

The March of Dancing Skeletons: Zen Vernacular-sermon Picture Scrolls and Their Development

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Today, the iconography of skeleton or skull motifs enjoys a broad popularity, found everywhere from T-shirts and rings to characters appearing in Japanese *anime*. That the charm of such motifs is one felt by people across different eras is clear from Edo-period *ukiyo-e*, where one finds frequent examples of skeleton pictures rendered with realistic detail, as in the *Sōma no furu-dairi* 相馬の古内裏 of Utagawa Kuniyoshi 歌川国芳, or the *Hajō bakkotsu zazen-zu* 波上白骨座禅図 of Maruyama Ōkyo 円山応挙. And while skeletons have always been symbols of death, impermanence, or even evil, there is also no shortage of pictures showing skeletons up and about, moving in the manner of the living, with something of a comical or humorous air. Yet when, and how, did such skeleton imagery, in its many guises from the loveable to the heroic, first come into usage?

Stories featuring skeletons have existed in significant numbers from ancient times. In the early Heian-period Buddhist tale collection *Nihon ryōiki* 日本靈異記, for example, one story has a skull taking vengeance upon the man who had killed him. Yet for all its universal character, found beyond Japan in narratives from every corner of the world, by and large it is a motif whose dominant elements are negative. In Japanese texts, skeletons of a more cheerful aspect begin to appear only with the advent of the Muromachi period. One such example is found in a work of *otogi-zōshi* (a Muromachi-period tale genre) bearing the title *Genchū sōda-ga* 幻中草打画.

In this work we find depicted a lively dinner party populated entirely by skeletons, whom we see beating drums, playing the flute, and dancing with abandon. The scene occurs within the story-in-a-story of *Genchū sōda-ga*, the narrative frame of which involves a travelling monk who falls asleep one day inside a temple, only to dream of long conversation with the skeleton of a woman who has come out of her grave to meet him. The conversation narrates the woman's life, portrayed throughout by accompanying pictures as the life of a skeleton—all

characters being drawn as skeletons—from her embraces with her husband, to that husband’s death, to his removal to the cremation fields, to the woman’s own taking of religious vows and, at last, to the subsequent Buddhist dialogues she pursues. It is a playful visual expression of the principle of *shōji ichinyō* 生死一如 (“life and death, one and the same”)—the idea that beneath the skin, human beings are all nothing but skeletons, showing no difference between male and female, indeed no difference between life and death. The sense of the Zen phrase used in the title, *genchū sōda* (“amid illusion, hit with grass [i.e. to make one wake up]”), is that the skeleton dream-figures of the text enlighten the reader about reality’s own true “emptiness” (*kū* 空). From this, as well as from the substance of the Buddhist dialogue in the work’s latter half, the picture scroll appears to be a vernacular sermon, designed to convey the teachings of the Zen school.

One of the four known extant textual witnesses of the *Genchū sōda-ga* allows it to be dated as far back as the Muromachi period: a valuable medieval picture-scroll manuscript (now in codex form) surviving in the collections of Kakuman-ji Temple 鶴満寺 in Osaka. This is the text previously introduced by Okami Masao 岡見正雄, bearing a transcribed colophon dated to Kōryaku 康暦 2 (1380).¹ The work also appears in *Kanmon nikki* 看聞日記, the diary of imperial prince Go-sukō-in Sadafusa 後崇光院貞成 (1372–1456), under a “Catalog of Various Tales” (*shō-monogatari moku-roku* 諸物語目録) found in a verso-side entry dated to Ōei 応永 27 (1420)—a corroborating indication that the work existed at least by the early Muromachi period, and was read then among the nobility.

At a later period, this work was split in half and adapted, gaining an association with the name of the famous Rinzai monk Ikkyū Sōjun 一休宗純 (1394–1481). The two resulting works were published, respectively, under the titles *Ikkyū gaikotsu* 一休骸骨 (Ikkyū and the Skeleton) (**Figure 1**) and *Ikkyū mizukagami* 一休水鏡 (Ikkyū’s Water Mirror). In these versions, however, the emphasis was less on the teachings of Zen, and more on the abundant comic potential of the skeleton figures themselves.

These anthropomorphized skeletons seem to have charmed people, and helped along by the popularity of Ikkyū, the texts became popular enough to see several printings over the course of the Edo period. Yet even as such reception through printed books with illustrations steadily increased, new copies of picture scrolls continued to be produced as late as the Bakumatsu period, as in the case of the picture-scroll manuscript of *Ikkyū gaikotsu*, copied in Kōka 弘化 4 (1847), that survives in the Ryūkyō University Library. Probably this continued long life in picture-scroll format is accounted for by the underlying Buddhist dialogue-text having taken as its subject something as fantastic, and as given to striking visuals, as an animated human skeleton.

In addition to the text’s artistic presentation of skeleton pictures, another aspect

¹ See Okami Masao, “‘Genchū sōdaga’ honkoku” 『幻中草打画』翻刻, ed. Nakamura Yukihiro hakase kanreki kinen ronbunshū kankōkai 中村幸彦博士還暦記念論文集刊行会, in *Kinsei bungaku: sakka to sakubin* 近世文学：作家と作品 (Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha, 1973).



Figure 1. Scene of a skeleton banquet. From *Ikkyū gaikotsu* 一休骸骨, Pub. Edo period. (Imanishi Yūichirō 今西祐一郎, Private Collection).
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of the *Genchū sōda-ga* worth noting is the depiction of a Buddhist dialogue between two nuns that occurs in the work's latter half, valuable as a reflection of actual discourse among contemporary Zen-sect nuns. This, considered alongside the work's fulsome use of both Muromachi-period didactic verse sermons and terminology taken from Zen *goroku* 語録 texts, has led the *Genchū sōda-ga* to be classified as a *hōgo-emaki* 法語絵巻 (a genre of vernacular-sermon picture scrolls), and one designed, moreover, for a female readership. Later in the Edo period, this female Buddhist dialogue was not only adapted, becoming the work *Ikkyū mizukagami*, but also had an influence itself on the *kana-zōshi* work *Ninin bikuni* 二人比丘尼 (**Figure 2**), penned by the Sōtō monk Suzuki Shōsan 鈴木正三 (1579–1655).

In *Ninin bikuni*, the wife of Suda Yahei 須田弥兵衛, after the death of a certain beautiful widow, goes every seven days to see with her own eyes how the widow's body, left exposed in the fields, decomposes to become gradually nothing but white bones. This leads to her enlightenment on the principle of impermanence, and to herself becoming a nun, one who eventually, as the story portrays it, achieves rebirth in paradise as the fruit of her devotions. Setting aside its clear



Figure 2. Scene of a woman in dialogue with a skeleton. From *Ninin bikuni* 二人比丘尼 [“Two Nuns”], Pub. early Edo period. (National Institute of Japanese Literature).

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relationship to Su Dongpo’s 蘇東坡 (1036–1101) poem on decomposition, *Nine Phases* (*Jiuxiang shi* 九相詩, J. *Kusō shi*), *Ninin bikuni* also betrays the influence of *Genchū soda-ga*, not only in its structuring concept—coming to enlightenment about impermanence though dialogue with a skeleton—but also in its own opening’s direct allusion to that of the earlier work. A similar process can often be seen at work in *kana-zōshi* of the early Edo period, with several texts being based on such Muromachi vernacular-sermon picture scrolls, whose content they selectively modified and adapted, in a very concrete manifestation of contemporary “interactions of knowledge” (*chi no kōtsū* 知の交通).

To turn, then, the question around: what was it about the Muromachi era that felt a need for such skeleton story-illustrations? In the background to their production there are various influences that might be adduced, in particular Song-period skeleton illustrations from China, and the popularity of those *otogi-zōshi* works now called *iruimono* 異類物 (“non-human” pieces)—stories centered on anthropomorphized flora and fauna. These story illustrations were of course an expedient, used to expound Zen’s difficult teachings in ways people could more readily understand. Nonetheless skeletons, simply through their

association with such pictures, came to acquire a new image among people. And so it is to the skeletons of these story illustrations, first appearing in the Muromachi period, that we trace the roots of the modern, more humorous, more loveable skeleton type, which continues to dance on in our own day and age.