

# PLAYING WITH *NEZUMI* TOYS, DREAMING OF UNATTAINABLE UTOPIA: UNIQUE PORTRAYALS OF *NEZUMI* IN JAPANESE FOLK TRADITION

**Fumihiko Kobayashi**

*Independent scholar, USA*

*Email: [fmendel88@gmail.com](mailto:fmendel88@gmail.com)*

**Abstract:** The Japanese have long regarded the *nezumi* – rats and mice – as vermin that plague agrarian and urban communities. In folk tradition, however, the characterization of the *nezumi* as amiable, efficacious, and auspicious has formed a powerful motif. As rodenticides and rat traps advertised widely and sold well, *nezumi*-motif toys such as Daikokuten *nezumi* (a protector deity of wealth riding on a white *nezumi*), *neko to nezumi* (a cat and a *nezumi*), and *komekui nezumi* (a rice-eating *nezumi*) enjoyed great popularity, particularly in eighteenth-century Japan. These toys substantiate the way people favored *nezumi*-motif items even as actual *nezumi* caused tremendous damage to Japanese cities and towns through their behavior. This article analyzes the motivation behind playing with *nezumi*-motif toys by examining the reasons why people accepted the more fanciful idea of *nezumi* expressed by toys in the face of a very different reality on the ground. The results of this investigation will provide an opportunity to understand the folk narrative embodied within the toy in order to reconsider the purpose such animal-motif toys and mascots have served in Japanese culture. Indeed, the *nezumi* have provided people with a vehicle they could use to play out elaborate fantasies of the kind of utopia of abundance and wealth that usually contrasted with their real lives. This unique portrayal of human-animal relationship can still be observed today, not only in toys but also in the animal characters found in media today.

**Keywords:** Daikokuten lore, *Edo nishiki*, Edo period (1603–1868), famine, Japan, *kakurezato* (hidden utopia) lore, *nezumi* (rats/mice), *nezumi*-motif toys, *otogi-zōshi* (medieval storybooks), woodblock prints

## INTRODUCTION

In everyday life, the people of Japan do not necessarily refer to the *nezumi* – a collective term for rats and mice in Japan – as endearing or auspicious animals.<sup>1</sup> In folklore, however, the Japanese have long portrayed the *nezumi* in

a favorable light, often for the very behaviors they scorn in daily life – such as collecting and hoarding (Minakata 1997 [1994]: 349–350, 388–392). For example, Mujū Dōkyō (1227–1312), a Japanese Buddhist monk, wrote 153 stories that explain Buddhism to laypersons and compiled them in a book that he called *Shasekishū* (Sand and pebbles, ca. 1283). In one of these stories, entitled “Nezumi no mukotori” (A *nezumi* seeks a good son-in-law for his daughter), a *nezumi* – a rat/mouse – the story’s protagonist, secures a superior groom for his daughter, a young *nezumi* stronger and wiser than any other. This story appears to indicate the emergence of a favorable opinion of the *nezumi* among the Japanese, juxtaposed against a historically negative view. Indeed, this kind of plotline developed in several narrative cultures; for example, the plot nearly matches that of “The Mouse Who Was to Marry the Sun”, which is recorded in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folk Tales (ATU) 2031C under the Cumulative Tales rubric, and also in India, as evidenced in the second-century BCE Sanskrit text *Panchatantra* (Inada 1988: 478). While “Nezumi no mukotori” invites many interpretations of its theme – for example, that the best or most suitable thing in our lives always lies near to us, and not beyond our grasp – it is also notable for its contrary depiction of long-detested rodent behaviors, such as hoarding and gnawing, in a positive light, as natural gifts that rodents could use to great advantage, and even good. Thanks to this development in folklore, the Japanese could project qualities of virtue on the *nezumi* rather than see them simply as vermin to be exterminated. This theme finds expression across the Japanese cultural landscape, which scholars have explored through folklore, literature, and art.

One interesting and popular expression of the *nezumi* motif, the toy, remains overlooked, despite its function as a plaything in the everyday life of historical Japan, and despite the fact that it never stood apart from portrayals of the *nezumi* in other, more closely studied, genres. Surely, *nezumi*-motif toys communicated the auspicious character of the creatures they portrayed to any child who played with them, an idea that persisted despite the animal’s verminous behavior in reality. Thus, the toy constituted a powerful, unique narrative form that influenced the fashioning and communicating of meaning behind the *nezumi* motif in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

This study discusses the nature of the *nezumi* motif and its expression through toys thanks to an examination of the socio-historical context and human-animal relationship that shaped these toys and affected their popularity in Japan since the eighteenth century. The colorful illustrations of toys contained in a 1773 picture book published by Rō Raishi in Edo (modern-day Tokyo), entitled *Edo nishiki* (Edo in two colors), include two illustrations of *nezumi*-motif toys.<sup>3</sup> This provides an opportunity to consider premodern (more narrowly, early

modern) modes of expressing their needs and expectations – even unattainable dreams – in the form of fantastic figures that help to quiet people’s uneasiness so that we may go on with our everyday lives.

## **POPULAR TEXTUAL NARRATIVE TRADITION ASSOCIATED WITH THE *NEZUMI* MOTIF IN JAPAN**

### ***Nezumi* in the Ōkuninushi story of Kojiki and Daikokuten lore**

One of the oldest stories in which a *nezumi* is portrayed as a beneficial, amicable little creature, called Ōkuninushi, can be found in the ancient Japanese mythological chronicle *Kojiki* (Record of ancient matters, completed ca. 712 CE). The story in question narrates the epic of Ōkuninushi or Great Land Master, one of the key deities in Japanese Shintoism, and the predicaments imposed on him by Susano-o, another key Japanese deity, after he declared his desire to wed Princess Suseri, Susano-o’s daughter. In response, Susano-o imposed many difficult riddles and dangerous trials on the Land Master in order to determine whether Ōkuninushi would make a suitable son-in-law. One of these stories describes the *nezumi*’s significant role:

*He [Susano-o] shoots an arrow into a plain and orders Ōkuninushi to retrieve it. When the latter [Ōkuninushi] reaches the middle of the plain, Susano-o encircles him with fire. There seems to be no escape, but a mouse [a nezumi] appears before Ōkuninushi and delivers the cryptic message: “The inside is hollow-hollow; the outside is narrow-narrow.” Ōkuninushi, solving this riddle at once, responds by stamping his feet until he opens a hole in the ground into which he disappears while the flames pass overhead. Later, the mouse [the nezumi] brings him Susano-o’s arrow as a souvenir. (Keene 1999a [1993]: 44)*

In the above story about Ōkuninushi, a *nezumi* was depicted as a kind of *deus ex machina* that rescued him from a deadly predicament thanks to its wits (Minakata 1997 [1994]: 391).

Interestingly, over time the Shinto deity Ōkuninushi in the above story transformed into the folk deity Daikokuten, the protector deity of wealth accompanied, according to vernacular belief, by *nezumi* as his loyal messenger. While it is quite difficult to point out exactly when this confusion began and spread across Japan, it is clear that the two characters became confused before early modern times (Minakata 1997 [1994]: 363; Suzuki 1996: 205). The abovementioned Ōkuninushi lore mixed with stories about Daikokuten and

thereafter gradually popularized throughout the Japanese society (Nakajima 2013; Sakurai 2017; Yasuda 2010, 2014); it also led to the basic concept of the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy that won favor among the Edo-period people. Thanks to this development in Ōkuninushi lore, Japanese myths and folktales have tended to portray the *nezumi* as a symbol of both fortune and wealth rather than as vermin (Nakajima 2013). Any negative image of the *nezumi* simply vanishes whenever they are depicted with Daikokuten, because they consider the *nezumi* as the deity's important messenger. People continued to try to exterminate the *nezumi* in real life, while they simultaneously revered *nezumi*-motif portrayals in verbal and visual ways – one of which took the form of the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy (see Fig. 1). The archetype for Daikokuten stems from Kubera, the lord of wealth in Hindu mythology, which accompanied Buddhist lore when the religion reached Japan in the mid-sixth century (Azuma 1971; Minakata 1997 [1994]; Suzuki 1996: 205). Kubera almost always appeared as a loyal messenger mongoose, even though mongooses did not inhabit Japan, so eventually people replaced the mongoose with a *nezumi*. Since then, the iconography of Daikokuten and his loyal messenger *nezumi* has earned public favor. From there, the *nezumi* motif lent itself to toys and other three-dimensional narrative forms, like the Daikokuten *nezumi* that *Edo nishiki* included in its profile of fifty-six popular toys in late-eighteenth-century Japan.

When *Edo nishiki* was published in 1773, the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy was popular among the common folk. This indicates that both adults and children enjoyed the symbolic meaning of the toy, namely that Daikokuten and his subordinate *nezumi* endeavored to protect people's wealth and happiness. Moreover, they saw a clear association between Daikokuten and the *nezumi* that stemmed from the animal signs of the Chinese zodiac (Nakajima 2013: 26–27; Yasuda 2010: 2–3). It should not be forgotten that, in the real world, the people of early modern Japan used rodenticides and rat traps, an evidence of that, in their everyday lives, they regarded the *nezumi* as hateful vermin (Sakurai 2017; Yasuda 2010, 2014). Despite



**Figure 1.** Daikokuten *nezumi* toy in *Edo nishiki* (1773). Courtesy of the National Diet Library Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.

this, they revered the *nezumi* as a messenger of Daikokuten, who bears bags of treasure to people's homes, which gave them an esteemed place in the circle of the Daikokuten cult (Minakata 1997 [1994]: 364; Nakajima 2013: 38–40; Sakurai 2017: 51). In this way, the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy suggests that the *nezumi* were also icons symbolizing wealth and happiness.<sup>4</sup> Thus, views of the *nezumi* in ancient texts (which later turned into folk narratives) were generally rather favorable, and this view was handed down to generations that followed.

### ***Nezumi* in other ancient texts**

The *nezumi* were also portrayed in many ancient texts both in a positive and negative light, such as in official chronicles of the mid-ninth and tenth centuries, as well as essays and memorandums of the early eleventh century. For example, Sei Shōnagon's *Makura no Sōshi* (The pillow book of Sei Shōnagon, ca. 1002) and Izumi Shikibu's *Izumi Shikibu Nikki* (Izumi Shikibu's diary, early eleventh century) both depict the *nezumi* as small, adorable animals. Indeed, some descriptions in official chronicles, such as *Shoku Nihongi* (Second chronicle of Japan, ca. 797), accused the *nezumi* of gnawing at priceless materials that were stored in private storage spaces and official warehouses (Nakajima 2013: 38–39). However, in general, the descriptions of the ancient texts verify the gentle attitudes contemporaries held toward the *nezumi*. Unfortunately, there remains no record describing commoners' views of the *nezumi* in their actual daily lives during ancient times.

### **Storybooks related to the *nezumi* during the medieval and early modern periods**

Generally speaking, the *nezumi* – rats and mice – have not always received public favor in agrarian and urban societies (Sakurai 2017). Throughout the Edo period, poisons and traps advertised widely and sold well (Yasuda 2010, 2014). For example, extant *otogi-zōshi* – short storybooks published from 1573 at the end of the Muromachi era to the early 1600s during the early Edo period – include such titles as *Tōshōji nezumi monogatari* (Story of the *nezumi* living in Tōshō temple, ca. 1570s); *Neko no sōshi* (Cat storybook, ca. 1602); and *Yakushi tsuya monogatari* (Story of a funeral wake for Yakushi, ca. 1643). In these stories, the *nezumi* persistently ransack kitchens and warehouses to steal crops and hoard them in their nests. Another short storybook, *Nezumi no sōshi emaki* (Storybook picture scroll of the *nezumi*, ca. sixteenth century), describes

the *nezumi* as vermin gnawing at kitchen utensils and damaging clothes while also displaying pictures of rat traps (Yasuda 2014).

The plotlines of storybooks such as *Keiso monogatari* (Story of hens and *nezumi*, late seventeenth century) and the abovementioned *Yakushi tsuya monogatari* revolve around the social turmoil caused by the Kan'ei famine (1640–43), the deadly, widespread famine that forced the Tokugawa government to reshape its policy on agricultural production and distribution (Ageta 1947; Yasuda 2014: 234). In this kind of historical context, Yōko Yasuda explains, these storybooks emphasized the ceaseless ransack of kitchens and warehouses to steal rice crops and other agricultural products, and then keep them inside their nests unseen. In the horrific food shortage among them, people dreamed of a utopia where the *nezumi* hoarded limitless treasure and plentiful foodstuffs – namely, a place they wished to live.

Despite their unattainable dreams of treasure and foodstuffs associated with the *nezumi*'s hoarding habit, it cannot be denied that the contemporaries regarded the *nezumi* as the prime object of public hatred at that time because they regularly stole crops and damaged materials. The Japanese have struggled with vermin such as the *nezumi*, sharing a disdain for the creatures with subsequent generations.<sup>5</sup> This relationship is skillfully discussed in the storybook *Neko no sōshi*, which was one of the popular storybooks published in Japan between the fourteenth and late-eighteenth centuries. In this anonymously written work, a Buddhist monk accuses the *nezumi* of exhibiting harmful habits that threaten him and others, saying:

*When I stand my umbrella after I repaired it, you, nezumi, bite the grip of this umbrella. When I prepare for baked beans and black beans in order to host my laypersons, you, nezumi, devour these beans in one night. You, nezumi, always eat Buddhist gowns and clothes, fans, books, folding screens, rice cakes, tofu, and more. Therefore, even Buddhist monks with peaceful minds cannot stop thinking of killing the nezumi. Needless to say, laypersons are eager to exterminate all of you nezumi!* (Kuwabara 1982: 265)

This exactly reflects the kind of blame that people levied on the *nezumi*. Clearly, they potentially affected human life in profound, intimate ways and in all kinds of everyday life situations. There is no doubt that people did not always favor them because they devoured almost everything people possessed.

Yanagita Kunio begins his article “Nezumi no jōdo” (*Nezumi* utopia) by explaining how Japanese people had long suffered from the small creatures. The *nezumi*, he points out, perennially devoured most of the crops that farmers diligently cultivated, so much so that people were sometimes forced to abandon



their farm fields and even villages whenever faced with the irrevocable damage they created (Yanagita 1987 [1960]: 157–209). Naturally, this shaped people’s actual views of the *nezumi*. At the same time, despite this view, Japanese people conjured a hidden fantasy world where the *nezumi* hoarded boundless treasures, including a limitless supply of foodstuffs. Thus, traditional representations of the *nezumi* remained rather ambiguous; the portentous existed side-by-side with the auspicious.

### Storybooks about the *Kakurezato* utopia: From *neko* to *nezumi* toy

The concept of *kakurezato*, a *nezumi* utopia where all animals dwell safely beyond the reach of humans and enjoy the secret stores of smuggled food they hoard, constitutes another important theme in *nezumi* lore. This concept informs the *neko to nezumi* toy (see Fig. 2), because a poem that accompanies the toy states that a *nezumi* hides in its peaceful *kakurezato* whenever a *neko* or cat detects it. This form of a *nezumi* toy is quite unique. When the board on which a *neko* figure sits is pushed forward, the *nezumi* figure shifts downward to hide inside the underlying box, as if secreting itself to its *kakurezato*.

The question of the *kakurezato*’s origins has elicited much discussion among scholars in many disciplines. Notable among them, Wan Jan Kang (1993) analyzed Japanese storybooks from the medieval and early modern eras and concluded that the concept of *kakurezato* traces back to Chinese Daoism. According to him, *kakurezato* refers to “[an] ideal place where one is not easily noticed, i.e., the home of the recluse” (Wan 1993: 51), and originated in the “Chinese Daoist tradition of cave dwelling as an ideal [way to lead life]”. Eventually, stories developed to become “early modern tales of the strange and marvelous” that thrived into the Edo period (ibid.: 52). To demonstrate, Wan examines an early modern collection of sixty-eight stories, *Otogi bōko* (Strange and marvelous stories, 1666) by Asai Ryōi (?–1691). One story, titled “Kakurezato”, focuses on *nezumi* messengers of Daikokuten as its main protagonists. Wan (1993: 57)



**Figure 2.** Neko to nezumi toy in Edo nishiki (1773). Courtesy of the National Diet Library Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.

argues that the author probably reformulated well-circulated *nezumi* folktales to create his story, though he does not provide evidence. However, story elements such as the *nezumi* as a messenger of Daikokuten in the abovementioned Ōkuninushi story influenced Asai Ryōi's story "Kakurezato" and also another *nezumi*-themed storybook entitled *Kakurezato* (Hidden village), which was written by an unknown author in the early seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup>

Another *nezumi*-related storybook published in the late-sixteenth century is *Nezumi no sōshi* (*Nezumi* storybook), which circulated widely during the Edo period. The plot revolves around an underground *nezumi* utopia where an old male *nezumi* attempts in vain to wed his male heir to a human princess so that his descendants could get rid of their animal status and live forever in the human world as human beings. As part of the genre of *emakimono* (picture scroll), the storybook's illustrations depict a gorgeous wedding banquet, for which the *nezumi* prepared an abundance of luxurious dishes using the most sophisticated kitchen utensils of their time.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it appears that this book represents the food fantasies that the author's contemporaries had; for, however rich noble classes were, it was not so easy to purchase food and other culinary items at times and so, most of the Japanese faced the specter of hunger in times of regional or nationwide famines (Farris 1985: 178–187).

The ambiguous identity of the *nezumi* pervades early modern Japanese literature. Examining the anonymously written *Nezumi no sōshi* as a part of their research on Japanese foodways during the Muromachi period (1338–1573), Miwa Kobayashi and Ikuko Tomiyasu remark:

*Generally, Muromachi people eagerly sought success, prosperity, and pleasure in their daily lives. It is quite suggestive that such Muromachi people easily connected their strong secularism with the nezumi and their fertility and productivity. This can also be detected in the plotline of the story Nezumi jōdo [Nezumi utopia] that is still narrated as a popular story in Japanese folklore. (Kobayashi & Tomiyasu 2007: 14)*

Interestingly enough, from an actual daily-life perspective, the *nezumi* occasionally appear in stories as vermin (Yanagita 1987 [1960]: 157–209). Nevertheless, from a folk-cultural perspective, they have appeared as beneficial animals and thus projected their dreams of treasure and foodstuffs upon them. Setsuko Suzuki observes:

*The nezumi has always been viewed ambiguously by the Japanese. Detested as a pest, it has also been held in high esteem as the messenger of Daikokuten, one of the Seven Lucky Gods who bestow and protect wealth. Perhaps this is because the presence of the nezumi in houses and granaries is a sign of abundance and providence. Even now, the nezumi is depicted*



*together with gold and silver coins and bags of rice on New Year's cards for the Year of the Rat [or nezumi]. (Suzuki 1996: 281)*

As the above remarks, the aforementioned *nezumi* motif stories provide us with good examples showing the way in which Japanese people traditionally have favorably observed the *nezumi*'s hoarding habit and then spun fantastic tales about their underground utopia, a persistent dream of wealth and happiness that in early modern times took the form of toys.

### **Guidebooks for feeding the *nezumi* as animal companions in the Edo period**

Despite the popularity of advertisements for rodenticides and rat traps in mid-eighteenth century Japan, the number of people who kept the *nezumi* as pets – white *nezumi* in particular – grew. Consequently, guidebooks to help these pet fanciers care for their rodent companions proliferated in cities like Osaka and Edo (modern-day Tokyo) where the practice was popular (Sakurai 2017; Yasuda 2010, 2014). This popularity reached a peak in the mid-eighteenth century, curiously in the wake of the Kyōhō Great Famine (1732–33), whose memory long haunted the Japanese. Popularity grew among the wealthy and commoners alike. *Nezumi* fanciers could find a variety of guidebooks to the ins-and-outs of *nezumi* care; books like *Yōso tama no kakehashi* (A guidebook of how to foster the *nezumi* as pets, 1775) and *Chingan sodategusa* (A guidebook to caring for *nezumi* as pets, 1787) were among the best-selling books of the day (Yasuda 2010, 2014). These pet guides reflect the adulatory perspective of the *nezumi*'s ambiguous characterization that attributed their hoarding habit to service as loyal messengers of Daikokuten distributing treasure and food to the people (Yasuda 2014: 241–244) and to the clear association made between Daikokuten, *nezumi*, and the animal signs of the Chinese zodiac (Yasuda 2010: 2–3).

Needless to say, although the *nezumi* pet boom was widespread, people of the Edo period did not always focus on the fanciful perspective on the *nezumi* that this implies. A book written in the early nineteenth century, *Nezumi domo kōjōsho* (Discourse on mice), for example, describes with some detail the kinds and levels of damage that the *nezumi* caused to everyday human life. Judging from the abovementioned *nezumi* pet guides, it appears that *nezumi* fanciers thrived in Japan starting from the eighteenth century; indeed, their numbers had grown so much that by the nineteenth century, two contrary characterizations – “harmful *nezumi*” versus “harmless pet *nezumi*” – coexisted (Yasuda 2014: 240–241). Fanciers were by no means naïve; indeed, they were drawn principally by the idea that the *nezumi* had the power to transmit wealth and happiness (ibid.: 241).

## FOLKTALES ON NEZUMI

Though it is difficult to find evidence of the time and place when people began to create tales about the *nezumi* and share them among others, stories that appear in the aforementioned storybooks did partly influence *nezumi*-related folktales that still circulate to this day. Among these folktales, the *nezumi jōdō* (*nezumi* utopia) story remains well known and widely distributed throughout Japan today. While Japanese folklorists generally categorize this tale as an oral story transmitted among people from generation to generation, its underlying plotline can be traced back to the abovementioned texts such as medieval storybooks that associated *nezumi* utopia with *kakurezato*. This association can be also detected in the underlying theme of woodblock prints in the Edo period.

Many variations on the *nezumi jōdō* story have been widely distributed throughout Japan. Though we cannot pinpoint their birthplaces, we can learn more about origins by studying related stories in local gazetteers. One of them, *Sanshū meiseki shi* (Famous places in Sanshū, 1711) written by Sakauchi Naoya (1644–1711), contains a *nezumi jōdō* story retold by the author's contemporaries. Among these folktales, the *nezumi jōdō* story effectively demonstrates how people traditionally treated the *nezumi* as denizens of their fantasy world.

While there are many variations of the *nezumi jōdō* story, they all share the following basic plotline:

*In a field, an old man dropped his rice ball, which rolled into a small cave. Following the rice ball, the man stumbled into an underground nezumi jōdō or nezumi utopia full of rice, rice cakes, gold, and other treasures. The old man gave the nezumi his rice ball, as they had never eaten one before. They were very happy to eat it. In return for the rice ball, they presented him with plenty of rice cakes, gold, and other treasures. The old man returned happily to his home, bearing plenty of rice cakes, gold, and other treasures. He and his wife lived happily ever after. A crooked old man living just next to the old man, upon hearing the above story, attempted to locate the underground nezumi utopia. Once he had located it, the crooked old man tried to steal their treasures, but the nezumi discovered his malicious plan in time and devoured him.<sup>8</sup>*

The above plotline is not completely identical to the abovementioned storybooks about *nezumi* utopia and *kakurezato*.

Indeed, many attempts have been made to identify the theme that underlies the above *nezumi jōdō* story and describe what it implies. For example, some scholars have attempted to argue that evidence exists that Buddhist teachings form the fundamental ideas underlying these stories – such as when the *nezumi*

offer gifts of food and treasure to the kind old man in gratitude for his benevolent treatment, while, in contrast, they rebuff and even punish the crooked old man for his malevolence against them (Yanagita 1987 [1960]; Yoneya 1998: 28). Though this interpretation invites much discussion, it does reflect the Japanese way of viewing the *nezumi* as a harbinger of efficacy and abundance.

When Yanagita Kunio published his folktale index *Nihon mukashibanashi mei'i* (Guidebook to the plotlines of Japanese folktales) in 1947, he recorded the typical plotlines of widely-known *nezumi jōdo* stories along with their local variants (1971 [1947]: 140–143). Seki Keigo also listed the *nezumi jōdo* story in his *Nihon mukashibanashi taisei* (Unified index of Japanese folktale motifs, 1978–1980) under tale-type index JT 185. Likewise, Inada Kōji recorded the *nezumi jōdo* story and its variations in his motif index, *Nihon mukashi banashi tsūkan* (General survey of Japanese folktales, 1988; see under Inada tale-type index IT 82). This index book also suggests that many kinds of medieval short stories probably influenced the development of *nezumi jōdo* tales, because their plotlines nearly match that of the folktales still circulating among the Japanese at the time Inada was collecting in the 1980s. According to Inada's index, short stories whose plotlines resemble that of *nezumi jōdo* folktales include: *Hamamatsu chūnagon monogatari* (Tales of Hamamatsu chūnagon, the mid-eleventh century); *Konjaku monogatarishū* (Collected tales from times past, ca. 1120); and the medieval storybook *Kakuresato* (Hidden utopia village, mid-sixteenth century).

Another such storybook, entitled *Nezumi kusa kami emaki* (*Nezumi* picture scroll book, ca. early-eighteenth century), contains a plotline nearly identical to that of the *nezumi jezu* story. It unfolds as follows:

*When an elderly man accidentally drops the rice ball into the hole, the nezumi are delighted with it and then guide him to their underground utopia. They entertain him and give him a treasure souvenir when he returns home. A bad old man who lives next to the good elderly man attempts to enter the underground utopia in vain and the nezumi kill him.* (Sakurai 2017: 51)

Variations of such stories recorded in medieval compilations on Daikokuten lore were still circulating among people when *Edo nishiki* first appeared in Edo in 1773. Santō Kyōden (1761–1816) and Kyokutei Bakin (1767–1848), both of whom were popular novel writers, did not list the *nezumi jōdo* story in their essays about folk narrative culture in the early nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The *neko to nezumi* story appears in *Umezono nikki* (Dairy in a plum garden) by Kita Seiro (1765–1848) and another about the *nezumi* biting bowstrings in *Matsunoya hikki* (Matsunoya's memorandum) by Oyamada Tomokiyo (1783–1847)

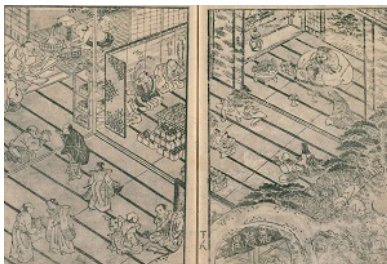
(Takagi 1995 [1974]: 25). Thus, folktales related to the *nezumi* and their utopia were popular in the Edo period.

## NARRATIVES IN VISUAL FORM: NEZUMI-MOTIF IN WOODBLOCK PRINTS

The aforementioned storybooks include many woodblock-printed illustrations that feature the *nezumi* as leading characters in *nezumi*-motif stories related to the *kakurezato* utopia. Instead of *nezumi*-focused illustrations, several woodblock-print, illustration-only books published in the Edo period include images of *kakurezato* in which the *nezumi* play both leading and supporting roles. The *nezumi* were also drawn as supporting characters in *nishiki-e*, multi-colored woodblock prints created for Edo-era art connoisseurs.

### Woodblock-printings for illustration books

Early modern Japanese woodblock-print artists employed the *nezumi* motif as both central and peripheral images in their works. In 1781, Toriyama Sekien (1712–1789) published his illustration book *Konjaku hyakki shūi* (Supplement to the hundred demons from the present and the past), which includes a woodblock-print illustration of *kakurezato* (Hidden utopia village) that features Daikokuten and also the *nezumi* (Toriyama Sekien, 1781; see Fig. 3). Interestingly, this illustration displays Daikokuten, the central character, in the seat of honor in a huge room while people busily provide him with luxury foods. Outside the room, many *nezumi*, as supporting characters, oversee countless sacks of oval gold coins. According to the illustration, Daikokuten and his *nezumi* dwell in *kakurezato*, a distant, dreamy utopia overladen with treasures and victuals. Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849) created a woodblock-print illustration of a *kakurezato* for the tenth volume of his fifteen-volume *Hokusai manga* (Hokusai's sketches, 1814; see Fig. 4). Entitled “Kakurezato” (Hidden utopia village), the print features the *nezumi* as leading characters industriously managing many sacks of oval gold coins, conveying



**Figure 3.** Toriyama Sekien's *Kakurezato* in *Konjaku hyakki shūi* (1781). Courtesy of the National Diet Library Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.

**Figure 4.** Katsushika Hokusai's *Kakurezato* in Hokusai manga (1814). Courtesy of the National Diet Library Digital Collections, Tokyo, Japan.



the mythical idea of a multitude of *nezumi* dwelling in *kakurezato* amidst boundless treasure.

### **Multicolored woodblock printings:**

#### ***Nishiki-e* for art connoisseurs**

Besides the above illustration books, the *nezumi* also appear as supporting characters in *nishiki-e*, multi-colored woodblock prints made for Edo-period art connoisseurs. Nishimura Shigenaga (1697–1756) printed a *nishiki-e*, entitled *Futamata daikon to nezumi* (Two-forked daikon radish and *nezumi*), that features a two-forked daikon radish and the *nezumi* together to symbolize prosperity of offspring (Sakurai 2017: 54). The *nezumi* biting fruits form the central image in *Kajitsu to nezumi* (Fruits and *nezumi*) by Ishida Yūtei (1721–86), another symbol of abundant progeny (ibid.: 55). Shirai Naotaka (1804–?) crafted his *Hanebōki to nezumi* (A feathered broom and *nezumi*) to feature three *nezumi* biting a feathered broom. According to Shintoism, a feathered broom symbolizes one of the auspicious items used to welcome Shinto deities at homes and prepare shrines at the beginning of the year for the *nezumi* (ibid.). Edo-period art connoisseurs thus regarded something propitious about *nishiki-e* featuring feathered brooms and the *nezumi*, reflecting the idea of the *nezumi* as a harbinger of good fortune, rather than as vermin (Sakurai 2017).

### **NEZUMI-MOTIF TOYS AS A THREE-DIMENSIONAL FORM OF NEZUMI-MOTIF NARRATIVES**

The above discussions focus on the way in which the *nezumi* motif found expression in narratives and visual forms, particularly in early modern Japan. These forms never functioned alone but interacted with each other. A mythical story about Ōkuninushi and his savior *nezumi* turned into Daikokuten lore, in which the Shinto deity assumed a new role as the folk deity Daikokuten with *nezumi* as his loyal messenger. Probably, the special relation between Daikokuten and *nezumi* can answer one of the reasons why the *nezumi* pet boom occurred even at a time when the harsh memory of famine lingered among Japanese people,

because the loyal *nezumi* could bring treasure and food from their utopia to the people that need them (Yasuda 2010, 2014).<sup>10</sup> In this way, variant narrative forms worked together to produce a new form, toys, as a three-dimensional form of the *nezumi* motif.<sup>11</sup>

### **Toys as a three-dimensional form of associated narratives**

In the year 1773, as mentioned above, a unique book entitled *Edo nishiki* (Edo in two colors) was published in the city of Edo (modern-day Tokyo), which features fifty-six kinds of old and new toys both of which were very popular at that time. Kryburz explains why this book stood out at that time:

*Edo nishiki* [*Edo in two colors*] (Ro and Kitao 1773) is the earliest work entirely dedicated to toys. With some eighty-eight [sic.] playthings drawn by Kitao Shigemasa (1739–1820) ... with a forward by the noted humorist Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823), this ehon (picture book) is a telling product of the milieu known as the “floating world”, of its chroniclers, and of the urban population of Edo [which had about one million inhabitants] and Osaka [which had about more than four-hundred thousand inhabitants] by the early eighteenth century in general. It had a very limited circulation, but its very creation proves that there was an interest in toys as a category of daily-life object. It remained, however, the only monograph produced until the middle of the Meiji era [1868–1912].<sup>12</sup> (Kyburz 1994: 16)

*Edo nishiki* introduces two kinds of *nezumi*-motif toys: Daikoten *nezumi* (see Fig. 1) and *neko to nezumi* (see Fig. 2). The poems accompanying these two toys indicate that the narrative and visual forms discussed above underlie the concept of these toys as representations of *nezumi* as amicable, auspicious animals. Thus, given the wide circulation of *nezumi*-motif narratives among early modern Japanese, what kinds of social and economic situations led people to play with *nezumi* toys?

### **Toys that pacified people in predicaments**

Since the Tokugawa shogunate began in 1603, Japan’s social and economic systems had improved, as government policies helped to raise the living standards of the urban Japanese and increased the agricultural output (Jansen 2000: 127–158). By around 1773, the Japanese had begun to enjoy a kind of “Pax Tokugawa”, as social and economic progress sparked a cultural change (Jannetta 1987: 7; Jansen 2000: 159–186; Keene 1999b [1978]: 1–7). This situation did not



preclude worries about the very real prospect of epidemic disease and famine that plagued both ruler and commoner, rural and urban dweller, alike (Jannetta 1992).<sup>13</sup> Under such circumstances, a book like *Edo nishiki* appeared in 1773, illustrating Daikoten *nezumi* and *neko to nezumi* toys with other popular toys of that time. Nowhere does the book depict *nezumi* – rats/mice – as vermin to be exterminated, preferring to focus on the image of the auspicious animal icon in the Chinese zodiac (Yasuda 2010: 2–3) over the destroyer of crops and food stores. Kyburz observes that, when *Edo nishiki* was published, *nezumi* toys served a purpose and function not unlike other kinds of toys:

*As practical function gives way to symbolic meaning, a plaything turns into a symbol, moving out of the child's hand into the conceptual universe of the adult. It is with respect to this class of "toys," which lacks all ludic purpose in form as well as intent. (Kyburz 1994: 11)*

As mentioned above, *Edo nishiki* contains an illustration of a Daikokuten-*nezumi* toy (see Fig. 1), in which Daikokuten straddles a white *nezumi* and its accompanying poem explains that the mythic figure rides a squeaking *nezumi* with a big bag on his back to symbolize limitless treasure. Essentially, this toy functions as a three-dimensional expression of Daikokuten lore. When Edo-period people played with this toy or watched it, they probably recalled words in the accompanying poem that praises the auspicious animal servants of Daikokuten and their ability to provide food and treasure.

Another *nezumi*-motif toy, the *neko to nezumi* toy, is also remarkably unique (see Fig. 2). As described above, a *neko* (cat) and *nezumi* sit on top of a rectangular box. When the toy player pushes the board atop the box forward, the *nezumi* moves downward into a box; as the board is pulled back, the *nezumi* reappears. This simple mechanism creates the impression that the *nezumi* can hide in its utopian *kakurezato*, as the accompanying poem claims. The narrative of this toy resembles that common to *karurezato* lore – *nezumi* dwell in abundance in *kakurezato* under the auspices of Daikokuten as a ruler or an honored guest. Thus, the *neko to nezumi* toy represents another three-dimensional expression of *kakurezato* and Daikokuten lore.

Despite its popularity after the publication of *Edo nishiki*, the *komekui nezumi* or rice-eating *nezumi* toy uniquely represents the *nezumi* eating rice (Saitō 1968: 79; see Fig. 5). According to Ryōsuke Saitō, this toy was first developed and popularized in the Kaga Domain, and then gradually diffused across all of Japan after the Tenpō Famine (1833–37), one of the three great famines of the Edo period. The Kaga Domain was one of the worst-affected areas and, because of this, Saitō argues, people played with the *komekui nezumi* toy in the midst of difficult times in order to conjure fantasies of satiating themselves

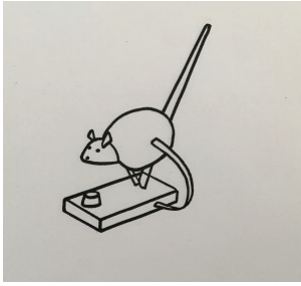


Figure 5. Komekui nezumi toy. Drawing by Hyunhee Park 2019.

with food (Saitō 1968: 82). He notes that people there played with this toy as a way to pray for rice enough to eat, just like the *nezumi*, who they imagined enjoyed an endless supply of food produced from limitless stores of their hidden utopia (ibid.). Thus, such a toy can also represent people's shattered dreams. The *komekui nezumi* toy never stood apart from the Daikokuten *nezumi* or the *neko to nezumi* toys, and remained firmly connected to the context of the textual, verbal, and visual narrative forms of the *nezumi* motif.

## CONCLUSION

Considering the above three toys as three-dimensional forms of *nezumi*-motif narratives, it is hard to deny that a *nezumi* icon serves as a narrative topos (so it does not matter which form it assumes) representing the possessors of treasure and food.<sup>14</sup> This is exactly what Kagawa means when he refers to “representation”, namely, the tendency to substitute something real for something unreal (2013 [2005]: 43–44). Representation functions as a kind of virtual reality, given its roots in reality and its allure as people's dreamed reality, in other words, the *nezumi* are real, but the tales they inspire are quite unreal. Thus, in folklore, the *nezumi* motif represents a utopia filled with the objects of people's longings.

As emphasized in the discussion of advertisements for rodenticide and rat traps in the Edo-era Japan, people loathed the *nezumi*'s hoarding habit more than any other, and they still do because of their carrying plague virus and gnawing important and expensive materials at homes and infrastructure systems (Sakurai 2017: 48). This was balanced by the auspicious view of the hoarder, which inspired stories about the *nezumi* as a loyal messenger of Daikokuten, the deity of wealth. Through examinations of the *nezumi*-motif narratives that circulated throughout early modern Japan, it became evident that *nezumi* fanciers and non-fanciers alike favored the iconic *nezumi* despite simultaneously

acknowledging that in real life they were vermin, too, as Sakurai (2017: 58) and Yasuda (2014: 244) explain. Ceaseless anxiety about famine perennially cast a blight on everyday life in the Edo-era Japan. It is not difficult to see why people would have the urge to dream of leading a happy life in their little utopia, as portrayed in the woodblock prints by Toriyama Sekien (see Fig. 3) and Katsushika Hokusai (see Fig. 4).

The *nezumi*-motif toy – a three-dimensional form of narrative about the *nezumi* – did not always work as mere playthings for children, nor were they ludic at all. In his insightful discussion of traditional Japanese toys, referring to Starr's observation, Kyburz mentions that traditional Japanese "toys" were not toys in the western sense; they instead functioned to produce "magical, curative, protective, or luck-bringing powers" (Kyburz 1994: 9). He also refers to Saitō's comment that traditional Japanese toys "are intimately related with folk beliefs concerning the protection from and riddance of disease and misfortune, and embody wishes for happiness and long life, vows for abundant crops, and prayers for easy delivery" (ibid.: 8). Saitō remarks that some toys "given or sold by shrines are in many respects the same as amulets or talismans" (1968: 20); if so, then "[s]ome are decidedly unlike playthings" (Kyburz 1994: 8). Espousing the observations of Starr and Saitō on traditional Japanese toys, Kyburz stresses that "most traditional toys originally were, and to some degree continue to be, talismans and amulets for the blessing and protection of the holder, tokens of and material links with certain holy places and their tutelary deities" (1994: 1, 9–16, 23). In short, Kyburz concludes, traditional Japanese toys usually served as "amulets and talismans" (1994: 11).

Saitō notes that the concept of what we today call "toys" gradually transformed from "tool of faith" to "tool of play" sometime around the mid-sixteenth century (1968: 20–21). Indeed, there had been many toys designed for children's play since the late sixteenth century (ibid.: 21), but the legacy of "tool of faith" has prevailed until today. In this regard, examining the way in which Japanese people treated (and still do) "*kumade* (rake-of-fortune)", one of traditional Japanese toys, Kyburz underscores that this *kumade* "could hardly be considered a plaything in any Western sense, intended as it is for no other purposes than to act as a talisman for prosperity in business" (1994: 4).<sup>15</sup> It seems that Japanese people did not treat the Daikokuten *nezumi* and the *neko to nezumi* toys as merely ludic playthings but instead as three-dimensional charms for conjuring wealth and happiness or, in short, a happy life in utopia. Traditional Japanese toys do not represent merely playthings that only have a ludic function, and it appears that this trend still works as the concept of today's mascot markets in Japan.<sup>16</sup>

As Kyburz notes, “[t]heir [toys’] essential formal characteristic is the miniaturized representation, in figurative terms, of certain human beings, animals, or material objects, expressive of symbolical values that do not intrinsically relate to play, games, sport, amusement, or entertainment” (Kyburz 1994: 10). Therefore, in light of what Kyburz argues, the *neko to nezumi* toy is on “a metaphorical level, as material objects representing or even embodying symbolical images and values” (ibid.: 11). In other words, this toy embodies a dream of people’s longing to live in a utopia narrated in a three-dimensional form. Those who played with this toy, even if only for a short time, could now make an imaginary trip to their utopia and escape so-called real life and forget all the concerns that tortured them. From this point of view, the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy illustrated in *Edo nishiki* represents a wish to be rich and to be free of suffering from starvation. Similar to “pigeon-whistle (*hato-bue*)” as Kyburz describes (1994: 11),<sup>17</sup> the *nezumi* figure of the Daikokuten *nezumi* toy is an emblematic animal that serves as Daikokuten’s messenger, assisting with the distribution of wealth and happiness to the world’s people. So, traditionally Japanese people did not always treat toys as mere playthings designed to pacify or entertain children but rather as items that have a “[m]agical function” which “is also the essential role of another family of ‘toys’ closely resembling ‘mascots’ . . . that are outright amulets (*omamori*) [in Japanese] or talismans” (ibid.: 12). And thus, he remarks, “[a]lthough they [toys that were “produced by adults and existing for adults”] may not be without a ludic dimension, their enjoyment is conditioned by so profound and complex a symbolism as to place them essentially outside the child’s mental range” (ibid.: 16). So, the *nezumi* motif toys illustrated in *Edo nishiki* serve as a three-dimensional form of people’s dreams of the happy life in utopia, free of predicaments.

When *Edo nishiki* was published in 1773, the people of the Edo Japan enjoyed Pax Tokugawana, in which connoisseurs living in urban and also agrarian communities had time to enjoy the arts, such as woodblock prints and theater plays (Keene 1999b [1978]: 1–7; Jansen 2000: 159–186). However jolly they found the amusements, epidemic diseases and famines that frequently and periodically attacked them always cast a blight on their actual daily lives (Jannetta 1992: 427–443; Tatsukawa 1979: 84–122, 1984: 31–69). Perhaps they accepted living amid the shifting sands of human life. This feeling led people to accept transient happiness and dreams that they could hardly fulfill in this real world. Anxieties about periodical calamities, such as epidemic diseases and famine that regularly and sometimes easily ruined everyday life, drove them to dream of a transient peace and appreciate fleeting beauty, a primary concept behind *ukiyo*, the “floating world”, popularized across Japan, at least in urban communities (Jansen 2000: 177–178; Keene 1999b [1978]: 156, 579;

Sansom 1978 [1931]: 477). They considered that their life simply drifted on the waves at the intersection of the periodical calamities – they had to enjoy their lives as the current calamity faded away until the next wave of calamity returned. Examining this phenomenon helps us to understand the advent of *nezumi*-motif toys – three-dimensional form of narratives – amid the streams of epidemic diseases and famines. Contemporaneous records reveal how people suffered from epidemic diseases and famines – no one could avoid them. As Saitō and Kryburz point out, Japanese people regarded traditional toys as good preparation and protection from the unmanageable, unescapable, and imminent threats to their everyday lives (Kryburz 1994: 11; Saitō 1968: 20). As already noted, people mainly focused on the *nezumi*'s hoarding habit and then crafted their fantasy around that. Thus, playing with toys to dream of utopia was a function of the *nezumi*-motif toys that circulated among Japan's Edo-era people.

We tend to consider animal-shaped mascots and ornaments as objects of superstition or, today, even laughter, and this three-dimensional form of narrative can provide clues to the dreams of our ancestors. Even today, this trend can be detected in the variety of mascots on display at gift shops in downtown Tokyo. Those who purchase or wear animal-shaped mascots and ornaments, such as the *nezumi*, snakes, lions, and other fierce beasts, still dream of living in an unattainable utopia where they imagine they are immune to the sufferings of their daily lives. As Elliot Oring notes, “[t]he new and the old are mutually constitutive [for creating what we call tradition]” (2019: 142), so the way Japanese people rely on talismans and mascots today can be identified with the same kind of behavior vis-a-vis the *nezumi*-motif toys that Edo-era people once had. This trend of relying on *nezumi*-motif toys sounds ludic, but it still lives deeply in the traditional Japanese way of viewing *nezumi* creatures, and also makes us understand their unique way of portraying human-animal relationship for imagining their longed-for, yet unattainable, utopia.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Zoologically speaking, Sakurai Fujiro identifies the *nezumi* to include the house mouse, brown rat (or common house rat), and Norway rat. However, it remains difficult to determine which of these animals is depicted in individual verbal descriptions and visual images. Thus, for the sake of discussion, this article employs the term “rat/mouse” (or “rats/mice”) when an English translation of *nezumi* is necessary (following Sakurai 2017).

<sup>2</sup> The concept of “narrative form” comes from Josef A. Kryburz (1994).

- <sup>3</sup> Its illustrations were drawn by Kitao Shigemasa (1739–1820), the preface written by Ōta Nanpo (1749–1823), and poems composed by Kimuro Bōun (1714–83). Henry D. Smith mentions that *Edo nishiki* offers “a remarkable example in a color-printed book of 1773” of “forty-odd [*sic*] pairs of old versus new toys” (2012: 24). See also Kyburz 1994: 16.
- <sup>4</sup> Examining stories about the mythical Daikouten lore, Sakurai Fujirō identifies the *nezumi* depicted in this lore as *dobu nezumi*, a brown or common rat, which is often called *daikoku nezumi*, the small common rat on which Daikokuten rides (Sakurai 2017: 51).
- <sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the Black Death did not break out in medieval and early modern Japan as it did in Europe, so Japanese people did not identify the *nezumi* as a vehicle of fatal epidemic diseases (Tatsukawa 1984: 9–16).
- <sup>6</sup> Although evidence of the *kakurezato*’s origins remains lacking, utopia-motif folktales can be traced to the seventh-century Chinese novelette *You xian ku* (A journey to the Fairy Utopia) by Zhang Zhuo (Li 2010: 41–58), which was imported to Japan in the early ninth century.
- <sup>7</sup> Various scroll pictures of *Nezumi no sōshi emaki* survive to this day. One of them can be seen at the webpage of the Spencer Collection at the New York Public Library (see <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/nezumi-no-soshi-emaki-the-tale-of-mice/#?tab=about&scroll=6>, last accessed on 10 October 2019).
- <sup>8</sup> This recapitulated plotline of the *nezumi jōdo* story is based on the one that appears in Seki’s Unified Index of Japanese Folktale Motifs (1978–1980): Japanese tale-type index JT 185, and also Inada & Ozawa’s References for Folklore Research (1988): Inada tale-type index IT 82.  
The same story plotline appears under the Aarne-Thompson-Uther Classification of Folktales; see ATU 613 (“The Two Travelers”, under “Tales of Magic”) in Uther’s folktale (2004); however, no *nezumi* (rats/mice) motifs appear in the ATU 613 stories.
- <sup>9</sup> Kyokutei Bakin, *Enseki zasshi* (Enseki memorandum, 1811), and Santō Kyōden, *Kottōshū* (Collecting curios, 1813).
- <sup>10</sup> As Toriyama Sekien illustrates in his woodblock print *Kakurezato*, Edo-era Japanese people simply thought that Daikokuten has the highest ranking status in *nezumi* utopia to command his loyal messenger(s) because he takes his seat of honor in the mansion of the *nezumi* utopia (see Figure 3).
- <sup>11</sup> I credit Kyburz with the term “three-dimension” to describe people shaping a conception into an actual iconic image: “[q]uantitatively the most important types are anthropomorphic figurines of popular, historical, legendary, mythical, sacred, or divine (also profane) personages, followed by animal figures and, finally, by three-dimensional likeness of material objects and symbols” (1994: 10). Following this line of reasoning, he examines the significant position of the papier-mâché tumbling *daruma* toy (a titling doll or a roly-poly toy with the legendary Zen monk Daruma figure) relative to other traditional Japanese toys and dolls, depicting it as “three-dimensional charm in papier-mâché” (ibid.: 15). Regarding the *daruma* toy, “the purpose [of the *daruma* toy] is magical rather than ludic” (ibid.: 15–16). Regarding the mysteries of *daruma* cult, see Faure 2011: 45–71.



- <sup>12</sup> The populations of Edo (modern-day Tokyo) and Osaka are based on data from Jannetta (1987, 1992) and Jansen (2000).
- <sup>13</sup> Even though the government of the Tokugawa shogunate firmly controlled Japan's society and economy during its long rule between 1603 and 1868, it periodically faced unavoidable predicaments. Regional and nationwide outbreaks of epidemic diseases and famine, for example, threatened not only the people living under Tokugawa rule but also the regime itself. Despite its successes in handling an array of crises, the shoguns had no power to control natural phenomena, of course, so that the specters of disease and famine, to which no one was immune, always hung over them.
- <sup>14</sup> In this paper, a *topos* (pl. *topoi*) means a well-known, traditional, and popular icon that verbally and visually represents or is associated with a certain theme. It can thus take the form of certain actual or imaginary places, figures (human or animal), or codes. A *topos* is generally understood as a certain kind of signifier.
- <sup>15</sup> Regarding the purpose of the *kumade* toys, Daniels describes that they “are fork-like objects ... which are used for the raking in of good fortune” (Daniels 2003: 625–626).
- <sup>16</sup> Regarding the contemporary trend of Japanese culture, Atkins' view of Japanese culture helps to understand a Japanese trait that has motivated Japanese people to engage with high and popular culture since early modern Japan to the present (Atkins 2017: 33–37).
- <sup>17</sup> According to Kyburz, a pigeon-whistle or *hato-bue* “is a well-functioning wind instrument” used to call the attention of deities to the individual who blows it (Kyburz 1994: 11).

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*Fumihiko Kobayashi*

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**Fumihiko Kobayashi** received his PhD in Jewish and comparative folklore studies from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel. He is currently an independent scholar. His main fields of research are comparative folklore and culture studies. [fmendel88@gmail.com](mailto:fmendel88@gmail.com)