Ghosts And The Japanese
Toelken, Barre, Iwasaka, Michiko

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Foreword

David J. Hufford

Ghosts and the Japanese is a fine book that has both great scholarly merit and broad appeal. In it Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken describe Japanese death customs, provide translations of contemporary Japanese ghost legends, and place both within their cultural and historical context. In the process Iwasaka and Toelken have illustrated the many ways in which such legends not only reflect deep cultural values but also are a central part of the dynamic process by which those values are shaped, maintained, and transmitted. This thorough cultural account is greatly enriched by illustrations drawn from rare Japanese art work portraying ghosts. The book does a remarkable job of addressing three important and fascinating topics.

Because of the careful attention to the cultural context of these stories, this book will be of great interest to all who study narratives and cultural process. It also provides an excellent introduction to Japanese culture at a time when growing political and economic ties have greatly increased the need for Westerners to understand Japan. No amount of history or economic theory can provide the human understanding that comes
with the kind of encounter with values, beliefs, and worldview that Iwasaka and Toelken have provided. The result is an introduction to central ideas that underlie everyday life in Japan, a crucial domain too often overlooked in typical efforts to “sum up” a culture. And yet it is precisely this domain that is necessary for graceful and comfortable interaction, as Iwasaka and Toelken clearly illustrate in their “Introduction to the Left Stairway.”

Perhaps the broadest appeal of this book, though, lies in the way that it helps us to understand belief in ghosts, a concept found in all cultures and at all times of which we have any record. In their commentary on this ample set of well-translated narratives, the authors have clearly shown their distinctively Japanese quality and their relationship to traditional Japanese culture. At the same time, they have elucidated a great variety of ways in which individual stories, and the Japanese ghost tradition in general, parallel beliefs found in other cultures.

Their great success in high technology clearly shows the Japanese to be a “modern” people or, as it is often put in ethnocentric terms, “westernized.” But as Iwasaka and Toelken point out, the changes in Japanese culture during the past several decades are very much like those that have occurred in the United States and Europe. It has often been assumed that this process of change destroys cultural continuity, and both Japanese and American society seem characterized by novelty and an apparently chaotic and fragmented eclecticism. Assumptions about modern discontinuity and fragmentation are strongest with regard to spiritual values. In Japan, Shinto, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Christianity mix in the practices of individuals and families, while a spate of new religions have sprung up since World War II. And, the authors point out, a great many Japanese, perhaps most, “belong” to no religion at all. Superficially this looks like a degradation of spirituality. And yet the stories in this book clearly show, as will a conversation with the average Japanese individual, that spiritual beliefs and values remain extremely strong and deep. This is the first of several direct parallels to the culture of the United States. Through much of this century sociologists believed Americans were becoming much less religious, only to discover late in the century that they had mistaken institutional religious affiliation for spirituality. The religious pluralism of the modern world creates a new and historically unique situation for the
believer, what Peter Berger has called "the heretical imperative." A stolid attachment to a monolithic set of institutional forms becomes much more difficult when one is constantly faced with the beliefs and disbeliefs of many other traditions. In Japan and the United States this has led to a more eclectic approach, sometimes disparagingly called "cafeteria style religion," and to the rapid development of new and rapidly changing religious forms. The new religions of Japan, despite their clear cultural stamp, have a great deal in common with "New Age" spirituality in the West.

However upsetting modern religious changes are to the traditionalist, one thing is clear: they do not represent a decline in either spiritual belief or values. Neither do they represent a sharp break with historical traditions. Again, both in Japan and the United States these changes embody both cross-cultural assimilation and a persistence of ancient beliefs. The assimilation is clearly a two-way street. Buddhist spiritual ideas such as karma, coming from Japan and other Asian cultures, have had an enormous impact on American spiritual ideas.

Perhaps more surprising is the discovery that the historical continuities of belief, those that reach back to times before constant intercultural influences became the religious norm, also show a core of remarkable cross-cultural parallels. To some extent this reflects universals of ordinary human experience. For example, a mother's desire to protect her children is common to all cultures, and many stories all over the world involve the intervention of a mother's ghost on behalf of her child. Iwasaka and Toelken have provided numerous examples of such stories. In Japan these stories of parent-child connection often have a very Confucian appearance, supporting filial piety. Others reflect earlier Japanese concepts about the dangers of unritualized babies. These influences give the narratives a distinctive cultural stamp. Such stories found in North America have many differences, but one does not need a strong tradition of ancestor veneration to understand the idea of maternal love that can reach beyond the grave. The importance of culturally distinct features should not be allowed to obscure the common humanity displayed in cultural traditions as the authors show in their trenchant criticism of Joseph Campbell's characterization of Asian religions as treating individuals as unimportant.

Perhaps more startling than the recognizable recurrence of ordinary human experience in ghost narratives is the
appearance of parallels in the details of distinctly non-ordinary experience. For example, the story of the audible death omens that Iwasaka and Toelken recount is essentially identical to narratives that I have encountered in Canada and the United States—right down to the details of hearing the sound of hammering nails into a coffin a number of days before the event. Many elements of the ghost ship and ghostly, drowned sailor stories are similarly striking in their parallels to narratives common on both sides of the North Atlantic.

I was particularly interested to find that vengeful child ghosts (zashiki warashi) are said sometimes to climb on and press the chest of a sleeping person, a readily recognizable feature of a set of beliefs about supernatural assault that I have documented in other parts of the world and associated with the medical phenomenon of sleep paralysis (1982). I have found other traditions in which this experience is explained by reference to a vengeful child. For example, I interviewed a man from Honduras who had been taught that the experience is caused by the attack of the spirit of an unbaptized infant. I have subsequently found the same event in the Japanese tradition of kanashibari, which may be translated as “to immobilize as if bound with metal chains.”

According to a recent Buddhist dictionary, kanashibari “is one of the spells of esoteric Buddhism to make one’s opponent or a criminal immobile by the power of Fudomyoo, a Buddhist god” (Nakamura et al. 1989). Kanashibari is very well known in current Japanese tradition and is frequently depicted in the popular Japanese manga (comic books). Not only do the descriptions in these popular accounts make it clear that they refer to sleep paralysis, but the Japanese sleep literature has used kanashibari as the common term for the phenomenon (Fukuda 1987, 1989). This magical binding is similar to the meaning of the English term spell bind, and in many Western traditions it is also believed to be something that can be done through esoteric knowledge. It was a common accusation made against witches. This case illustrates very well the operation of a common core of experience embedded within distinctive local cultural forms. The ghostly zashiki warashi are not Buddhist adepts, and the two kinds of accounts have many different meanings. Here we can see a particular kind of non-ordinary experience receiving multiple interpretations within Japanese culture. And yet both Japanese interpretations of this terrifying paralysis can be found accompanying the same experience in other cultures.

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The Japanese accounts presented by Iwasaka and Toelken are rich in experiential detail and make the identification of underlying experiences easier than is usually the case in folktale texts. This may be in part a reflection of the influence of Yanagita Kunio (1875–1962, whom Iwasaka and Toelken describe as the greatest single force in developing the study of minzokugaku (roughly, folklore). This remarkable person emphasized the importance of the subjective long before the current trends in “reflexive” scholarship. Having been pointed in the direction of Yanagita’s work by Iwasaka and Toelken’s account, I have found still more illustrations of cross-cultural experiential parallels. For example, in a recent translation of Yanagita’s The Legends of Tōto, originally published in 1910, I found the following account:

THE TEMPLE GATE

Matsunojo Kikuchi of Iide was ill with an acute fever from exposure to the cold and would often lose his breath. He went out into the rice fields, and hurried off to the family temple of Kisei-in. When he would put a little effort into his legs he could, without attempting to, fly into the air about as high as a person’s head and then gradually come down. With a little effort he could again rise as before. There is no way of expressing how much fun it was.

As he approached the temple gate he saw a crowd of people. Wondering what could be going on, he entered the gate, and there were red poppies in full bloom as far as one could see. He felt better than ever before. His dead father was standing amidst the flowers and asked, “Have you come too?” While somehow answering this, he went on. The boy he had lost earlier was there and also asked, “Papa, have you come too?” Matsunojo drew closer saying, “Is this where you have been?” The child said, “You can’t come now!” At that moment someone by the gate called out his name loudly. As troublesome as it was, he paused reluctantly, and with a heavy heart, decided to turn back. Then he regained his senses. His relatives had gathered around, and were throwing water on him, to call him back to life. (1975, 68–69)

Even though this is not a first-person account, it is easily recognized as what is today called a “near-death
experience.” Although the cultural details of the temple and other aspects of local landscape make this unmistakably Japanese, the experiential features are universal. We do not need the term “out of body experience” to understand Matsunojo Kikuchi’s ability to rise up in the air, any more than the context prevents us from recognizing the almost universal element of being told that it is not time for death.

Our understanding of cross-cultural patterns in narratives and beliefs about the supernatural is only beginning to take into account the non-ordinary experiences to which they often refer. Such an understanding will enrich our appreciation both of the distinctive qualities of cultures around the world and the common humanity of those who create, maintain, and live within them. Michiko Iwasaka and Barre Toelken’s *Ghosts and the Japanese* is a very important and enjoyable step forward in this process.