

Steering from the center: keywords of Japanese performance aesthetics

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中心からの乖離：日本のパフォーマンス美学のキーワード

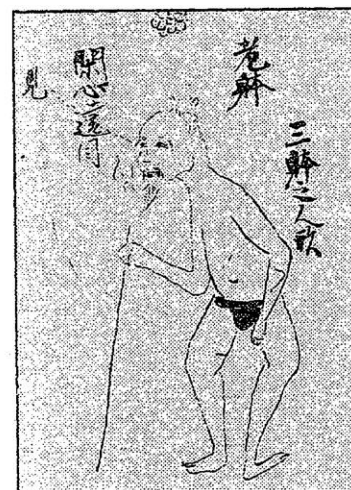
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Looking at aesthetic principles in Japanese performance is one way to understand a culture through its codified and archaic expressions; defining acting principles as potentially universal biological mechanisms is a central tenet of theatre anthropology. This paper examines the manner in which the *iemoto*-system of hierarchical performer guilds depends on strictly-codified kata forms and ranking of plays and players in *kurai*, to create a *hana* of fascination, employing common *jo-ha-kyû* rhythms and *koshi* pelvic centering.

この論文では、日本の演劇の美の概念を考察することが、記号化された伝統的な表現を通して文化を理解する一つの方法であること、演劇の原理を背景にある潜在的に普遍的な生物的功能として定義することが演劇学における中心理念であることが指摘される。こうした見地から、この論文では、日本における階級的な演者組織である家元制度が、厳密に記号化された形（型）と演目と演者の位による格付けに依存しており、そこから序破急という共通のリズムと腰の入った演技をともなう華という美の概念を作り出していることが示される。

The organizer of the PACKAJ Seminar has demanded somewhat unreasonably that we come up with three to five terms that are fundamental to understanding Japanese performance aesthetics. I have taken the liberty to interpret this broadly, including the social and educational context in which these arts flourish. Actor-teachers, students, fans, critics, and scholars maintain this critical language of practical aesthetics through their comments on their own, students, or other performances. It seems difficult if not impossible to examine the way in which artists create beauty unless one understands the dynamism of their maintenance, change, and manner of appreciation in their historic and contemporary milieu.

I will here concentrate on *noh* theatre, since the diversity of aesthetics from *bûgaku* to *buyo* to *butoh* seems a difficult one to encompass in meaningful aesthetic terminology. I am particularly curious as to whether these *noh*-specific terms are employed by performers and fans of other



Old Man, after Zeami

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Japanese genres, and whether they have equivalents in Korea.

Anthropology of performance aesthetics?

The mission to encapsulate in any meaningful way keywords which precisely explain the wide, deep, and varied performance forms of a single country, especially those as old and expressive as Korea and Japan, is somewhat of a fool's errand. Donald Keene's noble attempt—suggestion, irregularity, simplicity, perishability--was true of the elite arts of *noh*, *waka* poetry, and tea that he and the majority of Japanese intellectuals were interested in, perhaps. But as he admitted, "Any general statement about Japanese aesthetics can easily be refuted and even disproved by citing well-known contrary examples" (Keene 1971: 11). One is caught, as with any definition of an elusive definition, relying heavily on individual experience and taste, between defining a particular aesthetic with no claim to inclusiveness, or precepts so general that they deny local expression yet still cannot possibly grasp the multi-valent reality.

Yet the mission of studying cultural performance is not an unusual one for anthropologists, who have long attempted to utilize accessible, culturally-rich, and near-universally practiced ritual, festival, and stage performance as windows to cultural understanding. As Clifford Geertz noted famously of the meaning of cockfighting in Indonesia, it is "a Balinese reading of Balinese experience, a story they tell themselves about themselves" (1993). Anya Royce had just such a perspective of the insider-outsider playing out a story in her dance ethnography: by observing dance movements, documenting them and seeing their variation over region and time, one learns not only about a particular culture's body-aesthetic, but about its manner of organization and behavior. She carefully describes this methodology as moving from outsider to insider to extreme outsider again:

Analysis of our descriptions based on observations [including participant-observations] is the final step in the process of the study of one society or culture. It is in this stage that we move furthest perhaps from the reality of the situation as those native to it know it...to try to produce an analysis that is most compatible with the three levels at which all phenomena may be seen: 1) the actual behavior, 2) the natives' interpretation of the behavior, and 3) the analyst's interpretation.

Gaps and contradictions will naturally occur; these should be noted impartially, then checked against a distinct culture's performances:

The areas of non-correspondence are important because they tell us something about the culture we might otherwise miss... It is not part of the work to reconcile all the differences and reduce them to some common denominator but rather to note them and then to explain why they exist....Observation description, and analysis are the building blocks of anthropological research. From here, the next step is that of comparison, which allows us to make more general statements about human society and behavior (2002: 34-36).

Here Royce notes work in comparative dance by Joann Kealiinohomoku, who "tried to show

how comparison of the dance and gesture characteristics of two unlike cultures brings both cultures into clear focus. The uniqueness of each area is revealed through dance” (Kealiinohomoku 1967: 356, quoted in Royce 2002: 139). Following these dance anthropologists’ examples, by examining Korean and Japanese dance and theatre in comparative perspective, one might have a better idea about what makes Korean dance Korean, and Japanese dance Japanese, and both especially East Asian through relation with other cultures’ dance.

Yet PACKAJ also seeks useful advice on creative techniques to be employed in contemporary expression, following Eugenio Barba’s work in theatre anthropology: “the study of human beings’ socio-cultural behaviour in a performance situation” (2005: 7). Barba’s self-admittedly un-scientific inquiry serves a narrower but perhaps more ambitious purpose: to discover practical techniques on the biological level among diverse codified traditional dance and theatre forms that answers a western actor’s modern dilemma: “Where can performers find out how to construct the material bases of their art?” (2005: 6). His studies during ISTA sessions and with an Asian and international troupe in the Theatre Mundi are less scientific laboratory than artistic crafts workshop, where the lore of many lands is brought to bare on problems of stage presence, matching of music and form, individuality within given forms, and the challenges of transmission (Halstrup 2001).

Yet unlike dance anthropologist’s claims of generalizing from the particular or even identifying national traits from comparative culture, “theatre anthropology seeks useful directions rather than universal principles....”. Instead Barba seeks to go beyond superficial distinctions of particular genres to discover “good advice” for building effective theatre: “(Theatres) resemble each other in their principles, not in their performances” (2005: 7). Through sessions over two decades with masters from India, Bali, and Japan, Meyerhold biomechanics and mime, Barba has distilled principles common to all, hints that may serve as the basis for new creations: “balance in action, dance of oppositions, virtue of omission and substitution.” PACKAJ sought a similar perspective from specific genres of Korean and Japanese dance.

The performers and scholars brought together for the PACKAJ seminar came with their own backgrounds and biases. Their individual contributions to defining national aesthetic are necessarily prejudiced and incomplete. But looking at the entirety of their efforts to name and define, and especially the masters’ unconscious choices while teaching or performing, may allow us “primary source” materials for constructing an initial paradigm for a poetics of dance in East Asia. So with my background as student, director, and producer guiding my choices, I introduce my own take on the keywords of Japanese dance and theatre.

Contextualizing keywords: the headmaster (*iemoto*) system

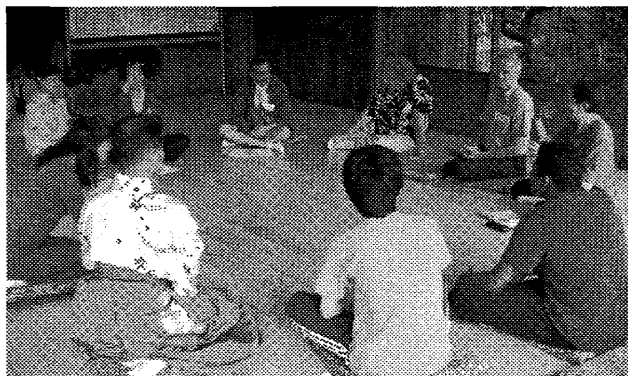
The aesthetic terms I have chosen—*kata*, *kurai*, *hana*, *jo-ha-kyû*, *koshi*—are only comprehensible when seen within the pyramid of power of the *Iemoto* System. While they may seem a rather random group of terms, I hope to show them as vital to the aesthetics of the *noh* and *kyogen*

actors, which have of course inherited earlier and in turn greatly influenced later forms of dance and theatre. Here I will explain how the Iemoto headmaster system exists to maintain the beauty and power of the art through transmitting kata patterns, then ranking performers according to their mastery of the prescribed forms and sense of TPO¹⁾. All are encouraged to aspire since the flower of charm *hana* is available at every age and level. Mastery is evidenced by the performer's sense of *jo-ha-kyû* timing control based on a firm foundation of the pelvis, hips and buttocks of *koshi*,

The iemoto system is a pyramid of power and authority transmitting the artistic tradition.²⁾ Movement, voice, and acting are passed down through family or family-like lines. The pinnacle of power rests with those who have succeeded to the name of the Iemoto, who has the singular authority to approve texts, costumes, masks; to interpret plays, or approve of variant interpretations; to grant licenses and ability to perform certain plays; to hold onto secret teachings and to perform one-son-only 一子相伝—plays. If noh is an art-world unto itself, the headmaster is king. Some basic tenets and ramifications of the system are:

1. pyramid of power, single head
2. power to teach, to grant licenses, to grant teaching licenses
3. power to change the texts, the staged forms, and the repertoire itself
4. *obligation* to maintain the costumes, masks, texts, family style
5. position in hierarchy not necessarily equivalent to artistic qualities
6. encouraging vertical, not horizontal, relationships of loyalty, obligation
7. counter-intuitive effect: encourages creativity and expansion at base of pyramid!

Donald Richie correctly admires the Japanese theatre as possessing a unique “strata” of vital forms, where popular genres are transmitted, displaced but not replaced, as new genres spring up and gain new audiences (1991). While acting guilds have existed for millennia, and directors and dancers fight legal battles even today for credit and control over their choreographies, the Japanese extreme degree to which licensing and codification is to the best of my knowledge unprecedented. The aesthetic terms are inexplicably bound up in the economic hierarchy.



Matsui Akira answers questions after his workshop.

Kata 型 (形)

The iemoto preserves, transmits, and moulds the ancient forms into systematically codified, precise, connected patterns—**katafied**—that serve as bottom-line basis for mastery. Kata are fixed, formal patterns of movement and voice.³⁾ These are highly prescribed, named, used as shorthand in teaching and in scripts. They are employed in nearly all the performing arts of Japan. Even while such forms as *butoh* resist their inflexibility in favor of inspired individual spontaneity,

one can easily detect kata-like movements, on the borderline of *kuse* (habits) and *kosei*, individuality.

There are kata for virtually everything that an actor does on the noh stage. His appearance is signaled by the *agemaku* curtain: it can be raised in a triumphal arch, or gentle curve; it can be raised, lowered, then raised again, flapped open from the side.

Precisely-transmitted kata determine how the feet are held, how to sit and stand, how various characters walk, how turns should be made. There are kata for floor-patterns: the speed and variant sizes of circles, triangles, and zigzags traced on the floor. There are kata for the fan's shape, length, how it is opened and closed. There are kata for fan movements: various points, scoops, slashes, and angles used to express emotion.

Besides having evolved into a convenient pedagogical shorthand of structured, standard conventions, kata solve three perennial problems of art: codification of beauty, judging performance, individual creativity within a tradition.

How to codify beautify

When an artist of special genius invigorates the fossilized forms, or invents new ones, how can followers hope to achieve the same level of control and expressive power? By kata-fying (codifying) forms, one learns endless variations on themes, competently repeating the bottom-line standards in one's youth, then adding "color" and depth as one grows older and more expert. Finally, one perhaps achieves a level of mastery to create new variants and individual interpretation to the existing kata that are then transmitted. Or not! In noh at least, merely copying and maintaining existing standards of competence is sufficient to earn a living as occasional performer, chorus member, stage assistant, or teacher. And perhaps one's son, or an aspiring disciple, will be able to absorb enough of the traditional kata to surpass you. The image I have is of carrying on the tradition as a great rope stretching from below. As one member of a large, ancient guild, it's not necessary to reach the summit each time; tying one's knot to maintain one's place is sufficient to allow the next generation to gain the next plateau, always approaching the summit.

What are the standards to which performers are held

Philosophers since Plato have argued that poetry (used in the sense of all the arts) leads men to be better moral humans, better thinkers and feelers, which make them more moral, creative and efficient doers.⁴⁾ But they have also warned that since no objective standards of evaluation exist to judge art, that it is dangerous: art similarly has the power to corrupt through fictions that are false and ugly. Art is morally neutral, as Leni Riefenstahl proved in her brilliant Nazi propaganda films; taste is relative.

But kata are the commonly-recognized standards that apply to particular genres. They are specific—how a little finger should be held—and ubiquitous—there is little room for individual choice in costume, mask, movement, voice in performance (timing being the exception). Actors

judge these kata according to the objective and inarguable authority of those taught by the iemoto. Connoisseurs among spectators—90% of whom study noh—judge these kata against those of their own teacher's, other master's, and their forebears. Actors who competently repeat kata can be objectively criticized as correct or not. It is important to realize that because of their time-polished recipe for effective staging, mere fulfillment of requisite kata is sufficient to create artistic impression. Those who vary from existing kata are either making a mistake—and will be criticized by fans, peers, and their teachers—or contributing a legitimate variant, an individual interpretation to the expanding body of kata tradition. When a kata is thus favorably recognized, usually by the iemoto's invention trickling down to disciples, it becomes a legitimate part of the new tradition. Those who do not adopt may then be ostracized as non-conformists, while considering themselves the truly orthodox.

How to enable individual creativity within a collaborative performance

This tension between the need to follow precedent and the desire to establish one's own turf is the underlying dynamic in the Japanese performance world. When there are 25 performers on the stage, each following an agreed-upon score which they have rehearsed independently—waki side-actor with waki, shoulder drummer with shoulder drummer, kyogen usually not at all!—one cannot experiment too freely or risk making the entire ensemble look bad. It is jazz improvisation where musicians don't rehearse and audiences too know all the notes. On the other hand, by performing by rote, as young players do, or as often happens on tours abroad with repeated casts, the plays grow stale and boring even to the performers. Therefore there is a fundamental need to both follow the score and experiment within it. Often this need is neither felt nor permitted until one is older: when repeating a role, or when forced into a new staging by an outdoor stage or purpose-built playing area within a civic hall, or gymnasium. But so strict and so second-nature are the fundamental kata of drums, song, and dance, that an individual has leeway within this supportive frame from which to deviate carefully and slightly, a deep and wide mainstream on which to surf.

Kata create fundamental patterns for both song and dance and acting that serve a narrative purpose. Yet they share a common level of stylization which can be appreciated on the level of pure pantomime and sound. Thus a door opened, a saw cutting, or sake being drunk follow the familiar patterns of kyogen *giseigo*. The frontal, step-by-step creation of unsheathing a sword, crying, or pointing in noh follow similar patterns of right and left foot, turns, and head follows hands. The accretion of these formal rules creates another layer of stylized beauty, an abstract beauty of line and movement paralleling the story being told through these forms.

***Kurai* (位) ranking**

Since all performers in the professional world eventually learn all the basic kata, a recognition of *kurai* ranking or dignity occurs that properly positions each performer in the world: texts and their variants, costumes and masks, and accompanying actors. Actors are distributed within

strict hierarchies of school and family position through privileges of *hirakimono* (debut pieces), secret teachings, one-son-only teachings, and once-in-a-lifetime performances provide concrete doors and barriers to the highest levels.

The sense of proper *kurai* is the fundamental pitch that many other choices are attuned. *Kurai* determines how the performer selects from among the hundreds of potential variant performances and professional ensembles for a single performance. In concrete terms, this means that a young actor is best accompanied by similarly young and inexperienced side-actors and musicians; aside from a senior chorus leader and stage assistant, other performers should occupy a similar status. Costume and mask choice are in turn limited by the actor's experience. A Living National Treasure should similarly perform with senior artists of exceptional caliber. It is self-fulfilling attunement of worth, a presentation of one's perceived standing, a declaration of identity that in turn helps to define it in the professional world.

Hana 花 The flower of performance

The eternal spear-carrier's lament: How can a young actor, forced into subsidiary roles with lesser performers, constantly overshadowed by seniors, criticized relentlessly, maintain aspirations to greatness. Worse yet, what if he feels himself to be truly talented, favorably comparable to those with greater names, performance opportunities, patrons, and fans? And how does a young actor, blessed with natural talents, winning acclaim for his youthful charm, not fall victim to resting on his laurels, leading to laziness, rote repetition, and eventual discouragement and decline?

Zeami solved this intrinsic frustration of precocious talent with his elevation of *hana* as the highest expression of artistry available at any age, from the six year-old making his stage debut with reedy voice and oversized movements to the bent-backed quiver of the octogenerian veterans. One may win spectators with the green bud of energetic youth, or suprise them with a bud on a near-dead branch—each actor has a potential flower potential. The flower is created out of surprise, and intrinsic interest, expressable at any level of the hierarchy. It is this common expression of fresh, transcendant beauty that encourages striving at every stage of development, multi-colored flowers in the same garden seeking the sun.



Child actor, after Zeami

Jo ha kyû 序破急 Timing

With such precisely prescribed positions, floor-patterns, fan-forms, and pitches, how does an actor manage to be more than a finely-tuned robot? The answer, as the old joke goes, is...timing. Separating the masters from the merely competent is one's sense of timing and expressive inspiration, seen in the cresting wave-like modulations of *jo-ha-kyû*.

- Jo literally Preface, the introduction
- Ha literally Break, deviating from the opening, a change of gears
- Kyû literally Quick, a rapid acceleration of pace and energy, the climax

The Japanese sense of *ma* (間) has been widely discussed: a special attention to the space-between, the negative space surrounding an object (spatial) or movement (time). In performance, this sense of *ma* is linked to the dynamic tension of the action through the jo-ha-kyû structure (Yokomichi 1968).

Jo-ha-kyû sequence is a dynamic, flexible formula of slow-medium-fast, opening-development-climax that determines the micro-movement of a single step, the flow of a dance sequence, the structure of a single play, and even the sequence of an entire program. Jo-ha-kyû is a natural snowballing of energy, speed, and power that provides it's own momentum: the end of kyû trails off into the beginning of the next Jo. The length of the Jo determines the length of the Ha, which in turn is completed in Kyû. Energy is stored, churning inside, giving life to the stillness—this is the Jo of Jo. The Ha breaks from Jo, but just before a complete break into Kyû is the Kyû of Ha. Then the stored energy explodes in Kyû—preceding from the Jo of Kyû. It refers not merely to time, but to dramatic tension, as in this escalation of passion expressed in alliterative ecstasy by Vladimir Nabokov:

Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta.

Vladimir Nabokov *Lolita*

Note the declension after the opening name from four to three to two to one syllables paralleling the emotional intensification. This is followed by the sudden rush of alliterative phrases, separated by commas, before the final three, staccato syllables of the nymphet's name. The quick kyû ending seeps into the following slow jo.

By necessity of frontal acting, acoustics, and spectator sight-lines, all twenty stage-persons are attuned to the back of the actor dancing. The lead actors are masked, unable to see others on stage through the narrow tunnel permitted by the eyeholes. Meanwhile the chorus sits stone-faced, accompanying from the back of the stage, unable to see each other yet needing to follow the incongruent rhythms of drum and singing. The body of the performer is a conductor's wand, shifting tempos with a flick of a sleeve, a careful step forward, or a sudden stamp. When the anticipated move is not forthcoming, accompanying performers and attentive spectators are led to wonder: is it a mistake, or an interpretative choice? This tension of near-confusion contributes to the sense of freshness in these centuries-old choreographies. Actor's competence or supreme mastery is evidenced by whether they merely perform rote stage conventions or command the stage through inspired deviance. And so the connected kata, with their micro-variations and individual interpretations, are pulled into a predictable yet still powerful cresting wave-like shape by the jo-ha-kyû trajectory that underlies them all.

Actors say a fellow actor has *ma* or not (*ma o toru*), that he is able to ride the rhythms (*ma o noru*) or not. During his workshop Matsui joked that those who lack timing are called fools (“*ma o nuku*”), while all must beware the devilish timing (*akuma no ma*). These subtle shifts of pace in even the smallest of movements turn a rote function into an expressive gesture: a hand brought to the eye is a symbol of sorrow; a cold circling pattern becomes an emotional oval of infinite time; a forward acceleration is seen as a rash rush towards one’s doom.

Koshi 腰 Fundamental stance

But it does not take a connoisseur a full trajectory of *johakyû* to recognize a master performer. The moment he steps or rather glides foot onto the stage, he is immediately judged

- does he have a firm, smoothe sliding feet *suriashi*?
- is his back straight?
- are his hips low? (*Koshi otosu, koshi ireru, koshi o hiku*)

Above all, it is this last that is the most important. The flower of graceful, rare, fascination is planted in the firm soil of the low, centered, body. The *koshi* is the administrative center for the *noh* actor’s body. It maintains a constant flow of energy, storing and distributing it where needed. It is grounded like electric current, receiving energies generated from the sliding feet, stored in the navel area, then channeled through the stylized forms—not minimalism, but “maximamalism” (*kakudaishugi*). At the same time that it unifies the body energies, *koshi* separates the upper and



Jonah Salz follows Nami Okada in the servant of *Suehiro-gari*.

lower halves of the body. This permits the two to move in extreme tension in opposite ways, one still while the other is dynamic, anchored by grounded, centripetal force.

Evidence for firm *koshi* are solid, elegant sliding steps, called “movement” (*hakobu*), not “walking” (*aruku*). Photos of *noh* professionals invariably come out focused no matter the light, no matter the movement; they are projecting a solid presence, a flowing *Ki* energy even while maintaining the clean lines of *kamae* basic position in motion.

Watch warriors’ fans gesturing fiercely above, while they carve smoothe, graceful patterns with their feet. When demons stamp, leap, and kick, their arms are frozen in dynamic poses, or poised at their sides. This unstable equilibrium of “quietness and dynamism,” (*sei to dô*, 静と動) provides the ultimate tension in a play, the feeling that there is constant movement within even the most static of still poses, a gentle heart of stillness within even the most violent demeanor. Zeami

in *Saidô Fuki* elevates this mode of portraying demons as possessing “demon fury, human heart.”

Conclusion

Koshi controls the physical expression in space just as the iemoto controls the art through time, with power emanating from the tradition's center. Thus we have come full circle, or rather full triangle: the iemoto system maintains a strict hierarchy of artistic competence through the transmission of highly-determined kata patterns. Masters proceed along a fixed trajectory of *kurai* ranking, encouraged through the knowledge that there is a flower of Hana available at each level. The kata are ordered according to principles of jo-ha-kyû into a performance structured to have power as narrative, visually and aurally. And the actor maintains this potency through effective manipulation of the balance of stillness and action in performance, steering from a firm center of *koshi*.

Notes

- 1) Time-Place-Occasion, a Japanese phrase for the necessity of attunement to circumstance.
- 2) Benito Ortolani (1971) is an insightful introduction to the iemoto system; Nishiyama's book on Edo Culture, which Ortolani draws upon, is the most detailed exploration of how the master-disciple and guild system helped disseminate formerly high culture pursuits to townsman and even rural cultural elite.
- 3) In fact all aspects of performance, costumes, lighting, and set, can be considered kata.
- 4) Gaut and Lopes, ed. *Routledge Companion*.

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