

“The Travel with Koinobori”—An Intertextual Kamishibai Tale

Cultural background and Explanation by Tara McGowan

A couple of years ago, when the Kamishibai Kids—a troupe of children kamishibai creators and performers in Princeton, NJ—were invited to create stories around the theme of Children’s Day to perform at the Japan Society in New York, one of our seasoned members came up with this beautiful example of an intertextual, *tezukuri* (hand-made) kamishibai. Kayo (age 11 at the time) had developed and performed kamishibai over a number of years in my workshops, which were held at Cotsen Children’s Library, before coming up with this story. Here, she combines her knowledge of both Japanese folklore and American popular culture, as well as her understanding of kamishibai illustrating techniques, to tell a highly inventive story. Notice, also, that she combines a variety of media—markers, colored pencils, origami and paper collage. Kayo gave me permission to present her cards on the Kamishibai for Kids website, along with her oral performance on video tape, and some cultural background for better appreciation of the story.

Cultural Background

The first scene in Kayo’s kamishibai, “The Travel with Koinobori,” shows a typical way of celebrating Children’s Day in Japan. The children are eating *kashiwa mochi*—rice cakes wrapped in oak leaves—and they have folded *kabuto* (samurai helmets), which they are wearing on their heads. Above them, a *koinobori* (carp wind sock)—another important symbol of Children’s Day—is blowing in the wind. Parents in Japan fly carps outside their houses around May 5th because carp are known to be very strong and resilient fish that can swim upstream and even up waterfalls, and they hope that their children will grow up to be equally resilient.



In the second scene, we suddenly zoom in on the girl's face, as she realizes that the carp has broken free from the rope, with a snap!



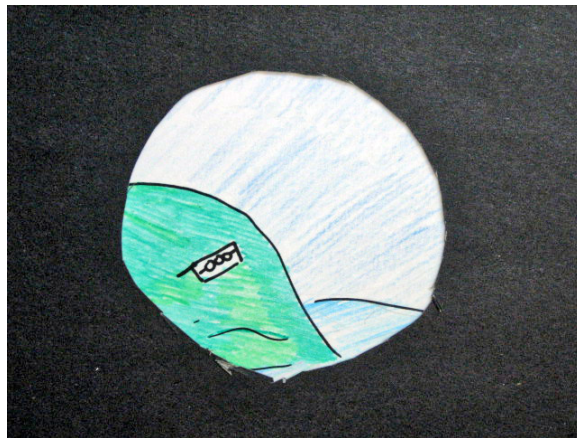
To keep the carp from flying away, the children offer it their *kashiwa mochi* cakes in exchange for a ride on its back.



As they fly through the air, one of the children rolls his helmet, which is made from newspaper, into a telescope to see what lies ahead.



Through the telescope, from the boy's perspective, we can see an island.



Suddenly, a large bird—a crane—crashes into the koinobori carp.



And the children fall down to land, stunned but unhurt, on the island (card half pulled).



Suddenly, out of nowhere, a giant bear attacks them with a mighty growl (pull rest of card).



Just as quickly two children super-heroes come to their rescue.



From their costumes we know that they are Kintaro and Issunboshi. **Kintaro** is a legendary child, who has super-human strength. He is known for his successful hand-to-hand combat with a bear, who later becomes his friend. He is often depicted wearing a red apron with the Chinese character for *kin* (which means “gold”) and riding on the back of a bear. **Issunboshi** comes from the folktale of the same name, which is often translated as “The One-Inch Boy.” Although he is no bigger than a human finger, he defeats a giant *oni* demon and takes the demon’s *uchide no kozuchi*, or “magic mallet.”

In the next scene, the children come upon two crying babies. Issunboshi uses his magic mallet to make them bigger, and POOF...



They turn into **Urashima-taro** and **Momo-taro**. In the story of Urashima-taro, the eponymous hero saves a turtle and is invited under the sea to the Dragon King’s palace. When he decides to leave, he is given a special magic box—*tamate bako*—by the King’s daughter, who warns him never to open it. When he returns to his villages and realizes that he has been gone for 300 years, Urashima-taro decides to open the box, whereupon he promptly turns into an ancient man. Momo-taro, or “The Peach Boy,” is another legendary child hero, who sets out to slay the evil *oni* demons of *Oni-ga-shima* (Oni Island). The flag he carries that says *Nippon Ichi*, which Kayo translates as “Best in Japan,” refers to his *kibi-dango* rice cakes that give him and his animal companions each the strength of one hundred men.



At this point in the story, the children realize that they are on a mysterious island of Japanese folk legends, especially in the very next scene where the daughter of the Dragon King hands them a *tamate-bako* box, just like in the Urashima-taro story, and thanks them for enabling the stories to begin. The princess is accompanied by other story characters, notably the man on the right with the big welt on his cheek, who is from **Kobutori-jiisan** (The Old Man with the Welt).



Suddenly, out of nowhere, an *Oni* appears (is it an *Oni* from Momotaro's story, or perhaps the *Oni* from the Issunboshi story?) The Oni grabs the *tamate-bako* box that the Princess has just given to the children, and he greedily opens it up...



Only to be transformed—just like Urashima-taro—(pull card quickly) POOF!



...into an ancient version of himself! The turtle, meanwhile, brings the children a new treasure box as a reward. This time when they open it, they discover the magic to transport them back home and a DVD of their own adventure—A Japanese Version of Shrek.



Kayo thus combines her knowledge, not only of Japanese culture and folktale, but also of media from the American popular culture of film, as she creates her own version of the intertextual movie Shrek, based on the picture book by William Stieg. The extent to which Kayo has managed to combine all of these literary influences in her life into a different artistic medium—kamishibai—is highly inventive and unique, and I hope her story will inspire more children (and adults!) to create equally exciting and innovatively constructed kamishibai stories to perform for one another.