

Journal of Buddhist Ethics

ISSN 1076-9005

<http://www.buddhistethics.org/>

Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan

Reviewed by Pamela Winfield

Department of Religion and Philosophy
Meredith College
Winfield@meredith.edu

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Review of *Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan*

Pamela Winfield*

Explaining Pictures: Buddhist Propaganda and Etoki Storytelling in Japan. By Ikumi Kaminishi. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006, 246 pages, ISBN 0824826973, US \$52.00 (cloth).

Ikumi Kaminishi's *Explaining Pictures* explores the Japanese practice of *etoki*; a term that simultaneously refers to the process of explicating religious visual aids, the visual aids themselves, and the monks and nuns who explained (and continue to explain) them for potential converts and patrons. Her scope spans from the tenth century to the present, and connects seemingly disparate images by virtue of their Pure Land associations. For example, she first links the wall paintings of Shōtoku Taishi at Horyūji and Shitennōji to the Ōtani family (long-time leaders of the True Pure Land sect) even before the publication of Kenneth Lee's *The Prince and the Monk: Shōtoku Worship in Shinran's Buddhism* (SUNY, 2007). Kaminishi subsequently goes on to discuss the Taima, Kumano and Tateyama mandalas, and demonstrates how these representations of sacred geography aided both practitioners and patrons to visualize and graft ideals of the Pure Land onto local pilgrimage destinations in Japan. Her ambitious study thus

* Department of Religion and Philosophy, Meredith College. Email: Winfield@meredith.edu

highlights the long-overlooked role that *etoki* art, artists, and itinerant clerics had on the propagation of the Pure Land faith, and demonstrates the religio-historical significance of using narrative and didactic religious imagery for proselytizing and fundraising effect.

Kaminishi's work represents a needed contribution to the interrelated fields of Art History and Religious Studies for several reasons: 1) it serves as a broad introduction to Buddhist narrative or semi-narrative scroll painting in Japan; 2) it specifically traces major developments in Pure Land imagery from the tenth century to the present; 3) as it considers contemporary *etoki* practice, it thus crosses over from Art History and Religious Studies into the fields of Anthropology and the Sociology of Religion; 4) it describes these narrative artforms (hanging scrolls, handscrolls, wall paintings, mountain mandalas, and so on) in terms of their religious function, not just in terms of their artistic or aesthetic value; 5) it demonstrates the compelling power of images in fundraising and proselytizing campaigns especially by and for women.

Much of Kaminishi's scholarship derives from Japanese primary and secondary sources, which makes them available and accessible to undergraduate and graduate learners. Her discussions of Shōtoku Taishi's wall paintings at Shitennōji, however, are overly indebted to Donald McCallum's work on the regent's hagiography, and her discussions of the Taima and Kumano mandalas reiterate much of what Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis already explained in *Japanese Mandalas* (Hawaii, 1999) and what Max Moerman argued in *Localizing Paradise* (Hawaii, 2006). Her creative juxtaposition of the staircase-like seventeenth-century European "life stages motif" against the Kumano mandala's rainbow-like "arc of life" is, however, unique and deserving of further investigation. As an indication of the significance of this aspect of her study, at least one Japanese scholar has already sampled her argument in the context of death and dying issues, but more work needs to be done to connect her clear

cross-cultural visual analogies with concrete historical links. One wonders, for example, if the lines of influence could not have equally flowed from Asia to Europe rather than the other way around as Kaminishi argues. Such a hypothesis might explain all the Dutch *memento mori* pictures and other such images of life's evanescence that suddenly emerged when European traders made contact with Buddhist Asia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. For the moment, however, such speculations remain just that, but Kaminishi has raised the issue and has thereby opened up a new avenue for future research. This, after all, is what good scholarship should do.

If there is one point where Kaminishi falters, however, it is in overstating her case. After listing Hayashi Masahiko's compilation of *etoki* topics, she claims that "These titles represent nearly the entire body of religious paintings studied in Japanese art history. Indeed this list indicates that almost all religious paintings were associated with *etoki* practice as didactic or promotional propaganda images" (13). This somewhat overblown statement ignores the enormous corpus of esoteric painting (e.g., the Diamond and Womb World mandalas, all their variations and individual deity mandalas, the eight esoteric patriarch portraits, paintings of the five wisdom kings [*godaimyōō*], the twelve heavenly bodhisattvas [*jūniten bosatsu*], iconographic line drawings, calligraphic manuals and *bonji* mandalas) not to mention the vast body of Zen painting (e.g., *chinzō* master portraits, *ensō* Zen circles, *kōan* paintings, transmission certificates such as paintings of dragon staffs, fly whisks and alms bowls, spontaneous, humorous genre scenes à la Hakuin or Sengai, monochrome Sung-dynasty influenced landscapes by masters such as Shubun or Sesshu, Buddhist motifs of White-Robed Kannon, gibbons reaching for the moon and so on). In other words, *etoki*-related painting does not "represent nearly the entire body of religious painting studied in Japanese art history," and conversely, not "all religious paintings were associated with *etoki* practice." One cannot even say that all religious

art in Japan was “didactic or promotional.” As Fabio Rambelli has argued in Scheid and Teeuwen’s *The Culture of Secrecy in Japanese Religion* (Routledge, 2006), esoteric Buddhist imagery was often deliberately hidden from view and the deeper doctrinal or ritual significance of its coded symbolisms were not explained, taught or promoted to any but the most advanced initiates. Furthermore, at least in the Zen case, images were rarely used to explain or promote Zen practice, but more often simply brushed for the master’s own enjoyment, given to friends and adherents as mementos, or transmitted to disciples to seal their dharma succession. To read Kaminishi’s Introduction, however, one gets the impression that her study of *etoki* somehow comprises all of Japanese art history, and that her analysis of their role in fundraising and proselytizing campaigns somehow comprises the only function for religious art in Japan.

If Kaminishi had qualified her claim to state that her study encompasses only Japan’s major *narrative Pure Land paintings* in their monastic and itinerant forms, and *quasi-narrative Pure Land mandalas* designed for the average layperson, her argument would be stronger. The former category of narrative decipherment would include the fixed monastic practice of explaining Shotoku Taishi’s wall paintings, as well as the itinerant *etoki* practices of Izumo Shōnin (dates unknown) whom Kaminishi argues first link *etoki* and *nembutsu* preaching. It would also encompass Ryōson (1279-1349) who revived the Yūzū *nembutsu* sect by explaining *emaki* handscrolls of the meandering founder Ryōnin (mid-twelfth century), and countless other anonymous late medieval *etoki* preachers whom Kaminishi demonstrates were of the same class and questionable reputation as traveling vendors, artists and street performers. Finally, the category of narrative Pure Land painting would also apply to the Taima mandala’s *predelle* (peripheral comic-strip-like frames) around Amida’s central court which successively narrate Queen Vaidehi’s tribulations and visualizations of the Pure Land. By contrast, the latter category of *quasi-narrative Pure Land mandalas* would refer specifically to

Kaminishi's analysis of the Kumano and Tateyama mandalas which depict the realms within which the spectator may visualize a virtual pilgrimage through sacred enclosures on each mountain. No narrative strain is explicitly denoted in these images, but rather implicitly connoted through the participant-viewer's invested and *etoki*-directed attention. Such careful and qualified claims would have done much to put Kaminishi's selected Pure Land images in their proper contexts, without raising questions as to the validity of her entire argument.

All this being said, *Explaining Pictures* is a well researched and well written study of a heretofore overlooked area of religio-artistic importance. It should be required reading for anyone interested in Pure Land Buddhism, and could be used in whole or in part in upper-level or graduate seminars on Japanese visual culture, medieval popular culture, mountain worship or women's roles in Japanese religion. It is a richly illustrated volume with over fifty black and white figures and twelve color plates, many of which have not been published elsewhere. As long as one remembers that not all religious painting in Japan was narrative, and not all narrative art in Japan was religious, this volume serves admirably to both fill in scholarly lacunae and open up new avenues for future research.