

**THE WOMAN WHO NEVER WAS: SOCIAL
CONTROL AND FAN POWER IN EARLY KABUKI
THEATRE**

The author dedicates the present work to the memory of Master Natsuo Horikoshi – Ichikawa

Danjūrō XII – 1936 – 2013.



十二代目市川團十郎

Introduction: The Call of Eternity

Outside, the snow had been coming down all day, and the quiet road outside the Korakukan – the wooden Kabuki theatre which had been built in the small Akita Prefecture mining town of Kosakain 1913 – was already under a thick blanket of white. The iced windsnaked through the cracks in the old building like the foreboding of dread, and as the small knots of men and women huddled round their heaters, practicing the calling of archaic phrases, or actor’s names in time with their leader, the day seemed to me rather out of phase...

I knew what they were about, of course.

How could I not? After all, I had known these folks for years. Yet, even after all that time I was still used to *kakegoe* [掛け声 – hanging words] primarily as part of the overall experience of watching kabuki theatre. Here however, in this isolated, wooden building, in front of an empty stage, the whole proceedings were unsettling. One might even say ghostly.

These words, these “call backs” are tokens of encouragement and support for actors, narrators, and musicians in plays, and are considered so important to the traditional atmosphere of professional kabuki that, according to Sakamoto Yoshinori, the leader of Akita Prefecture’s Actors Association, the Shochiku Company¹ regularly gives free tickets to the members of a number different *kakegoe* guilds around Japan, including his own small company of fans.²

It costs them a fortune to have even cheaper seats permanently reserved around each performance at large theatres around the country, simply for people who seem to do nothing but shout at actors. And it certainly confuses new-comers to kabuki, who often think that this sort of exuberance is more suited to a sumo match. [...] These voices are, though today codified and restrained to the point that each play has unique calls at specified points, essential to remind the fans that this form of theatre – the kabuki tradition – is uniquely theirs, if they were but to realize it. [...] What I mean by that is that this theatre, more than Noh, more than Bunraku, and certainly more than the glass-walled modern theatre is owned by its fans. It was created by its audience, transformed by their needs, the center of their daily lives and the representation of their hopes, dreams and fears. *Kakegoe* are the echoes of Izumo-no-Okuni, and the fans who built her art into their own lives, just as she built their lives into her art.³

He might have said more, but at that moment one of the theatre staff, distant and ashen as a ghost herself interrupted the recording and quietly announced that Ichikawa Danjūrō XII had died.

Suddenly, no-one had anything to say.

¹ The Shochiku Company is the agency which has controlled most of the large kabuki and bunraku houses in Japan for over a hundred years.

² Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 4 February 2013.

³ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 4 February 2013.



Master Danjūrō XII in the role of Saito-Musashibo-Benkei,
in ‘Kanjincho’ [勧進帳 – The Subscription Scroll]

Though this is not meant to be a eulogy for the great master, it must be said that Danjūrō XII, the leading actor of his generation, and one of the most fervent supporters of kabuki fan groups, such as Mr. Sakamoto’s *kakegoe* club, had restored modern kabuki in the eyes of many of its fans – transforming a declining post-war theatre from an increasingly out-of-touch anachronism into a more lively, entertainment which approached the vigor, if not the license, of its founding and heyday. With his open performances – especially the great, three month long *shūmei* [襲名 – naming ceremony]⁴ which celebrated him taking the Danjūrō name in 1984 – he was seen as a true populist, the inheritor of Izumo-no-Okuni’s theatre tradition and the actor who brought kabuki back to the common people. Indeed, as Dr. Michio Katsumata suggests, these attempts to draw a modern fan-base to kabuki by Danjūrō XII were central to his leadership of the Ichikawa family in the 1980s and ‘90s, after he took over the clan.

⁴ Professional Japanese actors take on different names at different stages in their careers, with the large performing families often reserving specific titles as marks of status within the family. For example, in the Ichikawa clan, the name Danjūrō has been associated with the leader of the family since the eighteenth century.

I remember [Danjūrō XII] saying that critics in the theatre community, especially in the broadsheets considered his activities to be demeaning and dragging the art down into the gutter. However, it is my contention that such a move was absolutely necessary for the long-term survival of kabuki, from Shochiku's perspective as audiences had begun to trail off in the 1970s, as the theatre became seen in ever more elite terms. [...] In truth, Danjūrō XII was giving *kabuki* back to the fans, or at least trying to, and if that involved taking control of the rights to signify and define the theatre and giving them to people who were seemingly beneath the notice of the critical establishment, then so much the better. After all, it was on such ordinary fans, and an awareness of what such ordinary people wanted that [Izumo-no-]Okuni herself built the very first kabuki theatres.⁵

I: Who Owns Culture?

This paper, concerns the dynamics of certain aspects of early kabuki theatre fan culture and the ways in which the seemingly “passive” relationship between fans and professionals actually proved essential in the sort of social processes by which Edo period stage art was signified. As Danjūrō XII believed, such arts were not just the province of the actors, or political figures, or wealthy patrons alone. Rather, the creation of Edo period theatre – like all art, and all culture – represents nothing short of a process of controlled negotiation in which numerous agents act to create social reality; with the most important of these agents being the common, “garden variety” fans themselves.

Indeed, it is this interplay between the agents, especially the fan participants, in such negotiation which we take as our central theme, in that we focus at least as much on the way in which fans have interpreted their passion for each other as on the actual nature of the art.

This may not seem a very important aspect of the argument, but it is proposed that when examining the development of any non-elite, collective culture – not just Japanese kabuki

⁵ Katsumata, Michio. Professor and Director, Akita International University. Interview with the author, 25 March 2013.

fandom – the key to understanding the thing itself is understanding the way in which participants come together to actively create the reality of the property in question.

Therefore, this paper deals with the control of culture and the way in which different parties are willing to debate – even compromise – their perceived rights to determine the course of a given cultural property’s development.

This was especially important for those people who lived and worked within the confines of the burgeoning Japanese urban centers, which became the heart of cultural transformation in the seventeenth century. Indeed, across the span of a hundred and fifty years, from the end of the sixteenth century, the debate over the control of what might be called fundamental Japanese culture itself, turned into a very heated debate among the various negotiating communities – as governmental, scholarly, moneyed, outcaste and popular groups jockeyed with each other for the rights to express their views on, as well as directly shape their chosen areas of interest. Thus, the exploration and examination of this conflict within the Japanese theatre arts community is the overall purpose of this paper, which attempts to raise one of the most important questions which we face as fans of anything: who actually owns culture?

To analyze current trends in Japanese cultural practices as a collectivized response to the uncertainty of a rapidly changing social framework is certainly a very attractive one. With the cultural/fanstudies movement largely perceived in academic/other elite circles as a modern, intellectual practice it is easy to see the fascination with common cultural trappings as little more than a search for a process of personal catharsis at a time of great unease for developed peoples; people who have ever easier access to the cultural map of the world at large, through increasingly global media than to their own history and heritage. However, while focusing on this process as a post-modern, emotional or political phenomenon certainly makes study of the

matter so much easier, to do so totally obfuscates a very pertinent fact concerning the mechanics of the control process.

This is the fact that what is commonly the root of fan interest is simply the most recent incarnation of an ongoing process of development which has been central to the maintenance of notions of social identity for as long as people have been thinking animals.

The forms of modern fandom may be different, but the fact remains that the interpretation and preservation of common cultural reality is not something which is unique to our age, especially in Japan. From Oe-no-Masafusa's "fan" publishing of Heian period agricultural songs to Hirata Atsutane's fascination with Akita fishing techniques in the nineteenth century, cultural properties which today would be described as common or non-elite have long been central to the creation of the negotiated meaning of reality for many groups within that society.

II: We Are All Fools, Whether We Dance or Not... So, We Might as Well Dance⁶

As the Civil Wars in Japan finally began to wind down following the Battle of Sekigahara in 1600, a young woman is said to have begun dancing *kagura* [神楽 – entertainment for the Gods] at the grand shrine at Izumo.

Girls had long been associated with pacification of *kami* in Japan by the time that this Okuni is said to have taken up the practice, and she proved quite able, popular even with the folks who paid to see her dance for Amaterasu at the shrine.

I say "seems to," for though Okuni is lauded today as the founder of kabuki, and her accepted biography has become part of canon law for the theatre, there is still no *absolute*

⁶Japanese traditional proverb.

consensus as to who this woman was, nor where she came from, nor of what her actual training was in.



Image 1: A print of Izumo no Okuni, from the "Okuni Kabuki-zu Byōbu" [阿國歌舞伎圖屏風] - a six-panel screen of street life in Kyoto. Circa 1600. Artist unknown. Courtesy of the Kyoto National Museum. Public Domain Image.

The first we know with even reasonable certainty, is that a woman, who claimed to have been a *miko* [神子 – shrine maiden] at the Grand Izumo Shrine arrived in Kyoto in the summer of 1600 on a *kanjin* [勧進 – donation/subscription] tour for her shrine. Such trips were not uncommon, both in the native faith and in Buddhism, and often involved entertainers brought along to enliven crowds and elicit donations through the wonders of the travelling spectacle. In the case of the native faith, such religious entertainment had actually been common since the

time of the Heian period, in which *kagura* performances were regarded directly as entertainment, not only for the people who came to worship at the shrine, but actually for the *kami* themselves.⁷

Just as with many other countries, religious centers in Japan became the seed from which secular entertainment and theatre sprang, and in the middle ages simple dances to the *kami* gave way to a wealth of other arts, such as militarist *Noh*, liturgical *Ennen*, dramatic *Sarugaku* and puppets of the *Ebisu Mai*. Ritual and entertainment, entwining and blending to serve different social purposes at the hands of many different patrons, each of whom sought to extract from these performances more than common entertainment or expressions of simple faith.

Take the *Noh*, for example. Here was an art form, almost “cobbled” together, if one will permit the indelicacy, by the father/son duo of Kan’ami Kiyotsugu [観阿弥清次 – c.1332 to c.1384] and Zeami Motokiyo [世阿弥元清 – c.1363 to c.1443] at the behest of the venal Shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu [足利義満 – 1358 to 1408].

Kan’ami, who had won popular acclaim due to his superb acting skills in *Dengaku* [田楽 – field music] saw real possibilities for improvement in the state of Japanese arts in general and began adopting other forms of art into his *Dengaku* troupe’s routine. Taking the best of music, dance, narrative and costumes to create an art which he aimed at a very specific group of patrons, who he knew would have the resources to support his family’s ambitions.

However, his art was not about rituals to the gods, nor about supporting the Imperial Court, nor even about the agricultural cycle. Kan’ami and Zeami were writing plays and devising art for a culturally overlooked group of powerful negotiators in Japanese society who were desperately seeking for something to call their own in an age which they themselves had made:
The samurai.

⁷Gunji, Masakatsu. *Kabuki to Yoshiwara*. (歌舞伎と吉原) [Kabuki and Yoshiwara] (Tokyo: Awaji Shobo. 1956. Page 32)

When the Minamoto crushed the Imperial Court and their Fujiwara enemies in the Gempei Wars (1180–1185), they established a government based on the rituals of the military. These warriors had entered the capital as uncultured bandit lords, who were taken into the society of Heian-kyo and educated as guardians of a fragile status-quo. As a consequence, even after the establishment of the Kamakura Government, the general attitude of the Court was that these samurai were little more than barbarians who, though clearly victorious in war, were not so powerful that they could dismiss or destroy the Imperial Families against which they had fought, as the ritual authority of the Emperor was still the root of the power to which the *Bakufu* [幕府 – military government] clung. All they had, culturally speaking, was copied or stolen from the Court and this led to much of the criticism of Yoritomo – and the way in which rebel Court factions attempted to undermine the regime, through attacking its lack of enculturation (especially during the “Northern and Southern” period, during which two Imperial Courts existed, both pouring scorn onto the shogunate as much as on each other).

A simple and trivial matter to be sure, and one which you might think would not worry powerful men such as the Minamoto and Ashikaga shoguns. Yet, worry they did – for in a world in which alliances could be made and broken on perceptions alone, the image of authority was just as important as the swords which supported it directly. This was the age in which the earliest forms of *bushido* [武士道 – the way of the warrior] were laid down by the *Bakufu* – an attempt to provide social regulation for the warrior class. Moreover, this was the age in which the samurai began seeking comfort in a variety of religious practices – with many temples and shrines actively reworking religion to suit the needs of the military.

Kan’ami recognized that the one thing which the warrior class was missing was an art of their own – and that might sound odd in the extreme, but just think about it for a moment...

This was a society ruled by ritual, and with an art of their own to present to the Court, the *Bakufu* were able to impose a very specific view of social order (based on a military model) onto Courtiers who had no choice but to accept it. The samurai were the rulers of the land, and yet were required to sit quietly in the Court and pay lip service to individuals who, though being essentially prisoners, scoffed at the “socially backwards” warrior-lords. Kan’ami’s family has helped redress this situation, in that it has opened up the Court to the true nature of life, for their daily round of ritual and performance had become dominated by Noh.

The country was guided by the sword, and the sword was guided by the Noh.

III: Who Is in and Who Is Out?

Noh, however had little impact outside its martial and Court fans, for this was what we might style as an exclusive fandom; wrapped up in forms of ritual and symbolism that were costly to stage, difficult to grasp and were almost impossible to study if one could not satisfy the various gatekeepers who maintained the art for their masters.

These however, were the people whom Okuni was allegedly sent to fete and cajole in 1600, when her troupe from Izumo arrived in Kyoto, yet in this elitist, protective clique that she encountered a man who proved to be not only the key to her transformation as an artist, but also the secret to creating Japan’s first national fan craze, Nagoya Sansaburo [名古屋山三郎 – c. 1572 to c. 1604].⁸

One might not credit the nephew of the abstemious Oda Nobunaga with the creation of kabuki. This young man, from a noble family might have railed against the priestly life to which his blood condemned him in the rule of his uncle’s successor, but we are better off today for the fact that Sansaburo was little better than a sot, who preferred to spend his family’s wealth on

⁸Kawatake, Toshio. *Kabuki Biron* (歌舞伎美論) [A Kabuki History] (Tokyo: Tokyo University Press. 1989).

drink, bawdy dances, and hiring prostitutes, in preference to earning his uncle eternal peace through pious prayer.

During his life in Kyoto, dwelling among the townsfolk and outcastes of this Imperial Capital, Sansaburo seems to have acquired something of an understanding of the ordinary folk that the rulers simply ignored, or could not comprehend. He accepted that it was upon the backs of these ordinary people that the whole of society rested, and that the State which ignored such folk did so at their peril.

The way in which the Japanese feudal system operated in the middle ages not only gave supreme social authority to the military and priestly classes, but also prized agricultural labor – the products of which were the whole basis of the value of the realm at the end of the sixteenth century⁹ – and gave little regard to people who were seen as parasitic; special status outcastes, townsfolk, merchants, *ronin*, wanderers, and so on. The irony here though is that, even before the rise of the Tokugawa, who are considered to be the great urban planners of early modern Japan, the old castle towns of the feudal era were beginning to expand into the sort of cities which would dominate the culture of the coming centuries.

As Stephen Turnbull reminds us, this was an age in which parochial, feudal thinkers were being asked to govern through the increasingly important hubs which cities were becoming, whilst holding onto a social outlook which treated most who lived within those areas as the scum of the very Earth, and regarded as little better than the outcaste peoples who had long done all the dirty work required of society. Tanners, leatherworkers, morticians and such like, along with ritual specialists, “entertainers” without more profitable trades and merchants, who simply made

⁹ Shortly before he died, Toyotomi Hideyoshi instituted a survey of his unified land, calculating all value on the production of rice in a given area. The unit derived – the koku, meaning the amount of rice needed to feed one person for a year (about 287 litres in dry grain).

money on the backs of others were seen as bleeding a society which was tuned only to the trinity of service to the gods, service on the battlefield and service to the soil.¹⁰

The problem was that the society of the end of the sixteenth century could not, or would not adapt quickly enough to the alterations taking place in it, as the folk who had been drawn to fortified towns during the decades of violence began to see urban life as the norm. [...] These people, had little enough to call their own, and defined their existence almost exclusively through the urban environment, in which they lived, literally on the very brink. They were the first lost generation of modern Japan; a dark shadow of the future of which the rulers of the land had no understanding and it can be seen as no wonder that Sansaburo, who was another lost child, cast out of his place by the vicissitudes of fate would find so much potential in them.¹¹

These people “on the brink” were known in Kyoto at the time as *kawaramono* [河原者 – folk of the riverbank] as they often made their homes upon the flood-plains of the local rivers, especially the Kamo-gawa, which ran to the east of the city proper. This land was prone to flooding in the wet seasons and, as such was claimed by no one. It was not subject to tax and was free to all who could build on it. In the Heian period, this land had been the ideal place to which the community might exile its filthy work (the tanners, morticians, butchers and so on), but by the time of Sansaburo, the *kawara* had become not only the workplace of low traders, but also a place for the dispossessed and marginalized. It had become the home of what we might see as disaffection with the years of war, and the center of resistance to the increasingly rigid systems coming in on the heels of the political consolidation, and outright despotism of the Three Great Generals (Nobunaga, Hideyoshi, and Ieyasu).¹²

I do not suggest that Sansaburo was a political ideologue in any way, merely that he recognized that in the *Kawara* places, the ordinary folk of Kyoto – both *kawaramono* and *heimin*

¹⁰Dr. Stephen Turnbull. University of Leeds. Interview with the author, 16 June 2008.

¹¹Dr. Stephen Turnbull. University of Leeds. Interview with the author, 16 June 2008.

¹²Yamaguchi, Hiro. *Geijutsu to Hou* (芸術と法) [Art and the Law] (Tokyo: Shogakusha. 2001).

– sought diversion from the weight of the modern world, and gave their devotions over to the hedonistic pleasures of the brothels, restaurants, and proto-theatres. This was a ramshackle, liminal existence for its aficionados, balanced upon the very edge of acceptability and morality, and a place to which people went to cast off the worries of the day, before escaping into a shared dream of pleasure, unity, and common understanding. Like the famous Yoshiwara that would be constructed in Edo later in the seventeenth century, the tented city of the Kamo-gawa was a Floating World – which had to be temporarily pulled down each year to accommodate the flooding of the river – and more than a den of vice, corruption, and filth, no matter what the Government might have to say on the subject.

This was the decadent heart of a rotten system, and if places like the Kamo-gawa represented nothing more than unbridled licentiousness to the ruling elite, then it was only because those people who patronized the place, both low and high, had come to see it as the only way to relieve themselves of the burdens of their age. The clients of this community were searching for something upon which they could hang their desires and that is where Okuni stepped in.

Whatever her personal history, or her reasons for doing what she did, she acted as the pole around which popular desire to express and define reality spun - even if it was in the teeth of authority figures who had little regard for people like her and her audience.

The name she gave us, kabuki, possibly derived from the word *katamuki* [傾き - slanting] gives an insight into the deviance she recognized, actively courted, and whole-heartedly supported in the margins of Kyoto society.

Around her, she gathered all the flotsam and jetsam of the *kawara* – the prostitutes, the singers, the street urchins, and magicians. She created the largest dance troupe in the city and

offered everything which one might need in such a place of other-worldly pleasure. Food, drink, companionship were all there to be had, but – most importantly of all – Okuni’s efforts legitimized the *kawara*, and the *kawaramono*, by tearing down all the social boundaries which those above continually imposed upon those beneath.

The equality of this endeavor was in its name.

It was first known as *okunikabuki* [阿国かぶき], then as *onnakabuki* [女かぶき – Women’s *Kabuki*] before being contracted to its ultimate form. At her dance hall, all were welcome, and sat side by side with each other, no matter of their social status. Here, only the beating heart and the common desires of that organ mattered. She was the Queen of Misrule, in a world that placed women – for her cast was mostly female – at the center of an almost ritualistic form of hedonism, and gave all participants over to the very nature of absolute pleasure.

I say this with no sense of irony here, for what Okuni was doing was no different from that which all *miko* did when they danced for the *kami*. Those “worshippers” who flocked to her dance hall offered up desire, respect, love, and coin in return for a chance to receive the blessings of the remote, ethereal figures on the stage – figures who could bless them far more directly and profoundly than any *kami* might. This was a new age, and perhaps, for the people who lived in the growing underclass of the cities, gods like Okuni were the new power. They were figures able to move whole bodies of people on the back of seemingly simple, but undeniably powerful emotions, born, as Michio Katsumata tells us, out of the very nature of Japanese faith itself.

All one has to do is look at the *Kojiki* [古事記 – Record of Ancient Things], which is the record of the founding of the nation. A political document to be sure, but one that reveals the human nature of the Japanese gods; they are proud, emotional, even childish. They are mortal frailties in immortal forms, as the saying goes. [...] And, if you think about it, Okuni is there directly framed, in the form of *Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto* [天宇受売命], the *kami* who threw off her clothes, jumped onto an upturned bucket, and

danced for the assembled gods, when Amaterasu was hiding in a rock-cave in after an argument with her brother. [...] Like the naked *kami* whose dancing brought Heaven to its knees with low and base desire, Okuni stripped all the artifice out of her fans, and made them revel in their commonalities and in their beautiful human baseness.¹³

The Night-Realm of Okuni's kabuki was a brutally beautiful, inverted re-imagining of the refined world of the shrine at which she danced in her youth, and to which devoted "religious fans" had clustered, sharing a common sense of purpose, no matter how different they might otherwise have been. Where the shrine was closed and ritually barred to all but the pure, Okuni's tents were open to all. Where the *kami* were bound safely away in the body of the *miko*, greedily taking in donations and offering little back but fragile hope, Okuni and her own dancers made themselves gods and rewarded their followers directly, and in equal measure with the offerings they made. This was the religion of the Bottom Line, and made no secret, nor took shame from the fact that they refused no one that could pay their way, willing to become whatever their audience needed them to be.

Yet this was the real problem for the authorities.

IV: Them as Pays the Piper...

Any alternative cultural phenomenon tends to become a moral issue for those who do not understand it in the context of its time, or who try to oppose what they see as dangerous deviation from the norm. It is as if battle-lines are drawn with camps forming up around the producers of a given culture, consumers and the authority figures who are, like a two-headed ogre simultaneously attempting to exploit and limit the development of the fandoms which sprout in such an environment.

¹³ Katsumata, Michio. Professor and Director, Akita International University. Interview with the author, 25th

Whilst Kyoto's common folk were content to roll around in the mire and debauch themselves they were of no account to the warlords and the Imperial Court. It is all very easy to write off something as beneath one's notice when your own people are not affected by it, but Okuni's kabuki quickly drew the attention of everyone in Kyoto, and beyond because, as Stephen Turnbull tells us, it appealed to a form of primal, very human tribalism that superseded all other concerns.

It is difficult to accept that the Tokugawa could miss the irony of expecting that men who had been trained to fight, and were conditioned to express themselves in very powerful emotional terms would be able to so meekly manage their moral observances in time of peace, so that they would not fall into low ways. Inviting [Okuni] to Edo Castle when her troupe was in the city is just one example of how little the government misunderstood her power until it was too late to contain. This hypocrisy was not new at the beginning of the seventeenth century, nor unique to Japan. However, it honestly does seem to have taken the incoming *Bakufu* by surprise when so many of their troops quickly fell to drinking, whoring and dueling for the attention of Okuni's girls.¹⁴

The Japanese version of "bread and circuses" which had been tolerated when it served to keep the lower classes quiet, became a serious moral panic when Ieyasu discovered that Okuni had not only organized the local entertainers into a perverse sort of religion of carnality, but also inspired the sort of dedicated following of which both gods and generals would have been jealous.

Okuni might be said to have provided the narrative structure around which successful fan groups have always seemed to form. Appealing to the inclusive nature of the most common human desires, and without the sort of discrimination which limits the growth of many such trends, she was able to draw fans from all sorts of social groups, which is what brought her people to the notice of the government.

¹⁴Dr. Stephen Turnbull. University of Leeds. Interview with the author, 16th June 2008

We tend to think of the charismatic authority of popular culture figures as something of a modern phenomenon; given birth in the Counter Culture's televised opposition to the Vietnam War, and brought to full realization in the Net Age. However, the fear for the new Shogunate at the beginning of the seventeenth century was that this Okuni figure represented a form of cultural egalitarianism which undermined the very principles of defined castes which various *bakufu* had maintained as proper, ever since the Imperial Court first imported scruffy soldiers to do their own dirty work. Indeed, how hard must it have been to sell the idea of the innate nobility of certain people, or the innate corruption of others when a whole city's adult male population seemed willing to sit cheek-by-jowl with each other laughing at, and lusting after a collection of performers who made mock of every social convention imaginable?

Okuni's business might have been created with the stated purpose of making as much money as possible for her and her sponsor, Sansaburo. However, her fan club was formed on the basis of nothing more than recognition of simple humanity. It forced all who entered into it to recognize their commonalities, expressed in the basest, and yet most beautiful forms – companionship, happiness and desire.

By the end of 1609, she had traveled to and from all the major cities in the land, and inspired dozens – if not hundreds – of performers to adopt and adapt her kabuki to their own environments, setting off a myriad of cultural conflicts over which the prosaic, imperturbable authorities flustered. She had been a deviant spark, and the fire that first blazed forth on the Kyoto riverbanks became a beacon which not only drew all who saw it, but also frightened those whose plans had little to do with common humanity.

Perhaps this is why Okuni so mysteriously vanished in 1610, after a wave of duels and suicides over the affections of kabuki girls finally prompted the first of several official

crackdowns on the art. It certainly enhanced her legend and legacy, for even today nothing is known about where she went, what she did or when/where she died. Among kabuki theatres, it is held that she travelled to more cities and taught her arts in secret, inspiring new dancers to come forward to the foot-lights, to act as a beacon for increasing numbers of disaffected Japanese urbanites.

In vanishing, she became almost messianic, and allowed any number of groups to claim her as a founder. Moreover, as the years went by, her fans were able to reconstruct her image, her performances and even her physical being to fit into the changing landscape of their own lives. [...] As time went by, even as kabuki shed its more salubrious symbols, Okuni remained as the mark of perfection and the image for all to follow. She had become a standard, a banner and a cypher for what the art truly represented, even though that meaning itself was prone to change as government pressure, financial limits and fan tastes dictated. There is nothing better than an icon who is both seemingly immutable and, simultaneously fluid.¹⁵

Wherever she went, whatever she did and whenever she did actually die, in the years to come Okuni's shade remained, walking the *hanamichi* [花道 – Flower Path] of every kabuki theatre she inspired, and this simple device of theatricality is perhaps the finest example of both her and her art's fandom. The *hanamichi*, as you can see from the image, is one of a pair of projections (large and small) of the *kabuki* stage which run out into the main audience pit, allowing performers to move out among the public, yet remain visible to all the house.

¹⁵Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 14 August 2007.

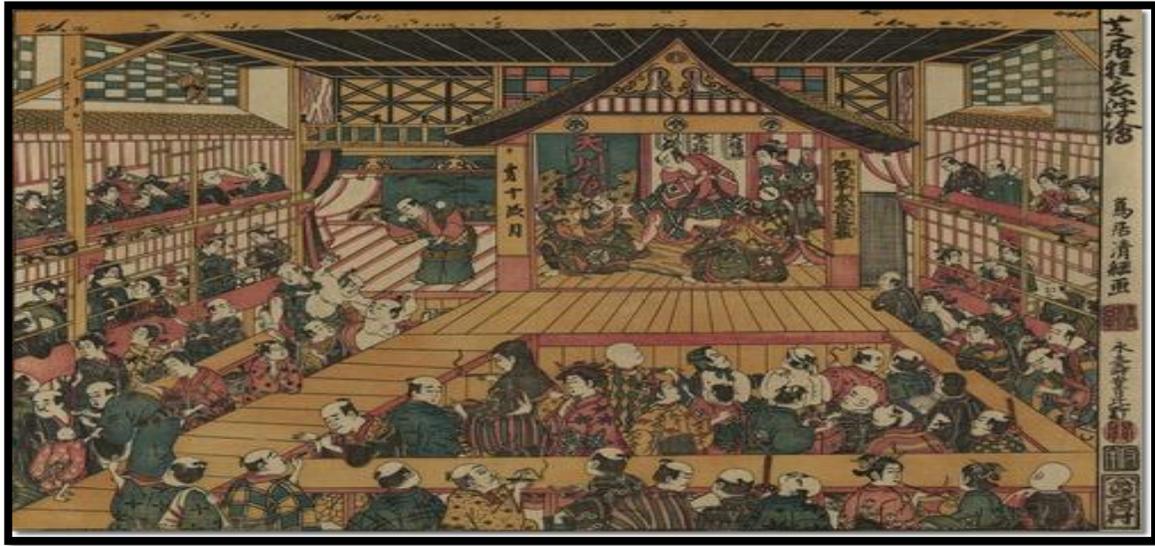


Image 2: "The Kabuki Theatre." Artist, Torii Kiyotsune. Woodblock Print, 1768. Author's personal collection. Public domain image.

With the earliest form said to have been invented by Okuni herself, the *hanamichi* is, like the *kakegoe* of the modern stage an echo of the relationship which developed between that remarkable young woman and the ordinary people who found common cause in her beauty, grace and art. In all its forms, the *hanamichi* gives the performer access to their patrons directly, a way of recognizing that nothing separated them. The *hanamichi* is more than a flower road, it is that narrow path that winds Northward into every fan's heart, and brings them to the very feet of the things that they love, desire and see reflected in themselves.

Thus it was that even without the person of Okuni, kabuki flourished and changed in the centuries to come.

V: Voices in the Air, Echoes in the Heart: Kakegoe

You might think it strange that we are obsessed with Okuni as a figure, when the theatre we love could be said to have as much to do with her as fish have to do with flying. Yet, for any ordinary person who loves kabuki, in any of its guises, it is the memory of this grand woman who pulls us on. Perhaps, I am simply raising a ghost who never was to justify my own involvement with the theatre, but I think it sad that the Kabuki Association did not

properly acknowledge her till a few years back.¹⁶ When I call, I call for her, more than for me. I want to create an echo of the calls she would have heard and give her rest, if I can.¹⁷

The icon has always been central to the notion of theatre – the creation, transmission and personalization of imagery which can be consumed and shared by like-minded aficionados. It is a process which is entirely devotional and religious in form, projecting the desires and concerns of the fans in question onto a sacred form, and accepting any sort of connection to, feedback from and negotiation with that icon as somehow justifying or guiding the life of the devotees in question. Indeed, as we have discussed already, this notion of connection and negotiated perception is at the very root of kabuki, as it is the crux of the question as to how the traditions of the theatre are perceived, interpreted and negotiated by its fans.

I had become fascinated by the concept of *kakegoe* as such a connection when doing field-work for my doctoral thesis in 2001. At a puppet theatre on Awaji, I was asked by the director to give a pair of calls at key moments for the senior puppeteer (I was to call out his family name when he performed a sword stroke) and for the *tayū* narrator (I was to call out a token of encouragement at the climax of the first scene). I felt crass at the thought of ruining what I saw would otherwise be powerful points in the performance, and did not want to spoil the moment for the performers involved. I stumbled through my calls, inevitably making terrible errors in both, but was amazed to see not only that the calls fit perfectly with the tempo of the performance, but that the audience itself appreciated them, and actually seemed to expect them. However, as time ticked by and I began to frequent the kabuki more and more, I started running into more and more people who seemed to be dedicated to these calls. Being an impecunious graduate student, I was always relegated to the rear seats in grand performances, and this is

¹⁶In 2002, a statue of Okuni was erected close to what is accepted by the Kabuki Association to be the site of the section of the Kamo River to celebrate the 400th anniversary of kabuki.

¹⁷ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 4 February 2013.

where most of the *Ohmuko* [大向 う – Lit: Great Direction. Meaning, “over there”], the members of the various *kakegoe* guilds and clubs prefer to sit, so that all can hear them.

Again and again, I was amazed at how audiences took these cries in their stride, as if they were an accepted part of the theatre-scape. Moreover, on several occasions I was sure that actors themselves were pausing in their declamations simply to allow the *Ohmuko* to play their own role.

This was confirmed to me when I spectacularly made the acquaintance of Sakamoto Yoshinori, who was at the kabuki-za one day to study the technique of one of the Master Ohmuko, Tanaka Kaichi (head of Kotobukikai). Sitting next to me, he was so worked up at this Mr. Tanaka’s *matteimashita* [待っていました – (I’ve) been waiting for this], that he upended a coffee into my lap.

This produced a sort of primal, unintelligible *kakegoe* for which no-one was prepared. However, it did break the ice and allowed me the opportunity of speaking to Mr. Sakamoto. I asked him why such refined *joururi* [浄瑠璃 – Ballad Drama¹⁸] theatre should tolerate such shouting, and he was taken aback that an Englishman who professed to be an expert on theatre would not be able to guess.

Think back to the days of the Globe. That is how I was taught it – an open space, with people jostling, eating drinking, shouting and fighting even as the plays went on. This was a theatre in which people came to have a good time and see their favorites on stage, and following a strong narrative was not the most important thing on their minds. That is why both in English and Japanese popular theatre, you find actors and playwrights building up their individuals in some way. A good actor needed a way to stand out.¹⁹

¹⁸ Literally, *joururi* [浄瑠璃] means shining/glinting Lapis Lazuli (or any jewel of value). It is used to refer to an form of early modern ballad drama, using a Narrator, *shamisen* musician and performers because of the play which brought the form to prominence in the sixteenth century; *Joururi Hime Monogatari* [浄瑠璃姫物語 – The Story of Princess/Lady Jewel]. Today it tends to refer only to kabuki, *bunraku*, and unaccompanied *joururi* narration.

¹⁹ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 14 August 2007.

Certainly, it is true that theatre still stands or falls upon the strength of its cast, but in the times of William Shakespeare and Chikamatsu Monzaemon both, the nature of nascent stardom needed a little help. In the case of Shakespeare, certain roles were written for a single company, with specific actors in mind. Part of this process – remembering that Shakespeare was himself an actor and aware of how audiences doted upon their favorite thespians – was that of writing amusing and outstanding moments (dialogue, physical expression, song, etc.) into a performance to raise the awareness of the audience. This has resulted in those magnificent vignettes for which Shakespeare’s writing particularly is rightly praised.

In the case of kabuki, getting and holding the attention of a chatting, drinking, and sometimes riotous audience was managed through different physical devices; primarily the banging of *tsuke* [ツケ - clappers] on the floor to alert the audience, as well as the shouting of specially placed members of the audience to re-enforce the action on stage.

At the beginning of the Edo period, when Okuni was performing, it must have been a real riot, with people calling out and having fun. The *kakegoe* of those days was little more than the general enthusiasm of the audience. No need for much direction to that when all you are doing is dance. However, whilst the general clamor might not have been much better by the time of Ichikawa Danjūrō I, the need for some sort of attention getter had arrived, and so we see the amalgamation of *mie*, *tsuke* and *kakegoe*.²⁰

At important moments, just before an actor goes on to make an important statement or perform one of the impressive fixed *mie* poses which characterize classic kabuki, the *tsuke* bearer bangs down on the stage, and chosen audience members call out to draw everyone’s attention to the proceedings in the performance space.

²⁰ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 14 August 2007.

Yet, the connection between the chosen audience members who practiced early, formal *kakegoe*, were more than simple fans. Even then, as Katsumata Michio tells us, they were part of the elite – a “hard-core” fandom, if you will – in that they tended to be members of particular actors’ fan-clubs and sponsor groups.

Remember that, in the Edo period, the merchant class had very few legal rights, and were socially just above absolute outcastes in the way that they lived. These were the richest people in the land,²¹ but they were incapable of expressing that wealth. Their clothing was prescribed for them, as was the type of dwellings in which they could live. They were visibly held back from using their wealth to appear grander and more important than the samurai. However, as the Nine Great Connoisseurs²² understood, there was nothing preventing them lavishing money on the theatre, the arts, and literature as a way of expressing their power.

The *kakegoe* guilds which formed in the Genroku Period [元禄 – a period from 1688 to 1704] particularly, were essentially exclusive fan-clubs into which patrons could enter and share a close bond with their chosen actor. In return, the actors would then share with them the correct calls and signals which would allow these sponsors to act as *Ohmuko* on performance days.

All part of a series of negotiations and games which aficionados and actors played with each other, and a measure of how well regarded you were as a performer. For example, the quality of your *Ohmuko* spoke a great deal of the power you might have as an actor. *Kakegoe*, even at the beginning was not about quantity, but about quality; even if that meant the quality of the person, not the quality of voice.²³

²¹ By the early eighteenth century, the Japanese economy was dominated by a merchant class which controlled how the samurai, even the government could convert their agricultural resources into hard currency. In a Confucian view, these merchants were nothing short of parasites, and even in the age of Tokugawa Yoshimune (Eighth Shogun), who understood the necessity of cash economy, merchants were very heavily restricted.

²²The leaders of the largest merchant families of the eighteenth century.

²³ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 14 August 2007.

However, whilst the merchant class was very active in spreading wealth about the art and culture environments, the vast majority of an ordinary actor's income came not from the great individual sponsors, but from ordinary people. Not only were they buying tickets, but also spending money on more direct merchandise like prints.²⁴

Most amazing of all though, seems to have been the fact that ordinary folk would be willing to directly support the purchase of housing, clothing, and other luxury items for these actors – which they could often not legally own, but which the authorities very rarely acted against as such action might be taken as unnecessarily provocative.

For many fans, the support of an actor could be seen both as a way of being part of a collective experience; wearing the actor's colors, posting their prints on their walls, being read and discussing his performances in the various fan journals and even engaging with their stars directly, as this was the age in which *kakegoe* was more than just a token callback. The theatres of the eighteenth century were colorful and riotous, but I feel that, by now most in the Government were largely content with the social truce which existed between all the parties in this cultural conflict. The people lived vicariously through their actors, and the theatres, in the main kept the attentions of the common folk on the stage rather than committing acts of violence in the streets.

The fan-clubs and *kakegoe* guilds/groups which survive today are the remnants of these massive, popular movements and the inheritors of a tradition which bound the producers of culture and the consumers together in a relationship which was nurturing and fluid rather than combative or purely consumerist.

We work together with the actors, and I don't think that it is arrogant to say that we are part of the plays. Actors do know what

²⁴*Hyobanki* were widely published in Edo, Osaka, and Kyoto and served as guides to the various theatres, restaurants, and brothels of the entertainment quarters.

to expect, they wait for us, they even invite us to some see them and discuss changes to performances sometimes. Mr. Tanaka, for example has such an excellent reputation that the even great actors will encourage him to attend especially important performances. That is why I am here today. I came down to listen to him call. He is the master of his craft, and even though his lines are few, and far between, he too as a master actor. He makes the stage a public place, like a vocal *hanamichi*.²⁵

Claims of ownership, control, or rights of access can be seen running through any fan community one might observe, and it clear that what actually supports the ongoing development of any such property is the negotiation and compromise which allows many agents to work together on their ongoing development. No one agent has the ability to direct events in such circumstances without collecting a consensus from enough other participants and, as any such control is wholly dependent on the ongoing support of those agents, the powers of any sort of authority are far more limited than they might appear.

Of course, such is the case with all human institutions. However, what is interesting about the negotiations which take place in arenas such as media fandom is the relatively open nature of the environment and the ease with which participants can pass into the processes of negotiation without, in the main, having to overcome the huge array of gatekeepers which protect more formal institutions.

This was certainly true in the times of Okuni, and is perhaps the root of the Edo Government's seeming inability to deal with the popular outpouring of fascination for the girls of the kamo-gawa for so many years. However, these notions of popular access and free negotiation of social meaning were – just as today –absolutely rooted in the free sharing of ideas and information; communication being the key to fandom, then as now.

VI: Selling the Self: Kabuki as a Mirror

²⁵ Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 14 August 2007.

Do not fear for the future of [kabuki], for it will never fail. You are far too obsessed with the changing state of the art and make the mistake of seeing specific traditions as representing more than they do, despite a clear attempt to look beyond issues of form. Kabuki reflects the world and has allowed people to look at themselves in the fashion that the gods look at humanity. The social distinctions might be different, but the result is much the same. When you view an actor on stage, at whatever age you view it, you are viewing yourself: as you think you are, as you wish to be, or even as you fear you might become.²⁶

The key issue here seems to boil down to whether or not one views properties such as Okuni's *katamuki* dancers or Danjūrō's rough-housing samurai, or even of modern kabuki as historical or contemporary social expressions, as well as how far any given participant in such a negotiation is willing to compromise their expectations of such a property in order to reach a working consensus with other participants. Those who consider this sort of media culture to be essentially historical in nature strive to see them preserved at what is seen as the most important stage of their development; much as is the case with the kabuki-za in Tokyo.

While the reasons for this approach – that each such property has a very definable developmental peak which represents its most perfect expression which should not be damaged – seems logical enough, the notion has become completely anathema to many of those fans who still recognize the interplay between media and members. Indeed, many in the opposite camp see this process as being completely arbitrary, in that it effectively allows people who do not operate within the community of a property to dictate the cultural values of a given property, often in defiance of the views of other participants.

As was stated earlier, to analyze the current Japanese interest in cultural practices as a contemporary collectivized response to the uncertainty of a rapidly changing social framework, is a rather attractive concept. However, as has been demonstrated herein, this is a very crude

²⁶Sakamoto Yoshinori. Actors Association of Akita. Interview with the author, 4 February 2013.

evaluation. Both the agents who worked within the media communities of early kabuki theatres, and those who conjure with the magic of modern fandom are not somehow isolated from society at larger, nor are they unable to interact with the world around them; there are no controlling masters in this realm of perception!

Indeed, just as Edo period kabuki fandom flourished in the face of a great deal of draconian legislation and other forms of opposition, today it is hardly possible for anyone to seize, or destroy, the sort of properties which we celebrate at A-Kon this weekend [Ed. Note: 31 May – 2 June 2013, Dallas, TX], not whilst even two uncontrolled agents persisted to re-negotiate its ongoing social meaning.

Social reality (culture) does not define what people do, but is created by a process of ongoing interaction. It is impossible to make that process exclusive to a limited number of controlling agents, without either damaging it in the extreme, or having it isolated by the activities of other agents, whose negotiations remain largely unaffected by such cliques. Ownership of geographical sites or physical objects might give specific agents rights of access which others might not have, in the same way that experience might allow one person to speak more authoritatively on a subject than another. However, the fact that all human social reality is rooted in what can only be called a “public domain” of ongoing interaction means that no one agent possesses the right or the ability to exclusively control any cultural property. The nature of the way in which humanity has socially developed – passing on important information via that never-ending cycle of social negotiation – has resulted in it being impossible to say which cultural properties belong exclusively to which groups or ages. It might be temporarily convenient to have specific properties defined in specific ways, but just as nothing in the human

social order is definite, nothing in the way we define things is beyond re-negotiation when required.

We say that Izumo-no-Okuni was the founder of kabuki, and that is a convenient starting point, perhaps the more so because she arrived on the scene so suddenly, acted so vigorously, and vanished so completely. She might have created a place, and gave it a name, but she did not create the desire already in the hearts of those who came to here, neither did she attempt to own the art which she created, seeding it – consciously or unconsciously – throughout the land where it grew, changed and reflected the ways in which more and more people used it to reflect their own dreams and desire. Perhaps that is why so many folk have difficulty interpreting her legacy today, for she was mutable and all things to all of her fans – from the commoners on the banks of the Kamo River, or the mighty Danjūrō XII, or the charming Mr. Sakamoto all of whom looked to her as the common heart of an art that needed to find its way back to the people.

Or, as the well-worn Japanese saying goes, “the village which shines in the moonlight leaves a different impression on everyone.”

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