

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie

**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft

**Band:** 58 (2004)

**Heft:** 3: Performing cultures in East Asia : China, Korea, Japan

**Artikel:** Performing the craft : medieval Japanese craftsmen (shokunin) - reality, images, and literary topoi

**Autor:** Vollmer, Klaus

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147645>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

**Download PDF:** 04.02.2026

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

# PERFORMING THE CRAFT: MEDIEVAL JAPANESE CRAFTSMEN (*SHOKUNIN* 職人) – REALITY, IMAGES, AND LITERARY TOPOI

Klaus Vollmer, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

## *Abstract*

In this paper I would like to briefly introduce a little known genre of premodern Japanese literature, the so-called *shokunin utaawase* 職人歌合, a term that might be rendered as “Poetry Contest of Various Occupations.” In these works, the poetics and literary devices of classical Japanese poetry are combined with vocabulary and images taken from the world of craftsmen and merchants as well as a wide variety of other professionals of premodern Japan (the so called *shokunin*). Due to restrictions of space I will limit my narrative here to the structure of the genre and its implications and will not deal with the importance of these collections as works of literature. In order to understand the particular potential of this genre it is necessary to focus on their structure as a poetry contest where a competitive, performative space is created. Therefore, at first some general features of Japanese poetry contests (*utaawase*) are summarized. In doing so, I provide an outline showing how the term “performance” applies here at different levels of interpretation, stressing the observation that incorporating artifacts of material culture seems to be a decisive element in the creation of poetry contests. Turning then to the *shokunin utaawase* proper and their structure I will also try to show how the idea of “performing” those crafts depicted in the texts might help to see these works of literature in a new and perhaps more interesting light. Finally, by analyzing examples of the matching process in one of the poetry contests, the rich potential for interpretation of these works is highlighted. Moreover, in pointing out some shortcomings of traditional scholarship on *utaawase*, the capabilities of the concept of performative space and performing culture will be underlined.

## Introduction: a comparative view

In order to put the *shokunin utaawase* of medieval Japan into perspective, let me begin with some very general remarks on the performative quality that is obviously inherent in the process of advertising and selling goods and services all over the world and throughout history. Visual representations of itinerant craftsmen, peddlers, merchants and a wide variety of other professionals offering their services have been produced in Europe since the late middle ages, often

taking the form of a series (*Plate 1*). Closely related to the growth of commerce and trade in the urban centers of England, France, Italy and Germany, for example, many of these prints or etchings reflect the activities of those people whose presence in the cities was a marked characteristic of everyday life there. Though sometimes bearing similarities to genre paintings, these visual representations more often tend to focus on the particular characteristics of a given craft that is then represented by a single figure on which all of these characteristics are projected. These are often symbolized by certain tools, accessories, clothing or other objects. In this way, an image or stereotype of a craft is created that does not represent some individual but points to the profession or craft as such.

Looking at these pictures one soon realizes that the representatives of those crafts were also regarded as some kind of performers. Thus, in a sense the entirety of craftsmen, peddlers and professionals could be seen as an ensemble or troupe of actors whose stage was the city streets. Furthermore, their colorful appearance easily lent itself being imagined as a theatrical performance staged for an urban audience. Moreover, presented in a stereotyped way with a given set of clothing, accessories and a particular cry or song by which goods and services were promoted, those representations came close to a set of characters from comedy or opera. Needless to say that very often these spheres indeed overlapped and those crafts became the object of parody and caricature (*Plate 2–5*).

To sum up, in late medieval and early modern Europe, the voices or the “cries” of these people advertising their goods for sale in the streets were an integral part of their image and, in fact, must have contributed considerably to the sounds of the premodern city that was devoid of much of modern noise pollution. Interestingly, however, the performative quality of offering and selling products remains a strong feature even in modern times. Itinerant craftsmen, peddlers and other professionals presented in those pictorial tableaux vanished from the streets in much of Europe during the early years of the twentieth century or have been relegated to some marginal albeit folkloristic existence in some cities. Nevertheless the market as a specifically designated territory for commercial transactions *as well as* a performative space persists. In fact, it seems that sometimes the performative atmosphere and the qualities of the “actors” in the market place have become one of the most important reasons why modern people are attracted to visit it. Although this is probably true for many regions and different cultures, I would like to single out one example from present-day Germany, which is most familiar to me. In Hamburg, right next to the river Elbe and adjacent to a large and notorious red-light district is located a

fish-market that every Sunday from very early morning on attracts thousands of visitors, some brought there by busses from all over Central and Northern Europe. Starting in the seventeenth century as a spot where fishermen were allowed to sell their perishable merchandise even on Sunday mornings before 8:30, today everything is sold there. The crowds, however, are drawn to those who most perfectly *perform* their craft. Among them are traders or barkers known by names such as Banana-Paul, Chicken-Hugo, Noodle-Heinz or Codfish-Kate. Most famous, however, is Eel-Dieter who sells eel and other fish five kilo or more at a time. Wielding a dozen or so eels in his hands, he cries out at the audience, offering his fish. He constantly moves in his stall, attracting the crowds with jokes or rough and insulting language. Sometimes he gets so ecstatic that he throws a bunch of fish at the closely packed audience that hastily withdraws from Eel-Dieter's stall. At other times he alludes to the neighborhood of the market and yells: "Well, boys, in the peep-show you are only supposed to look, now here is your turn to buy!"

Although the southern German city of Munich is roughly 1000 kilometers away, the "Hamburg Fish-Market" is regularly staged there as an event lasting for two or three weeks in early summer. The performance of Eel-Dieter and his colleagues explicitly is the main feature here and is advertised to attract visitors. In this case the performative quality of the market itself has become a commodity that is traded as part of a business strategy to boost tourism.

Although these observations might provide some interesting insights when compared to present-day Japan, this paper focuses on somewhat different and more complex issues and will be restricted to sources from premodern times, namely the so-called *shokunin utaawase* or "poetry contests of various occupations." It should be noted that the term *shokunin* ("craftsman" in modern Japanese) was a rather broad designation in medieval Japan, including "professionals," "occupations," or "arts and crafts," and so it has also been rendered as "the people of skill" by the historian Elizabeth Berry.<sup>1</sup> This translation is indeed a convenient label under which an extremely wide range of different professions and occupations of medieval Japan can be subsumed. As the historian Amino Yoshihiko has pointed out again and again, the only common characteristic of those "people of skill" (*shokunin*) in pre-seventeenth-century Japan was a seemingly non-agrarian

1 Elizabeth Berry: *The Culture of Civil War in Kyôto*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1994. The English terms (occupations, professionals, crafts) are used interchangeably for the Japanese word *shokunin* in this paper.

occupation.<sup>2</sup> There are four works extant from medieval Japan that take the particular format of a poetry contest (*utaawase*) in depicting those crafts. While the oldest of the four, dated to the early thirteenth century, contains poems attributed to 24 occupations the most recent *shokunin utaawase*, which was created around 1500, names 142 different professionals or “people of skill” (*shokunin*).<sup>3</sup>

Turning first to pictorial materials, we discover that a tradition of visual representations developed in Japan that seems to bear some similarities to examples from the West. Under the name of *fûzoku-e* 風俗絵 (“genre pictures”) or *shokunin zukushi’e* 職人尽絵 (literally “pictures of all occupations”) dating from the sixteenth century onwards, these visual representations depict everyday life in Japanese cities. The picture scrolls (*emakimono* 絵巻物) that accompany the *shokunin utaawase* quite obviously also belong to the category of “pictures of all occupations.” Moreover, at first glance the picture scroll of the largest of

- 2 Amino has published extensively on the subject of non-agrarian occupations (*shokunin*) and their role and function in medieval society, see in particular his seminal *Nihon chûsei hinôgyômin to tennô*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten 1984, see also *Nihon chûsei no minshûzô. Heimin to shokunin*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten 1980 (Iwanami shinsho 136), “Chûsei zenki ni okeru shokunômin no sonzai keitai,” in: Nagahara Keiji/Sasaki Junnosuke (ed.): *Nihon chûseishi kenkyû no kiseki*. Tokyo: Tokyo daigaku shuppankai 1988, pp. 69–100, and Amino Yoshihiko (ed.): *Shokunin to geinô*. Yoshikawa kôbunkan 1994 (Chûsei o kangaeru).
- 3 Only since the 1980’s and early 1990’s the *shokunin utaawase* (abbreviated: SUA) have become the object of some research, mainly by historians of social, economic, and cultural history. Although the largest of the four medieval SUA, the “Poetry Contest of Professionals in 71 Matches” (*Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*) has been included in the *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei* series by Iwanami (published in 1993 as volume 61 of the series) the genre has yet to be discovered by historians of Japanese literature. For studies in Japanese see Iwasaki Kae: *Shokunin utaawase. Chûsei no shokunin gunzô*. Tokyo: Heibonsha 1987 (Heibonsha sensho 114), Amino Yoshihiko: *Shokunin utaawase*. Tokyo: Iwanami shoten 1992 (Iwanami seminâ bukkusu 106); for studies in Western languages see Klaus Vollmer: *Professionen und ihre ‘Wege’ im mittelalterlichen Japan. Eine Einführung in ihre Sozialgeschichte und literarische Repräsentation am Beispiel des Tôhoku’in shokunin utaawase*. Hamburg: OAG 1995 (= MOAG 120) and the literature cited in its bibliography, pp. 479–523. For a partial and annotated edition and translation of the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase* see Roland Schneider/Christine Mitomi/Klaus Vollmer (ed.): *Gedichtwettstreit der Berufe. Eine japanische Bildrolle aus der Sieboldiana-Sammlung der Ruhr-Universität Bochum. Edition, Übersetzung und Kommentar*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 1995 (= Acta Sieboldiana V). Ito Setsuko has also included translations of some of the poems contained in SUA in her *An Anthology of Traditional Japanese Poetry Competitions. Utaawase 913–1815*. Bochum: Brockmeyer 1991, pp. 307–324.

the four medieval *shokunin utaawase* even seems to resemble its European counterparts, as it contains the cries and shouts of those Japanese professionals advertising their goods, just like, for example, *Les Cris de Paris* (Plates 6–7).

Although the pictures of the *shokunin utaawase* fit perfectly into the category of visual representations of crafts that we find in Japan as well in Europe and, indeed, they have been treated as such by Japanese historians, there is also a considerable difference. Because these representations follow the structure of a poetry contest (*utaawase*), they consist of *matches*, pairing *two* professionals in each round of the contest. Rather than depicting or imagining one craft at a time as in genre pictures from Western Europe or Japan, it is the additional dimension of a given pair that makes the *shokunin utaawase* an interesting object for students of cultural history. Before elaborating on this particular feature and its meaning it is necessary, however, to give an outline of the structural mode of an *utaawase* (poetry contest) because the *shokunin utaawase* have to be interpreted within this context.

### Poetry contests (*utaawase* 歌合) as performative space

In Japan, poetry competitions have a documented history of well over a thousand years and were held at the court and among Japanese elites. In an *utaawase*, poets were divided into two teams, the “left” and the “right,” and invited to compose poems on assigned topics such as the “autumn moon,” “plum blossoms among pines,” “unrequited love,” and so forth. After presentation a judge would comment on the poems and then announce the victor and vanquished of each round. From the eleventh century onwards, besides for being the major and most formally ritualized occasion for composing poetry, *utaawase* became an important forum for literary criticism and the formation of a conscious poetic aesthetic.<sup>4</sup> Significantly, however, whereas traditional scholarship has focused

4 The most important study on the genre remains Minegishi Yoshiaki: *Utaawase no kenkyû*. Tokyo: Sanseidô 1954; in Western languages see also the following works: Ito Setsuko: *A Study of the Development of Poetry Competitions (utaawase)*. Unpublished PhD, London University. London 1981, Ito Setsuko: “The Muse in Competition. *Utaawase* through the Ages,” in: *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 37 (1982), No. 2, pp. 201–222; Clifton W. Royston: “Utaawase Judgements as Poetry Criticism,” in: *Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 34 (1974), No. 1, pp. 99–108, see also chapters on *utaawase* in Oscar Benl: *Die Entwicklung der japanischen Poetik bis zum 16. Jahrhundert*. Hamburg: Cram, deGruyter & Co. 1951 and in Robert H. Brower / Earl Miner (ed.): *Japanese Court Poetry*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Stanford: Stanford

almost exclusively on the written texts of poetry contests, actually these were *performative events* of considerable importance and scale. According to regulations of poetry contests recorded in the twelfth century, the event had to be planned carefully in advance. Preparation included not only establishing the themes of poems, members of teams, their leaders and supporters, but also routine matters such as commissioning artisans to prepare elaborate and artistically designed tables to display the poems, together with a score-board and the proper lighting equipment. Finally, the banquet to follow the contest required a great deal of preparation, since it involved music and dance as well as the presentation of appropriate gifts to all the participants.<sup>5</sup>

Reading through records dating from late 9<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> century Japan it becomes clear that poetry contests were in fact organized as an elaborate social play performed by two teams competing for victory. Also, it should be emphasized that *utaawase* as performances or as “total art work” did not only involve different arts such as poetry, painting or music. Because carefully prepared products of material culture, including trays with artificial landscapes modeled after famous scenic spots, dress and clothing, furniture, food and drink were also integral parts of the *utaawase*, this performative space included an evaluation of artifacts and material culture as well. Moreover, this setting testifies to the high interest court nobles had in nearly every aspect of material culture and those people who had the sufficient skills to produce it.<sup>6</sup> This is particularly true for the so-called *monoawase* 物合, a performance where things (*mono* 物) were compared and evaluated in a poem presented by each team.<sup>7</sup> Among those *mono* we find living objects like fireflies, crickets, and plants and also a considerable range of other natural things, for example rocks and pebbles, or sea-shells, and man-made artifacts like fans, comb-cases and so on.<sup>8</sup> In a more abstract sense, I would like to argue, in *utaawase* the boundaries and relation between nature and

---

University Press 1975. Regarding predecessors of *utaawase* in early Japanese folklore and ritual see Otto Karow: “Utagaki-Kagahi. Ein Beitrag zur Volkskunde und Religionsgeschichte Altjapans,” in: *Monumenta Nipponica* Vol. 5, No. 2 (1942), pp. 1–47.

5 For a contemporary account see the *Fukuro sôshi* by Fujiwara Kiyosuke (in: Sasaki Nobutsuna (ed.): *Nihon kagaku taikei* Vol. 2. Tokyo: Kazama shobô 1956, pp. 1–171). Also, Ito (1978, pp. 52–54) gives detailed descriptions of the preparations and procedures involved according to this 12<sup>th</sup> century source.

6 On this aspect see Vollmer 1995, pp. 167–196.

7 On *monoawase* see Minegishi 1954, pp. 327–338.

8 For details see extensive quotations of source materials in Ito 1978.

culture were explored and contested in a performative space that developed its own aesthetic norms.

While the popularity of this kind of activity particularly among the courtiers of tenth through twelfth century Japan has been observed,<sup>9</sup> scholarship has much more focused on the so-called “literary *utaawase*” where the matching of poems seems to be the most important goal of the event. But a closer look at the setting of these seemingly “purely” literary poetry contests as recorded in contemporary sources reveals that again the presentation of poems was almost indivisibly tied to a particular mode of presentation involving carefully arranged plants or twigs, artificial landscapes and so forth. Although certainly the development of the literary *utaawase* has contributed considerably to the unfolding of and the discourse on poetics in premodern Japan, one might approach the study of *utaawase* not only from the viewpoint of literary history but also from the perspective of performance culture. To my knowledge this has not been done yet. Concentrating on the written texts of poems and the poetics included in the judgments of the poems instead, scholarship has tended to privilege only one particular mode of expression.

Let me now summarize the main features of *shokunin utaawase* and then elaborate on some of them that seem to be particularly interesting when approached with the concept of performativity.

### *Shokunin utaawase*

Although they follow the structure of *utaawase* just mentioned – i.e. two teams of poets, assigned topics, a judge commenting on the poems – the *shokunin utaawase* are *imagined* poetry contests written most probably by high ranking nobles of medieval Japan.<sup>10</sup> These nobles, very well versed in the art of Japanese *waka* 和歌 poetry, thus *imagined* the “people of skill” creating a poetry contest. A closer analysis of style and words used in the *shokunin utaawase* reveals that obviously the search for new modes of expression might have been one of the

9 A typical and widely read account is, for example, included in Ivan Morris’ classical study *The World of the Shining Prince* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Rutland, Tokyo: Tuttle 1986, p. 152), originally published in 1964.

10 On the authorship of the *Sanjūniban SUA* and the *Shichijūichiban SUA* see Iwasaki 1987. Iwasaki has argued convincingly that Sanjōnishi Sanetaka (1455–1537) has been involved in the creation of the former while poems by Asukai Masayasu (1435–1509) were included in the latter (Iwasaki 1987, pp. 100–109; 126–129).

reasons for creating the texts. Here, it seems, the authors aimed at carefully and playfully enriching the vocabulary of classical Japanese poetry.<sup>11</sup> Seen from this perspective the creation of the *shokunin utaawase* is an act of performance in itself. Putting on the “mask” of one of those professionals, playing their role and using words from their specific vocabulary, the nobles wrote poems on the topics “moon” or “love” in the name of carpenters, magicians, plasterers, peddlers, fishermen, weavers, shamanistic mediums and other “people of skill.” To give some idea on the outlook of this performance, let me describe the setting of the *Tôhoku'in shokunin utaawase* 東北院職人歌合 dated 1214, and thus the oldest of the four *shokunin utaawase* extant.<sup>12</sup>

The authors let the contest start quite auspiciously with poems allegedly composed by a doctor of medicine (*kusushi* 医師) and a yin-yang diviner (*onyôji* 陰陽師). In his poem on the topic “moon” the *kusushi* prescribes a “stormy breeze at midnight” as remedy to the “hazy moon, hiding behind layers of clouds;” in his love-poem he prescribes the moxa-cure for the love-sick. The diviner, who takes the position of the “right” in this match, laments that his magic *kagura* 神楽 dance has no effect on the one he is yearning for – just another expression of unrequited love that features so prominently in much of Japanese poetry. A shamanistic woman medium (*miko* 巫女) and a gambler (*bakuuchi* 博打) are paired in the fourth round. The illustration of this match in the oldest extant picture scroll is one of the most famous. Although he himself has already lost everything in the game and is portrayed stark naked, the gambler is wondering to whom the moon might give his “garment of clouds” as stake in a new game. The love poem of the *miko*, portrayed here as a rather old woman, is full of obscenity: the magic practice of calling the souls of the dead – *kuchiyose* 口寄せ – literally means “bringing mouths together” and is taken here to mean

11 See Minegishi 1954, pp. 605–619, for a summary of the literary aesthetics of the SUA see Vollmer 1995, pp. 181–186.

12 For a detailed analysis and translation of this SUA see Vollmer 1995. To give some idea of the nature of these poems the *uta* attributed to a doctor of medicine (*kusushi*) and a carpenter (*banjô*), respectively, from this SUA are given here in a tentative translation: (*Kusushi*) For the hazy moon/ high in the sky, hidden/ between layers of clouds/ a stormy breeze at midnight proved to be/ the healing medicine (*Murakumo no/ kakareru tsuki no/ kusuri ni wa/ yowa no arashi zo/ narubekarikeru*) (*Banjô*) Even if we are the ones/who make the crooked straight/ with inking string and square:/ no supporting beam / for the descending moon! (*Sumi kane no/ naoki wo tadasu/ mi naredomo/ katabuku tsuki ni/ kôbari zo naki*). For further translations into English see Ito 1991, pp. 307–324.

kissing, and so the technique of *kuchiyose* is employed to get hold of a suitable bed mate.

The famous fisherwomen from Katsura (*katsurame* 桂女) at the western outskirts of the capital are combined with the charcoal-peddling women from Ôhara (*ôharame* 大原女) north of Kyôto in the eleventh match, and thus, in addition to the two varieties of peddlers, two “famous places” (*meisho* 名所) are also paired in this match. The merchant (*akibito* 商人) appearing in the last round together with the salt-burner (*ama* 海人) refers to the moon over the Yangtze river in China, thus evoking the image of the archetypical Chinese merchant Fan li (Jpn. Hanrei), who lived in the 5th century B.C.. But even for a rich merchant – this is the pun of his love poem – a meeting with the one he loves is not for sale in the market place. The salt-burner, too, alludes to his profession and laments his salty tears shed for a love in vain. Obviously the poems of this contest are deeply rooted in the tradition of court poetry and an in-depth analysis reveals the rich texture of allusions to other anthologies of Japanese poetry.<sup>13</sup> Here, however, I will continue with some general observations regarding the genre.

### Shortcomings of scholarship and the potential of *shokunin utaawase*

As with poetry contests in general, the *shokunin utaawase* are particularly complex works of art, but once the disciplinary divisions of modern scholarship – e.g. history of literature, economic history, art history – got hold of them separately, this complexity is turned into a deficiency that was attributed to the works themselves instead of being blamed on the narrowness of scholarly approaches applied. For example, to historians of literature, the *shokunin utaawase* that contain comic stanzas and much wordplay belong only to the more degenerate stages of poetry and thus do not merit serious attention.<sup>14</sup> To the historian of Japanese society and economics, the pictures as well as some of the special vocabulary contained in the texts sometimes prove to be useful, but here

13 For details see Vollmer 1995, pp. 233–361.

14 See, for example, the judgement levelled by Ito Setsuko that echoes much of Japanese scholarship on the *shokunin utaawase*. They are seen as typical examples of the “iron age” of poetry contests, signifying a degenerate stage of the art that could not really match the accomplishments of the “golden” and “silver” ages, representing the *utaawase* in early Heian times and the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, respectively (Ito 1982, p. 208).

again no attempt has been made to analyze the overall structure of these works. And even when the *shokunin utaawase* were indeed acknowledged as historical sources, a misunderstanding of considerable importance lay at the root of this acknowledgement. Sometimes, for example, the genre has been interpreted as a mirror of basic social and economic changes that deeply effect the life of common people. Thus, the fact that the number of professionals that appear in the *shokunin utaawase* grew from 24 in the first one to 142 in the last of the medieval poetry contests has been rather crudely read as reflecting the progress of labour division and the splitting up of crafts and trade.<sup>15</sup> This superficial reading reduced the poetry contests to just another account of social or economic history – as if these literary works were intended to be a faithful copy of historical developments as determined by the paradigms of modern scholarship. Unfortunately this is still a major mode of interpretation even by most recent Japanese research. Here the complex art form of *shokunin utaawase* is labeled a “true image” (*jitsuzô* 実像) of the life and times of medieval “people of skill.”<sup>16</sup> This perception, highly problematical as it certainly is, raises some important questions on the relationship between “reality” and “fiction,” terms and concepts that prove rather misleading when studying the *shokunin utaawase*.

What kind of reality, then, do the *shokunin utaawase* reflect? What does the introduction of those very real “people of skill” mean in this context? First, all evidence makes emphatically clear that the poetry contests are purely fictional; there is no indication of the participation by “real” craftsmen in the creation of these texts. Instead, as mentioned above, in performing and creating these *shokunin utaawase* the author or the authors imagined the presence of the “people of skill.” As has been pointed out, in terms of literary history, the use of words from the world of craftsmen, peddlers, and mendicants certainly served as a device to explore new modes and techniques of poetic language. While this attempt might have been a very conscious act of the authors, simultaneously it offers insights into yet another realm of imagination inscribed into the structure of the text. The combination and matching of two professionals in one round, as well as their position in the overall sequence of poems, is a case in point. Here we find probably one of the most fascinating yet hardly ever studied features of this genre.

15 See, for example, the account in Inoue Mitsusada / Nagahara Keiji / Kodama Kôta et. al. (ed.): *Nihon rekishi taikêi*. Vol. 2. Tokyo: Yamakawa shuppansha 1985, p. 604.

16 See, for example, the designation of the SUA in Iwasaki 1987, p. 28.

As shown earlier, visual representations of crafts from Europe easily lend themselves to the study of their stereotyped images, of their accessories and their performative potential. Though highly suggestive, they are still just single occupations grouped together in a tableau of premodern city life. On the other hand the matching process in the *shokunin utaawase* itself that is due to the competitive structure of an *utaawase* performance requires an additional act of imagination that is not present, for example in *Les Cris de Paris* or other visual representations of that kind. The creative act of combining two crafts in one match thus reveals a element of imagination by medieval Japanese elites that carries considerable cultural meaning embedded in the combination itself. The matches of the *shokunin utaawase* thus do not represent two single crafts grouped together accidentally but their combination seems to reveal a concept, a cultural topos by which both are brought and bound together.

Looking at the *shokunin utaawase* from this perspective, some combinations of professionals are easily explained. For example, medieval Japan's notoriously quarrelsome Buddhist denominations were natural rivals and so it comes as no surprise that in one of the *shokunin utaawase* a representative from the Hokke-shû, the Lotus School founded by the priest Nichiren (1222–1282), is pitted against his counterpart of the Nenbutsu-shû that embraced the doctrine of salvation in Amida's Western Paradise. These schools of Buddhism did not only represent followers of different social origins but also considerable doctrinal tensions. This may have been one a reason why the authors had these imaginary clerics compete for victory in this poetry contest of professionals (see *Plate 8*). Similarly, in another match, the monks of Mt. Hiei near Kyôto (the *yama hôshi* 山法師) belonging to the Tendai school of Buddhism were put against the monks from the old capital of Nara (*Nara hôshi* 奈良法師). Again we may conclude, based on our knowledge from other medieval sources, that their very real economic, military, as well as doctrinal conflict might have made this match an obvious one for the authors of the poetry contest (see *Plate 9*). Still other matches clearly indicate that not only stereotyped crafts or professions are represented but that the format of this imagined poetry contest is also taken to represent ideas or cultural concepts as well. In one match, for example, we find a scholar and an archer combined in one round. In my opinion they do not simply represent each profession separately but obviously the match reflects the ideal of *bunbu* 文武, the equal mastery of civilian and military arts, a concept from the

Chinese classics so often alluded to in medieval Japanese documents, and particularly emphasized in the house rules of medieval warriors (see *Plate 10*).<sup>17</sup>

Other matches are more difficult to explain. Studied carefully, however, they reveal various layers of cultural meaning that might underlie the match. In two of the *shokunin utaawase*, for example, carpenter (*banjô* 番匠) and blacksmith (*kaji* 鍛冶) appear together as one match, in both cases either as the first or the second pair of craftsmen of the entire *utaawase*, respectively (see *Plate 11*). What does this mean? Why are these crafts combined and what justifies their prominent position?

To briefly summarize a complex matter,<sup>18</sup> there are various contexts in which this combination of craftsmen would have been highly meaningful. For example, it could be seen as reflecting the institutional arrangement of craftsmen by the ancient Japanese state bureaucracy. Here, both were incorporated into the state's building department. From other sources pertaining to the ambitious building projects of state and religious institutions, we know that they were often viewed as complementary, for the realization of the carpenters' planning and building genius could only be realized when the blacksmiths provided suitably exact tools. Obviously, and contrary to some of the visual representations in the *shokunin zukushi'e*, the blacksmith here should thus be interpreted as making iron and steel tools rather than swords. Moreover the combination of these two seems to imply more than just some very real, material or even organizational background that is related to the theme of "building" in general. We might also interpret this match as the visualization of a major cultural topos that was related to the question which craft was superior. This might sound as pure speculation and, indeed, other sources to support the evidence in this particular case are scarce. Nevertheless some evidence does exist to support this assumption. Take, for example, the following account on Japanese arts and crafts by João Rodrigues (1561–1634), a Portuguese missionary writing on Japan in the early seventeenth century. In his detailed account on customs and manners in Japan, he reports exactly this kind of discussion or dispute on the supremacy of carpenters and blacksmiths when he asserts:

17 For a convenient overview of the *bunbu*-concept in medieval Japan see Maria-Verena Blümmel: "Vom Krieger zum Kriegeradligen. Über den Umgang mit dem bun-bu-Ideal während der Kamakura-Zeit," in: Ulrich Apel/Josef Holzapfel/Peter Pörtner (ed.): *Referate des 10. Deutschsprachigen Japanologentages vom 9. bis 12. Oktober 1996 in München*. München: Japan-Zentrum 1997 (CD-ROM), pp. 263–270.

18 For a detailed account on this match, see Vollmer 1995, pp. 203–206.

After this (i.e., architecture) comes the art of working iron, principally for the offensive weapons which the Japanese prize so highly. This art competes with the previous one (i.e., architecture) as regards nobility and esteem, and there arise great disputes among them (i.e., the Japanese) whether this art or architecture in wood occupies the first place among all the mechanical art.”<sup>19</sup>

Seen in this light, carpenter and blacksmith naturally appear in one match and in a very prominent position within the sequence of the *shokunin utaawase*. Thus, in creating the *shokunin utaawase* those authors-cum-nobles not only were performing the crafts in the sense indicated above but were equally employing cultural topoi in this performance – another possible meaning of “performing culture.”

To conclude, I would like to briefly return to some questions raised earlier. First of all, it should be sufficiently clear that the depiction of the “people of skill” in *shokunin utaawase* can hardly be discussed in terms of “fiction” vs. “reality.” What is displayed here is an aspect of the cultural imagination of Japanese elites in medieval Japan. In particular, the mechanisms of playful combination of topoi and stereotypes taken from the world of material and everyday culture grant insights into the imagination and mentality of those elites that are hard to come by otherwise. As mentioned above, *utaawase* had developed as a performative space where the incorporation of a great variety of objects from nature or material culture into the world of courtly aesthetics was practiced and explored. Here, playing with the boundaries of nature and culture, fiction and reality could be seen as one of the driving forces behind this practice.

In connection with the *shokunin utaawase* it is interesting to note that the world of the “people of skill” on various levels was appropriated from early on by Japanese elites outside the space of *utaawase* as well. Typically, these events, too, took the form of a performance. Let me give just two examples. Minamoto no Tōru (822–895), who was an undisputed patron in the world of aesthetics in ninth century Japan and held many poetry contests in the garden of his mansion Kawarano’in, had a part of this garden remodeled after the famous landscape of Shiogama in northern Japan. To stress the “reality” of the scene the pond in the garden was filled with seawater brought there from the bay of Naniwa. Fish and other creatures of the sea were released there. Moreover, salt pans were set up on the artificial beach to simulate the work of the craftsmen producing salt and

19 Michael Cooper (ed.): *This Island of Japon. João Rodrigues’ Account of 16<sup>th</sup>-century Japan*. Tokyo, New York: Kodansha 1973, p. 308.

seaweed.<sup>20</sup> Another source, from tenth century Japan, the *Utsuho monogatari* 宇津保物語 (“The Tale of the Hollow Tree”), mentions a game played by courtiers that was called *zaenanori* 才名のり, literally the “naming of a craft or talent” (*zae* 才). When asked by one of the participants: “What is your talent?” the person addressed had to name a certain craft or profession that came to his mind. Then he would be asked again: “Well, now show your talent!” In fulfilling this demand the person in question had to say a few characteristic phrases that were associated and consistent with the respective craft or profession. To what extent nonverbal performance was also part of the play we do not know.<sup>21</sup>

While I have concentrated on material from medieval *shokunin utaawase* in this paper it seems highly promising to examine in detail the theme of the appropriation of material culture and its producers in modern Japan as well. Looking through the glossy, richly illustrated books on “traditional Japanese crafts,” for example, it occurs to me that those “traditional Japanese craftsmen” very much perform a topos of key importance for the self-image of modern Japanese culture and society. Do we not sometimes observe here “aesthetics at work” and the craftsmen performing the tension of modernity-*cum*-tradition that has been presented as so uniquely Japanese in modern times?<sup>22</sup>

20 For this example and its implications see Michele Marra: *The Aesthetics of Discontent. Politics and Reclusion in Medieval Japanese Literature*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press 1991, p. 51.

21 This account is contained in the *kiku no en*-chapter of the *Utsuho monogatari* (see *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* Vol. 11, pp. 28–30, 508). This courtly ‘game’ is also mentioned in Amino Yoshihiko: “Chûsei henrekimin to ‘geinô,’” in: Amino Yoshihiko / Ôsumi Kazuo / Yamaji Kôzô (ed.): *Chûsei henrekimin no sekai*. Tokyo: Heibonsha 1990 (Taikei Nihon rekishi to geinô 6), pp. 10–40. For a general discussion of these examples see Vollmer 1995, pp. 169–175.

22 See for example Yoshida Mitsukuni / Tanaka Ikko / Sesoko Tsune (ed.): *Tsukuru. Aesthetics at Work*, a volume published by Mazda Motor Corporation (Hiroshima) in 1990.

## Plates

**LES CRIS DE PARIS.**

Plate 1: *Les Cris de Paris*, print by Lacour (Nancy, 1831); Source: Massin: *Händlerrufe aus europäischen Städten*. München: Heimeran 1978, p. 119.



392



393



394



395

Plate 2: Cries of peddlers from Göttingen by Georg Daniel Heumann (around 1753); Source: Massin: *Händlerrufe aus europäischen Städten*. München: Heimeran 1978, p. 201 (from upper left: peddlers of glas, merchandise made of straw, plaice, chairs with seat made of straw).



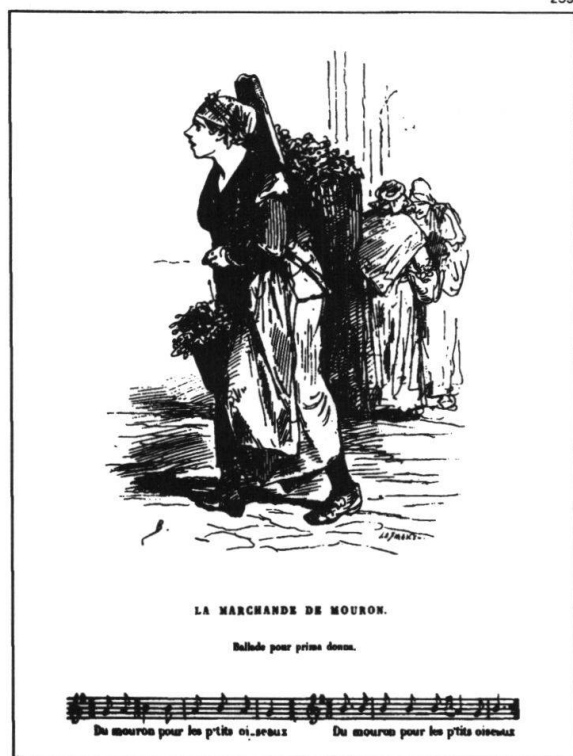
Plate 3: Cries of peddlers from Danzig by Matthäus Deisch (around 1780); Source: Massin: *Händlerrufe aus europäischen Städten*. München: Heimeran 1978, p. 202 (left: peddler of cauliflower and turnip, right: peddler of shavings).



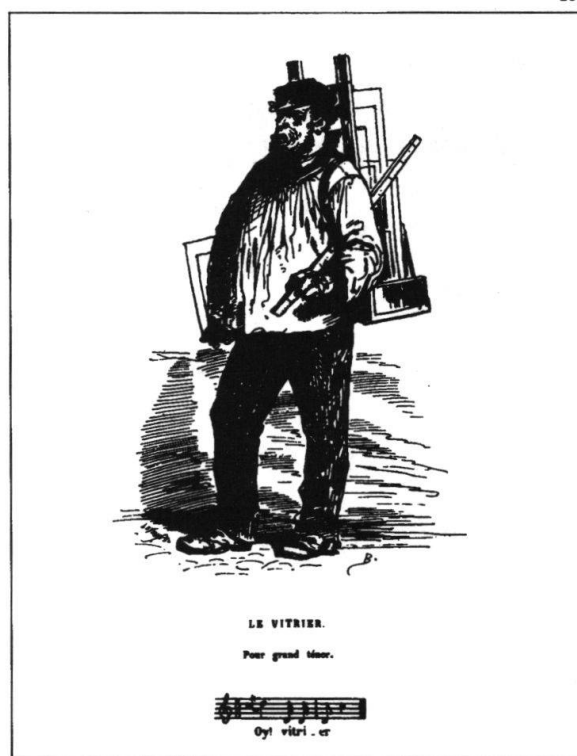
259



260



261



262

Plate 4: *La Comédie de notre temps. Acteurs et actrices. Costumes et visages*, by Bertall (Paris, 1876) ; Source : *Händlerrufe aus europäischen Städten*. München: Heimeran 1978, p. 141 (from upper left: peddlers of cheese, taps, bird-seed and window-glass).



Plate 5: *Les Cris de Paris (grotesque)*, print by Pellerin (Epinal, 1858); Source: Massin: *Händlerrufe aus europäischen Städten*. München: Heimeran 1978, p. 151.

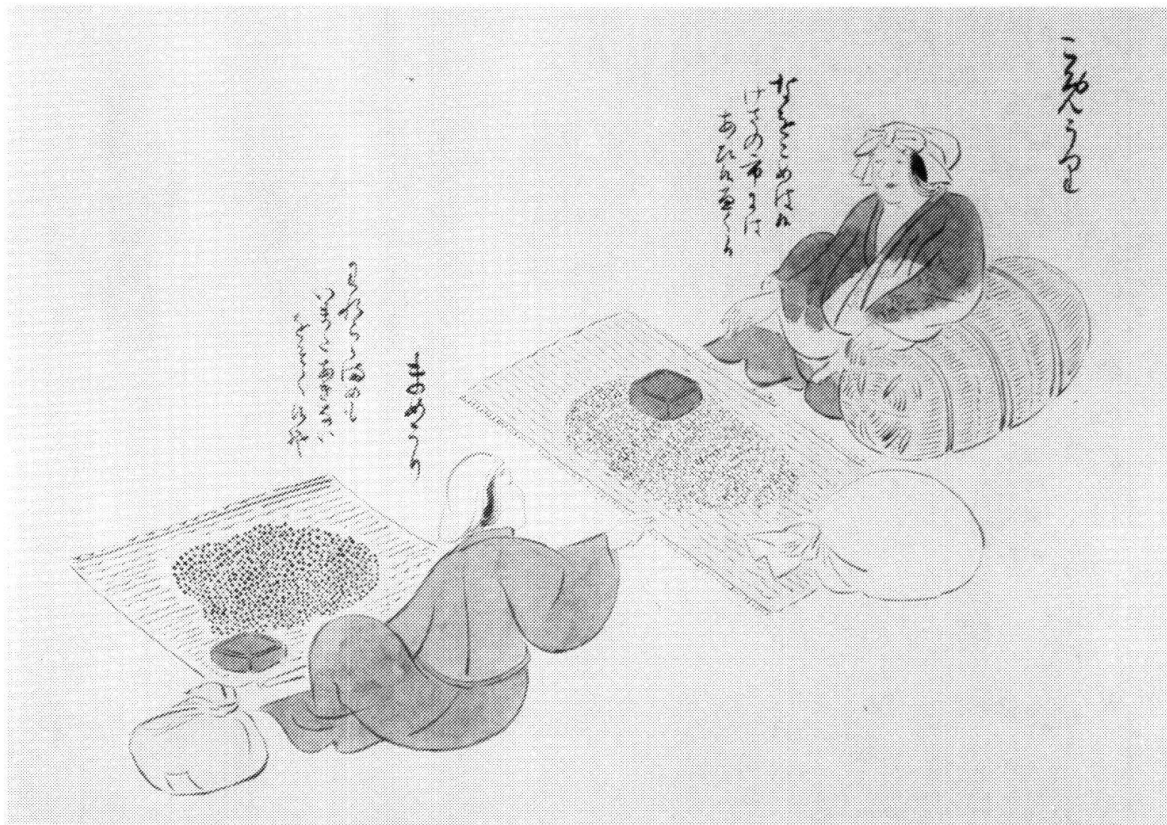


Plate 6: Bean vendor (left) and rice vendor as depicted in the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Kobijutsu* Vol. 74 (1985), p. 35.



Plate 7: Fan (*ôgi*) maker (left) and *eboshi* (headgear) maker as depicted in the the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Kobijutsu* Vol. 74 (1985), p. 34.



Plate 8: Representatives of the Hokke-shû (left) and the Nenbutsu-shû in the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*, in: Edo kagaku koten sôsho Vol. 6. Tokyo: Kôwa shuppan 1977, p. 141.

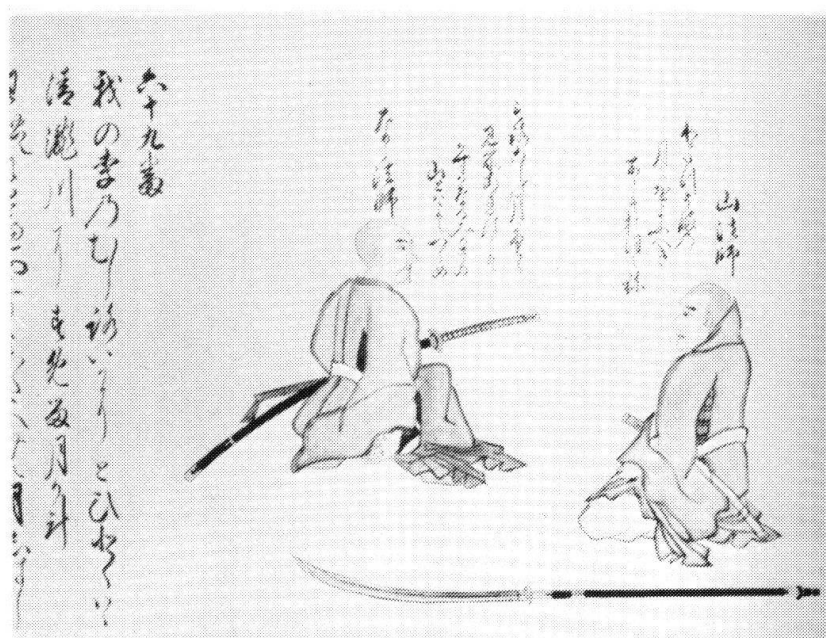


Plate 9: Representatives of Nara hōshi (left) and Yama hōshi in the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*, in: Edo kagaku koten sôsho Vol. 6. Tokyo: Kôwa shuppan 1977, p. 144.



Plate 10: Archer (*yumitori*) (left) and scholar (*bunja*) in the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*, in: *Edo kagaku koten sôsho* Vol. 6. Tokyo: Kôwa shuppan 1977, p. 105.



Plate 11: Blacksmith (*kaji*) (left) and carpenter (*banjô*) in the *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*; Source: *Shichijûichiban shokunin utaawase*, in: *Edo kagaku koten sôsho* Vol. 6. Tokyo: Kôwa shuppan 1977, p. 11.