

Book Reviews

Ikumi Kaminishi

Explaining Pictures – Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006, 246 pp.

This study treats *etoki* in Japanese religious history, the interesting phenomenon of explanation and dissemination of Buddhist teachings by using the medium of pictures. As the author clarifies in the introduction, *etoki* literally means “picture decipherment” or “picture sermons.” This term signifies three aspects at the same time: “pictorialization,” i.e. illustrating teachings or beliefs by pictures; the preacher explaining the pictures to an audience; and the actual “decipherment” itself occurring in such explanations. The objects of the *etoki* are hanging scrolls or hand scrolls. The medium of pictures has been employed for the purpose of edifying people who could not read. The author explains the goal of her study as “to decipher how pictorial and performative Buddhist propaganda worked in Japan between the 10th and the 19th centuries.” (p. 14) The book is richly illustrated, including beautiful color plates. The major themes, or genres, of *etoki* are explained in four main parts which follow historical order. Each part consists of two chapters.

In Part 1, the author treats “The early practice of *etoki* (late 10th - mid-12th centuries).” In the first chapter, she provides an overview of *etoki* in Japanese history. She identifies two “styles” of *etoki* according to localization, either in sacred places such as temples, or in profane or public space such as bridges and market places. In the first case, people would visit a temple and receive a picture sermon there. In the second kind, an itinerant *etoki* performer would leave a religious center and edify people in the midst of their daily life. Earliest references for the first type are found in 10th century texts, while documents concerning the second type date back to the 13th century.

The second chapter, “Deciphering the founder of Japanese Buddhism,” first treats the pictorial biography of Prince Shōtoku, the acclaimed “founder” of Buddhism in Japan, which was employed as *etoki* since the 12th century in Shitennō-ji (in present-day Osaka) for visitors. In her careful treatment of the oldest extant copy of the illustrated biography from Hōryū-ji, the author elucidates how the relationship between two powers of the time, Buddhist temples and the imperial court, were expressed in the paintings. The tradition of Shōtoku Taishi *etoki* later was taken up occasionally by Jōdo Shinshū in an attempt to legitimate the establishment of the school, and it is still practiced in some of its temples today. The Shōtoku Taishi *etoki*, the author concludes, “played a central role” in the dissemination of his veneration.

In Part 2, “Pure Land Buddhism and *etoki* (late 12th - 14th centuries),” the author describes how *etoki* contributed significantly to the growth of this kind

of Buddhism which eventually became the largest Buddhist tradition in Japan. Ch. 3 “Deciphering the Pure Land imagery,” treats the Taima mandala (or *Jōdo-ben kangyō mandara*) which was used in Taima-dera (Nara prefecture) for *etoki* performance at least since the 12th century. This old mandala is a pictorial representation of the Contemplation Sutra (*Guan wu liang shou jing*), illustrating Amida’s Pure Land and the nine stages of birth therein. A main figure of this Sutra, Queen Vaidehi, as well as the (14th century) connection of this mandala with the Japanese Princess Chūjō (the legendary creator of the Taima mandala tapestry), indicate the Pure Land interest particularly in the salvation of women. Since that time, various forms of Japanese theater also took up this legend and contributed to its popularization.

Ch. 4. introduces “*Etoki* as a Pure Land method of proselytization.” During the 12th century, a Pure Land tradition of *etoki* evolved in Shitennō-ji along with the Shōtoku Taishi veneration treated before. Heian Pure Land tradition had perceived the West gate of this temple complex as an entrance to Amida’s Land. On both sides of the gate outside the complex, two halls related to Amida belief had been built, the Gokuraku-dō and the Hachiman nenbutsu-jo. Whereas the latter was a place for practicing the *nenbutsu*, the former’s interior walls were decorated with Pure Land paintings which served the purpose of *etoki*. According to the author, since the 13th century also emerged the itinerant *etoki* preachers disseminating Buddhism among wider circles of the population, geographically as well socially.

Part 3 treats “Images of itinerant *etoki* (14th - 16th centuries).” In Ch. 5, entitled “Itinerant *etoki*: Solicitors of Buddhism,” the author situates the “socioreligious place of *etoki* performers” as transcending “the boundaries between religious and mundane.” (p. 103) Pictures from the *Ippen hijiri-e* (Illustrated handscrolls of Priest Ippen, 1299) show that Ippen’s *nenbutsu* movement was connected with itinerant *etoki* and depict them as mingling among beggars. The author elaborates that itinerant *etoki* were related to communities called *sanjo* (“scattered places”) which consisted of artists, dancers and musicians. These communities were located in manors (*shōen*), existed alongside the agrarian dwellers and were exempted from rice taxes. They also moved from place to place. Their mobility is indicated by depictions of *etoki* performances on bridges or mountain roads (plates 9 and 10). Later, during the 16th century, when the manorial system changed, the members of such communities moved to the cities in order to make their living. Ch. 6. on “Deciphering the quasi-religious *etoki* performer” introduces some cases which do not immediately concern Buddhist themes, but moral education in general, and which are part of wider popular culture.

Part 4, “Women and sacred mountains (17th - 19th centuries),” introduces folk Buddhist picture stories related to mountains. In Ch. 7, the author presents images from Kumano (in present day Wakayama prefecture) which were disseminated by female *etoki*. During the 16th - 18th centuries, the *Kumano bikuni* (nuns), based in Kumano, traveled through the country and promulgated the *Kumano shinkō*, an amalgamation of Buddhist and Shintō beliefs. They addressed especially the

religious needs of women with a “female friendly propaganda.” (p. 160) In contrast to other sacred mountains in Japan, women were allowed to visit Kumano. The nuns explained the *Kumano Ten-Worlds Mandala* depicting the realms between hell and Pure Land. The ten worlds include the six realms (*rokudō*) of reincarnations (from hell to heavenly beings), and the four kinds of beings liberated from there (from śrāvakas to buddhas). In the top section of the mandala, the human life cycle is depicted, moving from birth to death above an arched mountain. The element of a semicircular arch is exceptional for Japanese art and architecture. Surprisingly, it resembles a painting of the underground Christians (*kakure kirishitan*) which derives from European pictures introduced by missionaries to Japan during the 16. ce. Also the depiction of human life cycles is a motif found in European art. Hence, the author concludes: “The *Kumano Ten-Worlds Mandala* composition suggests that the imagery was produced after the introduction of Christianity [to Japan].” (p. 155) However, she does not claim that there was a “direct contact between Kumano *bbikuni* and other European analogues.” (p. 164)

The last chapter, “Deciphering mountain worship,” treats the *etoki* related to the Tateyama mountains (in present-day Toyama prefecture). The author describes the mountain worship and the religious communities. In this case, low ranking Shintō priests disseminated the belief in other parts of the country. The *Tateyama Mandala* depicts the founding legend, a description of pilgrimage sites in the mountains, hell, and Amida’s welcoming a dying person into the Pure Land. The *etoki* brought the “unmovable icon” in the form of the *Tateyama Mandala* to the people living elsewhere, who either could not undertake a pilgrimage, or were prohibited to enter the mountain (until 1872), namely women. Similar to Kumano, the Tateyama belief was especially concerned with the salvation for women. Even today, the *etoki* tradition in the Tateyama area still seems to be alive, while adapting to contemporary changes and religious needs.

With this book, the author provides an excellent account of *etoki* and its crucial role in the dissemination of Buddhism in Japan during more than a millennium. She elucidates vividly how *etoki* “exercise the power of speech and the power of image.” (p. 193)

Without minimizing the achievements of this book, some problems should be mentioned. There are a few typing mistakes, such as: *hōsi* should be *hōshi* (pp. 124, 126), Saishi should be Seishi Bosatsu (p. 96), and the Tokugawa *bakufu* was established in the beginning of the 17th century (not the sixteenth). (p. 138) As in other American academic publications recently, this book also contains a number of sloppy and inaccurate formulations, such as “evangelical monks” (p. 76) and “nonclerical monks” (p. 77), or Kūya’s characterization as “shamanic Amidist” (p. 80). The term “propaganda” (pp. 8-10, etc.) should be reserved for aggressive forms of communication (as in the case of political propaganda), and not be applied for religious mission in general.

From the perspective of religious studies, a number of factual errors should be mentioned: The *Guan wu liang shou jing* (Visualization Sutra) has no original “Sanskrit version” (p. 67) since it was created in Central Asia. There are no “six

Theravadin schools in Nara” (p. 74), even though these Nara schools followed the Theravada monastic rules. The proper name of the Buddhist preaching school is not Agoi (pp. 130, 215), but Agui. The revisionist view of “Kamakura New Buddhism,” proposed by Foard and others, relies on superficial studies and has no basis in the historical sources. (Cf. Martin Repp, *Hōnens religiöses Denken*, Harrassowitz 2005: 490-519) To claim, for example, that “The innovation in Kamakura Buddhism lies in the social class that it attracted rather in the content of Buddhist teaching.” (p. 75) is not tenable at all. The term “rebirth” should be used for reincarnation, and not for *ōjō* 往生 (p. 80), which signifies one kind of liberation from the cycle of rebirths. (Cf. Minoru Kiyota, ed., *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation*, University of Hawaii Press 1978: 250) Bishamonten is not a “god of war” (p. 89), but a deity protecting Buddhism. Hōnen studied and practiced as a recluse (*tonsei*) in Kurodani in the North-Western district of Mt. Hiei. Not here (p. 97), but later (after 1175) he preached and gathered followers, including lay people, in Yoshimizu in Higashiyama which is close to Kyoto. Brotherhood and lay organizations (p. 97) existed already earlier in the Heian period, for example the *kangaku-e*.

Finally, a question may be addressed to the publisher: Why is it not possible in an age of electronic publishing to produce more reader friendly books, such as printing footnotes instead of endnotes, and inserting Japanese characters consistently (not only p. 30), if not in the text, at least in a glossary? Readers will appreciate the publisher’s generosity in printing so many beautiful illustrations, but one wonders why it is stingy about these small, but significant features.

Leaving the critique of particular details aside, the book as a whole helps considerably to understand the dissemination process of Buddhism in Japan’s history by placing the “*etoki* in historical context.” (p. 194) It was not only the contents of certain teachings, such as “easy practice” or “worldly benefit,” that helped spreading the Buddhist message. Proselytization, as the author writes in her conclusion, “owed its success to the tireless legwork of medieval missionaries soliciting donations and faith.” (p. 194) These itinerant missionaries were liminal figures, who “moved freely between the sacred sites and the profane communities.” (p. 194) For a student of religious studies, the socio-religious positioning of *etoki* in the wider context of popular performing arts is especially intriguing, as well as the suggestion of the influence of *kirishitan* iconography on Buddhist paintings. All in all, this book on *etoki* enables us to view the fascinating world of Japanese religions with new perspectives.

Martin Repp
Ryukoku University