

Taketori no Okina no Monogatari – The Tale of the Old Bamboo Cutter

Adapted from a traditional Japanese tale by Shinjo Takame

The Tale of the Old Bamboo Cutter is a traditional Japanese folk tale that has origins in the 10th Century CE. Perhaps one of the earliest works of science fiction, it also has links to other motifs and myths that form part of the cultural exchange between east and west from trade, especially along the Silk Road.

Once there lived an old man who made a living as a bamboo cutter. Each day, he would go out into the tall forests of swaying bamboo, cut it, take it to the nearby village and sell it. Each evening he returned home to his wife. They had lived together for many years, and while they were poor this was not what made them unhappy. They had no children and were not likely to have any.

Then one day when the old man was cutting bamboo, he saw a bright light shining out of a severed bamboo stump. He went up to it and looked inside and saw to his delight there was a tiny girl inside. She was very small, no larger than his palm was wide, dressed in brightly coloured silken garments. Her tiny face was beautiful and perfect. The old man picked up the tiny girl and took her home. His wife was delighted with the small girl.

“She is so beautiful,” said the old woman. “Just like a little princess.”

After they had found the girl, the old woman and the old man prospered. The man began to find many gold nuggets inside the stems of the bamboo he cut. They now had a fine house with many servants and fine clothes to wear. The girl brought much joy to the house. She never cried and grew rapidly. First to a baby of normal size, but within three months she had grown into a beautiful young woman. They named her Kaguya, which means “shining light”, for her beauty had such radiance akin to the moon itself.

When it was decided she had come of age, the old man and woman gave a splendid feast and invited all the people around. Not only did people come to celebrate from nearby villages and towns, but some wealthy princes came as well.

These princes, five in all, continued to come to the house after the feast and enquire after Kaguya, waiting around the house hoping to catch a glimpse of her. The old man was pleased with this as he knew it was time that Kaguya should marry.

However, Kaguya seemed to show no interest in them, nor in the poems they composed in her honour, nor in the fact that the desire they felt for her had made them deny food and drink.

Desperate, the princes spoke to the old man and begged for him to speak to Kaguya on their behalf, to choose one of them to marry her.

But their pleas were in vain. “She is not truly my child,” said the old man. “I cannot command her.”

And so, the princes returned to their homes. In the months after they sent letters and poems hoping to win her heart, but these all went unanswered.

At last, the old man spoke to Kaguya. He told her that he wished to see her married and to consider the attentions of these princes. “All of them are fine and honourable men and have enough fortune that you would be looked after,” he said to her. “I will not always be in this world, and it would please me greatly to see that you are settled and protected.”

“But father,” she said, “I do not know any of them. What if they were to prove false to me?”

“Ah, I see,” said the old man. “What would make you meet with them then?”

“Tell the princes that I will test them,” said Kaguya. “And the one who proves most worthy, I will marry.”

The old man agreed to this and letters were sent, summoning the princes. They all came in splendid finery and bowed low before the old man and Kaguya.

“I thank you for coming so promptly,” said the old man. “As you all know, I have given my daughter her own choice in whom she should marry. She has said that she will test all of you and the one who is most worthy she will marry.” He then nodded to Kaguya.

She addressed the first prince. “I wish for you to bring me the begging bowl of the Buddha from the land of Tenjiki.” To the second prince she said. “I wish for you to bring me a branch from the tree of gold, silver and jade on Mount Horai.”

She then turned to the third prince. “I wish for you to bring me the flame-proof pelt of the rat of Morokoshi.”

She spoke to the fourth prince. “I wish for you to bring me the five coloured jewel from the head of a dragon.”

And to the fifth prince she said. “I wish for you to bring me the cowry shell from the swallow of the broad-sea plain.”

The old man looked in some surprise at the tasks his daughter had set. "These tasks that you have set are most difficult."

"Not to a man who is most worthy," said Kaguya.

Resigned, the old man addressed the princes. "You have heard my daughter, now go and prove yourselves."

The princes left with heavy hearts, all thinking that Kaguya asked the impossible.

The first prince wanted very much to marry Kaguya, but the land of Tenjiki, also known as India, was very far away and he was unwilling to travel.

He travelled to a nearby temple and there he saw an offering bowl that was old and dirty from the ash of many offerings. He figured this would be a suitable substitute for the begging bowl of the Buddha and he took it, placing it inside an ornate padded box and went back to present it to Kaguya.

Kaguya examined the bowl coldly.

"This is the begging bowl of the Buddha?" she asked.

"Indeed, it is," said the prince, keeping his face lowered so it did not betray him.

She placed the bowl on the floor in front of him.

"The begging bowl of the Buddha shines with holy light," she said. "You have tried to trick me."

The prince then departed with his bowl and a dejected air.

The second prince gathered some of his attendants and made as if he was to be taking the long and arduous journey to Mt Horai. He then departed alone, but instead of heading for Mt Horai, he travelled to a remote castle where he had arranged for some craftsmen to begin making the jewelled branch. When the branch was finished it was a marvel of jewels and precious metals. He returned home with it and acted as if the journey to Mt Horai had been long and arduous.

He quickly returned to Kaguya and her father with the branch, not even bothering to change from his travelling clothes or have a bath. The prince then presented the branch to her. Kaguya examined it closely and was dismayed to find no fault with it.

"It is indeed the very branch," said her father. "He has met your terms, my daughter, you cannot refuse him."

Kaguya nodded, her eyes downcast. Her father noticed this and allowed her to retire. He had servants prepare a bath and laid out fresh clothes for the prince. Later on, the two men sat in the garden and spoke over tea. The young man elaborated a long story of the many trials and tribulations he had faced in his journey to Mt Horai to retrieve the branch.

The old man was quite impressed with this and was about to begin talking about the impending marriage, when one of the servants approached them.

"There are some craftsmen here," said the servant. "They said that they have not been paid for the creation of a jewelled branch."

The prince's cheeks flushed with embarrassment and he hid his face.

The old man looked at him in shock. "You have deceived my daughter!" He then went inside and informed Kaguya of this.

The prince was then thrown out of the house with his branch. Kaguya then spoke to the craftsmen and paid them what they were owed. The craftsmen left, waylaying the prince on the road, beating him up and taking all his possessions.

The third prince sought out a merchant from the far land of Morokoshi, or China, and asked the merchant to obtain a robe made of flame-proof pelt of the rats that dwelled there. He gave the merchant much gold to purchase it. After many months, the merchant finally returned, saying that he had found the pelt but it had cost more gold than the prince had given him and he had to make up the amount from his own personal funds. The prince happily paid the merchant the necessary gold and was given the pelt.

The robe was a marvel, a brilliant blue with each hair tipped in gold. He presented it to Kaguya and her father. She examined the robe cautiously.

"It is indeed beautiful," she said. "But we must prove it is genuine. If it is not, then I will not marry him."

She then asked a fire to be kindled and threw the robe into it. The robe was consumed almost at once. The prince was shocked, he bowed low with his face touching the floor.

"Forgive me, I thought as well that the robe was indeed genuine," said the prince.

The prince then left, retiring to his own home and refusing all visitors.

The fourth prince gathered all his attendants and servants, telling them of the five coloured jewel on the dragon's head and how they might find it. He gave them enough gold to hire ships and provisioned them all the supplies that they might need for the journey. The prince himself would remain secluded in his home until they returned. When the men left the prince, they didn't like the idea of doing the work for him. They divided among themselves what the prince had given them and went home.

The prince, meanwhile, was so sure of the success of his men that he proceeded to decorate his home in such a sumptuous way that he felt Kaguya would favour. He also dismissed all his mistresses and passed his days and nights in solitude. After several months with no word from his servants, the prince started to make enquiries in the harbour. But his questions were just met with laughter. No one had embarked on a ship with such an errand, the prince was told. Outraged, the prince vowed to find the dragon's jewel himself.

He found a ship and went far out to sea in pursuit of the dragon. After many days, the ship encountered a massive storm such as had never been seen. The prince at once knew that this was the work of the dragon who had stirred up the storm to prevent the prince from finding it.

The prince immediately cried out that he would not pursue the dragon, shouting his repentance into the storm over and over. Eventually the storm subsided, and a fair wind blew them towards the shore. The prince knew that the dragon had heard him and several days later the ship came in sight of land.

But the prince would not leave the boat, thinking they had arrived at some strange and hostile land. Instead, he hid at the bottom of the boat. It was not until the local governor arrived, having gotten word of the prince's misadventure, that the prince was persuaded to come ashore.

The prince was now thin and hollow-eyed, his clothes were wet and torn. But he lost no time in returning to his house and cursed Kaguya, vowing to never see her again. Kaguya herself heard about the prince's plight but said nothing.

The fifth prince made the long and arduous journey in pursuit of the swallow that carried the cowrie shell. His quest took him to the mountains where the swallow had a nest on a ledge near the highest peak. Carefully he climbed the mountain, coming to right below the ledge where the swallow had its nest. He reached up inside the nest with one hand to try and find the shell, his hand alighting on something round. Excited, he started to climb down but he slipped and he fell to his death.

No word was heard from the prince and then a small party of his attendants went out in search of him. They found the prince's body and inside his closed hand was what he had taken from the swallow's nest: a ball of dung. The servants brought the prince's body back home for burial, sending word of his death to Kaguya who said nothing. By now, Kaguya's fame and beauty had reached the imperial court and even to the emperor himself. He wished to know more about her, so he sent one of the ladies of the court to meet her.

The lady arrived to see Kaguya, but Kaguya refused to leave her room. Her mother and father pleaded with her, but she still refused.

"But refusing the request of the emperor is death," pleaded the old man.

"Then let me be put to death," said Kaguya.

The lady of the court returned to the emperor and related this to him. Intrigued, the Emperor then summoned Kaguya's father to court, telling the old man that if he should bring his daughter before him, he should be raised to the nobility.

Her father returned home and told this to Kaguya, telling her that she had to come with him. But Kaguya again refused.

"I will not go," she said. "And if you force me to go, father, I will pine away and die."

"Then I will not force you," said her father.

The old man then returned to the Emperor with Kaguya's refusal.

"Can you not compel her to?" asked the emperor. "You are her father."

"But I am not her father, your majesty," said the old man. And he related the whole story of Kaguya to the emperor, starting with finding her inside the bamboo stem and the extraordinary speed that she grew to womanhood.

"Truly she is not of this world," said the emperor, he considered a moment. "Perhaps we could do a royal hunt near where you live. Then I might call upon you and see your daughter."

"It is a good plan, your majesty," said the old man. "And perhaps my daughter will change her mind once she has a glimpse of you."

The old man returned home and the emperor arranged for the royal hunt. Within days, the emperor arrived at the old man's house and he saw Kaguya. He was stunned by her beauty. He went forward to try and speak with her, but Kaguya attempted to run away, hiding her face with her sleeve.

The emperor clasped her arm, preventing her from leaving. "My dear lady, I must have you live at my palace. I come with a carriage to take you there."

"Your majesty, I cannot," said Kaguya. "I am not of this world, and I am not subject to your will."

"No one may resist my will," said the emperor, turning to his servants so they could take Kaguya away. But when the emperor turned back Kaguya had vanished completely. His hands clasped empty air.

"Forgive me, Lady Kaguya," said the Emperor. "Please return, I will not force you to come with me."

And so Kaguya reappeared, and the Emperor was again struck by her beauty. But he was sad that Kaguya would not come with him and left very quickly after that.

When the Emperor returned to the palace, he was most despondent and refused the company of the ladies of the court. All of them paled in beauty and grace compared to Kaguya. He continued to write to her and she to him, but she never relented in her refusal.

Much time passed, and then the old man began to observe that Kaguya would often stay up late at night to gaze upon the moon. Sitting silent, watching it sadly, her misery increasing as the moon increased to full. When the moon waned and disappeared, she was happier, but when it progressed towards full again, her sadness increased. Again and again, her mother and father asked what it was that troubled her, and it was only after many months that she finally told them.

"I am sad because I must leave this world soon," said Kaguya. "I come from the moon, and it is to there I must soon return. My people will come from the moon to take me away."

This greatly saddened her parents.

"Kaguya, you are our light and our joy," said the old man, tears in his eyes. "We love you no less than if you truly were our child. Must you go?"

"I wish I did not have to," said Kaguya. "I will miss you terribly, my father and mother still live in the moon, and I must return to them. But I love and honour you as my true parents, for it was you who raised me."

Word of this reached the Emperor, who grew alarmed and sent his soldiers to prevent Kaguya from leaving. Kaguya was locked in a storehouse, soldiers surrounded the house and grounds and were even posted on the roof. Kaguya's father stood vigilant outside the door, alert for any intruders.

But Kaguya said that their weapons would not hurt the people from the moon, that her people would still take her. "If they come for you, I will tear them to pieces with my own hands," said the old man.

"It would not do any good," said Kaguya. "These people of the moon know nothing of death, of grief, of pain or even of love. I tried to plead with them to stay longer here, but they would not listen. You cannot stop them."

"But I will still wait here," said the old man.

Night came and everyone in the house was on alert. The moon rose and then at midnight a great light shone upon the house that made it almost too bright to see. Celestial beings in garments of flowing silk descended from the sky, all standing on bright clouds.

The soldiers saw them, and many were filled with fear and awe and were unable to fight. Those who could found their arrows missed or their spears went wide.

Within the centre of all these shining people there was a great carriage, out of which came their leader. He was tall and regal, his face cold and solemn. He called out in a loud voice for the old man to come out of the house.

The old man came, bowing, his eyes filled with tears.

"Why do you weep, old man?" the leader asked. "The girl was given into your care, and you were provided for. Now it is time for her to return and you cannot prevent it."

"I have loved Kaguya as if she were a child of my own flesh," said the old man. "But she is sick and cannot leave her room."

But the leader ignored him, the celestial attendants brought the carriage right up to the store house.

"Come out, Kaguya," said the leader. "We have come to take you from this wretched place."

Kaguya came out the storehouse, glowing with soft light. She walked up to her father.

"I must go," she said, giving him two letters. "One of these is for you and mother, the other is for the emperor. Please see that he gets it."

Two of the celestial attendants came forward. One of them had a vial made of bamboo which contained the elixir of life, the other had a celestial feather robe. Kaguya took the elixir, tasted some of it and then gave the rest to her father telling him to take it to the emperor.

The celestial attendants then threw the feather robe over Kaguya's shoulders, and all that was mortal of her faded away. Her face was cold and empty, she shone brightly from within. She went into the carriage and was escorted by the attendants into the sky.

As he promised, the old man delivered Kaguya's letter and the elixir of life to the emperor. Sick at heart for the loss of Kaguya, the Emperor did not take the elixir. For he knew an eternal life was not worth living without her.

He composed a poem of his grief for her, and had it and the elixir taken to the highest mountain in all the land. Here both were burnt, the smoke rising high to mingle with the clouds where perhaps Kaguya could receive his words in heaven.

And to this day, the mountain still bears the name Immortal, or Mount Fuji.