

Going West to Reach the East: A New World Source for an Episode in the Earliest Japanese Edition of *Tales of Isopo*

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Japanese scholars have long recognized the existence of episodes in both the “Life of Aesop” section and the “Fables” section of *Isopo monogatari* 伊曾保物語 that are not found in the presumed “source” editions of the work, inaugurated by Heinrich Steinhöwel’s 1476/1477 Latin/German bilingual edition, *Vita Esopi fabulatoris clarissimi e greco latina* (etc.).¹ In his extensive series of studies, Endō Jun’ichi 遠藤潤一 identifies two episodes from the “Life of Aesop” (I-14 and II-7) and four fables (III-13, III-17, III-28, and III-34) from the “Fables” section.² Subsequent scholarship has determined that some of these are included in 16th-century Spanish editions of the *Fables*, as well as in such works as the *Fabulae* by Odo of Cheriton, a 12th-century preacher who lived for a time in Spain, and whose collections of sermon source tales were transcribed into Spanish.³

One episode, found in the “Life of Aesop” section, has eluded identification as to a possible source. This is episode I-14 and runs in English translation as follows:

No. 14 A Groom and a Samurai in a Dispute over a Horse⁴

A certain groom (J. *chūgen* 中間) had mounted his master’s horse and was

1 *Isopo monogatari* was published in multiple moveable-type editions between ca. 1615 and 1639, followed by a woodblock-printed edition (and its reprints) first published in 1659.

2 Episode and fable numbers include the fascicle number (I, II, III) followed by the entry number (1-20 for Fascicle I, 1-40 for Fascicle II, and 1-34 for Fascicle III). See Endō Jun’ichi 遠藤潤一, *Isopo monogatari daini-shu bon no honkoku to honmon kenkyū* 伊曾保物語第二種本の翻刻と本文研究, Tokyo: Kazama Shobō 風間書房, 1993: 218–22, for a chart comparing the *Tales of Isopo* with the 1476 Latin/German and 1489 Spanish editions from the Steinhöwel line of Aesopic texts.

3 See, for example, Itō Hiroaki 伊藤博明, “*Supeingo-ban ‘Isoppu giwa shū’ to kokuji-bon Isoho monogatari*” スペイン語版「イソップ寓話集」と国字本『伊曾保物語』(Aesop’s fables in the Spanish version and ‘Isohomonogatari’), *Saitama Daigaku kiyō (Kyōyō gakubu)* 53-2 (2018): 1–13.

4 Text found in Mutō Sadao 武藤禎夫, comp. and annot. (*Manji eiri-bon*) *Isopo monogatari* (万治絵入本) 伊曾保物語, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 2000: 50–52.

riding it quite a distance when he encountered a samurai traveling alone. The samurai bellowed haughtily, “I hold the rank of samurai but here I am on foot while you are someone’s menial underling. Now get down off that horse and hand it over for me to mount. If you don’t, I’ll slice through that scrawny neck of yours and toss your head away!” The groom thought to himself, “Out here in the middle of nowhere there is no one I can appeal to. If I try to resist, it’s certain that my head will get lopped off.” He thus had no choice but to dismount. The samurai then mounted it with an air of arrogance and, accompanied by the groom, arrived without incident at a place called San.⁵

The groom then shouted out, “This is my master’s horse! I beseech you to return it!” The samurai, still on horseback, retorted, “You insolent knave! Raise your voice once more and your luck will be cut short, as well as your head!” Realizing that he had no further recourse, the groom called on the governor (J. *shugo* 守護) and pleaded his case. The governor in response sent soldiers to bring the samurai before him. One side followed the other with his claim, but to no clear result. At a loss to determine right from wrong, the governor summoned Isopo and ordered him to prosecute the case. Isopo heard the details and then pulled the groom aside, and warned him in a low voice, “By all means do not blurt anything out while I am examining the samurai.” The groom humbly acquiesced.

Isopo then, according to plan, removed his outer garment and draped it over the horse’s head. He then asked the samurai, “Which eye is this horse blind in?” The flustered samurai struggled to respond. At the end of his wits he finally replied, “It is blind in its left eye.” At this Isopo pulled away the outer garment, revealing that the horse could see in both eyes. As a result, the horse was presented to the groom, and the samurai was left shamed, thus exposing right and wrong in this case.

The episode depicts “Isopo” (Aesop) as a clever defender of justice and compassionate protector of the weak. Having heard the testimonies of the two disputants, he instinctively understands that the groom has been robbed of his and his master’s horse by the more powerful samurai. He then engages in a trick by which he uses his cloak (the text uses a generic word, *uwagi* うはき [in the 1659 woodblock edition], rendered

5 Identified as the island of Samos in the eastern Aegean, off the coast of what is now Turkey.

here as “outer garment”) to hide the horse’s eyes, and thereby force the samurai into an indefensible position. The fact that the samurai has been given an impossible choice, and that the reader is aware of this, provides the episode with humor and the satisfaction that justice will be done and the powerful will meet their downfall if they abuse their position.

In his “additional note” to this episode Mutō Sadao provides an example from a source contemporary to the undated first edition of *Tales of Ise*, the collection of humorous anecdotes, *Seisuishō* 醒睡笑 (pub. 1628), by Anrakuan Sakuden 安楽庵策伝. In Fascicle IV part 1, “Fair Judgments” (*Kikoeta hihan*), anecdote 10, the Bakufu Deputy for Kyoto, Itakura Katsushige 板倉勝重, judges a case in which two commoners dispute ownership of a cat. Itakura puts the two at opposite ends of a room, and sets the cat in the middle. Each party is provided with a shaving of dried bonito, and the cat, thus given an equal choice, goes to its rightful owner, who had fed it since birth.⁶

The Kyoto publisher of the 1659 woodblock printed edition, Itō San’emon 伊藤三右衛門, included illustrations to only twenty-four of the ninety-four episodes of the “Life of Aesop” and the fables in the collection. Apparently he found this episode of a dispute over the ownership of a horse to be striking enough to commission an artist to provide an illustration. (See figure 1, reproduced from the Waseda University



Figure 1

6 See Mutō 2000: 263–64. The full text is available in Suzuki Tōzō 鈴木棠三, ed. and annot. *Seisuishō*, vol. 1, Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1986: 266–67.



Figure 2

Library digitized edition.⁷⁾ The illustration depicts the samurai with a guard seated on the white gravel (*shirasu*) before the military governor. In the foreground Isopo is covering the horse's head with his outer garment, while the attendant sits to his left in the lower left corner of the image. The governor together with another official sit at the edge of a typical military court of judgment in the upper left of the illustration. Captions not only identify the figures portrayed, they also provide clues to the narrative itself. The captions are as follows (clockwise from the upper right): “A guard (*koban no mono*)”; “the samurai loses”; “Isopo covering the horse with a cloth (*kinu*)”; “the groom, gaining justice (*ri*)”; “a judge (*gohyōban no hito*)”; and “the governor of the land”. While the text proper does not mention a presiding judge, but suggests to the reader that the governor is judging this case, the illustration includes an intermediate character performing the role of judge, presumably to make the scene closer to how an actual judgment would have been carried out at the time.

Another illustration, included in the illustrated manuscript handscrolls of *Tales of Isopo* in the collection of the Seimei Kaikan museum, Fukuoka, depicts the same scene, but this time in a Chinese geo-cultural context. (See figure 2.) In this image, which makes up the lower half of an illustration depicting this episode and the following episode (I-15) in the “Life of Aesop,” the four characters and the horse appear together at the court of judgment. On the far right, facing the others, sits the governor of San. To his left, on the same tiled floor as the governor, sits Isopo, while on the

7 A digital copy of the work is found at http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/he24/he24_00216/ and the illustration in question at http://archive.wul.waseda.ac.jp/kosho/he24/he24_00216/he24_00216_0001/he24_00216_0001_p0018.jpg

veranda area sits the samurai. The governor and the samurai are gesturing, with the samurai's left hand seemingly suggesting that it is the horse's left eye which is blind. On the ground in front of the structure sits the groom, and behind him stands a white horse with dark legs. The horse's head is shrouded in a light-green cloth of some sort, which is decorated with designs in gold pigment. While the 1659 woodblock printed illustration seems to depict the point at which the groom has won his suit against the samurai, the handscroll illustration (dating from ca. 1650–1680) presents the viewer with the point at which the samurai errs in his judgment of the horse's eyesight.

In terms of European-language sources, the various Steinhöwel-line of editions do not seem to include this; nor do the other widely disseminated collections of fables, exemplary anecdotes, and sermons from the 15th and 16th centuries. In an intriguing twist, however, two Spanish-language texts survive from the 17th century and include an anecdote that closely follows the early 17th-century Japanese *Tales of Isoyo* text. Furthermore, both narratives are set in the New World, not in Europe or the Middle East, as one might expect.

The first, and perhaps most significant text is found in the work, *Virtudes del Indio* (translated by Nancy H. Fee as *Virtues of the Indian / Virtudes del Indio: An Annotated Translation*) by Juan de Palafox y Mendoza (1600–1659), and probably published ca. 1650.⁸ Palafox was a Roman Catholic priest stationed at the cathedral at Puebla in present-day southeastern Mexico. He rose in rank to become bishop of the diocese of Puebla, and was recognized with the status of “Blessed” by the Holy See in 2011. Apparently concerned about the treatment of the indigenous Aztec people (whom he refers to as “Indio”) on the part of the Spanish conquistadors, Palafox collected documents and oral testimony about the Indios and compiled them into a volume that he seems to have presented to the King Philip IV (Felipe IV) of Spain soon after Palafox's return in 1650.⁹

Chapter XV, “On the Wits and Promptness of the Indian,” opens with praise for their ingenuity, and includes the following anecdote:

8 Fee's annotated English edition is Juan de Palafox y Mendoza (1600–1659), *Virtues of the Indian / Virtudes del Indio: An Annotated Translation*, ed. and trans. Nancy H. Fee, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009, and a reprint of the original is *Virtudes del Indio por D. Juan de Palafox y Mendoza, Obispo de la puebla de los Angeles*, Madrid: Tomás Minuesa, 1893.

9 See Alejandro Cañeque, “Palafox and the Virtuous Indian: An Introduction to *Virtues of the Indian*” in Palafox y Mendoza 2009: 77.

When they defend their arguments, they represent their reasoning with most ingenious discourses and insinuate in a way that convinces. I will herein propose to your Majesty a very odd case of this. An Indian was traveling and a Spanish resident too, both on horseback. They chanced upon one another in a barren, deserted plain. The horse of the resident was very sick and old and the horse of the Indian excellent. The man asked the Indian to exchange horses and the Indian refused because of what he would lose. However, as one man carried arms and the other did not, with the argument of power and the jurisdiction of force, he took the horse from the Indian. Passing his saddle to him, he resumed his journey, leaving the poor Indian behind with the bad horse. The Indian continued on, following the Spaniard and requesting that he return his horse to him, and the man denied that he had taken it from him.

2. They arrived with this complaint and quarrel to the whereabouts of the District Magistrate, who called to the man, at the request of the Indian, made him bring forth the horse, and asked him why he had taken it from the Indian. He responded and swore that he had not taken it from him and that all that Indian said was false because the horse was his and he had raised it from birth in his home. The poor Indian too swore that the man had taken it from him. As there were no more witnesses or proofs than the oaths sworn by the two parties and one possessed the horse and the other was asking for it, the District Magistrate told the Indian to be patient because it was not evident that that man had taken his horse from him. The Indian, finding himself without any recourse, said to the Judge: *I will prove that this horse is mine and not that man's*. He told him to prove it. After removing the *tilma*, which serves them as a cloak, that he was wearing, he covered the head of the horse that the other had taken from him and said to the Judge: *Tell this man, since he says he has raised this horse, to say then which of the horse's two eyes is blind*. The man, discomfited by the sudden question, responded doubtfully: *The right one*. Then the Indian, uncovering the head of the horse, said: *Well, it is not blind*. It seemed to be so and his horse was returned to him.¹⁰

10 Palafox y Mendoza 2009, 155, 157.

This anecdote shares several details with “An Attendant and a Samurai,” including the difference in social status between the two parties, the threat of force in taking the horse, and the appeal to the district magistrate in order to resolve the conflict. On the other hand the two narratives differ in important respects. The samurai identifies the left eye as being blind, but the Spaniard identifies the right eye. Also, while the attendant is unable to come up with a solution to the problem at hand, relying instead on Isopo’s mental acuity, the Indian defends himself, and singlehandedly tricks the Spaniard into revealing his guilt. Perhaps the most important detail, though, is mention of the *tilma*, a common Aztec garment at the time. The *tilma* (or *tilmàtli*) was a large piece of cloth tied over one shoulder (in the case of commoners), and used both as a kind of robe as well as a container for carrying bundles.¹¹ The fact that Palafox’s anecdote provides a specific name for a crucial element of this narrative lends it particular significance. Even though Palafox’s account postdates *Tales of Isopo* by at least three decades, it seems likely that the Jesuit translators from Spanish (and/or Latin) of *Aesop’s Fables* would have been aware of a precursor to this narrative, and then adapted it to fit into the “Life of Isopo” in order to further support his quick wit and ingenuity.

Another New World Account

Surprisingly, another version of this anecdote exists in Spanish, this time set in Lima, Peru. The presumed author, Catalina de Erauso (c. 1592–c. 1650), was a Basque native who grew up in a convent, escaped dressed as a male, joined the Spanish military, and fought in the New World, Peru and Chile in particular. Known as the “*Monja Alférez*” or “Lieutenant Nun,” Erauso has attracted the attention both of scholars in the field of gender studies as well as the general public, with numerous works of fiction, plays, and films appearing based on her memoirs. The autograph manuscript no longer survives, but evidence indicates that it was first completed in 1625 after Erauso’s return to Spain the previous year. A copy dated 1784 survived in an archive in Madrid. The first printed edition, based on this copy, dates from 1829,

11 See <https://aztlanddevelopment.com/the-clothing-of-the-ancient-aztecs/> (accessed 18 Dec. 2018).

nearly two centuries after Erauso's death.¹²

In this work, the narrator describes an event that is strikingly similar to the case of the horse ownership in *Tales of Isopo* and *Virtudes del Indio* discussed above. The narration goes as follows:

I stayed in Lima some seven months, getting by as best I could. I bought a cheap horse that suited me fine and I made the rounds on it for a couple of days, all the while turning over and over in my head whether I should head back to Cuzco. One day, when I'd just about made up my mind, I was passing through the plaza when a constable approached and told me that the mayor, don Juan de Espinosa, a knight of Santiago, wanted to see me. When I got to his honor's house there were two soldiers waiting there, and no sooner had I entered than one of them said, "This is the one señor. This is the missing horse, and we can prove it."

The deputies surrounded me and the mayor said, "Well, what do we have here?" The whole thing was so sudden that I didn't know what to say, and there I stood, confounded and stammering, the very picture of guilt, when it suddenly occurred to me to take off my cloak and throw it over the horse's head.

"Señor," I said, "I implore your honor, ask these gentlemen which is the eye the horse is blind in—the right or the left. It's entirely possible that this is another animal, and these gentlemen are mistaken."

"Good idea," the mayor said. "You two, answer together, which eye is this horse blind in?" The two of them were confused now, and the mayor repeated, "Together now, at the same time."

"In the left eye," one said, and the other said, "In the right—the left, I mean!" and the mayor said, "A fine story, you can't even get it straight!" and they came back at him, the two of them in unison now. "No, it's the left, the left, we both say so—no mistaking it." ... "I was going to say left, but I accidentally made a mistake—but then I corrected myself. It's the left I tell you." ... "They're

12 For the first Spanish-language edition, see Joaquín María de Ferrer, ed., *Historia de la Monja Alferez, Doña Catalina de Erauso*, Paris: Julio Didot, 1829. This work served as the source for Michele Stepto and Gabriel Stepto, trans., *Lieutenant Nun: Memoir of a Basque Transvestite in the New World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996. For further bibliographic information see Amy Cahill Williamson, "Searching for the Writing Subject in *La Vida de la Monja Alferez: Autobiografía Atribuida a Doña Catalina de Erauso*" (unpublished PhD dissertation, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 2010), 3.

both lying. This horse isn't blind at all." The mayor got up and came over to the horse, and looked at it, and said, "Take your horse, *vaya con Dios*," and then he turned to the others and had them arrested."¹³

In this version of events, the narrator is accused of having stolen a horse from two individuals, rather than having the horse taken from her at the outset. A humorous touch is added when the two accusers declare the right and the left eye respectively as being blind, thus exposing their ignorance of the horse even before the judge learns that the horse is actually without any loss of sight. The narrator, dressed as a male, takes off her "cloak" ("*la capa*" in the 1829 Spanish edition: 83) and covers the horse's head with it. The account in *Virtudes del Indios* makes reference to the Aztec *tilma*, identifying a garment limited to the indigenous people of the region, while Erauso's *capa* seems more generic, as does Isopo's *uwagi*.

It is possible that the horse judgment story was added by a later editor to Catalina de Erauso's 1625 memoirs, but it definitely is included in the 1784 copy. If the horse account originally appeared in the 1625 autograph manuscript, then this would predate Juan de Palafox y Mendoza's work, and actually be only slightly later than the first Keichō-Genna (1596–1624) wooden moveable type edition.

One short study in English compares the Palafox and the Erauso versions of the horse account, referring to it as a "clever tale."¹⁴ Here the author, Walter D. Kline, treats the account as an example of a folk motif and concludes that, while it "has been popular in European and Indian oral traditions, it was the Spaniards who first incorporated it into their literary prose productions."¹⁵ Kline identifies a Peruvian scholar, Efraín Morote Best, who considers the account "both as a part of gypsy lore and as an element of the oral heritage of the Peruvian Indians."¹⁶ While accepting Morote Best's Latin American oral identifications, Kline also suggests that other European oral traditions, such as German and Italian, possess this motif as well, and goes as far as to classify the motif as an example of the J1154 subdivision of the *Motif Index of Folk Literature*, Cleverness in the Law Court, "in which the witness is discred-

13 Stepto and Stepto, trans. 1996: 53–54.

14 Walter D. Kline, "A Clever Tale in Early Spanish Prose," In *Modern Language Notes* 76-1 (Jan. 1961): 25–29.

15 Kline 1961: 29.

16 Kline 1961: 28.

ited by his inability to tell details.”¹⁷

In an intriguing twist, the two famous seventeenth-century travelers to the New World, Erauso and Palafox, were actually linked together upon her death. (Palafox was still alive at this time, though.) According to an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America* (in which the sobriquet of “Lieutenant Nun” is translated as “Nun Ensign”), “a 1653 Mexican broadside announces the Nun Ensign’s death with an apocryphal account of the burial of her remains with the saintly Bishop of Puebla Juan de Palafox y Mendoza.”¹⁸

The Jesuit compiler-translators of *The Tales of Isopo* had at their disposal one or more editions of *Aesop’s Fables, with a Life of Aesop* from the Heinrich Steinhöwel line of translations from Latin into European vernacular languages, particularly Spanish. This edition or editions served as the core of the Japanese edition. However, in order to enhance the image of Isopo as a clever but just arbitrator of disputes, they had reason to supplement this text with material from other sources available to them, including a version of the account of the stolen horse that found its way into the works by Juan de Palafox y Mendoza and Catalina de Erauso’s narratives. By adding the figure of Isopo to the dispute between the attendant and the samurai, the compiler-translators successfully demonstrate that a clever and objective third party can solve a difficult dispute, especially when it involves a great imbalance of power on each side. In this way, *Tales of Isopo* serves both to entertain readers, as well as to teach important social lessons.

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