

Etoki and Capitalism

HASHIMOTO Hiroyuki

summary

This article introduces an actual practice of etoki as performed at Zuisenji temple in Toyama prefecture.

Etoki is originally a word referring to the storyteller who explains the context of a painting and, as well as to the act of explanation itself. The storyteller verbally unravels the contents of a picture, sharing with the listener the experience of a text being created. As a result, storyteller's performance reminds each listener of various emotional reactions. Etoki can be characterized as a type of theatrical communication, mediated through religious offerings (=money), between the storytelling priest (interpreter) and the listeners who have come to worship.

I point out how etoki is deeply-rooted in a money economy, and is regulated by a capitalist structure established in Japan's early modern era.

Key words: etoki, performative communication, Prince Shotoku worship, offering, modern capitalism (market economy)

1. A Definition of Etoki

According to Tokuda Kazuo, etoki "refers to the verbal act of explaining the contents of a painting, or the person who performs this act¹." In other words, it refers to language that describes a painting and seeks to transmit and explain its contents and narrate a scene. Etoki is thus a kind of storytelling that makes use of a painting as a visual aid for the story's content. From the audience's perspective, etoki involves the experience of being guided by the narrator's tale into identification with the contents of the painting and of partaking in a moment in which countless texts are continuously born. The painting explained by the etoki is, moreover, not just a landscape or illustration, but a depiction of a religious site that typically includes scenes about the site's founding. In other words, the content of the painting is religious. The performance of the etoki makes the crowd of listeners (or worshippers) to arouse a range of emotional reactions and awaken their spiritual sentiments.

Storytelling comprises a form of performative communication that mediates the most important element of etoki as a religious practice. Etoki was originally a form of preaching or proselytization, yet the secret of etoki's appeal as entertainment lies in its performance. The combination of religious content and artful performance creates a form of communication that is mediated by offerings, i.e., money, exchanged between the storyteller, who is a priest, and the listeners, who are worshippers.

This article introduces the current practice of etoki at Zuisenji, a temple of the Jodo Shinshu School (a form of Pure Land Buddhism) located in the town of Inami in Toyama prefecture, Japan. I will show how the etoki of this temple has its roots in the intersection of Jodo Shinshu doctrine

and monetary economics, and how it was shaped by capitalistic structures established in the early modern era (the kinsei period, approximately 1600-1867). In other words, etoki is a performative expression of capitalism. Furthermore, a new form of traveling etoki, instituted by Zuisenji in the modern era (the kindai or Meiji period, 1867-1912) at a time when the temple faced disaster and economic crisis, will be examined as an extreme expression of the practice that reformulated the implicit contractual relationship that exists between the temple and its followers.

2. Etoki and the Transmission of the Shotoku Taishi eden at Zuisenji

At Zuisenji an etoki is held every year, July 21-29, using the text of the Shotoku Taishi eden, the illustrated story of the life of Prince Shotoku, who is popularly regarded as the founder of Buddhism in Japan and revered as a legendary Buddhist saint². There are a number of extant versions of this text, but Zuisenji is the only place in Japan that has formulated it into an etoki. Briefly, the provenance of the Zuisenji text is as follows.

In 1390, the monk Shakunyo recited the Shotoku Taishi eden at the imperial palace, and, in appreciation, Emperor Gokomatsu gave the monk a statue of the two-year-old prince, said to have been carved by Shotoku himself, and a copy of the Shotoku Taishi eden in eight scrolls, attributed to Kose no Kanaoka. In the eighth month of that same year, Shakunyo built Zuisenji in the town of Inami in order to provide a suitable place for these wonderful treasures. Since then, every year during the hot days of midsummer—the time when Japanese people traditionally put out all their possessions (clothing, bedding, books, paper and wooden objects) to dry to get rid of insects before the long rainy season sets in—when the statue and the scrolls of the Shotoku Taishi eden were originally put out for airing, the temple has displayed the items to the public.

The tradition of etoki, however, did not begin until the Edo period (1600-1867). It is said that the first etoki performance of the story depicted in the eight scrolls was held when the twelfth priest of the temple, Shinsho (1694-1744), recited it from the twenty-second to twenty-eighth days of the sixth month (according to the traditional Japanese calendar) when the treasures were set out for their summer drying. When a separate hall, called the Taishido, or "Prince's Hall," was built to house the statue of Prince Shotoku, this building became the staging site for the etoki performance of the Shotoku Taishi eden and the worship service for paying reverence to the statue (Taishi den'e). Up until the present day the story of the forty-nine years of the Prince's life has been told again and again in Inami, a town of artisans and craftsmen, where faith in Prince Shotoku is deeply held. Thus, through the retelling of the story, Prince Shotoku is brought to life again and again to live in the bodies of the listeners and worshippers.

The modern practice of etoki at Zuisenji is performed over eight days by nine etoki priests (etokiso) who each in turn stand in front of the scrolls and narrate the story for about forty minutes. The priests speak into microphones, and, except for a few formal verbal forms (e.g., *de aru*), the narration is unfortunately hardly any different from normal speech. Nor is it particularly melodic since it is a spoken art form. However, we should not be surprised if etoki has not retained the feeling of an old art form but has undergone transformations over time. Without responding to its

changing audience, it is doubtful that the act of etoki itself could have survived³.

Morning and afternoon performances (called *za*, "sittings," in Japanese) are relatively poorly attended-perhaps because in the middle of the day people are working-and the atmosphere is relaxed. But for evening performances, the neighborhood people come with their families, and the floor of the Taishido, locally famous for its large size, is soon completely covered by the sitting listeners. First, a portion of a sutra is read, and then the priest begins to explain the contents of the painting using simple language and sometimes adlibbing. The audience quickly becomes enthralled by the narrative, and one realizes that the recitation, like a melody, does indeed contain inflections and modulations, diminuendos and crescendos, creating texture and mood to draw the listeners in. Then, as the story approaches its climax, the audience burst into chanting the name of Amida Buddha (*nenbutsu*) spontaneously.

After the etoki performance, the lay members prepare for the ceremony of the *manninko* ("10,000-person confraternity," a lay society organized for the worship of Amida Buddha). In this ceremony, officiants record the days on which worshippers' family members or friends have died during the last year.

At the end of the service the Pure Land sutras (*Sanbukyo*) are recited, offerings are made for the dead, and the officiants collect a donation of 300 yen for each of the deceased. As the several officiants make their way around the hall, the bamboo baskets they carry quickly become filled with the offerings. Then the priests sit in front of the altar and begin to chant the name of Amida Buddha. The worship service reaches its climax when, as the hall becomes filled with the sound of people chanting, the curtain in front of the altar is lifted so that at last the people are allowed to view the statue of the two-year-old Prince Shotoku.

The statue is revealed on every other stage of etoki performance, the entire recitation requiring eight days (one scroll narrated per day). As soon as the priests reveal the adorable figure of the young prince, with his hands held together in the gesture of Buddhist worship (*gassho*), all of the people lean forward and gaze up at the statue involuntarily.

Here and there in the audience one hears murmurs of reverence and realizes the depth of faith the worshippers hold for Prince Shotoku. In this region it is said that anyone who pays reverence to the statue of Prince Shotoku will pass the next year free from illness and calamity.

3. Traveling Etoki

In addition to the etoki performed during the Prince Shotoku worship service-what we might call the main performance-held once a year at Zuisenji, the performance also travels around towns neighboring Inami⁴. We might call this the traveling performance. Originally the Prince Shotoku statue and the picture scrolls never left Zuisenji. But in 1879 the temple and the Taishido were destroyed by fire, and, since economic conditions at the time were bad, temple officials could not easily collect funds for the reconstruction. They decided to display the statue and scrolls to the general populace in an effort to collect the contributions needed to bolster the temple's finances. A traveling circuit was established in order to collect donations (*kanjin*). The term traveling etoki thus

refers to the display of the Prince Shotoku statue and the etoki performance of the Shotoku Taishi eden held at various places at the invitation of the faithful. The traveling circuit included some eighty places in the 1950s, from the environs of Inami to quite far locations in the neighboring prefectures of Ishikawa and Fukui. Currently the practice continues only during the agricultural off-season in about twenty places near Inami. Matsuzaki Kenzo, who has surveyed the Daimon section of Tonami City, writes the following about the origins of the existing confraternity.

When the men who lived in the Daimon area were to be sent to fight in the Russo-Japanese war, all of them went to get a protective amulet (omamori), [representing the Prince's salvational power,] from Zuisenji. Thanks to this power, even if a bullet hit the amulet it would not hit the person, and so not one of them died [in the war]. So, when they returned from the war they formed the confraternity and together offered their thanks to the Prince. Thus in the beginning participation in the ceremony was limited only to those who had been in the war. Later a great many other people desired to participate in the confraternity, but up through World War II they were barred from doing so. Only after that war, when the number of original members had decreased and the continuation of the group seemed imperiled, were all of the townspeople allowed to participate in the ceremony⁵.

According to Matsuzaki, the confraternity of the Daimon area began in 1909, and thus it is clear that it was established in the modern era. It is this point that I especially want to emphasize. There has been a tendency to conceive of traveling etoki as the original form of etoki practice, but the fact that this example was created so recently indicates that scholarship on the topic needs to reappraise this assumption.

During the traveling etoki, only one etoki priest was allowed to leave Zuisenji, and only two of the eight scrolls were taken per year. The people of the town that had requested the performance went to meet the statue and the scrolls-and of course the priest-either directly at Zuisenji or at the inn of the town where the etoki had been performed the previous day. The statue, scrolls and priest were similarly seen off after the performance.

Traditionally, a crimson-colored banner was carried at the head of the procession, and a chest containing the two scrolls and the statue's portable altar was lifted on two poles and carried on the townspeople's shoulders.

It was strictly forbidden to place the altar on the ground, so even during rest periods the chest was supported with poles. Today, however, the statue and scrolls are usually transported by car.

The traveling etoki is held along the same lines as the basic performance and worship service at the temple, but in it the original function of the manninko as donation collectors is readily discerned. On the one hand, donations collected by the confraternity represent a verification of the faith shown by the townspeople toward Prince Shotoku. Certainly it is true that the manninko book, which records the anniversaries of deaths of family and friends, is offered before the statue of the Prince; thus clearly in this case the donations are offerings made for rites for the dead. Or, for the donor, it may represent an early investment for that inevitable one-way journey to the Pure Land.

On the other hand, to the listeners who have gathered in the local inn and shed tears of pious joy during the etoki performance, the etoki priest also appears as an artist who has a fluent

command of the techniques of storytelling. If this is the case, is it not too naive to describe the various thoughts and feelings that are wrapped up with the donation as simply a manifestation of deep faith in the Prince? After all, without a moving performance the priest can expect no donations. Even if etoki itself is a religious practice, the secret to its success lies in the fact that it embodies all the appeal of artistic performance. The donations might then be considered payment for the performance.

Thus Zuisenji, with the temple as the base and etoki priests making the circuit of neighboring towns, used this art form as a method to strengthen relationships with the surrounding regions by exchanging spiritual service for donations. It is further telling that at Zuisenji the work of the etoki priests and of those who manage the temple affairs remains separate, each type of priest having distinct roles. Overall, the etoki priests seem to be more concerned with rhetorical flourish than with Jodo Shinshu doctrine, as is quite well expressed by the priest's line, "I am merely a conduit for relaying this story to you based on the traditional tale." In the end, the most concrete proof of the contractual relationship between the etoki priests and the lay followers can be seen in the fact that a donation is equivalent to money.

4. Etoki and Capitalism

As I have already stated, traveling etoki began in the modern period at Zuisenji. Therefore, it is certainly not that it has persisted despite advances in scientific technology⁶. Rather, it was a form of performance born from the maturation of advances in scientific technology and the capitalist economy that supported those advances. Even if we grant that the practice evokes images of ancient customs, it is not likely that traveling etoki actually transmits an archaic art form in its original condition. We should rather regard it as a form created thoroughly in the modern period.

Yet with this realization we are forced to consider the complex problem of the relationships between modernity, economy and religious authority. Before addressing this problem, however, it is necessary to understand how modern-period etoki was supported by a new consciousness that formed the precondition for a market economy.

It is generally thought that the connection of the act of etoki with a kind of communication (here used in a broad sense to mean interpersonal exchange) that takes money as its medium occurred in the early modern (kinsei) period when the capitalist economy was basically established in Japan. Limited to the case of Zuisenji, etoki was from its very beginning in the modern (kindai) period encapsulated within capitalistic structures already established in the early modern period. But why was the art of etoki connected to a kind of communication that takes money as its medium? Here we must remember that the town of Inami was traditionally known as a town of carpenters and craftsmen, that is, trades people.

According to Inoue Toshio, the first bearers of the Jodo Shinshu teachings were wandering people known as watari (literally, those who "cross over"), traveling craftsmen who lived at the margins of society-in the mountain and river areas near towns-including such people as carpenters, plasterers, roofers, metal workers, woodworkers, coopers, dyers and laborers⁷. These people

experienced radical changes in society due to the completely new authority system that arose in the modern period. For example, the policies that Oda Nobunaga repeatedly tried against the strongholds of the Ikko Ikki, the rebellious Jodo Shinshu groups of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, were colored by the desire to pit the artisanal mentality of these people under basic capitalistic principles⁸. As a result, a merchant class eventually grew from among these marginal people, and the transcendent symbol called money was created. This was the beginning of capitalism in Japan.

However, as is demonstrated by the name of the Ikko Ikki groups (in which the word ikko refers to a single-minded, wholehearted practice), Jodo Shinshu is nothing other than a kind of Buddhism that is oriented toward transcendence, and so a strange kind of connection arose. That is, the very Jodo Shinshu doctrinal system that aims at an even fanatical transcendence lead to capitalist structures. If this is the case, then the etoki that began in the Edo period at a Jodo Shinshu temple like Zuisenji can be thought of as a circuit built in the present world that leads to a transcendent existence and perhaps represents a performative expression of capitalism. And the manninko can be considered an extreme expression of it.

However, the crux of the problem exists in the modern period itself. This is because, together with the dissolution of the system that supported transcendence (i.e., the spiritual authority) and the collapse of the authority of the extant government (the bakuhan system) at the secular level, the transcendental authority of Jodo Shinshu itself was thrown into the midst of the capitalist movement. At the time when it could no longer be supported by the traditional system, the authority system which had been transcendental in the past had no choice but to set out on these wandering travels. That is to say, the contractual relationship that had formerly bound Zuisenji and its followers through the medium of etoki began to shake from the very foundations that had insured it. At the brink of this dangerous situation, the form of etoki that had occupied the major portion of Zuisenji's proselytizing efforts, i.e., the basic performance at the temple, entered a period of reformulation. Even if the coincidental economic conditions were the direct cause, behind the adoption of the form of traveling etoki in 1879 was Zuisenji's veiled intention to rebuild its transcendental authority, then facing the danger of dissolution, by creating a new contractual relationship with the region's people through traveling etoki. In a case like this, if we do not recognize the system that lies hidden by the shadow of a coincidental occurrence, we are likely to misapprehend the true location of the problem.

Given such a beginning, traveling etoki depends on a kind of communication that goes beyond the region defined by Inami and requires the spread of a market system as its precursor. In other words, it is a product of the modern period. While we don't know what may lie in store for the future of the tradition, we certainly cannot deny that the traveling form created in the modern period resulted in the rebirth of etoki performance.

One version of the Zuisenji etoki ends in this way: "I have performed since last night, but now please allow me to end my performance. There are still many stories about Prince Shotoku, but I will have to wait to tell them to you on some future occasion when fate may bring us together⁹."

Even if this is a form that was developed in the midst of modern capitalism, this means of

communication called etoki certainly was alive.

(Professor, Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences)

Notes

¹ Tokuda Kazuo, "Etoki to engi emaki: Dojoji engi and Taimadera engi, fu etoki kenkyu no igi to hoho," in *Issatsu no koza: Etoki: Nihon no koten bungaku* 3, Tokyo: Yuseido Shuppan, 1985, p. 68. For a general overview of etoki, see Kawaguchi Hisao, *Etoki no sekai: Tonko kara no kage*, Tokyo: Meiji Shoin, 1981; and Hayashi Masahiko, *Zoho: Nihon no etoki*, Tokyo: Miyai Shoten, 1984. For this paper, I have especially relied upon the chapter entitled "Etoki kenkyu no tame no sanko bunken mokuroku" in the latter.

² The following discussion about etoki and the Prince Shotoku worship service (Taishi den'e) at Zuisenji is based on my own research at the site in 1987. I have additionally drawn on many other works, including: Inami choshi hensan iinkai, *Inami choshi*, Vol. 1, Inami-machi: [Inami-machi Publications], 1970; Yoshida Yumi, "Ecchu Inami Betsuin Zuisenji no Shotoku Taishi eden no etoki," *Kokugo kokubun ronshu*, vol. 11 (1982); and Hayashi, *Zoho: Nihon no etoki*. I have also drawn upon Kamishima Toshiaki's imaginative article "Etoki to chongare odori," *Maajinaru*, vol. 1 (1988), to describe the feeling and atmosphere of an etoki performance.

³ On this point, see Ozawa Shoichi, *Nihon no horogei*, Tokyo: Bancho Shobo, 1974, p. 44.

⁴ The following discussion is based largely on Yoshida, "Ecchu Inami Betsuin Zuisenji no Shotoku Taishi eden no etoki"; Matsuzaki Kenzo, "Inami Betsuin Zuisenji no Taishi junkai: Tonami-shi Daimon ni okeru shuzoku wo chushin ni," *Saiko minzoku*, vol. 99 (1982); and Kawaguchi Hisao, "Hokuriku ni okeru Taishi den no etoki," in *Sangaku mandara no sekai: Nihon retto no genfukei* 1, Tokyo: Meicho Shuppan, 1987. Of these, Kawaguchi's illustrations especially convey the ambience of the performance. A discussion of traveling etoki is included in Ozawa Shoichi and Hayashi Masahiko, "Taidan 'etoki' wo kataru," in Hayashi, *Zoho: Nihon no etoki*.

⁵ Matsuzaki, "Inami Betsuin Zuisenji no Taishi junkai," p. 11.

⁶ This idea is borrowed from Ozawa Shoichi. See Ozawa and Hayashi, "Taidan 'etoki' wo kataru," p. 312.

⁷ See Inoue Toshio, *Ikko ikki no kenkyu*, Tokyo: Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 1968; and idem, "Chusei kakugyo to Taishi shinko," in *Yama no tami, kawa no tami: Nihon chusei no seikatsu to shinko*, Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1981.

⁸ The following discussion is based on Nakazawa Shin'ichi, "Edo no oken," "Ikyoteki monoteisumu," *Akutoteki iko*, Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1988.

⁹ Kawaguchi, "Hokuriku ni okeru Taishi den no etoki," p. 288.