Folklore is Fan Lore: Building Cultural Consensus among the Saibata Puppets

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"One would not have thought it possible that so much acrimony could surround such a relatively unimportant matter as puppet theatre, and yet it did. Some have said that I was the one to blame for being party to the modernization of Saibata puppets. I care not what they think though, because as long as this theatre exists it will be a reminder to everyone that the Tokushima Puppet Theatre does not represent the only voice for Shikoku's puppet arts."[1]

Ikehara Yukio: Director, Saibata Ningyō Takenoko Puppet Theatre.

Photographer Unknown. Dated 1915 and provided by Master Ikehara Yukio.
山本久助: Yamamoto Kyusuke in an advertising image from 1915.

[1] Ikehara Yukio: Director, Saibata Ningyō Takenoko Puppet Theatre. Interview by the author, 16 January 2002.

Introduction

This paper is one in an irregular series touching on the intersection of fandom and traditional culture in Japan.

In this case, we will be examining an example of truly 'common' puppet art, and the struggles which take place in an ongoing folk culture revival which still remains at the heart of a community, and does not simply operate as a tourist attraction.

In the previous papers in this irregular series, we have examined how many different individuals, each with their own personal motivations, are able enter into a given specific cultural revival movement and negotiate the terms of its existence.

In each case we saw how it is always extremely difficult, if not actually impossible, for a single party to claim executive control over the right to define a specific cultural reality without the support of a substantial majority of the other participants. In this paper however, we set out to examine what happens to a cultural revival which has become fragmented due to disagreement as to which one of two surviving artistic traditions best represents the arts of the region.

Essentially, what is being examined here is the nature of participant authority and just how far a given agent of negotiation can press demands to signify a property without actual reference to their fellows. We will also be looking at the way in which different negotiators in this specific case react when presented with artistic agents who seem unable to work together within a negotiated reality. As before, we begin this investigation with a short narrative which describes something of the day to day operation of the modern revived theatre, its performance style and its staff's general attitudes to the place of their art within the Tokushima revival community as a whole.

The Takenoko theatreThe Takenoko theatre was originally built in the summer of 1971, after the Ikeharas, Yukio and Yoshimi, acquired some limited funding from the Takamatsu local government, on the advice of master Yukio's respected former master Honda Kotaro.

What the authorities had expected was that the Ikeharas would construct something along the lines of a traditional puppet theatre of the late 1800s; something in the vein of a rural Bunraku-za. However, when master Yukio brought in a number of pre-fabricated building units, sold his house in the nearby village and moved into the 'theatre' it caused quite a stir in the halls of power in Takamatsu. Indeed, as Ikehara Yukio intimated during an early interview:

> ‘The fools did not know what to do. They had been completely taken by surprise by my actions and were most upset that we had not behaved as was expected of us. Every time I pointed out to them that there was no such thing as a ‘traditional rural theatre’ […] or that performers often lived in their halls or that the units had come so cheaply that we were able to completely construct the interior as well, they just flustered and talked about tradition and ‘regional identity.’[2]

From the beginning, Takenoko has always been as much a centre for education in the puppet arts as it has been a theatre and this is obvious to the visitor when entering the main theatre building in the compound. This is especially the case during one of the regular open access periods when interested people, including many children, from all over the Shikoku region come to Haruno Town to experience the intricacies of the Saibata puppets.

Some come to learn the basics of traditional Saibata puppet making. Some come to study the arts of puppeteering, music or even narrative storytelling to enhance their own amateur groups. Others, mainly from the school clubs and private groups in the area, come to audition for the puppet troupe and a chance to work more professionally with a master who, despite his many idiosyncrasies, is regarded as one of the finest practitioners of the puppet arts on Shikoku.

A performance day at Takenoko begins at sunrise for the staff and guests who are required to pack away all their bedding, tables and other ‘homey’ touches before any attempt can be made to turn the Takenoko building back into the theatre it is. This arises from the fact that, as was hinted above, the theatre is also the home of the Ikehara family and the ‘auditorium’ of the building serves as a very comfortable and spacious study-bedroom most of the time.

Once the theatre has been cleared, the performers retire to the workshop area to dress and equip the puppets for the day, whilst the remaining people are engaged with arranging forty seven cushions, a number of folding chairs and a pair of overstuffed sofas around the hall ready to receive the evening guests.

[2] Ikehara Yukio: Director, Saibata Ningyō Takenoko Puppet Theatre. Interview by the author, 14 December 2001.

Training carries on for much of the day, with most time being spent in endurance exercises designed to train the puppeteers in maintaining the very unusual stance taken by the Takenoko players on the Saibata style of puppetry. The performers stand in a pit which is set about three and a half feet into the foundations of the theatre and fronted by a two foot panel which creates an artificial ground level for the puppets when they are held at full extension by the performers; and it is this which places most stress on the puppeteers. Moreover, each puppeteer must also be able to manipulate both of the arms of their puppet on long poles of steel as well as handle any large props which the stories call for all at the same time as delivering their own dialogue with enough force to be heard throughout the theatre, an extremely demanding task with both arms raised above their head. As Ikehara Yoshimi described it:

> 'Performing is like being crucified in some ways. Your arm, chest and back muscles are so distorted as to make it hard to breath and very difficult to speak properly as the capacity of one's lungs is markedly reduced. Fainting is not uncommon among the younger members. However, our training includes the work of Master Yamamoto Kyusuke, who was a tenor with the Takamatsu Opera House and that allows us to teach our people to control their breathing more effectively'[3]

You would be forgiven for thinking that this physical excess would make for particularly bad theatre, but that could not be further from the truth. While Saibata puppets might not have the range of expression which the classical Takeda style *ningyō* might have, it cannot be doubted that they are possessed of a symbolic power which more formal Japanese puppets do not have. I do not imply that because *sangyo* puppeteering places the puppeteer in view of the audience that it is somehow artistically weak.

However, it cannot be denied that being witness to a performance from which all human elements have been, as far as possible, banished creates a very powerful sense of suspension-of-

[3] Ikehara Yoshimi: Senior Puppeteer, Saibata Ningyō Takenoko Puppet Theatre. Interview by the author, 8 August 2001.

disbelief in an audience and allows them to think of the puppets as being true representations of the characters they portray and not just as extensions of skilled human agents. This becomes, according to Ikehara Yoshimi, doubly important when dealing with people who only seek entertainment:

> 'The Saibata Theatre was originally founded as a place of entertainment and not a place of religious ritual, though we cannot really escape it, or artistic expression, and its patrons were the common people of the Tosa region […] In some ways it represented a real step backwards, past the sophisticated puppet arts of Tokushima city itself, to the sort of simple humorous puppet plays which were a staple of *sangaku* [Three Amusements/Miscellaneous Amusements], *sarugaku* [Monkey Amusements] and *dengaku* [Field Entertainment]. […] However, it is my belief that it was created to serve a purpose which more sophisticated puppet theatre in itself could not, and this purpose does actually have a very serious motivation. This I see as being one of the ways in which Meiji era residents of this region found unity during a period in which much that held the local community together was being swept away in favour of modernization.'[4]

Evidence of this role which Shikoku's Saibata puppets have in binding the local community together, can be found in the very interactive nature of the performances themselves. Each one begins with an introduction by a most charming character known as *Jiro*, the 'narrator' of the Takenoko Theatre, in which he addresses himself, by name, to certain members of the audience.

He pokes fun at some, begs drinks, sweets or money from others, and encourages as much audience participation as possible during this prologue. Once the laughter has died down, Jiro pushes the curtain aside with much huffing, puffing as well as a little foul language and introduces the puppets (though not the performers) for the evening before giving the audience a rundown of the play itself. The plays themselves also, according to master Yukio, are also carefully chosen or written to enhance local self image in the audience and focus almost exclusively on the folkloric narratives of Eastern Shikoku.

[4] Ikehara Yoshimi, 14 December 2001.

'I have no shame in saying that this theatre is all about us, meaning the people of the local community. It is nice that people such as yourself think that what my wife and I have done here is unusual or special when compared with other puppet theatres, but to be honest, I really don't care that much about whether we represent 'a snap-shot of pre-*jōruri* puppet art' as you put it? You start talking in those terms and you only encourage outsiders to come here and start making claims of ownership to your work, which I will not tolerate [...] As far as I can see, nothing gives anyone the right to dictate terms here, other than the performers and the audience themselves.'[5]

Spies and Spirit Possession: Puppets on Shikoku

Shikoku, might rightly be called one of the most important areas in Japan for the development of native puppet arts, in that it was in the Shikoku-Awaji region known as Awa (up to the end of the Edo period) that the modern forms of *ningyō jōruri* developed in the seventeenth century. Therefore, before any discussion of the specifics of the Saibata tradition can be entered into it becomes necessary to briefly go over the developmental history of puppet art in the Edo period Awa region: examining those aspects of its expansion which were unique to the region.[6] However, the question of where to begin such a history begs us to consider whether, in this case, demonstrable fact or local legend gives us a better way into the significations which surround the arts in question. This is an important distinction and we must be aware of the way that fact and fiction have been woven into each other to create the Saibata puppet arts of today. It is with this in mind that we begin our story of Saibata in a mythic tone, taking up the most popular legend on the island, which attests that Shikoku was possessed of a well-developed tradition of *ningyō jōruri* at the beginning of the seventeenth century.[7]

Rooted in the area around the old castle town of Tokushima, the story has it that in the struggle which followed the death of the *kanpaku* Toyotomi Hideyoshi in 1598, the lords of the

[5] Ikehara Yukio, 16 January 2002.
[6] The Agency of Cultural Affairs. Ed. *Bunkazai Hogoho Goju-nen-shi* (文化財保護法五十年史) [Fifty Years of the Cultural Properties Law]. (Tokyo: The Agency of Cultural Affairs. 2001. Page 128).
[7] Fudo, Saiichi. Awaji Ningyō no Yurai （淡路人形の由来）[The Origin of Awaji Puppets]. (Mihara: Awaji Ningyō Hozon Kai. 2012. Page 23).

Awa region, the Hachisuka clan, took the extremely daring act of openly declaring loyalty to the Tokugawa faction under Ieyasu and found themselves surrounded by foes as a result.

Thus, when the lords of the Hachisuka clan wished to communicate with their master Ieyasu in the run up to the 1600 campaign of Sekigahara they were left with a very difficult decision; send their communiqués via ship and render them vulnerable to the sea-power of the loyalist lord Iesada Kinoshita (1543-1603) or send them as far as possible via land, over Awaji, which was likewise controlled by loyalist troops under lord Ikeda Terumasa (1564-1613).[8]

The legend states that the Hachisuka chose the land route for their messages and gave responsibility for them to the head of their house-guard, Taidai Genzaemon, a man renowned in Tokushima City for both his skill at arms and acting abilities.

The legend also notes that, when disguises were being considered for the operation, Genzaemon suggested the use of one of the local touring puppet groups, the Uemura family, as these Special Status entertainers were essentially free from the sort of travel restrictions which were placed on most other wanderers in that time of unrest. Thus, disguised as a puppeteer from the islands, Genzaemon was able to quickly circumvent the forces of lord Terumasa and reach the camp of Ieyasu in plenty of time to hear the plans for the coming campaign and receive orders to take back to Tokushima Castle.

It is recorded that so impressed were both Ieyasu and Genzaemon with the bravery of the Uemura family players that the soon-to-be *shogun* approved Genzaemon's suggestion that they be taken under the Hachisuka clan's protection and when the group returned to Awa, they were installed as the Hachisuka's own puppet company.[9]

The earliest reliable record of actual Hachisuka sponsorship of puppet theatre in Awa comes from the end of the seventeenth century, at which time they are recorded as being responsible for the construction of what was then considered to be the largest (temporary) puppet theatre in the country.[10]

Built in order to host a two week long festival of *ningyō jōruri* in the summer of 1693, the compound near the Hachisuka family residence at Higashitomita was constructed to accommodate over a thousand guests which makes it clear that the Hachisuka sponsors were not

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[8] Fudo, Saiichi. Awaji Ningyō no Yurai （淡路人形の由来）[The Origin of Awaji Puppets]. (Mihara: Awaji Ningyō Hozon Kai. 2012. Page 37).

[9] Kudo, Takashi. *Awa to Awaji no Ningyō Shibai （泡と淡路の人形芝居）[The Puppeteering of Awa and Awaji]*. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1978. Page 44).

[10] Adachi, Kenji. *Bunkacho Koto Hajime (文化庁事始) [Founding of the Agency For Cultural Affairs]*. (Tokyo: Tokyo Shoseki. 1978. Page 84).

simply creating an event which was to be open only to the elite of the region, but to all. This is borne out when one examines the records which the clan drew up in organizing the event in that it is clear, from both the plans of the theatre and the admission charges which were levied from the public, that large sections of the venue were dedicated to the peasant masses of the Tokushima region. Moreover, puppet troupes from as far away as Osaka and Kyoto were invited to the event. The 'stars' of the show were the Gennojo, a family of Special Status Ebisu puppeteers. which fell directly under Hachisuka family protection.[11]

Further, from the few complete records which have survived from the early Edo period, it is possible to infer that the ongoing nature of this seeming generosity towards puppeteering in Edo period Awa served a tangible purpose for the lords of the region and was not simply the result of an unconscious signification transfer from the Gennojo company to all puppeteers of the islands. Indeed, these clan records make it clear that there was a good deal of transfer of personnel, information and work contracts between the main professional troupes in Awa and the many Special Status *kaki* groups which operated from that region.

The Gennojo had expanded by this period to the point of possessing five repertory groups, each a self-supporting theatre in its own right and situated in a different part of Awa. For these troupes to remain at peak efficiency as performing properties it was apparently necessary for each one to have access to a ready supply of likely candidates for training, which could not be met through inheritance alone and this, apparently, was something which the Special Status puppeteers of the region could easily fulfil.[12]

In it might be considered a little extreme to suggest that the lords of Awa, the Gennojo troupe, or some form of Special Status *kaki* collective actively sought to send out local puppeteers to enhance the reputation of the island domain among the population of the rest of the country. However, it cannot be denied that Awa puppeteers alone in the Edo period were able to maintain very profitable connections, through tours as well as through the founding of regional troupes, with domains as far north as Mutsu (now part of modern Aomori Prefecture) or as far south as Osumi (on the southern tip of Kyushu), which could only have been possible through negotiation with their feudal masters in Awa, as well as the approval of the central authorities in Edo.

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[11] Kudo, Takashi. *Awa to Awaji no Ningyō Shibai （泡と淡路の人形芝居）[The Puppeteering of Awa and Awaji]*. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1978. Page 54).
[12] Fudo, Saiichi. Awaji Ningyō no Yurai （淡路人形の由来）[The Origin of Awaji Puppets]. (Mihara: Awaji Ningyō Hozon Kai. 2012. Page 67).

In no other part of Japan did members of the ruling elite invest so much time, money and personal signification into the puppet arts as the Hachisuka did in Awa. It was as if, as Umazume Masaru suggests, in that the lords of the region had decided to put a stop to certain aspects of social development simply because they and their subjects enjoyed them far too much to conform to the model of social reality being imposed on other feudal families.

> 'They may have been granted this leave because they were one of the Tokugawa clan's firmest allies in a still relatively unstable region, or perhaps the clan was simply too remote to worry about; with their 'rural' ways being indulged by a government who appreciated complete loyalty in a time of great distrust'[13]

Either way, puppet art significations in Edo period Awa remained relatively unchanged, in that the customs of the *ningyō* stage were viewed as something which could be appreciated by all classes. That, by the early years of the nineteenth century, the arts had become truly open to all, warriors, commoners and Special Status people alike, was certainly a change, but one born of the ubiquity of the arts and their acceptance by all people.

The arts of the puppet stage on Awa had gained a similar level of universal signification to the one achieved for the practice in the great cities. In both locales patrons of both common and elite stock had socially re-signified Special Status *kaki* puppeteers as being 'common' Japanese by dint of the collective power they possessed to negotiate such matters, even with the government itself. As Taneda suggests, these two social worlds might seem poles apart, but what the rulers, artists and commoners of these areas were engaging in was essentially the same; a process of negotiated cultural re-signification out of which a form of puppet theatre emerged which each could appreciate without thorny issues, such as status, harming the experience.[14]

The difference between the mainland and Shikoku is that whilst the efforts in Osaka went towards *creating* a form of art which was socially acceptable to the sponsors involved (essentially the money-elite of the merchant class and the power-elite of the samurai), the efforts on Shikoku had always been directed at *maintaining* an art which was a proven source of comfort to all groups.

This is key to understanding both the development of folk puppet arts in the Awa region and their 'revival' in the post-war era after a thorough re-interpretation of those conditions. By

[13] Umazume Masaru, Director, Awaji Puppet Theatre. Interview with the author, April 2001.
[14] Taneda, Yosuke. Ed. Saibata Deco Shibai (西畑デコ芝居) [Saibata's Art Deco Theatre]. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1997. Pp 71-72).

the end of the Edo period the Awa region had become the most vibrant and open minded area for the puppet arts in Japan.

Theatres from the major cities sought out trainees from this domain, whilst masters from the island region were celebrated as the greatest living practitioners of the puppet arts. Such praise cannot be said to have been improperly assigned when one considers the level of support which the arts had enjoyed since the early years of the Edo period. The Hachisuka clan's willingness to negotiate this matter with their subjects might be said to have created an atmosphere in which puppet theatre could evolve freely, under its own auspices; I say this without reservation, as well as in full recognition of the technical brilliance of the Osaka tradition of Bunraku. The theatres of Osaka can in many ways be seen as little more than 'end users' of the sort of free artistic, or ritual, development which was carried out on Awaji and Shikoku during the Edo period, and the arts which sprang up in these places developed only through a very narrow process of cultural negotiation, due to the very limited participant cross section involved. In Awa however, though the ruling family took a good deal of interest in the puppet arts, they did not attempt to impose standards on the arts at all, which resulted in many different forms of puppet theatre appearing, evolving, merging and failing in this environment.

It would appear that the puppeteers of this region were truly able to engage in whatever degree of cultural negotiation was felt appropriate to satisfy whichever groups they negotiated with in the development of their theatre, without excessive pressures to concern themselves with.

Thus, it was in this atmosphere of relative cultural diversity that the form of puppet art which would come to signify Shikoku culture in the post-war period would be founded. However, as we shall see, the most intriguing aspect about the development of this Saibata puppetry is that it only emerged *after* the Meiji government began the process of destroying the harmonious relationship between common and elite interests in the old fiefdom of Awa.

This new and totally unique form of puppet theatre which, as will be discussed, has given of itself to some of the best theatres throughout the world can, therefore, be viewed as something of a revival form, even at this early stage.

Of Eggs and Sawdust: Saibata Puppets

The first performance of what would come to be called *saibata ningyō shibai* [Saibata Puppet Art] was given on the morning of the tenth of January 1879 in the Tosa Village Hall by Mr. Yanagii Juzō (1832-1892) as part of the village's Tōka Ebisu [Tenth Day Ebisu] festival celebrations.

A devoted aficionado of puppeteering from childhood, master Juzō had become by the time of his first performance something of an accomplished amateur puppeteer and had long wished to practice the arts he admired so much for the people he lived among in Tosa. However, not being of a puppeteering family he possessed neither *ningyō* nor any of the other properties which would be required to put on a performance.

This small fact does not seem to have deterred him, and he advertised that he and an assistant Yano Kosaburo (1848-1890) would put on a series of puppet folk plays at the Tosa community hall on the last day of the Ebisu celebrations of 1879; an announcement which appears to have caused a good deal of interest in the local community.[15]

> 'Upon entering the Tosa hall the most striking feature of the performance space, according to master Juzō, was that there appeared to be no performing space, no curtain, no set, and nothing which could disguise the puppeteers save a screen door which had been placed upright on its longest edge as if someone were mending it. Yet if, as the master wrote, this caused some confusion among the patrons of the performance, it was more than doubled when Yano [Kosaburo] and he emerged from a side hall and crouched down behind the door to give their performance.'[16]

'Worse' was to come in the shape of the puppets which the pair manipulated: lacking *ningyō* of a more classical design or the money to have them made, master Juzō had taken painted chicken eggs and, having mounted them on colourfully dressed poles, manipulated them along with master Kosaburo in a rendition of the story of 'The Oni of Takamatsu'. However, the puppets themselves were not simply put together without careful thought for their form, as master Juzō communicated to Yamamoto Kyusuke, the third master of the Saibata tradition, in 1890. It would seem that he had elected to use this egg-pole-cloth form for his first puppets as much for the fact that their construction drew on a very important form of Shikoku ritual puppet art, as for the equally important fact that they were cheap to manufacture. The *tamago* [egg]

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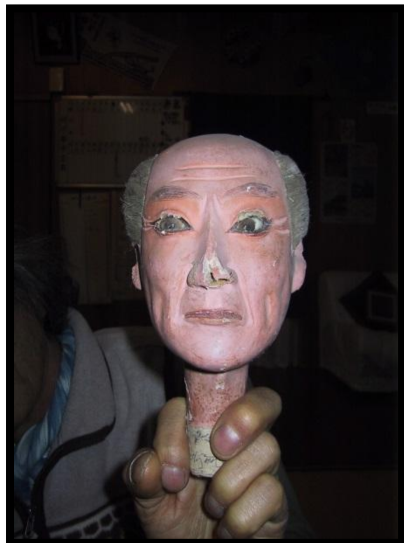
[15] Taneda, Yosuke. Ed. Saibata Deco Shibai (西畑デコ芝居) [Saibata's Art Deco Theatre]. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1997. Page 51).

[16] Ikehara Yukio, 21 August 2008.

ningyō had, by Yanagii Juzō's time, been employed for centuries in many of the region's shrines, as well as in homes, as *goshintai* [body double] puppets of *kami*. The use of the egg for the head of this puppet type is especially important in that it represents the potential which is in all living things; a potential which would, through that medium, be transferred to the *kami* which inhabited a particular *goshintai* during a performance.

Yet, such simple puppets would not do for a more dedicated company and, when the decision was taken by Juzō to take up the arts professionally, these puppets were largely set aside in favour of a design developed by Yano Kosaburo. The problem which faced master Kosaburo in this regard was that this nascent Saibata Puppet Theatre had built itself up on being extremely traditional, in that it called on the oldest known form of *ningyō shibai* practiced on Shikoku for much the same reason. The narratives which were at the heart of the performances presented no problems to the developing troupe. Indeed, once the group, which had started to expand in June 1879, had started toying with a full stage and props, it soon became evident that some very exciting possibilities were open to them.



However, there remained the thorny issue of what sort of puppets were to be used and how were they to be made within the constraints of the, still self-financed, Saibata Ningyō-za [Saibata Puppet Theatre], which itself was divided into three smaller concerns.

First was the size of the puppets, for they would have to be several times larger than Juzō's original *ningyō*. This was so because as the troupe was aiming at moving into theatrical performances, the puppets they used had to be easily visible to all members of an audience.

Second, there was the issue of how to make the heads which would replace the eggs of the original puppets. Here Kosaburo appears to have felt that imitation was the way to go and he created a style which might simply be called an 'artificial egg', replicating the form of the original *ningyō*.

However, it is one thing to decide how the heads should be made to look, but quite

another matter to actually make them. Heads of this size would have to be made, according to master Juzō's directive, in such a way that they would last a long time and at the same time retain something of the ritual characteristics which had made his first puppets so appealing.

Thus, materials such as clay which, according to Ikehara Yukio, master Kosaburo had first experimented with were very quickly dismissed and, in the end, it was concluded that only 'sacred' *kiri* [桐] wood (Paulownia Tomentosa) could fulfil the requirements of master Juzō.

However, the troupe could not afford to buy this valuable wood in any quantity, let alone engage a craftsman skilled enough to shape it, so Kosaburo was forced to think laterally about the issue and came up with a solution which stands out even today in its elegance and simplicity.

> '[Master Kosaburo] spoke to some carpenters who specialised in shrine repair, and arranged to buy *kiri* sawdust. This would have been thrown out daily, of course so we has able to get a regular supply for very little. He then experimented with inexpensive resins, mixing in the sawdust and moulding heads, which could then be carved and sanded. He would then coat them in *gesso* [a chalk lacquer] and paint them, as he might an ordinary puppet head. […] This made for long-lasting heads which could be fitted with materials like hair, which the egg heads had not permitted.'[17]

Thirdly, there was the issue of how to manipulate these puppets, which had not only grown in stature, but also acquired articulated arms. Master Kosaburo's suggestion of making them two or three man puppets was rejected by master Juzō for reasons of cost, in that it would need a radical increase the puppeteer budget. However, this apparently left master Kosaburo in something of a bind, in that he seems not to have known how to make the puppets move effectively with only one person underneath them, especially as master Juzō had also insisted on the Saibata Puppet Theatre not abandoning the 'over-the-head' style of manipulation which had been characteristic of the first 1879 performance. The troupe quickly came to the conclusion that internally mounted rods and wires could not provide enough support for the arms in question and master Kosaburo became convinced that only externally mounted rods, both held in the off-hand of the puppeteers, would be able to work.

It must be remembered here that this, now ubiquitous, technique of puppet manipulation was entirely new to master Kosaburo at the time and it took him a good deal of trial and error to find the ideal rods for his *ningyō*. Initially, he seems to have tried wooden staves, but soon rejected them as they were apparently thick and distracted audiences.

[17] Ikehara Yukio, 16 January 2001.

He is even noted as attempting to use materials such as bone, baleen and bamboo without much success before, as master Yukio tells us, quite by accident, coming across the solution: the extruded steel tines from European umbrellas which were becoming extremely popular among the elite of Meiji Japan.[18]

Thus when these puppets were added to a new performance hall the Tosa Saibata Puppet Theatre was finally born on 10 January 1881, giving a day of Ebisu and Sanbaso performances to beg the indulgence of these most *ningyō shibai* friendly of *kami*. As might be gathered from the Tosa public's willingness to support the venture, the theatre appears to have become an outstanding success from the its opening, not only within the context of the company's own theatre, but also within the more festival-oriented folk culture context which had given birth to the troupe in the first place.

Indeed, it is possible to see just how important the theatre had become to the local community when one considers the way in which Meiji government officials, who were despatched to the region to see to the closure of places such as the Saibata troupe, spectacularly failed in their stated objectives due to pressure from the people who essentially controlled all rights of signification to these local folk arts.

In the years from 1881 to 1888, the Saibata Puppet Theatre is noted as going from strength to strength, with attendances rising to such an extent that the troupe had paid its debts on the theatre by 1886 and was required to extend the hall to accommodate a further thirty seats by the winter of 1887. So successful does the troupe seem to have become that, in 1888, master Kosaburo requested to leave the troupe and set up his own theatre in the village of Hirota, whose people often visited the Saibata Puppet Theatre itself. This request was readily granted by master Juzō and, along with a number of the players from the first theatre, Yano Kosaburo took a number of puppets and a generous loan from master Juzō, to Hirota and founded his own troupe, thereby establishing the second of the lines of succession to the Saibata legacy which would,

[18] Taneda, Yosuke. Ed. Saibata Deco Shibai (西畑デコ芝居) [Saibata's Art Deco Theatre]. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1997. Page 102).

though founded in loyal affection, become the cause of so much modern acrimony.

According to Miyamoto Yukio, the expansion of the Saibata tradition at the end of the 1880s, just at the time that the island was finally opening up properly, began to attract the attention of patrons from the mainland, who seemed to be universally intrigued by this, then rather modernist, take on puppet art.

As he tells us, this period of increased artistic popularity saw not only the wealth of both Saibata theatres increase, but also some remarkable technical innovations which remain part of the character of Shikoku's surviving theatres to this day; largely in response to the contribution which these new elite audience members were making to the process of artistic signification of Saibata puppets.[19]

For example, it was in 1889 that the Tosa theatre of master Juzō finally began using fully carved paulownia wood heads, though, ever after, they remained carved in the fashion of master Kosaburo's resin heads. Moreover, in 1892 Master Kosaburo's disciple Nakayama Ushitaro (1864-1952) redefined the performance space of the Saibata tradition and created the 'pit and screen' form as it is known today. Further, and perhaps most importantly, wealthy Osaka sponsors who helped turn the small scale Saibata Summer Puppet Festival, which had been founded in 1887 by master Juzō as a way of showcasing all the talent in the theatre at one time in open air performances, into a well-regarded annual celebration of puppet art.

It was also around the time of the opening of the Hirota Theatre, and possibly the reason why master Juzō was content to allow Yano Kosaburo leave Tosa, that the acclaimed (western opera) singer Yamamoto Kyusuke from Takamatsu joined the Tosa Saibata Theatre as master Juzō's first disciple; a prestigious position and an appointment which speaks volumes of the reputation of master Kyusuke before he came to Tosa. He brought to the Tosa theatre a level of voice training which, as Takauchi Eisai tells us, had been rather lacking in the previous incarnations of the Saibata puppets. In addition, master Kyusuke brought to the theatre, which was renamed the Yamamoto Kyusuke Ichiza [The House of Yamamoto Kyusuke] after Yanagii Juzō's death in 1892, increasing numbers of patrons of western arts. These were people who had been persuaded to see the Saibata puppets as representing a form of artistic expression which was attempting to bridge the gap between folk and elite culture, much in the way that *kabuki*, *bunraku* and *kyogen* had done before it.[20]

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[19] Miyamoto Yukio: Archivist, National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka. Interview with the author, 9 December 2001.
[20] Takauchi Eisai, custodian, Hirota Saibata Puppet Museum. Interview with the author, August 2009.

It cannot be denied that the Saibata puppet traditions of Shikoku have always taken advantage of whatever materials, concepts or narratives came the performer's way when considering how to make shows more easily assimilated by the paying public; and the above references to composite heads and umbrellas are only the beginning of a process which picked up momentum as more and more troupes broke away from the two founding theatres.

Indeed, between 1893 places such as Tosa, Hirota, Tokushima and Takamatsu saw the creation of over thirty individual puppet theatres of the Saibata type, all of which seem to have contributed something of importance to both the pre-war development and the modern revival of the arts. Moreover, even the build up to war did not seem to dampen the popularity of the Saibata tradition with several of the larger troupes regularly touring the military bases and cities of the south of the country with the full support of the authorities.

However, in the years following the ending of hostilities, much as was the case all over Japan, many of the theatres began to merge or close as interest was drawn off to other quarters, both by the practicalities of post-war austerity and the increasing availability of other forms of entertainment.

Of course, this is not to say that Saibata puppet art suffered quite the same degree of decline which other forms of the art did; despite all the hardships, the two core traditions of Tosa (by this time called the Asahi Wakateru's Saibata Puppet Art and Hirota (by then known as the Toyo Oriental Puppet Kabuki Art) remained active and well enough supported by die-hard fans to run as commercial ventures until they were handed over to the next generation of performers.

During the 1950s and 60s, each of the two branches of the Saibata tradition began to grow apart more visibly as the prefectural authorities and the central government began making overtures to the puppet community about officially funding a Saibata puppet art troupe in order that the traditions not die out completely. The then head of the Tosa branch, Honda Kotaro, proposed that the two branches of the tradition be reunited in a Tosa based grand theatre to honour the memory of Yanagii Juzō, the founder of the tradition.

However, Nakayama Kazuki, head of the Hirota branch, countered by suggesting that as the founder of the modern puppet art had actually been Yano Kosaburo, in that he was the one who developed the modern puppets of the art, any 'officially' protected Saibata puppet organization should be led by a member of his troupe, meaning, of course, himself. Moreover, he also added that, as the famed Yamamoto Kyusuke had come to the tradition both from outside the region and the art, he represented a break in tradition which invalidated any Tosa claim to

supremacy over Hirota.

According to Taneda, it would appear that this schism might have developed not only due to this perceived historical failing on the part of the Tosa branch of the art, but from the fact that Honda Kotaro, and his disciple Ikehara Yukio, were experimenting with material which the more traditionally minded Nakayama Kazuki found inappropriate. This seems to derive from the fact that in 1956, Kotaro's Theatre (at that time known as Koppori) put on the first foreign play to be performed by a Saibata troupe, a compilation of some of Grimm's fairytales, using materials such as plastic and foam to make the mysterious characters of these dark, brooding tales of emotion running amok. Further, when NHK was persuaded to film a Saibata performance in 1959, it was a Koppuri rendition of Christopher Marlowe's 'Faustus' which was broadcast to the Kinki region, which fact, according to master Yukio, further incensed the recalcitrant members of the Nakayama Kazuki Theatre.[21]

This performance caught the attention of UNIMA [Union Internationale de la Marionnette] and opened up the staff of Koppori to a world of puppet possibilities. Indeed, it was almost exclusively through the encouragement of the membership of UNIMA Japan, such as then vice president Kawajiri Taji, which saw the Koppuri performers turn their stop-start attempts at making their puppet performances more contemporary into an impressive artistic renaissance. Thus it was that in the years from 1959 to 1962 that the Koppuri theatre worked together with the like-minded Tokyo Puk troupe on one of the most innovative and important modern era puppet performances to come out of Japan: 'Nigedashita Jupiter' [Escape From Jupiter].

However, whilst Koppuri was courting UNIMA, the surviving members of the Nakayama Kazuki company (by this time renamed Piccolo), had quietly been making their case for support directly to the local authorities with the result that when the first round of public funding dedicated to Saibata puppet art was awarded in 1965, the majority of the money went to Piccolo, along with the tacit acceptance of the group as the theatre which was most representative of Shikoku's puppet art heritage.

However, having won the support they needed, the Piccolo group appear to have refused to let go of the fact that the Koppuri group continued to perform modern plays, children's theatre and courted the attention of the world as if it were the most important group on Shikoku. The

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[21] Taneda, Yosuke. Ed. Saibata Deco Shibai (西畑デコ芝居) [Saibata's Art Deco Theatre]. (Okayama: Yamagawa Shoten. 1997. Page 112).

acrimony seems to have gone so deep that in 1971, when Ikehara Yukio proposed moving the Koppuri theatre to his rural home near the city of Takamatsu after the retirement of master Honda Kotaro, some of the staff at Piccolo seized on the move and began speaking of the Tosa tradition in terms of it coming to an end with the closure of Koppuri.

These people seem to have claimed that the Takenoko troupe was, without master Kotaro, not a true Saibata company any more and therefore, in spite of its impeccable lineage, unsuitable to bear the name of Saibata Puppet Arts any further into the modern age.

Yet, more than thirty years after this wedge was driven between the two great traditions of Saibata puppetry, Ikehara Yukio's Takenoko Theatre still stands as one of the most respected guardians of Shikoku's puppet art heritage by its increasing follower base. Moreover, despite muted, but still ongoing, complaints on the part of a few Hirota faction conservatives who still have influence within Takenoko's opposite number, the staff of master Yukio's troupe feature heavily in the recently established Saibata Puppet Art Preservation Centre.

Art For Heart's Sake: The Takenoko Theatre

With this I mind it becomes necessary to examine in greater detail this 'unsuitable' Saibata puppet theatre and attempt to discover the deeper reasoning behind Nakayama Kazuki's aggressive stance towards this idiosyncratic little theatre. It cannot be seen as an accident that it was in 1971, the year of the first Saibata Festival since the war, that Ikehara Yukio took possession of the Koppuri Theatre from Honda Kotaro, renamed it Saibata Ningyō: Takenoko,

and gave his first public performance as leader. This had been at the suggestion of the old master and was devised as a way of introducing the youthful Yukio to an audience which had great respect for the elderly Kotaro and might not, according to master Yukio, have reacted as positively if the retiring puppeteer had not made some effort to acknowledge his disciple as the legitimate successor to his tradition:

> '[Master Kotaro] was of the opinion that when the time came to hand over the theatre it had to be in the context of an important public performance because he felt that the public had to see themselves as being involved in the changeover and that they had the right to approve, or disapprove, the selection of successor. […] My master was very much of the mind that the authority of the paying public was the ultimate test of his art, after all if people do not like a thing they will not partake of it, and respected the 'family' with their few small coins far more than he did the big spending industrialists which the Hirota group feted.'[22]

Master Yukio's point is extremely important, in that it reminds us that this sort of cultural activity possesses an element of negotiation which cannot be overlooked when making adjustments to its form. By making the changeover from Koppuri to Takenoko in the shadow of the Saibata Festival master Kotaro was ensuring that as many people as possible were involved, if only superficially, with the decision to partially transfer the rights to signify the Tosa branch of the Saibata tradition to the care of the Ikeharas.

Moreover, despite the popularity of Koppuri's experiments with modern puppet theatre, such as their cooperation with Puk on 'Nigedashita Jupiter', there appears to have been some concern over the fact that the Tosa faction was taking the Saibata tradition away from the roots which had been laid down by Yanagii Juzō and, more importantly, Yano Kosaburo. Thus it was also to answer these criticisms that the Saibata Festival was used to 'pass the torch' from master Kotaro to master Yukio, with the elder recognizing the importance of the modern influences of his young disciple, in that:

> 'Saibata puppet art was envisaged by both its founders as a contemporary form of folk theatre which all classes and all ages could enjoy in the context of their own time and not something to be mired in the past as a museum piece.'[23]

This last comment seems to have been aimed specifically at the members of the Hirota faction, whose members were in attendance with their new leader Kawabuchi Yoshio, and the impassioned address which several of them made to the assembled guests concerning the terrible

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[22] Ikehara Yukio, 21 August 2008.
[23] Ibid.

state of corruption into which Saibata puppet arts risked falling without a concerted effort to preserve the few remaining accurate expressions of the tradition left to the region.

However, it cannot be seen as being inappropriate considering what stood to be gained by whichever group was able to secure an influential enough collection of supporters from the festival. Each group knew that, as both the Tosa and Hirota theatres were founded by people who had given rise to the Saibata traditions in the first place, it was impossible for either to easily deny the rights of the other, as Nakayama Kazuki had already discovered on several occasions in the 1960s.

Thus, for each to flourish on their own terms, at least in the thinking of their masters at that time, the other had to be shown to be somehow deficient.

For the staff of the Kagashi-za, the Takenoko troupe represented, as we have seen, a debasement of their craft and this could only be addressed by convincing enough of the supporters of the puppet arts to side with them in calling for the exclusion of Takenoko from the Saibata tradition. The Tosa faction also seem to have recognized this potential difficulty and, though not originally inclined to make any claims about the fitness of any puppet theatre to practice their art on Shikoku, were forced to recognize that if the Hirota claims were to go unchallenged they might succeed, threatening to undo not only their own work, but all Tosa traditions back to master Juzō himself.[24]

What was at stake then was the right to signify Saibata puppet arts in revival as a whole and the people who would actually decide the issue, the people who would have the chance to negotiate a unified *ningyō shibai* tradition for Shikoku, were those who supported the arts outside the bounds of the two main theatres themselves: the puppet art community (from Shikoku and beyond), the (local and national) government, wealthy potential patrons, the academic establishment and the general public of eastern Shikoku.

The success or failure of a situation such as this hinges on how much each participant in this process of negotiation is willing to accommodate the group as a whole into their own desires. In the 'Tosa vs. Hirota' case however, people who had long been aware of the divergent nature of Saibata puppet arts were being asked to make a choice which would, very possibly, see one aspect of the island's folk heritage (historical or contemporary) suffer as a result.

That these two theatres would force such an issue through, despite much concern even at that time as to the long term consequences, speaks volumes of the pressure under which each

[24] Ikehara Yukio, 16 January 2001.

side felt they had been placed. However, of equal interest is the way that, as Ikehara Yoshimi informs us, each of the groups shared very different philosophies regarding the sort of supporters which they should be attracting into order to better serve their respective cases.

> '[Kagashi-za's] emphasis was on attracting the attention of the authorities, local councils and the business community, powerful people who it was felt could best help them directly and who, they believed, understood the true nature of regional pride. It seemed so much more focused and professional than what we [at Takenoko] were up to. However, it did not take all that long for us to see how right master Ikehara [Kotaro] had been, and how misguided master Nakayama had been.'[25]

Mrs. Ikehara makes a very important point here, touching on the nature and the extent of the very different power-bases each participant in a process of negotiated social signification brings to such a debate; especially the way in which the most powerful members of such a debate are not able, at least in the long term, to overcome concerted efforts on the part of the other participants, should those agents feel that they are being overborne by the offending partner.

Thus in this case, we see that the Kagashi-za's attempts to court the power elite bore some impressive immediate, to medium term, returns when compared with the very low key approach which the Takenoko theatre staff took to gaining popular support at grass roots level. The Kagashi-za troupe built a magnificent home at Hirota in 1972; the finest performance space of any type to be built on Shikoku at the time. A museum, ostensibly built to honour all Saibata puppeteers, was attached to the theatre in 1974 and the Hirota tradition of the art made the central focus of its own exhibits.

Moreover, in 1976, the authorities awarded the Kagashi-za the title which Nakayama Kazuki himself had pushed so long for, the position of the region's official puppet theatre. Yet, despite all this they appear to have failed in their ultimate goal of gaining control of the right to signify all of Saibata puppet arts through influence with their authoritarian mentors in that the Takenoko theatre remained very much at forefront of the artistic life of the region.

> 'Takenoko has succeeded only because, as my old master [Honda Kotaro] fervently believed, nothing could force us to relinquish our place within Saibata puppet theatre, no matter how we might express it, if enough of the people around us were willing to take a stand and say to the authorities that theirs was not the only way forward. […] We all knew, even before Takenoko was founded, that there was more to being successful than winning the favour of the government. The ordinary people, the schools and even the amateur puppeteers of the region all had something invested in the customs of the Takenoko theatre; things they stood to lose touch with if we collapsed and left only a

[25] Ikehara Yoshimi, 16 January 2001.

museum theatre.'[26]

Thus, while the Kagashi-za flourished on the back of the support of the authorities, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, the Takenoko theatre, though always seemingly on the verge of financial collapse according to master Yukio, remained active exclusively because of the fact that enough local inhabitants were willing to work together to ensure that it did not fade away for want of official recognition.

For the common people of Takamatsu, for whom both Honda Kotaro and Ikehara Yukio had, and have, great affection, the Tosa branch of Saibata puppet arts, whose inheritor was the Takenoko theatre, seems to have stood for a form of social continuity and popular involvement in the development of common cultural practices which the Hirota tradition simply did not offer. Saibata puppets had been founded as the last expression of a wide variety of Shikoku/Awaji puppet art customs which had, thanks to the enlightened thinking of the feudal lords of the Awa region in the Edo period, become the most commonly practiced form of social diversion in the region.

By the time that Yanagii Juzō and Yano Kosaburo gave their first performance in 1879, the puppet arts of the region had become a pursuit which any could follow without let or hindrance: a fact which can be said to have made the creation of Saibata puppet art, by two amateurs from non puppeteering families, possible in the first place. Thus, to many people the region, Saibata puppet art has come to represent a form of folk cultural expression in which the real value of the property lies in its social inclusiveness and, as a consequence of being so open to all, its very contemporary performance aspects.

However, the inclusiveness of Takenoko's approach to the signification of native folk culture has proved popular with many more of the participants in this particular process of negotiation than the common folk.

For example, master Yukio's open acceptance of any who wish to come to his art, added to the very up-to-the-minute attitude which the Takenoko's staff have to the preservation of their own folk culture, in their fascination for modern and foreign theatre traditions, is one of the most important aspects of their work, and the thing which makes them most appealing to the, admittedly few, scholars who have studied puppet arts on Shikoku. This seems to have come as a surprise to most of the Takenoko theatre staff who view their approach to the modernity of the

[26] Ikehara Yukio: Director, Saibata Ningyō Takenoko Puppet Theatre. Interview by the author, 14 December 2001.

theatre as being, though important to the local community, rather off-putting for professionals or academics who would have been far more at home in the Hirota Museum.

However, in comparison with the Hirota Museum, the Takenoko theatre represents a much more worthwhile study of local folk art traditions, because even beneath the theatre's veneer of foreign techniques and post-modern puppet forms, the relationships between staff and audience are, to all intents and purposes the same as they had been when Yanagii Juzō had laid down the first guidelines for his theatre in 1881.

Though this approach to the mechanics of folk art study has attracted some criticism – in that to alter an activity, even slightly, makes it impossible to study it in the correct context. However, I cannot agree with this assessment; finding it a somewhat blinkered approach to the contemporary purpose of common cultural expression. The study of folk art is, or should be, as much the study of its contemporary setting and the participants who use it to define the specifics of their own social reality.

This represents the view which all of Takenoko's major supporters seem to have taken over the years, from UNIMA, through the local board of education, to the small businesses of the region: these, much as noted in the previous Nishinomiya paper, take a real pride in supporting something which is unique to Haruno.

From Takenoko's first performance to the present day, the Ikeharas have always maintained that the most important aspect of their art is the relationship which the players have with their supporters, and the responsibility which the theatre has to them; to be whatever those patrons wish the Saibata arts to be. In some ways, as we have examined above, this appears to be a purely practical move, in that patrons will only pay good money to get what they want. However, it is clear that master Yukio's belief springs from a very deeply rooted faith, not only in the art he practices, but also in the social and cultural reality on Shikoku which has been given voice so effectively by puppet arts on the island since the days of the Hachisuka clan.

The Takenoko puppet theatre is, to my mind, both more and less than a place of entertainment to the agents who have come together to negotiate its social worth. It is an ultra-modern theatre to some, a historical archive of common art to others, and a representation of the contemporary folk identity to the more scholastic followers, In bending before each and every breeze which has come its way it has survived and, as even the local government was forced to admit in 1991, when the Takenoko theatre was finally included in the Hirota Museum and given a place in the annual arts funding round, fills all the roles assigned to it by its many friends (and enemies).

Conclusions

> 'It is no lie to say that we have prospered because we have submitted ourselves to just about every demand which the groups that maintain our theatre have come to us with. […] I'm not saying that we have become the artistic superiors of the Hirota Museum Theatre because of that, but you cannot fail to have noticed that, after all these years, it is they who have been required to compromise their opinions of the fitness of my theatre to represent the history and future of Saibata puppets and not vice versa. […] This, though, has not been a triumph of one artistic faction over another. Indeed I think that the people [of the troupes involved] eventually became immaterial to the argument. Rather, it was the result of everyone else, eventually, sitting down and deciding that enough was enough and even the [local] government had to take note of that.'[27]

In this paper we have generally concerned ourselves with examining what happens to the processes involved with the negotiation of social signification of a cultural property which has been beset by an internal conflict of control. In this regard, its main aim has been to demonstrate how little authority an individual agent (or small group of like-minded agents) has to radically alter the significations of the other members of the group in circumstances when those members are content with their perceptions.

What it has also done, in contrasting this post-war antagonistic attempt at artistic exclusionism with the very socially inclusive way in which the Saibata puppet tradition developed in the last century, has been to highlight the way in which this discordant debate was actually introduced to the island from the mainland, in the shape of the ministry of culture, which pushed for the support of the Hirota faction's claims to artistic supremacy in the early 1960s.

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[27] Ikehara Yukio, 21 August 2008.

Indeed that such a powerful, and quite uncharacteristic, debate over the artistic fitness of a foundation branch of the Saibata art should have erupted on Shikoku, a place where artistic freedom of expression in the puppet art community had been valued for centuries before the schism, between brother artists, is cause enough to suggest an external force might have been at work in this case. However, the force which does become exposed as the ultimate agent of this argument, the national government, cannot be entirely seen as a remote agent, attempting to gain entry to the process of signification which protects localised customs such as the puppet arts of Saibata as a whole. Rather, it is more along the lines of an emissary from another negotiated social reality which had, through the changing face of post-war Japanese government, been granted a degree of access to the social processes of that region.

Yet, the Tosa/Takenoko puppet theatre survived, despite the best efforts of some of the most powerful agents in the region. Why did they survive against such powerful lobbies and why did the Hirota group ultimately fail despite having the support of those same lobbies? In short, once the Hirota group seems to have fallen into the misguided belief that, simply because it had the support of a number of powerful elite sponsors it had automatically acquired the *right* to determine the social reality of the tradition it superficially headed – in concert with the Tosa group. The failure of its masters to recognize the power of grass roots supporters to successfully validate alternative significations of local culture, and the Tosa master's recognition of that fact, is what decided the modern course of the Saibata revival. History demonstrated to the citizens of Shikoku that this sort of top down control could extend into every aspect of life and popular pressure required that elite social negotiators suborn certain of their desires to the community. The Hachisuka clan, local officialdom, and even the very 'anti folk' Meiji government were forced to admit that they were facing negotiators who had an unusually powerful belief in the specifics of their regional social reality.

As powerful as certain elite agents might be, the work which these groups carry out to facilitate the significations which the group creates is wasted without the support of the majority of the group, which, in most cases, means the support of common patrons, amateur practitioners, local industry etc. Not even the most draconian government has the ability to destroy popular social significations, nor the inherent power to prevent people from establishing, if only within themselves, reality as they wish to perceive it. The Takenoko Puppet Theatre stands as the most important, respected, popular puppet art venue on Shikoku today because its masters respect that.

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