

Response to “Adopting the Fetish” by Ellen Schattschneider

Robert A. Paul

Charles Howard Candler Professor of Anthropology and Interdisciplinary Studies

Emory University

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For many years Ellen Schattschneider has been exploring the fascinating topic of the use of “dolls” and other human figurines in Japanese culture and religious life. This essay represents a valuable further development in that effort, bringing in the unifying idea of the ambiguous relationship between the marital and the sibling tie in Japanese thought. Assigned a central place in Shinto mythology, in the brother-sister marriages of the ancestral deities, and replayed symbolically in every generation in the Emperor-Empress pair, the blurring of the line between these two relations is also instantiated in such institutions as the pairing of a shamaness with a male partner who is both “brother” and “lover”, and the role of the adopted groom. The latter, around which Schattschneider structures her analysis of the ethnographic material, abandons his own natal family to provide an heir for a patriline with daughters but no sons. The man, usually of lower status who hopes to gain wealth and social standing by his sacrifice of his own patrilineal standing, adopts the daughter’s family name and venerates her parents, not his own. His child will bear his wife and in-law’s name and inherit their land, while he is socially understood to be something less than a real member of the family whose name he adopts.

The ambiguity in this case is that he shares some characteristics of a brother of his wife, in that he has her surname and venerates her parents, as a real brother would do. At the same time, the practical purpose of his acceptance in the family is simply that he provides the male sexual contribution that will enable the patriline to continue. As Schattschneider points out, there is a further trace of incest in that the father of the bride gets to have his cake and eat it: he need not see his beloved daughter marry out, but retains their close relationship normally disrupted when the daughter is sent to another patrilineal house in marriage. The tension between endogamy and exogamy that is actually a feature of most descent and exchange marriage systems is thus resolved in this case with a heavy emphasis on the pull of endogamy.

My own thinking about such cases relies on a dual inheritance model, which recognizes the fact that humans reproduce along two different channels, one genetic and requiring sexual intercourse, the other symbolic and culturally constructed, from which sexuality is generally excluded, and which often assigns the sexual mode of reproduction a lower status. Thus in the case of the adopted groom, he is a mere genitor, brought in to provide the necessary semen in exchange for the continuity of symbolic markers such as the family name and shrine. While sexual procreation is a necessary ingredient in generational succession, it is the cultural markers that have the higher prestige. Similarly, the close affectionate tie of siblings – what David Schneider called the “diffuse enduring solidarity” supposed to exist between kin – is asexual but apparently more highly valued than the marital sexual tie, which can be more an object of privacy and shame. So, in the case of Yoko and Shinji, their Platonic “marriage”, carried out

partly through the medium of dolls, was the one that they would take to eternity, even though both were also married to other spouses with whom they had children. After Shinji's death, Yoko played the care-giving role towards his children usually assigned to the father's sister, as if she was in fact Shinji's sibling. The purely asexual but deeply felt bond between them, of the sort normally expected between siblings, gave their union a spiritual dimension that rose above mere biological procreation.

This leads me to suggest a way to enrich Schattschneider's effort to situate these ethnographic matters with Freud's theory of the uncanny. Freud analyzes the story of *The Sand-man* by E.T.A.Hoffman, which features a mechanical female doll with whom the hero of the story falls passionately in love, leading in the end to his own madness and suicide. Freud's cites a paper by Jentsch to the effect that the uncanny effect arises from the blurring of what should be a clear distinction, namely, that between what is animate and what is inanimate. Freud, however, dismisses this point and focuses instead on the theme of castration, since attacks on the eyes, which regularly stand in symbolically for the male genitals, are (for him) even more central to the story than is the figure of seductive but deadly automaton Olympia

These theories can be reconciled: while there is no reference to castration in the ethnographic material Schattschneider presents, it is obvious that the effect of castration is to render sexual procreation impossible. Thus, if carried out, it would either rule out a marriage, or render it infertile. But the hero of *The Sand-Man*, Nathanael, is in fact in love with and engaged to be married to someone named Clara when he is distracted by Olympia's charms. His suicide of

course short circuits that marriage. But the theme of infertility is linked to the sibling relation, which is governed by an incest taboo prohibiting sex and procreation. And we discover in Hoffman's tale that

In order to make the beginning [of the story] more intelligible, it is necessary to addthat, soon after the death of Nathanael's father, Clara and Lothair [her brother], the children of a distant relative, who had likewise died, leaving them orphans, were taken by Nathanael's mother into her own house. Clara and Nathanael conceived a warm affection for each other, to which there could be no objection.

Thus, Clara is in effect first Nathanael's sister, adopted into his household, and then his lover and fiancée, thus combining the qualities of sibling and (prospective) bride. It might be mentioned that in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, exactly the same relationship exists between Victor Frankenstein and his sister-bride Elizabeth, who is murdered on his wedding night by the creature he has made, who like Olimpia crosses the line between living and non-living. But what is the difference between a mechanical person and a live one? Precisely that one can procreate, and the other cannot – the same distinction as that between wife and sibling, or between someone who is castrated and someone who is not. These are the same distinctions – ultimately all between genetic and symbolic non-sexual reproduction - which the Japanese cases also struggle to reconcile, with human figurines, straddling the border of life and death, as the mediators.