Essays on Language and Culture

Myth, Ritual and Drama: The Japanese Paradigm

STUART D. B. PICKEN

It is the purpose of this paper to parallel aspects of the development of two classical civilizations on the issue of the emergence of drama from ritual. Classical Greek and Japanese civilization have been variously compared since the 19th century onwards, and many of the observations that have been made are highly illuminating. I will begin by making reference to a thinker who himself saw some striking parallels that lie behind the wider issue of how drama evolved from myth and ritual.

Lafcadio Hearn, known also by his Japanese name after naturalization as Koizumi Yakumo (1850–1904), the 19th century observer of a newly modernized and still modernizing Japan, frequently alluded to the similarities he felt that existed between the culture of the Japanese and that of classical Greek civilization. In other words, he saw Japanese culture as in some way possessing the qualities of a classical civilization. By that I mean that he saw it as manifesting original paradigms that expressed its own creativity, and that it merited the same respect as the classical world of Greece or Rome, although it differed vastly from either.

His *Japan: An Interpretation* contains numerous references he sees to parallels between the culture of Japan and that of classical Greece. The index of the 1959 (Tuttle, Tokyo) edition lists 19 such references, (namely pages 15–16, 27–28, 34, 36, 57, 59, 65, 67, 70, 78, 89, 99, 148, 169, 202n., 229, 264, 443–444, 446). In the Introduction, in referring to the artifacts of ancient Japan, he says (p. 9) "… these are the products which became, within its own limits, so exquisite that none but an artist capable of judging its manufactures,—a civilization that can be termed imperfect only by those who would also term imperfect the Greek civilization of three thousand years ago."

While I think there is a more than a tinge of romanticism in his perception, there is also some substance. The historical origins of the Japanese may remain obscure and controversial, but what came into being as Japanese "culture" is clearly defined by its very distinctiveness from the culture of its neighbours. Sir George Sansom (1883–1965) the Japanese historian, in his three volume *History of Japan* (Tokyo, 1979 edn.), made a similar point when he argued that Japanese culture had its own spiritual basis that pre-dated any of the material forms imported from the Asian mainland. They were introduced for the purpose of giving expression to that spirituality. The relationship between Japan and those cultures from which various forms and styles were imported is a continuing controversy concerning which Sansom's view is clear. The same issue is addressed in his famous comparative study *The Western World and Japan: A Study of the Interaction of European and Asiatic Cultures*

(Barrie and Jenkins, London, 1931) and in his *Japan, A Short Cultural History* (Charles E. Tuttle Company, Tokyo, 1977).

This insight is important. Because of the long tradition of borrowing from China, borrowing which included a writing system, dress, manners, music and architecture, Japan has become viewed by some observers, and quite mistakenly so, as a cultural suburb of Beijing or Shanghai. When Chinese see so much that they can recognize in Jeven some Japanese have expressed. Those who take such a position understand neither Japan nor China. They also confuse ontogeny and phylogeny. Indeed, Japan did borrow much from the high culture of China, just as she later did from the west. But Japan remains Japan, and is no more Chinese than American, although the world's largest Bronze Buddha is to be found in Nara, and the world's largest Disneyland is in Tokyo. The same kind of argument has been about Tokyo Tower, which is about one meter taller than the Eiffel Tower.

Such artifacts were created by a people determined to be equal to their peers, and who were seeking recognition by the great power of the day. The Chinese, however, always considered that Japan was a subject state under Chinese hegemony, similar to Korea, although even under the Mongols, they failed to land successfully on Japanese soil. Japan remain respectful of China, but culturally independent. The important point to recognize is that the eclectic character of Japanese culture is one of its principal features. Hence while Noh and Bugaku, and other classical Japanese performing arts resemble Chinese forms, the resemblances end there. What came to be their content was quite unrelated to that of the country of origin. Rather, they became the inspiration of Japanese ideas dressed in imported clothing.

For example, the formal dress of Shinto priests dates to the Heian period (794–1185). It was modelled on the court dress of T'ang Dynasty China (618–907). Anyone with a knowledge of China of that period, or even someone seeing a statue of the period would probably recognize the similarity. But it ends there. The wooden *shaku*, held by a priest reciting a *norito* (liturgical formula) functioned as a liturgical instrument in Japan. In China, it was simply a memo pad, a prompt for carrying information. The colors used in Shinto are derived from the native tradition, with white being the basic element. These are clear instances of forms being borrowed to give the native spiritual culture clear visible material expression, centered on the concept of purity, symbolized by the use of white, but with a dignity of style that was fitting for acts of reverence to the *kami* who were being invoked in the rituals.

Before entering into an examination of ritual and drama in the Japanese tradition, it is necessary to establish certain premises that will support the later stages of the argument. The first of these deals with Shinto and the roots of Japanese culture.

Shinto and the Roots of Japanese Culture

This issue needs to be dealt with at some length, because I wish to establish the autonomous base of Japanese culture as the premise upon which to build the argument that what developed in Japan was an expression of Japanese values and concepts irrespective of its form. Consequently, if any parallels exist between what happened in Japan and what developed in the West, the relationship is not causal, but forms the potential basis of a theory that the

evolution of human civilization and the development of certain aspects of cultural forms can be viewed within a universal framework.

A pertinent example can be found in Shinto, the spiritual roots of Japanese culture. I will introduce it in terms of the concept of "Ethnophilosophy". Ethnophilosophy is a relatively new concept, but, like the philosophy of ritual, another recent intellectual concept, it is helpful in discussing Shinto. Both refer to a probing of the symbols or rituals and activities of a cultural system to identify the meaning behind them, without requiring them necessarily to fit into any rational framework. The term "Ethnophilosophy" is currently a subject heading used by the Library of Congress, replacing terms such as folk philosophy, or primitive philosophy.

In an article entitled "In Defense of Afro-Japanese Ethnophilosophy" in *Philosophy East and West* (47–4, October, 1997: 363–82), Dr. Fidelis U. Okafor of the University Nigeria summarizes the concept of Ethnophilosophy as follows:

> Ethnophilosophy is so called because its focus is on the thought that underlies the life patterns and belief system of a people. It is folk philosophy insofar as it is an exposition of the philosophical thought under girding the way of life of a people as a collectivity. African and Japanese philosophy belong to this tradition. Western philosophy, however, is based on reason and logic; in contrast with ethnophilosophy, it developed *ab initio* as a critique of folk thought and worldviews. Both traditions are not contradictory but complementary. Each bears the marks of its peculiar culture and history.

Western civilization is a complex integration of common roots in Greek, Roman, and Hebraic concepts. Japan is an island civilization off the mainland of Asia that developed its own values and ideals and then incorporated, as was felt appropriate, whatever forms that seemed to have an attraction in order to express them. That is not to say that either Japanese culture or Shinto is in any sense "irrational". The approriate word is perhaps "a-rational" or "trans-rational". It has evolved a form of logic that gives its activities a meaning that is not derived from one set of concepts from which principles are established or implications are deduced in a systematic manner.

In this regard, Shinto embodies in ritual form, the self-understanding of the ancient Japanese people and the paradigmatic value of the culture they created, in particular, the concept of people and objects being ritually "pure". In this sense, Shinto is a form of Ethnophilosophy. It was a working, rather than intellectual response to experience. This fact also helps to deal the controversial question of whether or not Japan can be referred to as a Buddhist culture. If Japan is to be described as a Buddhist culture, then a redefinition of Buddhism becomes necessary, because in the process of finding a place in Japanese culture, Buddhism compromised and abandoned its essential doctrines. It became a Buddhism that did not believe in reincarnation, that practised ancestral reverence, and permitted married priests to inherit temples. The late Professor Joseph Kitagawa, the authority on Japanese religion, made relevant observations:

> Some people hold that Japan became a Buddhist country during the Heian period when Buddhism in effect absorbed Shinto. Yet is is not equally true that Buddhism surrendered to the ethos of that nebulous religion of Japan, which lay deeper than the visible religious structure, commonly referred to as Shinto? (*History of Japanese Religion*, Columbia University Press, 1966: 85).

Professor Kitagawa is making the point that in order to accommodate to the Japanese ethnophilosophy, Buddhism had to surrender its essential content in order to preserve its form.

While the process began in China, where Buddhism and Chinese philosophy met, in the case of Japan, it was not a rational philosophical system that challenged Buddhism, but an Ethnophilosophy that had enormous spiritual energy enabling it to integrate alien ideas on its own terms, giving the impression that it had itself succumbed in the process, but which, in actuality, it conquered. Shinto may thus be one of the last great truly natural, human a-rational philosophical systems. It is a reference point for a study of the development of all human culture, and therefore with justification provides us with a valid comparative measure on the theme of the evolution of drama from myth and ritual.

Key Paradigms

By examining Japanese mythology, we can see where the principal themes found in Noh arise. They come directly from the key paradigms found within the mythology. I shall here offer a brief characterization of Japanese mythology, and discuss its principal themes. These have remained deep in the culture since ancient times, and still find expression in many facets of modern life.

The core of the ancient beliefs of Shinto derive from the mythology recorded in the *Kojiki* (712) and the *Nihon Shoki* (720), two texts which were presented to the Imperial court as being carefully compiled records of Japan's history to that time. In particular, it is found in the section in particular referring to the *kami-yo*, the age of the *kami*. Scholars have identified two basic sets of narratives, the first of which is known as the Yamato myths, which are understood as being intended to support the claims of the Yamato clan to be descended from the *kami* of the sun, Amaterasu-omikami.

According to this tradition, the Zoka-sanshin (the three central *kami* of creation) in Takamagahara (the High Plain of Heaven) produce other *kami*. A complex pattern emerges of *kami* creating *kami*. This includes Izanagi-no-mikoto and Izanami-no-mikoto whose work is procreating the Japanese islands. Izanami dies after giving birth to the *kami* of fire, and she goes to Yomi-no-kuni, the land of the dead (a Japanese version of Hades), one of the few concrete concepts related to the idea of death in Shinto.

Izanagi-no-mikoto visits her and finds a land of decay and pollution from which he escapes, and immediately purifies himself in the River Tachibana. Various *kami* continue to be born, demonstrating the important link between purity and creativity. From his nose emerges Susano-o-no-mikoto, who becomes a key figure for the understanding of subsequent narratives. His sister is Amaterasu-omikami who is born from his left eye. Susano-o-no-mikoto creates havoc in the palace of Amaterasu and Amaterasu eventually becomes so distressed that she hides in the Ame-no-iwato, a cave in the High Plain of Heaven, consequently plunging the world into darkness. A ribald dance by Ameuzume-no-mikoto entices her out because of the noise of the other *kami* laughing, and the world, darkened by her absence, is again filled with light. As a result of his indiscretions and tempestuous behaviour, Susano-o is finally banished from the Plain of High Heaven.

The other strand, designated as the Izumo myths, focus on Susano-o-no-mikoto after he is banished from the Plain of High Heaven, and when he had settled near Izumo. His descendant, Okuninushi-no-mikoto (Master of the Great Country) features in numerous Japanese legends, one of the most famous of which is the Hare of Inaba, a skinned rabbit that

is advised by his brothers to bathe in salt water, and which Okuninushi saves. His own brothers try several times in vain to kill him, and once succeed only to find that his mother had brought him back to life. He had many adventures and conquers much of the land of reed plains. He finally agrees to hand over the country to the *kami* of heaven, in particular to Ninigi-no-mikoto, grandchild of Amaterasu. He is guided by Sarutahiko-Okami to a place where he will settle, assisted by Ameuzume-no-mikoto, who subdues the fish of the sea.

These two important narratives provide content that goes a long way towards defining Japanese culture. The Ame-no-Iwato, the Cave Myth, and the dance of Ameuzume-no-mikoto constitute one. The act of purification performed by Izanagi-no-mikoto in the River Tachibana is the other.

This brings the narratives to the third phase, the principal feature of which is the descent of Ninigi-no-mikoto. Before he is able to complete the descent, Ameuzume-no-mikoto is dispatched to meet a huge earthly *kami*, Sarutahiko-Okami who guards the crossroads of heaven and earth. He is perceived as fearsome, and she is sent to try to pacify him. However, she successfully charms and pacifies him, and the descent is thus facilitated. The mythological narrative continues through various imperial reigns into the more clearly evidenced historical period. In this strand of the narrative, the descent (*amakudari*) from the Plain of High Heaven is the key narrative.

These three elements together present the key themes of the mythology. It is indeed a solar myth with a female divinity at the center. All the normal concomitants are present, including white stones and a white horse. (Celtic mythology, for example, presents an interesting and co-incidental parallel here.) The cave incident was one of the first pieces of the mythology ever dramatized, and is probably the root of Noh. But more than definitive in the culture is the role of purification. The entire tradition of Shinto rests on the ritual importance of purification. This is the central act in all Shinto rituals, and is linked to so many identifiable facets of Japanese life, from the penchant for bathing to the love of newness, the periodic reconstruction of shrine buildings, so that they remain eternally new, to the past tradition of demolishing and rebuilding a house in which someone had died. The importance of ritual is emphasized here also in that a ritual act of purification, performed with proper dignity is pleasing to the *kami* and ensures that the order of heaven and earth remains. We may now turn to examine some of the rituals of the Shinto tradition that have parallels in the Greek tradition, but that also help to explicate the notion of *kami*, festival, and the roots of dramaturgy.

Perpetutaion of Myth in Ritual

Before moving to the theme of drama, it is important to note another theme that is ancient in the Japanese tradition, namely phallicism, something that 19th century western critics and missionaries condemned and even encouraged the Japanese government to suppress. As we saw, the Japanese archipelago comes about as the result of the procreative act of Izanagi-no-mikoto and Izanami-no-mikoto, an act described in graphic detail. It so distressed the 19th century translator of the *Kojiki* (712), Chamberlain, that he rendered the entire narrative into Latin. He did the same when translating the passage in which Susano-o-no-mikoto frightened some workers in the palace when he threw a flayed horse through the roof. One young woman

struck her genitals against a loom and died. Shinto, in its world view, is quite open in its treatment of fertility and sexuality, and shows no sign of either the prudery or the narrow moralism associated with some western attitudes.

As one explanation of how the uninhibited vigour of phallicism at festivals can co-exist with such sober drama as Noh, it should be noted that the Japanese *kami* are understood as having two aspects to their makeup. There is the *nigimitama*, the gentler side, and the *aramitama*, the rougher or more boisterous side, visible particularly at festivals. At the level of folk Shinto, in spite of pressure to the contrary, much of the traditional fertility culture survived the enormous purges conducted during the early Meiji Period (1868–1912). In popular entertainment at village festivals, overt sexual themes were frequently depicted. Normally after a major project had been completed, banquets at which people ate and drank freely and entertained each other with song and dance of a ribald nature were a normal practice. Festival times in general were occasions when promiscuous sex was openly tolerated, rather like the Oktoberfest in Bayern, or the medieval Holy Fairs.

While the agricultural background of Japanese culture may have weakened, the tradition continues into the kind of drinking gatherings of various groups, social or corporate, where language and behaviour is tolerated that would be regarded as politically incorrect by modern western standards, but which is forgotten the next day. While fertility is fundamental to all festivals, in some shrine rites, at certain festivals, phallic symbols take pride of place during the celebrations.

The famous Henoko Matsuri or Phallus Festival of the Tagata Jinja in Komaki, near Nagoya Airport in Aichi Prefecture is one of the best known. Nearby Inuyama city's Oagata Jinja hosts the Ososo Matsuri (Vagina Festival). These festivals are intended to protect crops, cure sterility and impotence, and to guaranatee business success and fertility. Touching and kissing the sacred objects, the phallus at the Tagata Jinja Matsuri, by women, assures pregnancy, while at the Oagata Jinja, the clam, a symbol of the vagina, guarantees marital harmony, conception, and the cure of sexual diseases in addition to a good harvest.

The very survival of these festivals indicates how deeply rooted in agricultural motifs Japanese culture remains. They may not have as much relevance to the present as they did in the past, but they open another window to the understanding of the evolution of Japanese culture. It could be argued that the wilder side of the *kami* is released at the festival, but that the gentler side remains enshrined in Noh.

Ritual invocations of the *kami*, were first compiled in a text known as the *Engishiki* during the Heian period (794–1185). Most important is the *Ohbarae no Kotoba*. The *Engishiki* contains numerous liturgical forms which are associated with festivals and shrines. The manner of celebrating these events is detailed along with the form of words to be used at the time. *Norito* have certain common characteristics which seem to be the key to how they were created. Firstly, they are addressed to the *kami* of heaven, the *kami* of earth, and the myriad *kami*. Secondly, they invariably go into great descriptive detail. This is still the case when farmers are reporting their rice crop or other harvested goods at their tutelary shrine. Thirdly, they specify a date on which the offerings were made, when the purification takes place, and when the norito was recited. This is the pattern shown by analytically examining *norito* listed in the *Engishiki*, and is yet another continuing feature of Shinto rituals.

Reading *norito* in translation is not of great value as means towards their understanding.

The theology they imply is simple, if articulated in propositions derived from the study of the content. However, the ritual acts which surround the occasions on which they are intoned, the liturgical appliances, the apparel of the priests and the atmosphere which these generate are designed to create an aesthetically pleasing offering to the *kami*. This is the total context of the idea of *kotodama*, sounds that are pleasing to the *kami*. This in itself tells a great deal about the meaning, role and function of ritual in Japanese society as a whole. It is part of the total context within which drama emerged.

The Evolution of Myth into Drama

I now consider the topic of the emergence of drama. The purification rituals that linked the ancient Japanese rice culture to its self-understanding were themselves symbolic re-enactments of the primal act of Izanagi-no-mikoto. It is from this source that religious drama evolved from Shinto rituals, which, in turn expressed themes from Japanese mythology. It appears to have arisen from lengthy rituals that were performed initially by priests, whose roles were subsequently taken over by actors. Eventually, these actors performed only the early parts of the total sequences, which came to be performed as separate artistic modules.

Although it is performed in a secular context in modern times, many Noh performance still take place at shrines. Even when they do not, the actors, chorus, orchestra and stage assistants as well as costumes and masks all receive *oharai* (ritual purification) before performances. The oldest deal directly with themes from the age of the *kami* (*kami-yo*) as recorded in the classical texts already mentioned, the *Nihon Shoki* (720) and the *Kojiki* (712). As the art form developed, new themes were introduced from time to time, but in spite of its evolution, many of the ancient features still remain highly visible.

I will now give a profile of Noh and its characteristics as a form of drama, and follow this with some examples of how it arose from the culture of Shinto. As evidence of its roots in ritual, the earliest Noh plays were performed outdoors, with nature as the setting and the earth as the stage. When Kagura, sacred dance sequences, came to be performed, particularly after Chinese costumes were introduced, stages began to be erected, but again, outdoors. The shrines in which Kagura first appeared, (for example, Kasuga Taisha in Nara,) were also places where Noh was being performed. Hence, the Kagura stage became very important for the subsequent development of Noh. Dance rituals, such as the Shishimai, a harvest divination dance using a lion costume of Chinese origin, are still performed outdoors, on large reed mats, with the audience surrounding the dance area at a distance. While modern Noh theatres (Noh-gaku-do) combine roofing for the audience and the actors, two elements of tradition remind audiences of its sacral past. Firstly, there is a separate roof over the stage, as in the past, and secondly, white gravel, known as *shirasu*, is spread on the ground between the stage and the audience as a reminder of the time when the plays were performed outdoors and the gravel reflected the natural light of the sun on to the stage. A third link with Shinto is seen in the floor of the stage which is made of Japanese cypress, from which all shrine buildings are constructed.

Noh performances consist of three elements, vocalization (voices of the actors and the chorus), woodwind (the Japanese flute), and percussion (stick and hand drums). Attention to acoustics is very much part of the developed period of Noh. For example, the angle of the

ceiling is designed to amplify sounds far into the audience, to heighten the sense of immediacy. Traditionally, large stone jars were buried under the floorboards of the main stage and of the bridge-like apron that leads from the wings to the main stage, known as the *hashi-gakari*. This enhanced the sound of the actors' feet performing stamping movements during the dance. The manner of deploying these jars was a secret tradition of Noh, kept so by the generations of carpenters who build these outdoor stages. 2 Traditional Noh eschewed the use of any external or artificial effects or decorations because they affected the colors of the costumes and masks. This is further evidence of the simple origin in ritual from which it emerged.

In terms of form and content, the basis of Noh is the essence of simplicity. It can be performed with as few as two actors. The principal one is known as the *shite*, and the secondary performer is called the *waki*. The role of the *waki* is to provide the occasion for the *shite* to come to the stage, and the reason for him to perform the dance. As soon as the *shite* takes center stage, the *waki* retires to an unobtrusive corner. The absolute centrality of the *shite* is the essence and unique feature of Noh dramaturgy. Finally, actors never change roles. If one is trained as a *shite*, he will never perform as a *waki*. Likewise, a *waki* will never becomes a *shite*.

In considering each role briefly, the *shite* can be asked to fill many roles, depending upon the type of Noh. In the oldest genre, of which I shall speak shortly, the *shite* acts as a *kami* or divine being. But in later forms, he might be a soldier, a warrior, or a ghost. In response to the demand for image and presence, the mask was introduced. It is here also that Noh parts company with the other form of Japanese drama, Kabuki and China's Beijing Opera. The latter make use of heavy make-up with a thick flat-white base. In contrast, the focus in Noh is on the mask which represents the essence of the art being created. The chorus, musicians and even stage assistants must also maintain motionless faces, so that nothing detracts from the efforts of the *shite* to express the pure aesthetic form through his measured body movements. The mask, which obliterates the actor's personality is thought to have been derived from the shamanistic behaviour of priestesses who were completely possessed by the *kami* when they were uttering oracles. The *shite* is thus completely absorbed into his role.

In contrast, the *waki* usually has one of three types of role. Firstly, there is the *daijin-waki*, people of government ministerial rank, or officials in charge of important shrines and temples. The others are the *so-waki*, who are priests, and the *otoko-waki*, common village men. Since his costume identifies him, the *waki* wears neither make-up or mask.

Finally, I should note that there are five types of Noh, only one of which is relevant to this discussion. The four later forms, *Shura-mono* (Noh plays about ghosts), *Katsura-mono* (literally "wig-Noh", about women), *Zatsu-Noh*, also known as *Kyojo-mono* ("mad-women Noh", plays about slightly deranged women), and *Kichiku-mono*, (demon plays) deal with varied themes that probably reflect the historical period in which they developed. The total number of existing plays is around 240.

It is only the earliest that is of interest here. They are known as *Waki-Noh*, where the *shite* is always a *kami* or the messenger of a *kami*. The pattern is very clear. The *shite* tells the story of the origin of a shrine or recites a poetic narrative. In the second scene, he appears as the *kami* of that shrine, and performs a dance. Orchestra members performing at a *Waki-Noh* play dress in the *eboshi*, a head dress worn by Heian period courtiers and by Shinto priests

performing certain rituals. Plays in this category are preceded by the performance of *Okina* in its entirety a Shinto purification ceremony. *Okina* is made up of three dances, *Senzai, Okina*, and *Sanbaso*. After the first dance is completed, the *shite* puts on the special white mask known as the *haku-shiki-jo* while he is on-stage, and before he dances the *Okina* role. Once the dance is finished, he removes the mask, shows proper respect and reverence towards it, replaces it in its box, and leaves the stage.

The *Sanbaso* consists of a more lively stick drum performance, and a dance, the *momi-no-dan* in which the actor himself vocalizes loudly as he stamps his feet. He wears a black mask, the *koku-shiji-jo*, and carries a *suzu*, a purification implement with bells attached, which he shakes during the *suzu-no-dan*, the *suzu* dance. The dances are performed also on certain other important occasions, such as at New Year, festivals and other times. They symbolize requesting the *kami* for a good harvest and good fortune, the core purpose of all Shinto rituals and festivals.

Perhaps by taking a brief look at one of these *Waki* plays, the links in ritual will become even more apparent. On April 11th each year, at Tsubaki Grand Shrine in Suzuka City, Mie Prefecture, since its revival in 1973, he Noh drama *Uzume* has been performed. After the Civil War period, General, Oda Nobunaga (1534–82) attempted to destroy the shrine and the play was neglected for 300 years, the *shite* role was performed by the Reverend Hisanori Kongo, of the Kongoryu School of Noh. Its setting is the Shrine precinct itself when the camellias are in full bloom. Tsubaki Gand Shrine, located in Mie Prefecture, is the First Shrine of the ancient Province of Ise, and enshrines Sarutahiko-Okami, *kami* of pioneering and development, along with Ameuzume-no-mikoto, his wife, referred to in the mythological incident when she danced to entice Amaterasu-Omikami out of the Ame-no-Iwato (the Cave of Heaven).

The principal actor takes the part of Shinto priest reciting a *norito* in front of the Uzume Wakamiya, the building in which Uzume is enshrined. Suddenly, a beautiful and noble woman appears. The priests asks her where she is from, and in reply, she narrates the mythological incident in which Amaterasu is enticed out of the Ame-no-Iwato by her dance. The woman says that she has come to visit the shrine because of its divine virtue. The priest is very impressed by the intricate detail in which she describes the incident of the *kami-yo*, the age of the *kami*. She then conceals herself behind the sanctuary building, and promises to reappear and perform the sacred dance of Ameuzume-no-mikoto in front of the Ame-no-Iwato.

The priest continues his duties, and has summoned several dancers to perform Kagura. They see a bright light in the sky, and at the same time, the shrine buildings suddenly begin to shake. There is a great noise, and the woman reappears as the embodiment of Ameuzume-no-mikoto. She begins to explain the history and origins of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine. She explains how Sarutahiko-Okami guided the descent (*amakudari*) of the grandson of Amaterasu, Ninigi-no-mikoto, and led him to Ise. She explains how she met and married the principal *kami* of the shrine. She demonstrates how the world can be peaceful and how people can live in harmony. She assures them that the bond between the human and the *kami* remains in tact, and that prosperity will ensue. Finally, she makes a sweeping gesture with her sleeve and turning round, returns to the Plain of High Heaven by the Floating Bridge of Heaven.

All the important pieces of evidence are found in that performance. They show the

intimate link between myth, ritual and drama in the Shinto tradition. The sequence I infer from the above is that once the rice culture of Japan had been created, (although it is likely that even before that, expressions of self-understanding had been generated,) mythological explanations were used to give a context of meaning to the kinds of rituals that had been used to show respect to the divine. The written forms of these date to the 8th century, although the themes of earlier centuries are to be found in the famous poetic collection the *Man'yoshu*, the Thousand Leaves Collection. It is clear from these poems what kind of world of divine beings the Japanese saw themselves as inhabiting. Purfication rites were practised which became stylized with appropriate *norito* during the Heian Period (794–1185). The earliest forms of Noh appear to have arisen out of festival rituals as ancillary explanations of shrine culture, intended for worshippers to see and understand. From there, it is but a step to professionalizing the modules, but as the case of the Tsubaki Grand Shrine Noh illustrates, the *shite* actors of the Kongoryu School are priests, and the play does indeed set forth the origins of the shrine. This format is typical of the oldest genre of Noh, and demonstrates its proximity to the rituals of Shinto.

Prima Facie Contrasts betweem Greek Drama and Noh

Before proceeding to discuss similarities and contrasts, two initial points should be noted. Firstly, the Greek tradition had historical dramatists, principally Sophocles (496–406 B.C.E.), Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.E.), and Euripides (484–407 B.C.E.). Its plays were of three kindsm tragedies, comedies, or histories. While very little remains of the total number of play most probably written, the character of Greek drama is fairly clear. By contrast, historical themes exist in Noh, but no historical personalities are recorded as having composed the oldest plays. The development of Noh during the Edo period (1600–1868) saw it stylized into the form in which we now see it, but the oldest plays, those which are closest to Shinto rituals, have no known authors.

Secondly, while comedy is found in some allusions in Noh, it is confined to two styles that evolved within Noh. There is *Sarugaku* (monkey music) which consisted of varied acts like juggling, sword-swallowing, and acrobatics, which were performed at festival times. There is also *Kyogen* ("crazy words"), which were comic interludes between serious dramas. Although arranged and connected differently, all the elements are present in both Greek and Japanese traditions suggesting again that the evolution of drama went through similar phases wherever it developed.

However, in spite of a possible common path of evolution, it must be said that similarities end there. To summarize the unique features of Noh, which help to make the contrasts with classical Greek Drama clear, I would begin by linking its elements into a kind of working characterization. It is a highly stylized form of drama which uses music and a dance performance as its principal component. It does not concern itself with plot development, nor with any deep philosophical issues. Rather it is devoted to creating the atmosphere and context within which a single emotion or mood can be expressed, and through which purity or beauty can be sensed and felt. All aspects of the story are subordinated to this, and even consistency and rationality may be sacrificed. Everything must be simplified and refined to create the most intense and concentrated effect on the audience. The manner of

vocalization must be exact and perfect, in the same sense that the *norito* in rituals must be intoned according to set traditional forms, because they posess *kotodama*, the quality of soul that makes the *kami* pleased.

This approach is characteristic of all Japanese performing arts where heavy stylization achieves aesthetically pleasing forms. *Ikebana* (a kind of flower arrangement), *Sado* (tea ceremony), *Sumi-e* (black and white painting), and *haiku* (a poetic form) all share this feature. Anything may be sacrificed in the interests of refined beauty. Noh thus does not fit into any western category of drama. It is more musical than western musicals, because it is in reality a complex dance set to song. It is not lyrical in the sense of western opera, and is neither conversational nor interested in profound issues. One Japanese scholar, observed, suggestively that its effect is closer to liturgy, or the effect of Gregorian chant than to anything else known in the western world.

This stands in stark contrast to what I have considered one of the essential features of the Greek dramatic tradition, its framework of rationality and its concern with serious psychological or philosophical issues. Themes such as found in *Oedipus Rex* could never be the object of Noh simply because their enormity would detract from the aesthetics of the performance.

Looking at the Greek tradition, there is not much evidence of ethno-centrism, which is assumed in Noh, because the *kami* are Japanese, and they are related to places within the country. Superfluous imagery is also a feature of Noh, partly through Chinese influence, but also because of the need to express rank and dignity is overt form. Actors pore over the costumes, and select which mask they will use with great care. The form of the dance and the style of vocalization is also the responsibility of the performer, hence Noh performances may vary each time, depending upon how the performers have prepared themselves. Both types share the act of celebrating by word and action some deeply felt concern or idea, the presentation of the cardinal elements of the myths of a cult, but where belief is an issue in Greek drama, only feelings are relevant in Noh.

Yet the question of similarities lingers. It is perhaps here that the universal elements are to be found. The use of masks, the performers being men, the *amakudari*, the descent from heaven matches the deus ex machina, outdoor performances in custom built theatres, the existence of a chorus and so forth make an interesting list. But these are not the result of causal influence. Rather they seem to belong to the category of universals that arise out of practice rather than any intellectual reason.

Some of the universal sources of drama are easier to identify than others. The human instinct for narrative and for impersonation is one. But for the Greek dramatists, the true root is the desire for the ritualistic expression and interpretation of the power of natural forces within the cycle of life and death. It is as Sophocles put it “the encounter of man with more than man”. For Noh, it is the appreciation of refined beauty as an act of spiritual devotion that takes priority.

Concluding Observations

If what I have argued is true, then what constitutes the major difference between the Japanese and the Greek paradigm? In my view, it is the same issue that divides the Chinese from the

Japanese, and that tells all. In a word—"rationality". The Japanese have remained intuitive, as a model for moral sense theory, and probably the oldest surviving model of how myth, ritual and drama linked in pre-modern times.

According to my general theory, the Japanese have remained in essence, dominated by aesthetic concerns,—the "Beautiful", as against the "True" and the "Good". The culture of the Chinese was drawn to the ideal of the "Good" in the social concerns of Confucian culture. The western world is much more concerned with the "True", following the Greek tradition. Hence it leads to secularization and demythologization. Japan remained guided by nature without science. Japanese culture is preoccupied with, in the Aristotelian sense, form as against substance, or with the primacy of appearance over reality. The meaning of life lies in the performance of rituals which are scripted and formatted and which the *kami* appreciate. This is the background to Noh. At the popular end, the festivals cope with the other wide range of ritual and symbolic concerns.

In closing there remains one final interesting question, namely in what manner and why did drama as ritual transform itself into drama as entertainment? Dr. Johnson's famous statement "The drama's laws the drama's patrons give" may hold a clue. Certainly economic problems during the Edo period (1600–1868) resulted in the creation of spectator events such as Kabuki and Sumo. Noh was also stylized during that period. For whatever reason, a process of evolution took over which created an independent art form. But that is a question for further investigation.

Just as I began with a quotation from a western scholar who saw great parallels between Shinto and the cults of Greece, I will conclude with a quotation from another western thinker in the same mould. I think it provides a fitting conclusion to the argument.

> Shinto is, strictly speaking, the cult of the native land. The *kamis*, venerated by the Shintoists, include, together with the ancestors of the clans, the nature-divinities; those of the mountains and the plains, the seasons and the hours, those who whisper among the reeds and dance upon the waves….
> Like the Hellenic cults, Shintoism seeks out the most picturesque sites for its sanctuaries….
> In this religion of the East, the trees and waters in the liturgy often rises to heights of real grandeur: "Give ear," says the officiating priest; "I declare in the presence of the sovereign gods of harvest that if they cause the late-ripening harvest, produced by the sweat of our arms and the slime of the rice-field, pressed between our thighs, to be lavish ears of corn, I will offer them as a first-fruit, a thousand ears of rice and the sake contained in the bulging jars drawn up in a row." This might almost be a poem of Hesiod's.
>
> Shintoism lies at the root of the whole of Japanese culture. Japanese drama and lyrical poetry have their origin in the religious tones and liturgical songs in which the Shintoists proclaimed their participation in the universal life and joy … a religion, as we can see, that was at once very simple and most profound, and had affinities in many respects with the Greek cults.
>
> Rene Grousset, *The Civilizations of the East: Japan* (translated from the French by Catherine Phillips of *Les Civilizations de l'Orient*, G. Cres, 1930. Edition Alfred A. Knopf, 1934: 13–15).

Notes

1. This paper was presented by invitation at the Harvard University Center for Classical Studies Colloquium on the theme "From Ritual to Drama", held in Washington D.C., August 15 to 20, 2000.
2. For the record, after the Pacific War, all theaters were rebuilt with artificial lighting, and now employ cones filled with sand to replace the jars.

Some Principal Reference Works

Blau, Hagen (1966). *Sarugaku und Shushi, Beitrage zur Ausbildung dramatischer Elemente in weltlilchen under religiosen Volkstheater der Heian-Zeit unter besondere Breucksichtigung seiner sozialen Grundlagen*.

Boyd, James W. and Williams, Ron. G. (1999). Artful Means: An Aesthetic View of Shinto Ritual Practice. *Journal of Ritual Studies*, 13, no. 1 (Summer 1999): 37–52.

Garfias, Robert. (1959).*Gagaku: The Music and Dances of the Japanese Imperial Household*. New York: Theater Art Books.

Gundert, Wilhelm. (1926). *Der Shintoismus im Japanischen No-Drama*. Tokyo: Vevlag der Deutschen gesellschaft für natur-und Volkerkunde Ostasiens.

Harada, Toshiaki. (1961). The Development of Matsuri. *Philosophical Studies of Japan*. Tokyo: Japanese National Commission for UNESCO, Vol. II.

Hoff, Frank. (1977). The "Evocation" and "Blessing" of Okina: A performance of Ritual Kagura. *Alcheringa Ethnopoetics*, 3, 1.

Hoff, Frank. (1978). Shinto and the Performing Arts. *Song, Dance Storytelling: Aspects of the Performing Arts in Japan*. Cornell University East Asian Papers, 15.

Honda Yasuji. (1974). Yamabushi Kagura and Bangaku Performance in the Japanese Middle Ages and Folk Performance Today. *Educational Theatre Journal*, 26, 2.

Iwamoto Tokuichi. (1970). *Shinto saishi no kenkyu* (Research into Japanese Rituals). Tokyo: Kodansha.

Jinja Honcho (1970). *Jinja Shinto Shrines and Festivals*. Tokyo: Kokugakuin University, 1985.

Kreiner, Josef (1969). *Dir Kulturorganisation des Jajanischen Dorfes*. Vienna: Braumüller.

Kurabayashi Masatsugu (1975). *Matsuri no kozo* (The Structure of the Festival).

Muller, Gerhild. (1971). *Kagura: die Lieder der Kagura am Naishidokoro*. Weishaden: Harrasowitz.

Nihon minzoku geino jiten (Dictionary of Japanese Folk Entertaiment Arts) (1969). Daiiichi Houki.

Okada Shoji. (1987). The Development of State Ritual in Ancient Japan. *Acta Asiatica* (Toho Gakkai), 51: 22–41.

Satow, E. M. (1879; 1881). Ancient Japanese Rituals. *Transactions of the Asiatic Society of Japan*, VII: 97–132; IX: 182–211.

Yanagita Kunio (1962–71). *Nihon no matsuri* (The Festivals of Japan). *Teihon Yanagita Kunio shu*, Vol. 10.