

## Iroha Karuta: a Source of Japanese Values

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Every culture has its own traditional values indicating what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. These values are abstracted from various sources, one of which must be proverbs. They say the things that people have thought important in common over centuries. Proverbs are expressed mostly in short phrases or concise sentences easy to recite and remember. They are not usually taught at school but handed down from generation to generation.

In Japanese, too, there are thousands of proverbs born in Japan or derived from other cultures, such as China, India and the West. Many of the proverbs, as a kind of idiomatic expressions, have been so deeply implanted in the Japanese language that they are often quoted in daily conversations, speeches and writings to refer to truth in life, worldly wisdom or moral lessons. These "daughters of experiences" encourage or reprove the people and also facilitate or moderate their communication.

The Japanese have a marvelous way to learn their proverbs. It is Iroha Karuta, a card game based on the Japanese syllabary of 47 letters called "kana". The game has 48 pairs of cards with proverbs whose initial letters construct the syllabary and with their associated pictures. While one of the proverb cards is recited aloud, the contestants search for its matching picture card. The game is played by several contestants and won by getting as many cards as

possible.

The game used to be very popular among Japanese children as one of their New Year's enjoyments, in which the children could learn both Japanese letters and proverbs at the same time. The game itself is getting out of fashion but Japanese children still grow up hearing many of these proverbs which later form a part of their own values.

The origine of Iroha Karuta is thought to be in the Edo era in the 18th century. There are some variations made in Kamigata (Kyoto and Osaka) and Edo (Tokyo), but only the Edo version survives today. Since many of its proverbs have a Japanese original tone and sound ironical and humorous rather than instructive and moralistic, they have won great popularity among the mass of people in the long run, and now they are regarded as Japanese representative proverbs. Therefore, whoever wants to know Japanese values should first examine Iroha Karuta, a source of Japanese values.

In this paper, I have tried to make a literal translation of the proverbs of Iroha Karuta (the Edo version), add their English equivalents and put some notes to have the proverbs understood better.

1. Inu mo arukeba bo ni ataru.

A rambling dog will meet with a stick.

(The beast that goes always never wants blows. The dog that trots about finds a bone.)

Note: this originally meant that an obtrusive person would suffer a trouble but now means that an active person will meet with a good luck.

2. Ron yori shoko.

Proof is better than argument.

(The effect speaks, the tongue needs not.)

3. Hana yori dango.  
Dumplings are better than blossoms.  
(Bread is better than the songs of birds.)  
Note: Japanese people like cherry-blossom viewing.
4. Nikumarekko yo ni habakaru.  
A hated child is pushing in public  
(The devil's child the devil's luck.)
5. Honeorizon no kutabiremoke.  
Efforts often gain only fatigue.  
(Great pains but all in vain.)
6. He o hitte shiri tsubome.  
To try to close one's anus after a fart.  
(No use shutting the barn door after the horse has bolted.)
7. Toshiyori no hiyamizu.  
The old dare to drink cold water.  
(There's no fool like an old fool.)  
Note: the old should act their ages.
8. Chiri mo tsumoreba yama to naru.  
Dust gathers into a heap.  
(Many a little makes a mickle.)  
Note: an encouragement to make efforts or save money.
9. Richigimono no kodaksan.  
An honest hard-working man has a large family.  
(Children are poor men's riches.)
10. Nusubito no hirune.  
Thieves sleep in the daytime.  
(There is no faith in man.)  
Note: one cannot be too careful of the others, because they

have their own secret purposes.

11. Ruri mo hari mo teraseba hikaru.

Both emerald and crystal refract the light.

(Weed come forth on the fattest soil if it is untilled.)

Note: one's talent comes out if he makes an effort.

12. Oite wa ko ni shitagae.

When old, obey your children.

(The same in English.)

13. Warenabe ni tojibuta.

A mended lid matches a broken pot.

(There's no pot so ugly that a cover cannot be found for it.)

Note: making fun of a well-matched ugly couple.

14. Kaeru no tsura ni mizu.

Pouring water on a frog's face.

(Like water on a duck's back.)

Note: it says about a person who doesn't care of any blame or abuse.

15. Yoshi no zui kara tenjo nozoku.

Looking up into the sky through the stalk of a reed.

(You cannot see the wood for the trees.)

Note: caution to avoid having a narrow view.

16. Tabi wa michizure yo wa nasake.

Companions in travel, compassion in life.

(Friendships multiply joys, and divide griefs.)

17. Ryoyaku wa kuchi ni nigashi.

Good medicine tastes bitter.

(Bitter pills may have wholesome effects.)

Note: candid advice is often hard to be taken.

## 18. Soryo no jinroku.

The eldest son is a blockhead.

(The younger brother has the more wit.)

Note: in Japan, the eldest son used to be taken better care of in a family.

## 19. Tsukiyo ni kama o nuku.

An iron pot is stolen even at a moonlit night.

(The tortoise wins the race while the hare is sleeping.)

Note: an advice to be always cautious.

## 20. Nen niwa nen o tsukae.

Make things sure again and again.

(Second thoughts are best.)

## 21. Nakutsura o hachi ga sasu.

A face in tears is stung by a bee.

(An unhappy man's cart is easy to trumble.)

## 22. Raku areba ku ari.

Hardship comes after comfort.

(Without pains, no gains.)

## 23. Muri ga toreba dori hikkomu.

Force pushes reason away.

(Where might is master, justice is servant.)

## 24. Uso kara deta makoto.

Lies often come true.

(Many a true word is spoken in jest.)

## 25. Imo no nietano gozonji nai.

Some cannot tell a boiled potato from an unboiled one.

(He knows not a hawk from a handsaw.)

Note: those who know little of the world.

26. Nodomtoto sugireba atsusa o wasureru.  
Once passed the throat, nobody remembers how hot the water was.  
(The danger past and God forgotten.)
27. Oni ni kanabo.  
A deamon with an iron bar.  
(That makes it double sure.)  
Note: "oni" is a powerful deamon with horns.
28. Kusaimono niwa huta o suru.  
To put a lid on what smells bad.  
(To hush up a scandal.)
29. Yasumono kai no zeniusuinai.  
It never pays to buy cheap things.  
(Penny-wise and pound-foolish.)
30. Makeru ga kachi.  
A loser is a winner.  
(To stoop to conquer.)
31. Gei wa mi o tasuku.  
Arts help you.  
(An occupation is as good as land.)
32. Humi wa yaritashi kakute wa motazu.  
There's no writing a love letter without knowing letters.  
(To be on tenterhooks.)  
Note: a cil-che' spoken by geisha girls.
33. Ko wa sangai no kubikase.  
Children yoke parents all their lives.  
(Children suck the mother when they are young and father when they are old.)
34. Ete ni ho o age.

To give one's skill full sail.

(Hoist your sail when the wind is fair.)

35. Teishu no sukina aka-eboshi.

The husband like a red headgear.

(Every man is a king in his own house.)

Note: "eboshi" is a black headgear worn by Japanese nobles.

36. Atama kakushite shiri kakusazu.

Head hidden, buttocks revealed.

(To bury one's head in the sand like an ostrich.)

37. Sanben mawatte tabako ni shiyo.

Let's patrole three times before smoking.

(Take time and do the work well.)

Note: "tabako" implies "having a break" in Japanese.

38. Kiite gokuraku mite jigoku.

Paradise on hearsay, hell at sight.

(Fame is a liar.)

39. Yudan taiteki.

Security is the greatest enemy.

(The same in English.)

40. Me no ue no tankobu.

A wen above one's eye.

(A thorn in one's flesh.)

41. Mi kara deta sabi.

Rust comes out of the inside.

(One must reap what one has sowed.)

42. Shiranu ga hotoke.

A man knowing nothing is a Budda.

(Ignorance is bliss.)

Note: "hotoke" is a spiritually awakened person or the dead.

43. En wa inamono ajinamono.

Marriage is strange and interesting.

(Marriage goes by destiny.)

Note: "en" is human relationship by chance or fate.

44. Binbo hima nashi.

Poor men have no leisure.

(The same in English.)

45. Monzen no kozo narawanu kyo o yomu.

A little boy near a temple recites an untaught sutra.

(A good candleholder proves a good gamester.)

46. Se ni hara wa kaerarenu.

Bellies cannot be substituted for backs.

(Necessity has no law.)

47. Sui wa mi o kuu.

Taste and pleasure eat out a man.

(Gay life proves the ruin of many a man.)

48. Kyo no yume Osaka no yume.

Dreams in Kyoto and dreams in Osaka.

(Wishing will make it so.)

Note: Kyo and Osaka were longed-for cities in the Edo era.

In order to abstract some of Japanese values from Iroha Karuta, I have tried to classify and analyze its proverbs according to their themes.

(a) hardship: 5, 21, 22, 44, 46

(b) caution, prudence: 10, 19, 20, 37, 39

(c) self-restraint, patience: 1, 17, 26, 30, 41

(d) irrationality: 4, 23, 24, 38

- (e) ignorance: 15, 25, 42
- (f) frugality: 8, 29, 47
- (g) saving appearances: 6, 28, 36
- (h) marriage: 13, 35, 43
- (i) children: 9, 18, 33
- (j) opportunity: (1), 27, 34
- (k) the aged: 7, 12
- (l) substantiality: 2, 3
- (m) talent, effort: 11, 31
- (n) experience: 45
- (o) personality: 14
- (p) impatience: 32
- (q) obstruction: 40
- (r) companionship, compassion: 16
- (s) dream: 48

These themes obviously reflect the social situations in the Edo era. It had a hierarchical, patrimonial and age-oriented society consisting of small closed communities whose residents helped and also watched one another to exclude outsiders. Most of the people were poor in their large families and suffered from hardships and irrationalities in the world. As a natural result, the people became cautious, self-restrained, frugal and industrial in their attitudes. Although only a limited number of warriors, landowners and big merchants could afford to enhance their culture and art, the ordinal people also had their survival skills to enjoy themselves in their own ways.

On such a background, Japanese values have been formed. Japan is not what it was in the Edo era, but many of its values are still alive as a cultural heritage. These values are not unequally Japanese but

rather universal. It is their combination and intensity in Japanese minds that make them unique. Thus, the Japanese have developed their national character in which they respect such values as self-restraint, reticence, modesty, obedience, obligation, prudence, diligence, compassion, harmony, unanimity, etc.

One of the characteristics of Japanese proverbs including those of Iroha Karuta is that they are full of references to human relationship. They tell the people how to do with the others. That is why there are many pairs of proverbs which seem to contradict each other, such as "Children yoke parents all their lives." vs. "Children are the most valuable treasure." , "An honest man makes a fool of himself." vs. " God is in the head of an honest man." , " Suspect a stranger of a thief." vs. " There is no devil in human form in the world." (There is kindness to be found everywhere.) These proverbs train the people for acquiring ability to adapt themselves to different circumstances.

Another characteristic of the proverbs is that they are rich in lively images of nature. A variety of animals, plants and natural phenomena appear in them to play the metaphorical role of projecting human nature on themselves. " Even monkeys fall from trees. " " A sutra into the ears of a horse." (To preach to the wind.) "A cornered mouse bites a cat." "A clever hawk hides its talons." "A sparrow never forgets dancing to its death." "(What is learned in the cradle is carried to the tomb.)" "The child of a frog is a frog. " " A mudfish is not always under a willow. "(There are no birds of this year in last year's nests.) " A crab digs a hole according to its shell. " (Everyone stretches his legs according to his coverlet.) " No bamboo is broken by the snow." (A mud-wall deads a cannon-bullet.) " Even dead trees decorate a mountain." " Tomorrow will have

its own wind. ” (Let the morn come and the meat with it.) “ Land becomes harder after rain.” (After a storm comes a calm.)

As far as proverbs are concerned, Japanese values seem to be chiefly in human relationship and the relationship between nature and man. In Japanese culture, in terms of the value orientation proposed by Florence Kluckhohn, the self is dependent to nature and society, so that a man is identified as a part of nature and a member of a society rather than an individual. It is fair to say that the wareness of values and the self-identification of Japanese people are partly based on their proverbs. Moreover, the Japanese equivalent of “ Proverb ” is “ Kotowaza ” which literally means “ the art of language ” . Both art and language have been thought something spiritual by the Japanese, who must have been deeply affected by their proverbs.

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