

# Shamanism and Noh

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## Abstract

In support of our theory on the evolution of mathematical ideas from paleolithic shamanism, we are interested in the survival of shamanic ritual elements in the classic theatre arts of Japan. In this short article we describe some of these elements in their historical contexts.

## 1. Introduction

While researching the roots of chaos and fractals in our paleolithic past, I happened across book titles connecting shamanism with the classical theater arts of Japan. Among these arts, Gagaku and Noh seemed especially to preserve survivals of shamanism.<sup>1</sup> To investigate this connection I made an exploratory one-week trip to Tokyo in November, 2010, with my assistant, Hiroko Tojo. Here is a brief report on that trip, and its sequel.

My short visit to Tokyo in November 2010 did not coincide with any Gagaku or Bunraku performances, but I was able to observe one Kabuki performance, and two Noh plays. Kabuki is of special interest as its birth is contemporaneous with the beginning of opera in the West. The example that I saw included the most incredible stagecraft I have ever seen.

Observing Noh theater was my first priority on this trip. I had never seen a performance, but had read several books (see the bibliography). My expectations were to

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<sup>1</sup>See (Blacker, 1975), (Ortolani, 1995), (LaFleur, 1983), and (Shigeo, 1984; Ch. 4).

see an early form of chaos art, perhaps the earliest: chaotic music and dance coordinated with poetic chant. This would be centuries earlier than the art of Kupka, which I have previously proposed as a prefiguration of the computer graphics of the chaos pioneer Ueda, and the creator of fractal geometry, Mandelbrot.

There are several Noh theatres in Tokyo (also some in Osaka, Nara, and Kyoto).<sup>2</sup>

## My Noh experiences

With Hiroko Tojo, I went to the Kanze Noh (Shibuya area) on Sunday November 7th, and saw: Kyogen *Shimai*, and Noh *Kanawa (Iron Trivet)*. Then we went to the National Theater (near Kokuritsu-Kyogijyo station) on Wednesday, November 10th, and saw: Kyogen *Sakono Samuro*, and Noh *Aoi-no-ue (Lady Aoi)*. Lady Aoi exists in an excellent translation by Arthur Waley.<sup>3</sup>

As for the connection with shamanism, I was surprised by the difference between the two Noh performances. The first one (Iron Trivet) realized my expectations, while the second (Lady Aoi) was very tame in comparison. I will have to return to Tokyo (or perhaps Kyoto or Nara) to see Gagaku and Bunraku, in search of more such connections.

The production of Iron Trivet was splendid with masks, costumes, movements, and music. As for the story, it concerns people, demons, and a shaman. A woman visits a Shinto shrine every morning at two-o'clock to curse her ex-husband who has abandoned her. A priest receives a divine revelation in a dream that he should give her a message. When the woman appears he gives her the divine oracle, which says that if she puts on a red kimono, spreads red powder on her face, puts an iron trivet on her head which burns with three flames, and holds rage in her mind, she will be able to turn into a demon as she wishes.

Meanwhile the ex-husband has nightmares every night and visits a shaman, who predicts that he and his new wife will die from the curse of the ex-wife. The shaman transfers the curse to two dolls. The ex-wife appears with an iron trivet on her head, and transforms into a demon. She beats the two dolls, but the demon is exorcised by the shaman.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>(Kenny, 1974)

<sup>3</sup>(Waley, 1921/1976; pp. 117-127)

<sup>4</sup>This abstract is from [www.the-noh.com/enplaysdataprogram\\_026.html](http://www.the-noh.com/enplaysdataprogram_026.html), which also has photos of a production very much like the one I saw.

The background in shamanism is evident in the cosmology, and the role of the shaman.

## Background

We will make occasional references to the major eras of Japanese history<sup>5</sup>

- Heian period (capital in Kyoto, 794-1191 CE)
- Kamakura period (capital in Kamakura, 1192-1333)
- Muramachi period (capital back in Kyoto, 1334-1573)
- Azuchi-Momoyama (1574-1600)
- Tokugawa (1600-1867)

The four traditional arts of Japan are, in chronological order:

- Gagaku, the court music (Kangen) and dance (Bugaku) of the Heian and Kamakura periods.
- Noh, the music and dance of the Muramachi period. Performances usually include short comedy (Kyogen) interludes.
- Bunraku, puppet theater, Muramachi period from 1500.
- Kabuki, song and dance from the Tokugawa period around 1600.<sup>6</sup>

## Noh

Noh has several traditional troupes, from about 1400, the four best known being:

- Enamani-za, became Komparu,
- Sakado-za, became Kongo,
- Tobi-za, became Hosho, and
- Yuzaki-za, became Kanze.

Kanami, the first leader of the Yuzaki-za, moved to Kyoto and founded a new school, Kanze, which remains the most prestigious school today. Kanami's son Zeami, who succeeded him as head of Kanze, contributed greatly to the development of Noh as we see it today.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>See, for example, (LaFleur, 1983; p. xvi)

<sup>6</sup>See ( Kenny, 1974)

<sup>7</sup>(Cavaye, 2004)

In Noh we may recognize remnants of paleolithic shamanic rituals.<sup>8</sup> The shamanic cosmology of three levels of consciousness (subteranean, ordinary, and celestial) is especially relevant. This cosmology need not have been carried out of Africa by our earliest Homo sapiens ancestors, but could rather simply emanate from the same Ur source: altered states of consciousness. In addition, Noh has been related to the Enochian magic of the Elizabethan magus John Dee (1527-1608).<sup>9</sup>

## 2. From Shamanism to Noh

Shamanism is our oldest surviving religion, and has influenced all the later sacred movements. Mathematics, magic, ritual, medicine, the visual arts and music – all may be traced from shamanism in the archeology of paleolithic times. While the shamanic tradition survives even today, in a continuous line of teacher and apprentice, many aspects are known only from cave paintings and other buried treasures. The decorated drums of Siberian shamans, seen in situ and in museums, inspired Kandinsky in his innovation of abstract painting around 1910.<sup>10</sup> It happens that, in terms of historical time, Japan is relatively close to its roots in shamanism as a living tradition. We will begin our investigation of shamanism with the evolution of the classical Noh theater of Japan.

### The path of shamanism

The origin of shamanism is unknown, but the earliest surviving relics are found today in Western Europe. From there there may have been a cultural diffusion to Siberia (Northern Asia), or perhaps, it went the other way. In any case, the connection between shamanism and psychedelics (entheogens) is sometimes credited to the Siberians, and otherwise to the Western Europeans. Characteristic of this thread in all times and places has been a cosmology of three tiers: the ordinary realm, the underworld, and the celestial sphere. Other characteristics include the ritual use of masks, drums, flutes, costumes, ecstatic dance, and abstract (symbolic) drawings.

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<sup>8</sup>(Lewis-Williams, 2002; pp. 132-135)

<sup>9</sup>(Lehrich, 2007; pp. 61-81)

<sup>10</sup>(Abraham, MS#131)

The trail from the frozen north to Japan, around 300 CE, is usually traced via China, and Korea.<sup>11</sup> Alternatively, Alaska, Siberia, and Japan are closely connected today by sea, and presumably in the Ice Ages, by land. To this northern source they may have been also an admixture of southern shamanism, from Polynesia.<sup>12</sup> In any case, Japanese shamanism fused with Shinto and Buddhism in late prehistoric times, 5th or 6th centuries.<sup>13</sup>

## The roots of Noh

Turning now the history of the classic theater and music of Japan, the oldest written source on the folk rituals seems to be around 300 CE.<sup>14</sup> Among these ancient records is found the myth of Ame-no Uzame-no-mikoto performing in front of a heavenly cave. This is associated with a shift in emphasis from shamanic ritual to artistic performance, and thus, the origin of the Japanese performing arts in a bifurcation from primitive shamanism. Myths, rituals, religions, the arts ... cultural history in general: all are characterized by the universal features of complex dynamical systems, such as bifurcations, or saltatory shifts from one plateau of evolution to another.

In the case of this shamanic bifurcation, the arts evolved from rituals to *kagura* – a dance performance involving *kami* (ghost, divine guest) – by the 8th century. In the same period *gigaku*, involving musical instruments, fanciful masks, and costumes which survive today – arrived from China. Next came *gagaku* (music from Korea) in the 5th century, and *bugaku* (dances from India, Tibet, and China) evolving in Japan continuously from the 8th century to the present.<sup>15</sup>

The further development of the Noh has been described in three stages:<sup>16</sup>

- Inception, from 11th century gagaku and bugaku,
- Earliest performances, from 15th century works of Kannami and Zeami,
- Preservation, from 17th century.

Again, these stages were punctuated by cultural bifurcations. The Noh theater came together from these roots (especially shamanic kagura) in the creative work

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<sup>11</sup>(Ortolani 1995; p. 2)

<sup>12</sup>(Blacker, 1999; p. 27)

<sup>13</sup>See (Blacker, 1999; p. 29), (LaFleur, 1983; p. 46), and (Ortolani, 1995; p. xii).

<sup>14</sup>(Ortolani; 1995; p. 2)

<sup>15</sup>(Ortolani, 1995; Ch. 4)

<sup>16</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 16)

on Kanami around 1400.<sup>17</sup> The history of Noh from that time consists of faithful adherence to tradition, and new works created within the traditional parameters. And thus, we may experience shamanic rituals in artistic recreation in the Noh theaters of Japan today. Besides the ritual dance, costumes, masks, and drama of the ancient tradition, the music integral to the performance stands out as preeminently shamanic.

### **3. The Music of Noh**

As the music of Noh derives from that of the paleolithic shamanic traditions, we must be aware of these ancient roots.

#### **The Roots of Music**

From footprints found in paleolithic caves, it is plausible that chthonic rituals in the caves included ingestion of entheogens, improvisation on musical instruments, and ecstatic dancing. Shamans in historic times have very commonly been observed (and photographed) with frame drums, such as those that inspired Kandinsky for his abstract paintings. Stringed instruments are thought to have evolved from the hunting bow, attested in cave paintings throughout Western Europe. And the oldest musical instruments presently known are flutes made of bird bone and mammoth ivory, more than 40,000 years old. These were found in a cave in the Jura mountains, near the Danube in Germany.<sup>18</sup>

#### **The Instruments of Noh Music**

The music of Noh today is provided by the chorus and the orchestra. The chorus is seated on the right-hand side of the stage and sing in unison.<sup>19</sup> The orchestra, seated at the back of the stage, consists of four instrumentalists: a transverse flutist and three drummers.<sup>20</sup> The three drums are a shoulder drum and a side drum, both

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<sup>17</sup>(Ortolani, 1995; p. 93)

<sup>18</sup>Reported in the BBC News, 25 May 2012.

<sup>19</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 29)

<sup>20</sup>(Tamba, 1981; pp. 27, 141)

played with the hands, and a front drum, played with sticks.<sup>21</sup> The performance is punctuated by vocal cries by the drummers.<sup>22</sup>

## The Characteristics of Noh Music

The music of gagaku comprises musical notes from the chromatic scale, harmonic intervals, and regular rhythms, much like the classical music of Europe.<sup>23</sup> As gagaku evolved into the music of Noh, in the 15th century, these three principles were replaced by new principles of rhythm, tempo, and structure.<sup>24</sup> Note pitches were freed from the chromatic scale, intervals from Pythagorean harmonics, and rhythms from periodicity. In place of the traditional rules, a new structure of vocal and percussion cells emerged.

The vocal cells are short melodies, patterns of movement in fluid, relative pitches.<sup>25</sup> The flutist also utilizes melody cells.<sup>26</sup> And each of the drummers plays from a set of rhythm cells, special to the type of drum.<sup>27</sup> A rhythm cell comprises drum beats and vocal cries.

## Shamanic Resurgence

Here again, in the shift from gagaku to Noh, we have an example of cultural bifurcation. There is a special name for a bifurcation which repeatedly recovers an earlier state: *resurgence*. This term was introduced by cultural theorist Riane Eisler in the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> She studied *gylanic resurgence*, in which the prehistoric partnership form of social organization (equal partnership of the genders in human society) repeatedly breaks through the barriers of the dominator society. In our history of Noh, we have observed repeated incidents of *shamanic resurgence*.

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<sup>21</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 159)

<sup>22</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 165)

<sup>23</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 5)

<sup>24</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 6)

<sup>25</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 63)

<sup>26</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 171)

<sup>27</sup>(Tamba, 1981; p. 172)

<sup>28</sup>(Eisler, 1987)

## 4. Conclusion

While survivals of the shamanic practices of prehistoric times may be found in several cultures today, only the Noh theater of Japan recreates the full spectacle, including music, dance, drama, masks, costumes, integrated performance, and highly evolved stage art. The content – story, poetry, historic and mythical characters, ghosts, and elemental forces, relating to all three levels of the shamanic cosmos – is enhanced by chaotic music and surreal movements to invoke the ambiance of an authentic paleolithic cave spectacle.

Reading widely in world cultural history, informed by this exemplary case of shamanic resurgence, we may now recognize many other examples of this phenomenon. Particularly, in current events, we find ourselves amid a shamanic resurgence affecting mathematics, the sciences, the arts, politics economics, the environment – everything – which is crucial to our choice of a future.

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