



## PART I

# Traditional theatres

### PREFACE TO PART I JAPANESE CIVILIZATION ARISES LAURENCE KOMINZ

Japan's society and culture have been determined largely by its geographical location: a series of islands on the fringe of China, one of the most enduring civilizations of the world. Japan is just far enough away from China to make it safe from military invasion (most of the time) yet accessible for trade and religious/cultural exchange. This distance meant that civilization came later to Japan than to China's contiguous neighbors in East and Southeast Asia, but also that Japan was able to maintain cultural and political autonomy throughout its history (the only exception being the brief US occupation, 1946–53). Japan–China relations took the form of continuous and varied connections, ongoing debates about what aspects of continental civilization should be adopted by Japan, and, conversely, what was and should remain “Japanese.”

### Hybrid beliefs and language

While Japan's native language (in the Ural-Altaic family) and religion are very different from China's, Chinese civilization was perceived as so powerful and useful that Japan absorbed it while developing its own hybrid language and religion. Shinto (神道, the way of the gods), a pantheistic animist religion, has thrived from prehistory until today. Japan evolved into an agricultural society and Shinto believers prayed to, gave offerings to, and entertained their gods to ensure good weather and bountiful harvests, beseeching them to exorcise evil spirits that caused illness, crop disease, and infestation.

Buddhism came to Japan in the sixth century from India via China and Korea, embraced by the elite for its moral teachings and guarantee of an afterlife. Initially Buddhism helped the fledgling Japanese state solidify its political power, working in tandem with institutions and the political culture of Confucianism. Buddhism and Shinto have coexisted until today, enjoying a primarily harmonious and symbiotic relationship – most Japanese participate in rituals of both religions. The shrines and temples not only nourished ritual performances by priests and *miko* shrine maidens, but also became safe refuges and tax havens for secular entertainers at festivals.

By the seventh century, an imperial family emerged in Japan, head of a relatively small aristocracy that supported the emperor, while competing to wield power behind the throne. The Chinese model of a grand, long-lasting imperial capital inspired the Japanese to establish two great capitals in the classical age, Nara (710–84) then Kyoto (also called Heian-kyō, Miyako, or Kyō, 794–1868). Literature and performing arts in the Nara and Heian periods (794–1185) were centered in these capitals, from which sophisticated urban culture diffused to the rural provinces. Throughout the premodern era, vibrant traditions of travel literature celebrated Japan's natural beauty while depicting the pleasure and pain of life in the countryside.

Japanese was apparently a spoken language without written characters until these were imported from China and Korea in the sixth century. Japan's tiny, educated elite could write both Japanese and Chinese using the same script, much as our educated British forebears wrote in English or Latin. Despite heavy cultural borrowings of Chinese architecture, political organization, pictorial arts, and poetry, literary Japanese was also generally prized and preserved, perceived as different in purpose and feeling from Chinese. By 850, Japan had developed its own phonological script, used in tandem with, rather than replacing, Chinese logographs – demonstrating the hybridity so prevalent in the development of performative expressions.

### Early arts: poetry and fiction

The earliest important literary genre was poetry, begun as Shinto religious rites, then popularized for secular uses. Japanese poetry from the beginning was affective and dialogic. The earliest recorded myths of the *Kojiki* (712) abound with exchanges of love poetry, and elegies to console the dead and their surviving kin. Vivid natural images were appropriated from mountains and seacoast descriptions to express human form, apparel, actions, and emotions. The first great anthology of Japanese poetry was the *Man'yōshū* (759). Compared to Chinese antecedents, Japanese poetry was considered private and personal. Japanese poetry was rarely used to express political or social

3     Early arts: poetry and fiction

concerns – Japanese wrote Chinese poetry for this purpose. A preferred literary meter emerged for Japanese poetry: the 5–7–5 syllable count, capturing the stressed, atonal, non-symmetrical rhythmic dynamic of the spoken language:

Oki mo sede [5] Without arising –  
 Ne mo sede yoru o [7] but also without sleeping  
 Akashite wa [5] I passed the night till dawn.  
 (first verse of anonymous *Kokinshū* poem, 905, author translation)

For a brief period in the late 700s and early 800s, Chinese poetry threatened to overwhelm Japanese, but love kept Japanese poetry alive. Women did not learn Chinese, which was felt to be too scholarly, so all courtship poetry and personal correspondence poetry had to be written in Japanese. Love and travel tales about the great poets of the first imperial anthology of Japanese poetry (*Kokinshū*, 905) would provide Japanese drama with stories and heroes for the next millennium. Criticism and standards were established, with poetry deemed the purest and most beautiful vocal expression of the human heart. When drama emerged, naturally it quickly took the form of poetic drama, often borrowing verbatim from the imperial anthologies or contemporary popular songs.

In the 900s–1100s courtly culture flourished among the ruling elite. A relatively genteel game of power politics required leaders to educate daughters for use in strategic marriages. Women writers came to dominate Japanese literature. They created poetic diaries and magnificent works of poetic fiction, epitomized by Lady Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* (c. 1001–14). Romantic tales such as *Genji* and *The Tales of Ise*, and folktales and adventure tales (*setsuwa*) such as *Konjaku Monogatari* (Tales of times now past) from popular oral and written traditions, were adapted to the noh theatre, centuries later.

This golden age of courtly literature and relative peace ended with the rise of the samurai military elite, who ruled and fought over Japan from the 1160s until the dawn of the modern era in 1868. In 1192 the Shogun, a dominant military ruler, created a new government in Kamakura, his own alternative administrative capital, thus rendering the emperor and his surrounding aristocracy subservient. The bloody struggles for supremacy by rival clans Genji and Heike were recited by blind minstrels in the epic *Tales of the Heike* (c. 1200) then reimagined and reconstructed in myriad forms on stage for the next 800 years.

# 1 ∞ Ancient and early medieval performing arts

TERAUCHI NAOKO

A number of important Japanese performing arts (*geinō*, 芸能)<sup>1</sup> flourished before the appearance of the first dramatic forms, *noh-kyogen*, in the mid-fourteenth century. Some ancient *geinō* even offer complex stories using words, music, and dance.<sup>2</sup> Performances or rituals played at court, Buddhist temples, and Shinto shrines influenced later theatrical spectacle. Some survived, but others are traceable only through historical records, literature, or picture-scrolls.

Ancient performing arts show diversity in origin, patronage, and style. Some were imported directly from the Asian continent under the Yamato government's (fourth to seventh centuries AD) policy of progress through assimilation, while others are native to the Japanese archipelago. Some arts supported by the nobility were highly refined; others, enjoyed by the lower classes, were wild and dynamic. These arts were neither perfected nor isolated, but rather continuously mutually influenced each other. Some arts descended from and replaced older ones, while others intertwined to bring about new hybrids. This continuous recombination of court, folk, and religious genres is a defining feature of the fluid premedieval performing arts.

## Continental imports: *gigaku*, *sangaku*, *bugaku*

Japan's interaction with the Asian continent was especially active during the seventh and eighth centuries, with the systematic introduction of Korean and Chinese arts that then became established in Japan via continuous transmission within permanent institutions.

1 "Gei" originally meant "to plant" or "sow," eventually indicating "skill" or "art," while "nō" means "ability" or "skill." Before the twentieth century, "geinō" included arts such as music, poetry, dance, calligraphy, medicine, horse riding, and scholarship. Today it refers to "performing arts" or "popular entertainment" generally, unless preceded by a qualifier: *minzoku geinō* (folk performance), *dentō geinō* (traditional performance), or *koten geinō* (classical performance).

2 "Ancient" in a Japanese context refers to the period from mythological times to the end of the Heian period (1185); "medieval" from Kamakura to the end of Azuchi-Momoyama (1185–1603).

### Gigaku (伎楽)

Masked pantomime *gigaku*, also known as *kuregaku* 呉楽 (lit., ‘music of China’s Wu dynasty [222–80 AD]’), is one of Japan’s earliest foreign performing arts. According to *The Chronicles of Japan* (*Nihonshoki* a.k.a. *Nihongi*), *gigaku* was introduced in 612 AD by Mimashi from the ancient Korean kingdom Paekche, who taught it in Nara. *Gigaku* was staged for the “eye-opening ceremony” of the Great Buddha in the Tōdaiji Temple in 752 AD and other annual, religious events.

*Gigaku* masks cover the entire head, unlike the smaller ones used in *noh*, and some are quite realistic and grotesque. According to the musical treatise *Kyōkunshō* (Anthology of lessons, 1223), *gigaku* was accompanied by flute, hip-drum, and cymbals. Plots described include:

- *Chidō* and *shishi* (herald and lion): A herald (*chidō*) and a lion (*shishi*) led by two boys (*shishiko*) purify the stage before a ceremony. A lion-like creature (*shishi*, 獅子) led by two boys walks around a stage. The *gigaku shishi*, believed to be a sacred beast capable of destroying invisible demons, inspired many types of lion dances (*shishimai*) in later folk festivals.
- *Gokō* (Lord of Wu): A Wu lord dances as if playing a flute (accompanied by an actual flute player).
- *Karura* (Garuda-bird): This character dances wearing a mask derived from the Indian sacred bird that eats snakes.
- *Baramon* (Brahman priest): Although this noble priest is from a Hindu high caste, his comic actions, such as washing diapers, satirize the earthy reality of high status.
- *Konron*, *Gojo*, *Kongō*, and *Rikishi* (the Villain, Lady, and Deva Kings): The villain *Konron* stalks and rapes the beautiful *Gojo* (a lady of Wu), before two Deva kings chase him away, pulling his symbolic phallus.
- *Suikoō* and *Suikojū* (Drunken Barbarian King and Servants): Details about these characters are not clear.

Thus *gigaku* pieces contain satiric, erotic, or comic flavors seemingly contradictory to Buddhist morality. However, these simple, easily understood *gigaku* were employed as a practical device for attracting people to temples, where they assimilated Buddhist ideology.

*Gigaku* declined after the thirteenth century, although there are records of its performances at Kasuga Shrine in Nara through the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Its long-lost tradition has been revived by a former court musician, Shiba Sukeyasu (1935–), with masks reconstructed at Tenri University. It was

3 Kasagi Kon'ichi, *Gagaku to Nara* (Gagaku and Nara) (Nara: Nara City, 1980), 14.

6 ∞ Ancient and early medieval performing arts

performed during celebrations surrounding the renovation of the main hall of the Great Buddha at Tōdaiji in 1980.<sup>4</sup>

**Variety entertainments: *sangaku* (散楽)**

*Sangaku*, also known as *hyakugi* (one hundred entertainments) or *zatsugi* (miscellaneous entertainments), was also brought from the Asian continent, mainly for performance at Buddhist ceremonies. *Sangaku* comprises acrobats, conjuring, juggling, and comic skits. The picture-scroll *Shinzei kogaku-zu*, depicting performing arts of the early ninth century, includes *sangaku* arts: entering a small jar; a monkey passing through a metal hoop; sword swallowing; an acrobat riding atop four others' shoulders; three child acrobats riding on one man's shoulder; a tightrope walker; and the juggling of balls and swords.

The Japanese court provided a position for *sangaku* players in governmental institutions until the late eighth century. After its abolishment, performers were rehired as palace guards to perform *sangaku* at imperial ceremonies. Others became affiliated with temples where they served in Buddhist rituals or as freelance players in folk agricultural rites or street entertainments, later absorbed into *dengaku* or *sarugaku* (noh) troupes.

*Sarugaku* (猿楽, monkey entertainments) possibly derives from *sangaku*. According to the *Shin-sarugakuki* (Records of new *sarugaku*), written by aristocrat Fujiwara no Akihira (989?–1066), *sarugaku* at the beginning of the eleventh century included various acts, such as *noronji* (*shushi* wizardry), a performance deriving from an exorcism rite; *dengaku* dances and plays; *kugutsu* (puppetry); *shinadama* (juggling balls) and other forms of juggling; various comical mimicries or parodies; and narrative accompanied by a *biwa* (lute).<sup>5</sup>

**Cosmic court dance and music: *bugaku* (舞楽)**

*Bugaku* is a dignified dance repertoire accompanied by *gagaku* (雅楽, elegant music), consisting of instruments introduced from the continent, and adopted into rituals at court, temples, and shrines. By the seventh century, music and dance of Korea's three kingdoms, Kudara (Paekche), Shiragi (Silla), and Kōkuri (Koguryō) had been imported. Together with later music from Bokkai (Balhae, present-day Manchuria/North Korea), these were reorganized into *komagaku* (Korean music). Chinese and Vietnamese music and dance,

4 Kyogen actor Nomura Mannojo (later Manzō VI) attempted to revitalize the tradition with "new *gigaku*" in 2001, using masks and dance styles from Asia. Yoshiko Fukushima, "Masks, interface of past and future – Nomura Mannojo's *Shingigaku*," *ATJ* 22:1 (2005), 249–68.

5 Fujiwara Akihira, *Shin-sarugaku-ki*, reprinted in *Nihon shisō taikēi*, vol. VIII: *Kodai seiji shakai shisō* (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1979), 133–52.



Fig 2 Six-panel painted screen by Kanō Yasunobu (1613–85), illustrating bugaku.

called *tōgaku* (Chinese music), and *rin'yūgaku* (Vietnamese music), later categorized simply as *tōgaku*.

A bugaku piece is constructed of several parts comprised of choreographed foot-patterns and gestures; introduction, body, and exit. Some pieces have multiple sections for the main body; the typical three-section structure is called “jo-ha-kyū,” which became an important concept in *noh*. *Jo* 序 (prelude) is usually in free rhythm with a slow tempo, *ha* 破 (breach) a metrical rhythm with moderate tempo, and *kyū* 急 (quick) a metrical rhythm with rapid tempo. Thus jo-ha-kyū originally was a notion of gagaku composition focusing on rhythmic traits, later enhanced into a more philosophical concept.

Each dance consists of short choreographic patterns. For example, leg patterns include *hiraku* (open), *suru* (patter), *ochiiri* (sink down), *tateru* (stand), *fumu* (stamp), and *tobu* (jump), while those for arms include *hiraku* (open), *tojiru* (close), and *awasu* (join hands). Group patterns for four to six dancers are performed in a soft and elegant manner called “calm dance” (*hira-mai*), while solo or paired dancers perform a more active “running dance” (*hashiri-mai*).

Dancers wear ornate costumes and, for some dances, large, decorative masks. Bugaku dance is categorized either as “left dance,” accompanied by Chinese music, or “right dance,” accompanied by Korean music. Left and right dances are played alternately. Although there is neither a dramatic story nor even concrete meaning behind each choreographic motion, some pieces have a specific motif or background. The popular piece *Ryōō* employs a fierce, grotesque mask, portraying a king of ancient north

Qi (present Henan Province) who was so handsome that he wore an ugly mask when he fought. *Ryōō* was performed during sporting competitions featuring archery, wrestling, and horse riding, and on other noble, festive celebrations. In contrast, *Karyōbin* (迦陵頻; Kalavinka in Sanskrit, bird of paradise) and *Bosatsu* (Bodhisattva) are often staged during a temple service where dancers also participate in a food offering to the Buddha or saints.

In addition to each piece's character, the structure and dramaturgy of the whole bugaku ceremony deserves attention. Ceremonies at court, temples, or shrines utilize a large outdoor space in front of a main hall where personnel, instruments, and ornamental settings are placed in a symmetric position. The city plans of ancient Nara and Kyoto were themselves based on such a bilateral system. However, the principle indicates not just a pair of same or similar things but also a dichotomy of bright/dark, strong/weak, or male/female, derived from the yin/yang ordering principle. The left *dadaiko* (huge drum for outdoor performance) displays a golden disc above the drum skin, representing a sun, with dragon carving in the frame attached to the body, while the right one displays a silver moon above the drumhead and phoenix carving on the frame. Dancers' costumes also show contrasting colors signifying the dual forces of the cosmos: warm reds and oranges for left-dance costumes, cool blues and greens for the right.

During a ceremony, a host, guests, and other high-ranking nobles sitting inside the main hall gaze down into the south front yard where a pageant is performed. A Chinese-music dancer appears from the left (east) side, dances in the center of the yard, and exits, followed by a Korean-music dancer who mirrors the actions from the right (west). This series of alternate dances continues for hours, interpreted as symbolizing the rotation of sun and moon, or day and night. While the two opposites never merge into one, their circulation brings balance to the universe.

Bugaku boasts a continuous history of over 1,300 years. It has received governmental support since being instituted as the Gagakuryō in 701. However, in the ninth century, inner guards replaced the Gagakuryō musicians and since then have performed in various court rituals. These hereditary families then handed down the tradition over generations. Three large troupes established, respectively, in Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka, were active until the musicians moved to Tokyo in 1869, following Emperor Meiji. The forerunner of the current governmental institution, the Kunaichō Gakubu (宮内庁楽部, Music Department of the Imperial Household Agency), was established in 1870 in Tokyo, inviting musicians from Kyoto, Nara, and Osaka. They primarily serve in traditional court rituals, but sometimes offer public concerts. Large temples and shrines such as Shitennōji in Osaka and Kasuga

Shrine in Nara have maintained annual events showing a number of bugaku dances, performed today by amateurs.

Nowadays, *tōgaku* employs the *shō* (mouth organ), *hichiriki* (double reed pipe), *ryūteki* (transverse flute), *biwa* (lute), *koto* (zither), *kakko* (barrel-shaped drum), *taiko* (big drum), and *shōko* (small gong), while *komagaku* uses *komabue* (transverse flute shorter than *ryūteki*), *hichiriki*, *san-no-tsuzumi* (hourglass shaped drum), *taiko*, and *shōko*. Some *gagaku* instruments became popular with the public, bringing about other musical genres, such as *noh*. The *ryūteki* was transformed into the *nōkan* flute: the *san-no-tsuzumi* is the precursor of the *ōtsuzumi* (large drum), while *ikko*, a smaller sized *san-no-tsuzumi*, became the *kotsuzumi* small drum. The *biwa* lute became an accompaniment to narratives; the *koto* zither also became an accompanying instrument in the Edo period. Thus the *gagaku* ensemble can be seen as the progenitor of many later musical instruments and traditions.

## Court and folk arts

Japan's native performing arts percolated up from lively folk entertainments and filtered down from court rituals, displaying a dynamic energy contained within strict forms and patterns.

### *Mikagura*

Native music and dances have also been performed at courts, temples, and shrines, and on various secular occasions. *Kagura* (神楽; literally, “gods’ entertainment”) can be found throughout Japan in many styles, roughly classified into two types:

- 1 rites to purify a place for making prayer offerings for a peaceful world and healthy harvest
- 2 theatrical to embody the mythical worlds of Japanese gods.

*Mikagura* is the most noble and refined among various ritual forms performed exclusively at court and certain shrines, Iwashimisu-hachiman Shrine (Kyoto), Tsurugaoka-Hachiman Shrine (Kanagawa), and Hikawa Shrine (Saitama). Consisting of fifteen songs and two dances accompanied by a *kagura-bue* (flute), *hichiriki* (reed pipe), *wagon* (six-stringed zither), and *shakubyōshi* (clappers), the plotless pieces follow a precise structure:

- 1 introduction (purification of site)
- 2 welcoming the gods
- 3 entertaining the gods
- 4 conclusion and sending off the gods.



Fig 3 Miko channel gods and purify the stage at the Wakamiya Festival, Kasuga Shrine, Nara.

In the introduction, a sacred fire is lit and “Niwabi” (Sacred fire) and “Ajime” (meaning unknown) are sung to purify the venue. The lyrics of “Ajime” employ a few unintelligible syllables, reflecting a traditional belief that a word or even the voice itself retains magico-religious efficacy. To invoke the gods, “Sakaki” (Sacred branch) and “Mitegura” (Strips of paper) are sung to praise the god’s symbols, danced by a trance-possessed leader with *torimono*, sacred implements acting as temporary abodes of the god. Then, a summoning of a god of Korean origin, “Karakami” (韓神), is sung and danced. The entertainment part includes several songs depicting sacred gods and local landscapes. The last song, “Sonokoma” (The horse) praises the sacred vehicle of the god.

The original forms, established at the beginning of the eleventh century, contained twice as many songs as now. Today, the Mikagura Rite is held annually on a mid-December evening at the Imperial Palace, requiring over five hours.

### *Miko-kagura* shamaness rituals

While only men are permitted to perform mikagura, another type of kagura welcomes exclusively female performance: *miko-kagura* (巫女神楽) (shamaness kagura). The episode of the goddess Amenōzume found in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* suggests that female priests have conducted important services from very early eras. In the Nara period and earlier, the Sarume-gimi family, claiming to be descendants of Amenōzume, contributed exclusively