

Asian Folklore Studies, Vol. 43, 1984, 215–225.

wife provides an appropriate symbolic focus for the tribulations that many women bring to shamans.

The second wife and stepmother incurs a particular bundle of difficulties when she joins a widower's household. Shamans attribute these difficulties to the dead first wife's malevolent presence. Ritual propitiation of the dead first wife is, simultaneously, family therapy for the second wife. These rituals, and the beliefs surrounding them, reveal the stresses and strains in family situations which, however common, are not normative, and are therefore easily overlooked in more general discussions of the Korean family.

Before considering the particular attributes of dead first wives and living second wives, I will offer a few remarks on the nature of Korean ancestors and ghosts and on the circumstances in which one is likely to find them. My remarks are based on field work in a place I call "Enduring Pine Village," a rural Korean community due north of Seoul. The material presented here was collected during twenty months of research on women's rituals (Kendall 1979).[1]

Restless Ancestors and Ghosts

Shamans (*mudang* 巫堂, *mansin* 万神) sight restless ancestors and ghosts in divination visions and cast out these dangerous shades by exorcising their victims. Shamans pelt the afflicted person with scraps of food and coarse grain, they flourish knives and cut away baleful forces, and sometimes sacrifice a scapegoat chicken. Sometimes a mock funeral is performed over the afflicted person to fool the malevolent forces that have mustered to snatch his or her soul away.

A family sponsors an elaborate shaman ceremony, a *kut*, when "their ancestors are hungry and the gods want to play." Costumed shamans summon up all of the gods, ancestors, and ghosts of the client's household who, speaking through the shamans, banter with the assembled family and neighbors. All of the ancestors of the husband's house within four degrees of relationship appear, as well as daughters who have married into other households and some of the wife's own kin from her natal home.[2] Some of these weepy dead make only pro forma appearances when they speak through the lips of the possessed *mansin*. Some of the dead have urgent business with the living. Some families sponsor a special ritual, a *chinogi kut*, to send their restless ancestors away "to a good place" (*chohŭndero*). The vocal, tearful, often dangerous ancestors of woman-sponsored shaman rituals contrast to the ancestors of male rituals (*chesa* 祭祀), the passive, invisible guests, the appropriately patrilateral souls who receive food and wine from sons and grandsons on death anniversaries and feast days.

The unquiet dead afflict both men and women, and both men and women accept the possibility of ancestral malevolence as a source of affliction, but it is women who bring their suspicions to a shaman's attention. Men are generally more reluctant to accept the shaman's diagnosis that a particular affliction is a consequence of supernatural causation, reluctant to sanction the wife's investment in a shaman's cure. This is as it should be. It is Korean women who honor the household gods, perform simple exorcisms, and become the regular patrons of a particular shaman shrine or Buddhist temple. The patterns of ancestral and ghostly malevolence I shall describe are based on my observations of *kut*, exorcisms, and divination sessions, and on my interviews with village women.[3]

Those who died well are ancestors (*chosang* 祖上). They married, begat or bore children, and now receive ritual sustenance from sons and grandsons. Ghosts (*yŏngsan* 靈上)[4] violate all of these conditions. Ghosts died badly: as bachelors or maidens, without descendants, violently, or far from home. These unhappy souls are filled with resentment and envy, usually directed at living siblings or at a youthful niece or nephew. Bachelor ghosts bring sickness to a surviving brother or cousin and sometimes hamper his career prospects, delaying a security clearance or meddling in a business venture. Married women are harassed by a sister or a husband's sister who died unmarried. These virgin ghosts cause much marital strife and set a husband's affections wandering. A woman in labor is vulnerable to the envy of a sister or an aunt who died in childbirth. One's own dead children, nieces, and nephews contribute to a general climate of supernaturally induced household misfortune. They are seldom cited as the direct agents of severe parental malaise. They are often enjoined in *kut* to help their surviving siblings and their siblings' children. By implication, these envying young ghosts would most likely harm their surviving siblings and their siblings' children. I did hear, second hand, of two dead stepchildren who avenged themselves on wicked stepmothers by driving the women mad. As we shall see, the stepmother / stepchild relationship is particularly problematic.

Affection, anxiety, and compassion draw the dead to the living, but their presence is unwholesome. "The hand of the dead is a hand of nettles," states a Korean proverb (*chugŭn sonŭn kasisonida*); it cannot touch living flesh without inflicting injury. A deceased mother hovers around her living son, who drinks to excess. Grandparents stroke a living grandchild, and the baby sickens. A pitying mother caresses her grief-ridden daughter and drives her mad. There are also ancestors who died in their prime and who grieve for the years they have

missed or for the comforts they might have enjoyed, ancestors who did not live to see their grandchildren, and ancestors who died while their children's prospects were uncertain. Ancestors who hold any lingering emotional attachment or desire are restless and dangerous. The living must send them away from the household, inviting them back only as guests on proper ritual occasions.

In the field, I heard of only one " proper " ancestor who willfully afflicted a descendant.[5] This particular ancestor was a dead first wife with a justifiable grievance. The living second wife, now a widow, denied the first wife her ancestral offerings. The first wife touched her daughter-in-law's sore leg, preventing a wound from healing.[6] This strategy brought her complaint to the shaman's and thus to the community's attention. Some living second wives anticipate this all-but-forgotten first wife's fate. One old woman complained of her stepson and his wife, " When the old man dies, they'll give him rice offerings as ' grandfather,' but when I die, they won't even give me what a dog eats."

Spiteful First Wives

While living children and shamans seem unwilling to ascribe evil intentions to dead parents, dead first wives are common perpetrators of intentional ghostly mischief. Although dead first wives are honored as ancestors, they are filled with unrequited resentments (*han* 恨). The dead wife's husband now shares his quilt with another woman, her reluctantly abandoned children are being raised by a stranger, and her successor enjoys material comforts the first wife never knew.

Several women told me that a dead spouse will return and try to snatch the widow or widower's soul. A dead first wife is a prime suspect when a living husband suffers a severe or mysteriously persistent affliction. One woman told me, amid embarrassed giggles, how she had hired a shaman to exorcise the " big wife " who was clinging to their common husband's sore finger. Another dead wife inspired her daughter to complain whenever the husband prepared to sleep with his new wife.

At least two of the women I interviewed consider their husbands' deaths the first wife's triumph. One of these women was married against her will to a recent widower. After she married, she would often dream of a woman with a child on her back who would enter the courtyard and sit on the porch. These dreams unsettled her. The woman with the child on her back was the dead first wife, still hovering about the house. The husband grew ill and slept fitfully. Once, in the middle of the night, he slapped at the mattress and woke with a

start. He told her that in a nightmare, his dead wife was crawling into bed between the two of them. When the husband was hospitalized during his last illness, the second wife, asleep in the sickroom, dreamed that they were at home. The first wife walked into the room and said that she was hungry. The dead first wife went to the kitchen for the rice scoop. The second wife thought that she would offer some sweet bread to her convalescing husband. The first wife entered the room and went to snatch the bread. The husband opened his eyes, saw his dead wife, gasped, and turned his face away. When she woke up, the second wife realized that it was the first wife's death day; the first wife had come looking for her rice, the *chesa* offerings she should have received. Soon after this inauspicious dream the husband died. " That woman took him away," the second wife said.

The conflict between living and dead wives is akin to the conflict between wives and concubines. The little wife claims the husband's daily attention, the first wife can only bide her time and stoke her jealousy. With perseverance, she may win her husband back in the end. In divination sessions, shamans often counsel women who suspect that their husbands are " smoking the wind " (*paramŭl piuda*). The women are told to be agreeable and patient and reminded of their limited options should they divorce. Sometimes a talisman (*pujŏk* 符籍) is secreted in the unsuspecting husband's trousers and an exorcism is performed to free the wife of a ghost whose ill will is causing her marital strife.

Although dead first wives do try to crawl beneath marriage quilts, abandoned dead and living first wives are not only sexually, but also materially deprived. The husband bestows upon his new consort resources that rightfully belong to the first wife and her children. One woman told me, with considerable bitterness, how, as a child, she would spy on her father when he went to the market to buy meat for the little wife's house. She would go to this second household to collect rice from her father for her mother and siblings. She would see meal trays piled high with good things to eat, while at home they were eating rice gruel to stretch their small allotment of grain. The dead first wife who is denied her appropriate ancestral offerings, or the dead first wife who sees her own children slighted by their stepmother is similarly deprived. The jealousy of a dead first wife who sees thick quilts and bright clothing piled in the second wife's cabinets is the jealousy of a first wife who never enjoyed the luxuries her husband now bestows upon his little wife. Lines from the mourners' dirge (*hoesimgok* 回心曲) evoke the first wife's bitterness:

Your kind original wife you treat coldly
You love your bad later wife . . .

Guilt and evil heavy and extreme,
Go to the hell of wind like knives
(Dix 1977: 215, his translation)

But to shift perspectives, the abandoned concubine and the widowed second wife may also fall upon dire circumstances. Nearly all once-married women have few options—peddling, piecework, prostitution, or another alliance. The women who become widowers' second wives and married men's concubines have much else in common. Both are often runaway brides, young widows, women who have borne illegitimate children, or women otherwise unlikely to contract proper marriages with young bachelors. The less desirable the bride, the greater the likelihood that she will marry an older man and raise his motherless children.[7] Women who marry widowers may be several years younger than their spouses and may survive their older husbands by many years, often in precarious financial circumstances and with the added burden of stepchildren.

Stepchildren are a tribulation for the second wife. Koreans consider the mother the kind or loving parent (Osgood, 1951: 48; Han 1949: 150; Yi 1975: 116). In Cinderella fashion, it is assumed that she will pamper her own children but deal harshly with the first wife's issue. One woman, who disliked her husband, told me that she had often contemplated running away. Because she, herself, had suffered much hardship after her mother's death, she could not abandon her own children to a stepmother's mercies; she knew that they would suffer.

On the other hand, it is assumed that a stepmother commands little loyalty or affection from her stepchildren, however commendably she fulfills her maternal obligations. A mother's power over her children is the coercive power of affection, carefully cultivated. This, the stepmother lacks. One exasperated woman told me, " It's no good raising other people's children. If you do ten things right and make just one mistake, they say you've done badly by them because you're just the stepmother." Although she clearly favored her own child, born in the first year of marriage, this woman had raised her youngest stepson from babyhood. " I took your shit and piss," she told him, " and raised you as if you were my own child." When he was old enough to earn a living, the boy ran away from home and went to live with his married sister. The sister had encouraged his departure, telling him that he owed no obligation to a stepmother.

Stepmothers complain to shamans that they cannot discipline rebellious stepchildren, or that stepsons drink to excess. The prime topic of local gossip as I prepared to leave Enduring Pine Village concerned how a querulous couple of newlyweds had driven the hus-

band's father and stepmother from the house. This was the stepmother who feared for the hunger of her soul after death.

When stepchildren cause strife, shamans invariably discern the unsettled presence of the dead first wife. When the newlywed son drove his father and stepmother out of the house, villagers offered opinions not only on the young man's conduct, but on two rival shamans' prescriptions for settling the dead first wife. Before the son's marriage, a venerable shaman had suggested offering the second wife's wedding dress to propitiate the dead first wife. The second shaman, backed by her experienced cronies, argued that the dead first wife had seen the dress and been encouraged to return. This, she maintained, was why the young couple was giving the stepmother so much grief.

Settling the First wife

When shamans summon a dead first wife to speak in *kut*, the ritual process transforms a spiteful enemy into the second wife's ally. When the first wife appears, she vents her spite, moaning at her unjust fate in the manner appropriate to dead first wives. She contemptuously fingers the spirit clothes that have been prepared for her and unfavorably compares them to the second wife's garments. She wipes her nose on the bundles of cloth that will be used as bridges to send her soul to paradise. When women tell her to "go away to a good place," she curses them. Eventually mollified by wine and travel money, she assumes a more positive guise, making common cause with her erstwhile rival. She berates her own children for their misbehavior, telling them that she is grieved and worried, caressing them while they stand with bowed heads. She turns to her successor and strokes her arm, thanks her for raising the children, then departs.

Does this confrontational family therapy work? It seems to. In one *kut*, I heard a dead first wife gloat to the assembled spectators, "Well, I made the kid stop drinking, didn't I?" as she extended her hand for travel money. In interviews, a few women told me that their stepchildren had reformed after a *kut*. Like many therapies, this one seems to be a holding action. One of the women who related that a *kut* had spared her heavy-drinking stepson a trip to the hospital was the very stepmother whose abrupt departure from her stepson's household would precipitate so much social and ritual speculation a few months after this interview. The woman whose predecessor had appeared in so many ominous dreams more than ten years ago continues to be harassed by her ungrateful stepchildren's demands and by their dead mother's mischief. She acquired the latter with the former, and they are the combined bane of her existence, subject to periodic pro-

pitiation and reconciliation.

One wonders at the shaman's vivid portrayal of the first wife, and at the rich complex of belief associated with this particular restless ancestor. What is the social basis of so powerful an image?

I have stated that the first wife's baleful presence is a common theme in shaman ritual, but let me elaborate. Husbands' first wives appeared in seven of the twenty-five *kut* I observed and recorded. More than a quarter of the women sponsoring *kut* had joined widowers' households and dealt with ghostly first wives. I also noted five village households where, during the period of my field study, shamans exorcised the baleful influences of dead first wives. Shamans' clients are, however, a self-selected group; they are women under stress. I have suggested that marriage to a widower is particularly stressful, but how common are these marriages? When I tallied the biographical interviews I had elicited from forty-four random women in Enduring Pine Village households, I discovered that eight of them had married once-married men. A ninth woman could not be certain, but strongly suspected that her husband had left a wife in North Korea. Three husbands were refugees who had abandoned their families north of the parallel. As a consequence of the Korean war, many men began new lives in the South and these "widowers" follow the pattern, but ethnographic evidence suggests that Korean widowers have routinely remarried (Han 1949: 51; Brandt 1971: 132). The childless widower still hopes for descendants, the widower with children needs a woman to raise them, and no Korean man can keep house.

Why do women enter these less than desirable unions? Of the women I interviewed, three had contracted proper and respectable unions with young refugees. Of the remainder, one was a widow, two had fled prior husbands, one had borne an illegitimate child, and one confessed to a bad horoscope and a brother's wife impatient to see her married off. Restless ancestors beckon us to consider some of the murkier aspects of Korean family life.

Conclusion

Ancestors, ghosts, and shamans have established working relationships in all three East Asian societies. Writers acknowledge the cultural appropriateness and symbolic efficacy of shamans' ascriptions of supernatural malevolence. Most studies stop short of welding the semantic possibilities of supernatural affliction to specific case-by-case analyses of ghostly harassment.

Some writers suggest that the shaman's choice of an afflicting shade is ad hoc guesswork within the culturally acknowledged range of ghosts

and ancestors most likely to give trouble (Lebra 1969: 3; Janelli and Janelli 1979). Or again, the shaman probes for a structural anomaly, a virgin ghost or twice-married maternal ancestor, to set in place and tidy up the kinship diagram (Jordan 1972: 138–171). Other writers posit a direct symbolic correlation between the offending wraith and a particular client's immediate, if unmentionable dilemma (Ts'eng 1972: 162–3; Kleinman 1980: 158). A virgin ghost, for example, is attracted by a sickly young man and becomes a divine euphemism for his excessive onanism (Kleinman 1980: 121–124).

Some cases lend themselves more readily to socio-symbolic speculations than others, and these we write up. While I have glibly commented on the conflict of loyalties implied in a woman's possession by household gods and her own mother's ghost (Kendall 1977), I am less certain that an " uncle who died young " or a " husband's aunt who died in childbirth " everywhere constitute appropriate and powerful personal symbols. The dead first wife, however, is both a structural anomaly and an appropriate symbol of the second wife's distress. As a structural anomaly, the first wife is an ancestor who died young, a wife who does not live with her husband, and a mother who does not raise her own children. She is also the appropriate metaphoric source of the second wife's anxieties—a husband's precarious health, an untimely widowhood, or a difficult stepchild.

Living second wives most likely never knew their predecessors, since Korean women marry outside their natal communites. Indeed, several of the dead first wives were lost in North Korea. The Janellis have observed that social relationships between particular persons lead them to accept or reject ancestral hostility as a cause of personal misfortune (Janelli and Janelli 1982: 162). The dead first wife confounds this generalization, or does she? The concept of " ancestor," as anthropologists and Korean villagers use the term, implies a continuing obligation to particular categories of dead kin. Proper ancestorship is an extension of kinship; women become ancestors as wives and mothers in their husbands' households.

As we have seen, the female ancestor's status is sometimes precarious; a second wife denies the first wife her ancestral offerings or a second wife fears that her husband's children will not give her an ancestor's rice (cf. Janelli and Janelli 1982: 119–121). The shaman's visions and divinations permit aggrieved, ignored, or otherwise ambiguous ancestors to claim recompense. That dead first wives are so often assumed to act maliciously is a logical consequence of more general beliefs in ancestorship, in lingering ties between the living and the dead. The dead first wife remains the " big wife," the second wife is

the " little wife," and flesh and blood women provide ample models of this bitter, fractious relationship. Portrayed as a jealous living wife, the dead first wife is driven by predictable and understandable emotions. The living wife engages in a fine old conflict; in shaman rituals she confronts and neutralizes a formidable foe.

NOTES

1. My research in Korea was made possible by grants from the International Institute for Education, the Social Science Research Council, and the National Science Foundation. I am grateful to Homer Williams, Akira Yamamoto, and Roger Janelli for comments on an early draft of this paper; to Roger and Dawnhee Janelli for providing an advance copy of their important study of Korean ancestor worship; and to Clark Sorensen for a translation, from the German, of Eno Beuchelt's study of Cheju shaman ritual. Thanks to Clarissa Wilbur for typing this manuscript. I, alone, am responsible for its shortcomings.

2. The terms " affinal " and " matrilateral " do not adequately indicate the kin of a married female ego in a patrilineal descent system. For a discussion of the range of ancestors appearing in shaman ritual, see Kendall 1983. For a thorough discussion of Korean ancestorship, see Janelli and Janelli 1982.

3. This admittedly woman-centered sample accords in most respects to the Janellis' more balanced account of ancestral malevolence in a Korean village (Janelli and Janelli 1982: esp. 148–176). We differ in our interpretations insofar as the Janellis ascribe women's greater sensitivity to ancestral malevolence to women's conflict-laden experiences with the parents-in-law who will become her most immediate ancestors (Janelli and Janelli 1982: 192).

4. " *Yŏngsan* " is part of the shamans' working vocabulary and not widely used in other contexts. *Chosang* is sometimes broadly applied to all familial souls, as the Janellis also note. They provide the qualifying term, *yat'ŭn chosang* for children of the house who died unmarried (Janelli and Janelli 1982: 151). One also hears the blanket term *kuisin* (鬼神), ghost-god, and more specific classifiers such as *wŏnmanggi* (怨望鬼), ghost of one who died filled with desire; or *haesan'gi* (解産鬼), ghost of one who died in childbirth.

5. But see Janelli and Janelli (1982: 148–176) for other examples of malevolent ancestors.

6. This was " Munae's Mother ". I have described her case in some detail (Kendall 1981: 128–129).

7. These observations are drawn from my field notes but see also Han (1949: 51) and Brandt (1971: 97).

REFERENCES

BEUCHELT, Eno

1975 Die Rückrufung der Ahnen auf Chejudo (Süd Korea), ein Ritual zur psychischen Stabilisierung. *Anthropos*, Vol. 70: 10–179.

BRANDT, Vincent S. R.

1971 *A Korean village: between farm and sea.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

DIX, Griffin M.
1977 *The East Asian country of propriety: Confucianism in a Korean village.* Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of California, San Diego.
1980 The place of the almanac in Korean folk religion. *The Journal of Korean studies*, Vol. 2: 47–70.

HAN, Chungnim Choi
1949 *Social organization of Upper Han Hamlet.* Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Michigan.

JANELLI, Roger L., Dawnhee Yim Janelli
1979 The functional value of ignorance at a Korean seance. *Asian folklore studies*, Vol. 38/1: 81–90.
1982 *Ancestor worship and Korean society.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.

JORDAN, David K.
1972 *Gods, ghosts, and ancestors: folk religion in a Taiwanese village.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

KENDALL, Laurel
1977 Caught between ancestors and spirits: a Korean *mansin*'s healing *kut. Korea journal*, Vol. 17/8: 8–23.
1979 *Restless spirits: Shaman and housewife in Korean ritual life.* Ph.D. thesis, Columbia University.
1981 Wood imps, ghosts, and other noxious influences: the ideology of affliction in a Korean village. *The Journal of Korean studies*, Vol. 3: 113–145.
1983 Korean ancestors from the woman's side. In *Korean women: View from the inner room*, Laurel Kendall and Mark Peterson, eds., pp 97–112. New Haven: East Rock Press.

KLEINMAN, Arthur
1980 *Patients and healers in the context of culture.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

LEBRA, William P.
1969 Ancestral beliefs and illness in Okinawa. In *Proceedings of the VIIth Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences* 3: 1–6.

OSGOOD, Cornelius
1951 *The Koreans and their culture.* New York: Ronald Press.

TSENG, Wen-shing
1972 Psychiatric study of shamanism in Taiwan. *Archives of general psychiatry* Vol. 26: 561–565.

YI, Kwang-gyu 李 光奎
1975 *Han'guk kajok ŭi kujo punsŏk* 韓国家族의構造分析 (Analysis of Korean family structure). Seoul: Ilchi Sa.