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Dictionary of Japanese Illustrated Proverbs. By Masamizu Tokita. Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki Publ. Co., 2008. Pp. 845. With 4127 illustrations.

The book contains 2177 proverbs and 4127 illustrations from the Nara period (8th century) to the present day. The author explains various meanings of each proverb in the past and the present and reproduces several illustrations for most of the proverbs. He also gives the transcriptions of the old texts inscribed in the illustrations and he translates them into modern Japanese. All these extra efforts help readers understand the original meanings of the proverb. Therefore Tokita's *Dictionary of Japanese Illustrated Proverbs* is evaluated as the first large scale illustrated Japanese proverb book. The following proverb materials in the appendix are very valuable for proverb studies: 1. The chronological list of illustrated proverbs in the various genres from the Tumulus Period (2000 BC) until the present time (pp. 835-840). 2. The alphabetical list of illustrated proverb books with short comments and the cited proverbs (pp. 821-834). 3. The alphabetical list of the printed single pages related to the proverbs (pp.798-820). 4. 136 kinds of visualized proverb items from everyday life such as clothes, mirrors, combs, boxes, ink stones, plates for food, signboards, helmets, swords, tea ceremony tools, cigarette boxes and pipes, doll talismans, doors, gardens, procession chariots and so forth.

Tokita has spent thirty years amassing his extensive collection of proverb emblazoned artifacts. His collection is dated from before the Edo period (1600-1867) until the present time. It consists not only of paintings, sculptures, woodcut block prints, books, playing cards (Japanese alphabetical proverb cards called "Iroha karuta"), but also the above mentioned ordinary items of different genres. It demonstrates how Japanese artists and craftsmen through history have depicted proverbs in various ways and how Japanese society loves to visualize proverbs used

in their daily life items. Most of his collection, about 3500 items, were donated to Meiji University, Tokyo, in 2007. Meiji University published the complete catalogue of his collection in 2009.¹

His first book on proverbs was *Illustrated Proverbs of Japan* (*Zusetsu: Nihon no Kotowaza*) in 1999 by Kawade Shobo Shinsha Ltd. Publishers, 135 pages with 292 illustrations. The book became so well-known that he was afterwards offered to publish several Japanese proverb books with many illustrations of proverbs like *Pleasant Proverb Pictures from the Edo Period* (*E de tanoshimu Edo no Kotowaza*) by Tokyo Shoseki, Publ. Co., 2005.

Even many art historians of Japanese art are very often unaware that there are so many proverbs depicted in the visual arts. Japanese curator of The Omiya Bonsai Art Museum in Saitama city wondered why flowers on a dead tree were expressed as a bonsai in *Kyosai's 100 Illustrations* (end of Edo period, 1860s). Then he found out from Tokita's book that "Flowers on a Dead Tree" ("kareki ni hana") was a common proverb from the Heian period (10th century) and was very current in the Edo period. The proverb has two meanings, 1. Resurrection from death, 2. Against all odds, an impossible thing is realized. Kyosai's woodcut adapts the first meaning of this proverb and he depicts an astonished doctor witnessing the sudden recovery of his patient near a bonsai which was also thought to be dead yet is shown with blossoms. The wife of the patient happily points both to the bonsai and her husband.

A Japanese proverb, "Even though rotting, it is still a tai (sea bream) ("kusattemo tai," **Fig. 1**) has an equivalent English one, "A diamond on a dunghill is still a diamond". For Japanese sea bream is considered a very valuable and expensive fish, and it is served at all celebratory occasions even today. In former times people used to put it in the home gallery corner as a New Year's decoration. After a few days people roasted it even though it smelled bad. Therefore, it means if a thing is very valuable and expensive, its worth will not be changed even if it gets relatively damaged. For this proverb Tokita gives six illustrations from a playing card deck dated around 1700 to a painting by Ishihara Bangaku (1905). In Fig. 1 by Kuwagata Keisai a samurai-soldier is about to cut a giant sea bream and he must hold his nose with

his fingers in order to avoid inhaling the rotten smell. Placing a giant sea bream on the cutting board, Keisai apparently caricatures the exaggerated appreciation of the fish by the folk. The illustration originated from Keisai's *Illustrated Proverbs* (*Gengaen*), privately published in 1808 and is considered to be one of the most important albums for Japanese proverb iconography.

There are numerous episodes or Buddhist scripts from which proverbs are cited, although Japanese people don't often recognize the origins. "A tiger crosses the river with her cubs" ("Toranoko watashi") is one of them which comes from the story of a Chinese hermit in the Tang period, Zhang Guo Lao. The literal meaning of the proverb is how a mother tiger safely brings her three offspring including a leopard to the other bank. Its allegorical meaning is finding a solution to manage the limited family budget. This is one of the most famous visualized proverbs and is seen in the Zen stone garden in Ryoan-Ji (Temple) in Kyoto according to the position of stones. Yet it is less known even among Japanese visitors. The proverb displayed in this garden was mentioned in a book of the Edo period. It was also designed as an ornament in *tuba* or brims, *kozuka* or a small knife attached to a sword sheath in the Edo period.

Another proverb from a Chinese legend is, "A foal comes out of a gourd" ("Hyōtan kara koma ga deru"), that is, unexpected things will happen. Tokita presents 19 illustrations of the proverb and explains how the proverb from China has been transformed in the various ways in Japanese art. Instead of a foal jumping out of a gourd, most Japanese artists express it as a horse emerging with a few exceptions mentioned below. A Japanese painter, Shikibu Terutada in the Muromachi period (**Fig. 2**), following the Chinese legend, depicts a hermit overturning a gourd and a tiny foal-like ant coming out of it. The hermit usually rides a white foal several thousand kilometers a day, but he puts his animal in the gourd while he is resting. In an ink painting by Ikeno Taiga a Daruma monk holding a gourd enjoys looking at a horse jumping through smoke from it (**Fig. 3**). Hakuin, a famous Zen Buddhist painter expresses many acrobats riding horses coming out of a gourd (**Fig. 4**). It is very interesting to remark that the same proverbial image appears on *Senjya fuda*, a pilgrim's card which is brought to a shrine for one's good luck.

Yet in this card chess pieces instead of horses appear, because the word for a chess piece, namely “koma” and a horse are homonyms in Japanese (**Fig. 5**), and chess players apparently enjoy the proverb together with a pun.

“Called stones turn to sheep” (“Ishi wo shishitte hitsuji to nasu”, **Fig. 6**). According to the Chinese classic *Shenxiantai*, the hermit’s elder brother appeared and asked him about the sheep. Wong Tai Sin called the stones and commanded “wake up !”. About ten thousand stones turned into sheep. Many famous Japanese artists like Sesshu, Hasegawa Tohaku, Maruyama Ōkyo painted this proverb in their works. In Fig. 6 *Shenxiantai* and his companion pleasantly observe two sheep and two lambs half changed from stones. The others represented this legend during the Edo period, however, the subject has been less discussed among Japanese art historians from the aspect of proverb iconography.

“An old man’s cold water” (“Toshiyori no hiyamizu”, **Fig. 7**). It is an ironical proverb of an old man overestimating his physical strength. An equivalent English proverb is: “It is an old man’s indiscretion.” Many Japanese will imagine today the literal meaning of this proverb as “an old man swims in cold water.” Tokita reproduces six illustrations of the proverb in which five depict the old man drinking cold water. The earliest figure from the 17th century is an image composed by letters of the proverb. An old man drinks cold water accompanying the inscription of this proverb. People definitely enjoy seeing the image and reading the proverb delineated by the letters. However, Jun Hashimoto mistakenly illustrated in *Even Monkeys Fall From Trees and Other Japanese Proverbs*, 1987² an old man bathing in a wooden tub with a huge ice cube. The proverb reads “An old man dips into cold water.” Thus an English proverb, “there’s no fool like an old fool” has a slightly different meaning than this Japanese proverb.

“Cake rather than flowers” (“Hana yori dango” (**Fig. 8**) is equivalent to “pudding rather than praise” or “substance rather than trappings”. Many present-day Japanese consider “the flowers” referred to as being cherry blossoms, because they are appreciated as the national flowers in Japan. However, Tokita points out that the flowers of this proverb have been regarded as

plum blossoms since the Heian period (the 9th century). Kawana-be Kyosai depicts a soldier eating a dango (cake) and carrying a branch of a plum blossom on his back around the late 18th century. In front of him a woman of the tea house roasts dango over a charcoal fire. The Fig. 8 represents an illustration by Utagawa Kuniyasu for Jippensha Ikku's *Ukiyo Kotowazagusa (Proverbs of the Earthly World)*, namely, a court lady wearing a ceremonial dress moves her fan in order to roast dangos over burned charcoals, but there are no cherry blossom trees in the illustration. Tokita posits that the viewers might liken the elegant woman to the flower, so that they prefer her to the dangos she roasted. Yet Tokita does not pay attention to the cherry blossom motifs on her dress or kimono and viewers might have been amused to notice the double meaning that she herself personifies cherry blossoms by her dress and she cooks dangos.

Tokita's *Dictionary* extends to the Western world and tries to find how European proverbs were accepted and visualized by Japanese cartoonists after the Meiji period (1868-1913). Those imported proverbs demonstrate how they become so popular among Japanese that Japanese use them without realizing their Western origins. "A drowning man will catch at a straw" ("Oboreru mono ha wara omo tsukamu") was translated into Japanese, but the Japanese phrase has become so familiar that its Western origins are often not realized.

When I researched the iconographical comparisons between the sixteenth-century Netherlandish proverbs in art including paintings, engravings, carvings, tapestries and so forth, and their corresponding old Japanese proverbs in art,³ Tokita's publications and his own collection served as a very useful reference for analyzing the similarities of proverbs between both countries and their cultures.

A Japanese proverb, "To use two tongues" ("Nimaijita o tsukau") by Utagawa Utashige (**Fig. 9**) is very similar both in the meaning and the expression of Bruegel's, "To speak with two mouths" (**Fig. 10**). While the merchant by Utashige flatters customers with his two tongues in order to sell as much merchandise as possible, Bruegel depicts a male face with double mouths implying the passage from I. Timothy of the New Testament (3:8). It is very interesting that the keyword of the proverb is almost the same both in Japan and in Flanders.⁴

“A monkey tries to get the moon” (“Enko ga tsuki“, **Fig. 11**) originated from the Chinese Buddhist script and is meant as someone trying to obtain the impossible things at the cost of one’s life. It depicts a monkey (often a gibbon) stretching down his long arm in an attempt to foolishly catch the moon on the water of a pond or a well only to fall to his demise from the branch of the tree. There is a decorated sword with this proverb from the Heian period (the 10th century), but Fig. 11 from the 16th century-painting by Toki Douga looks more familiar. The painting reminds me of a Flemish proverb from Bruegel’s *Twelve Flemish Proverbs* in Antwerp, “He urinates toward the moon” (**Fig. 12**), that is, the ridiculously bold attempt which easily fails. In his painting a man urinates toward the moon’s reflection on the water.⁵

A Japanese proverb, “To change from a cow to a horse” (“Ushi o uma ni norikaeru”) is explained by Tokita as the fall from the superior thing to the inferior one and from a good situation to a bad one. However, in Isamu Maeda’s *Dictionary of Edo Language* (2003), he cites an interesting quotation of this proverb from *Rice Wine, Seiro, Five Kariganes* in the Edo period: “You married far above your poor family background, as the proverb says, ‘to change from a horse to a cow.’” From this example it is commonly used to mean attainment of a superior situation, by leaving an inferior one, or to jump from the inferior position to a superior one. Therefore there is no difference between the value of the cow and the horse in either proverb. In Kawanabe Kyosai’s album of painted proverbs, *Kyousa’s Hundred Illustrations* (before 1868), the painter depicts an unfaithful husband riding a swift horse with his young lover saying goodbye to his old wife. A young packhorse driver angrily points his finger to the couple on his stolen horse. A similar Flemish proverb also using two different species of livestock distinguishes the value order of two animals. “He falls from the ox onto the ass” (Hij valt van de os op de ezel”) from Pieter Bruegel’s *Netherlandish Proverbs* in Berlin (1559) can be interpreted according to Erasmus’ *Adages* : “From a horse to an ass, as if he turns away from honorable studies to less honorable ones, from a philosopher to a chorister, from a theologian to a grammarian, from a merchant to an inn-keeper, from a steward to a cook, from a

craftsman to an actor.”⁶ Bruegel very clearly visualized the meaning of this proverb to express a man falling headlong from an ox to an ass.

A Japanese proverb, “One believes in a sardine’s head” (“Iwashi no atamamo sinjin kara”, **Fig. 13**) has two meanings according to Tokita. The first one is: a fanatic. One believes a worthless thing like a sardine’s head will effectuate miracles. The second interpretation is: irony to the person who stubbornly believes in a trifling thing. The illustration by Toba school carries the inscription and it says, “What a precious one, a thankful one!” and “the aureola is shining!” The Japanese proverb is to be compared with Bruegel’s “a pillar biter”, depicting a man biting the church pillar which means the hypocrite or fanatical prayers.

“When kaki –persimmons become red, the doctor becomes pale” (“Kaki ga akakunaruto isha ga aokunaru”). Tokita explains as sick people recovering during the good fall weather when the persimmon become ripened. However, Tokita does not pay attention to the nutritious effect of the kaki for the human body. Kaki contains rich vitamins and calcium, the leaves of kaki are especially popular to stop the serious hiccups in present day hospitals. The proverb is almost equivalent to the English, “An apple a day keeps the doctor away”. A fresh apple contains rich nutrition, dietary fiber and vitamin C.

We may compare his book with Lutz Röhrich’s, *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, 1973,⁷ however, Röhrich’s main concerns are not the illustrated proverbs. As I mentioned above, Tokita edits the proverbs in alphabetical order, reproducing for each proverb at least one and at the maximum twenty figures. As Röhrich gives alphabetical keywords of proverbs as an index, it is easier to find unknown proverbs under an article. Yet Tokita’s *Dictionary* has no index so it is not easy for readers to find proverbs from keywords or images. We would look forward to seeing them in the second edition.

In short I observe four remarkably characteristic features in Japanese illustrated proverbs, especially in the Edo period whose essential structure for both subjects and style are as follows: 1. playful and burlesque, 2. comical like a farce, 3. vivid and sketchy. 4. quickly understandable by light touches.⁸ “Playful” would be the most important character trait for the men of letters in the Edo period who execute the proverb images rather for fun

or entertainment for their intellectual friends, clients or viewers, and they also enjoy themselves in the humorous world of proverb portrayal. In addition, Japanese visualized proverbs are represented in numerous fields not only in art, but also craft arts, book illustrations, ordinary items, architecture as mentioned before. On the contrary European visualized proverbs seem to appear in more limited fields, mainly in paintings, prints, sculptures (mainly as misericords) or tapestries.

It was not so popular for them to appear in everyday items like in Japan. Proverb art in general serves the European public as more serious and deductive messages as seen Bruegel's images discussed above.

Finally I would like to stress Tokita's *Dictionary* is a remarkable publication because of his more than 4000 rich illustrations of the proverbs from all kinds of genres. His collection really portrays the distinctive aspects of Japanese culture and tradition. It should not be overlooked well-known painters such as Seshu, Tanyu, Korin as well as Ukiyoe artists such as Utamaro, Hokusai, Hiroshige, Kyosai etc. also incorporated proverbs in their works. Sometimes Japanese historians pay less attention to proverbial motifs or they neglect the proverbial art as a minor world, because many proverbs are not used anymore and they don't notice them. The iconographic study of proverbs is not yet established in Japanese art history as an independent research field. Thus this book will provide a stimulus to Japanese as well as foreign historians of such fields as art, folklore, social science, religion and others to find the pictorial sources of their studies and to analyze Japanese culture and the structure of its moral concepts.

Tokita was one of the founders of the first Proverb Knowledge Certificate Examination held in two Japanese cities during August 2011. There are three levels which are open to all age groups, namely, Beginner, Intermediate and Advanced. Many school children participated in the examination enjoying the proverbial culture through illustrated proverbs. Japanese people will pay more attention to the background of visualized proverbs in the future.

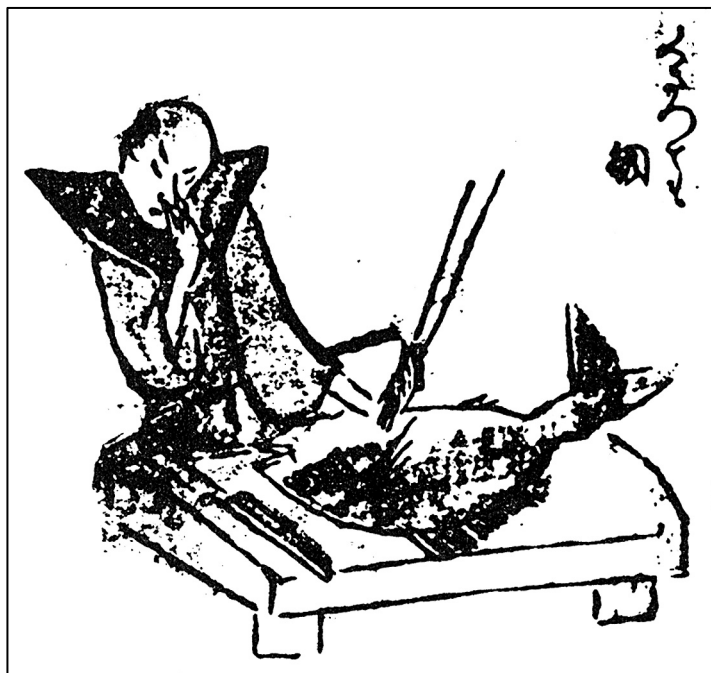


Fig. 1

Kuwagata Keisai, "Even though rotting, it is still a sea bream",
1808, *Gengaen*, woodblock print.



Fig. 2

Shikibu Terutada, "A foal comes out of a gourd", the first half of the 16th century, ink painting, Osaka, Masaki Museum.

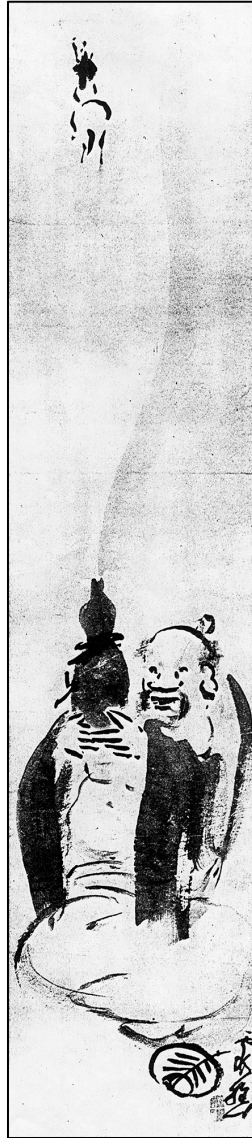


Fig. 3

Ikeno Taiga(1723-76), "A horse comes out of a gourd", ink painting, private collection.

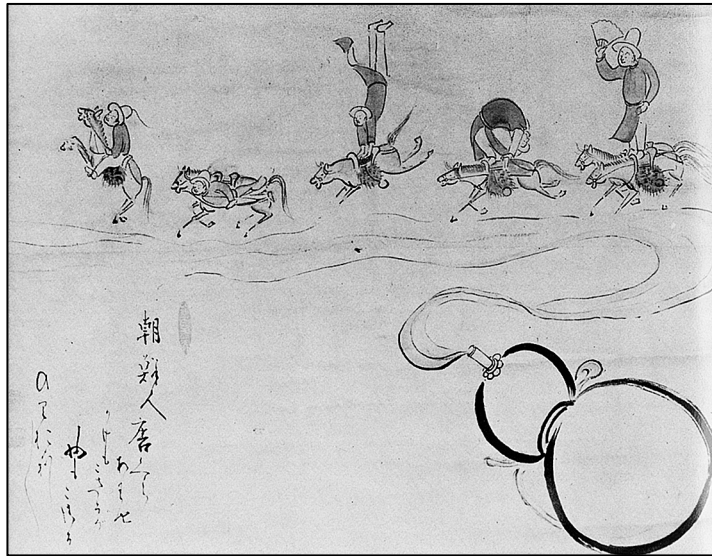


Fig. 4

Hakuin (1685-1768), “Acrobats riding horses come out of a gourd”, ink painting, present location is unknown.



Fig. 5

Senja Fuda, “Chess pieces come out of a gourd”, around 18th century, woodblock print.



Fig. 6

Maruyama Ōkyo, “Called stones turn to sheep”, 1777, painting, Saitama, Toyama Memorial Museum of Art.



Fig. 7

Okumura Masanobu (1686-1764), "An old man's cold water", playing card, *Mojie Zukushi*, woodblock print.



Fig. 8

Utagawa Kuniyasu, "Cake rather than flowers", 1828, *Ukiyokotowazagusa*, woodblock print.



Fig. 9

Utagawa Utashige, "To use two tongues", 1867, *Hitokokoro Ukiyo no Tatoe*, woodblock print.

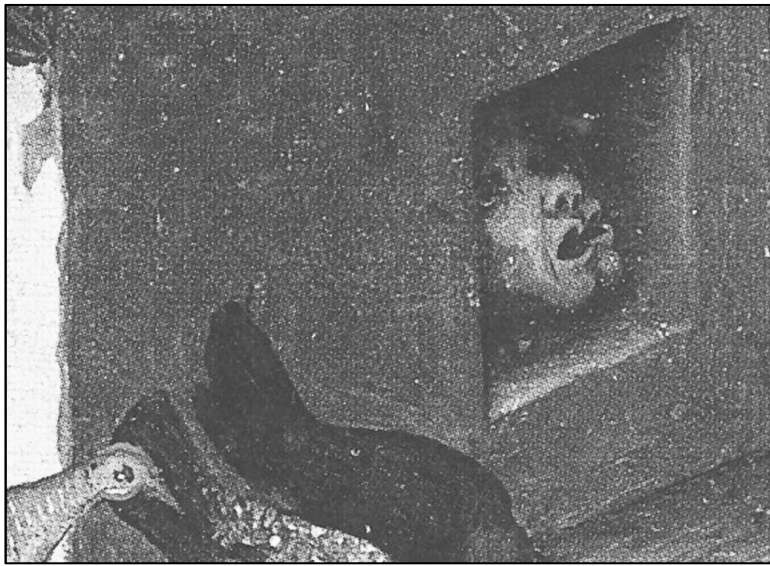


Fig. 10

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "To speak with two mouths", 1559, oil, detail, *Netherlandish Proverbs*, Berlin, Staatliche Museen.

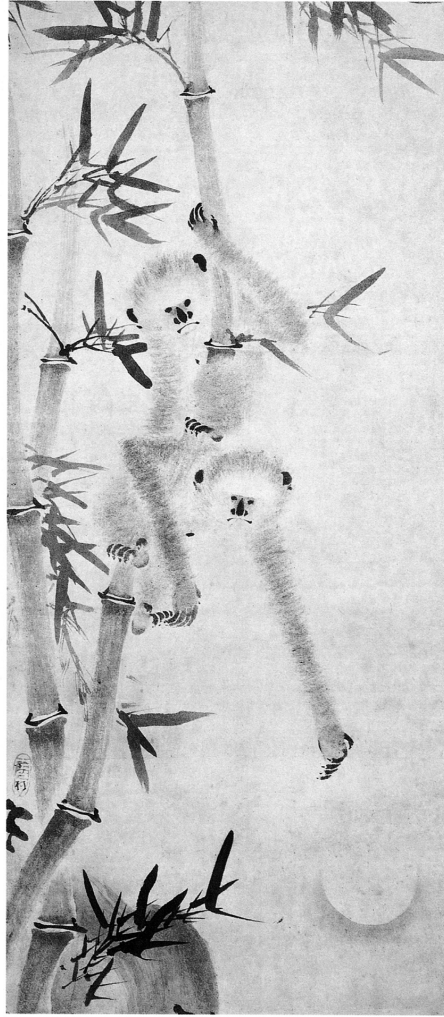


Fig. 11

Sesson Shukei, "A monkey tries to get the moon." It looks like the second half of the 16th century, ink painting, private collection.



Fig. 12

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, "He urinates toward the moon", c.1558, oil, detail, *Twelve Flemish Proverbs*, Antwerp, Museum of Mayer van den Bergh.

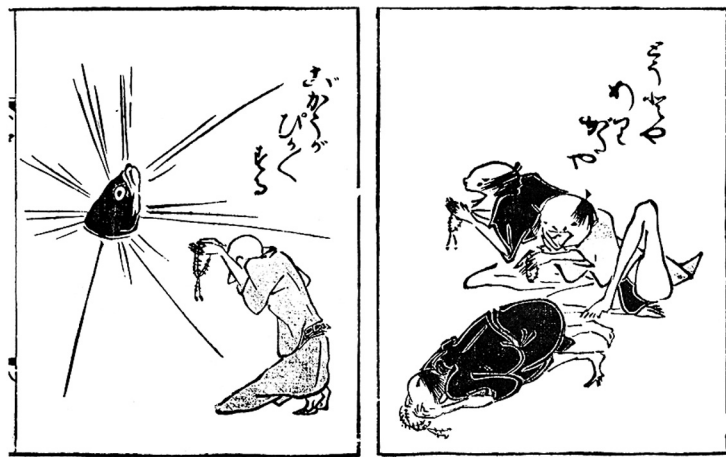


Fig. 13

Anonymous, "One believes in a sardine's head," 1720, *Keihitsu Tobaguruma*, woodblock print.

Notes

¹ *Tokita Masamizu's Proverb Collection*(in Japanese), Meiji University Museum, Tokyo 2010.

² David Galef, comp. and trans. Jun Hashimoto, illust. *Even Monkeys Fall From Trees and Other Japanese Proverbs*, Tokyo 1987.

³ Yoko Mori, "Bruegel's Netherlandish Proverbs and Corresponding Images in old Japanese Art," *Acta Historiae Artium*, vol. 44, Akadémiai Kiadó, Budapest 2003, pp. 191-205.

⁴ Yoko Mori, "Pieter Bruegel's *Netherlandish Proverbs* and old Japanese Proverb Paintings", *Listen to Proverbs*, Tokyo 2010, pp.272-274 (in Japanese).

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.278-279.

⁶ Desiderius Erasmus, *Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera Omnia*, Hildesheim 1961, t.II, p.274.

⁷ Lutz Röhrich, *Lexikon der sprichwörtlichen Redensarten*, Freiburg 1973 (paperback 1988).

⁸ Shoko Ota and Hiroshi Onishi, "Illustrated Pattern Books as New Media Introduction for the Symposium", *Image Revolution since the Publication Culture in the Early Edo Period*, ed. Shoko Ota, Institute of Art and Aesthetics, Kanazawa College of Art, Kanazawa 2007, pp. 24-28.

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