Gagaku/Bugaku

*Extract from “Dancing, The pleasure, power, and art of movement”,*

*Gerald Jonas, 1992*

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 Tadamaro Ono is also a palace servant. His job is to play gagaku ("elegant music") at the Imperial Court of Japan. The austere, stately dances performed to this music are called bugaku. Members of Ono's family have been performing at the emperor's behest for close to twelve hundred years. His is the thirty-ninth generation in an unbroken line of court musicians.

 Gagaku and bugaku represent the world's oldest continuing tradition of court music and dance. For centuries, these performances were a closely held secret of the palace, heard and seen only by members of the aristocracy, government officials, and official guests. Since the end of the Second World War performances have been open to the public in a theater on the palace grounds. Even for the Japanese, the glacially paced gagaku and bugaku are an acquired taste. Yet more than fifteen thousand people apply for admission each year. Since the performance hall holds only seven hundred and there are only about thirty performances a year, a lottery is held to determine the lucky ticket winners. The losers can console themselves with a compact disk of the music, sales of which have been rising. In Ono's words, "there is a boom, something like nostalgia," for gagaku and bugaku.

 Outsiders who try to understand modern Japan are struck by the apparent contradiction between the Japanese appetite for the new (whether in electronics, economics, or politics) and their concern with preserving the past. This contradiction is itself nothing new. Except for a three-hundred-year period of isolation from the world that ended in 1868, the Japanese have characteristically adopted new ideas without letting go of tradition. Often, today's novelty becomes tomorrow's tradition and takes an honored place in the ever-expanding gallery of Japanese culture. A classic example is the way Japan enthusiastically adopted Buddhism, imported some thirteen hundred years ago from the Asian mainland, while keeping up the rites of Shinto, the indigenous religion. Many Japanese families maintain two household shrines, one Shinto and one Buddhist. At the Imperial Court, the same impulse can be seen in the survival of gagaku and bugaku, which bonded native traditions and exotic foreign novelties into something fundamentally Japanese.

 The word Shinto can be translated as "continuity." Shinto has no founder and no set scriptures, no myth of creation-out-of-nothing, no apocalyptic world-ending. From the first Japanese historical records in the fourth century, Shinto is already there, channeling the energies of its people toward the worship of myriad divinities, ranging from tutelary spirits and deified ancestors to personalized forces of nature and abstract concepts such as purity and truth. The first Japanese emperors known to history were both political and religious leaders; and through centuries of political upheaval in which the Imperial Court was often little more than a pawn of powerful warlords, the religious role of the emperor has remained crucial to the self-image of the Japanese.

 The imperial family claims descent from Amaterasu, the sun goddess, whose favor is necessary to a successful rice harvest. Disgusted by the boorish behavior of her brother, Amaterasu shut herself up in a cave and the world fell into darkness. To lure her out, the goddess Ame-no-uzume danced half-nude on an overturned tub before the assembled divinities; her antics so amused the gods that their laughter awakened the curiosity of the sun goddess, who peeped out of the cave and was drawn back into the world. Ame-no-uzume became the patron of music and dance in Japan—the Land of the Rising Sun—and dance as "entertainment for the gods" became a part of Shinto ceremonies. But in the seventh century, when Buddhist dance-drama processions and gorgeously costumed banquet entertainments were introduced from Korea and China, the Imperial Court of Japan quickly embraced the new imports.

 Over the centuries these were adapted to Japanese taste and combined with surviving Shinto rituals to make up a suite of spectator dances, known as bugaku, for performance at court functions and religious festivals. What is most remarkable is not the survival of the native Shinto elements but the preservation, in something approaching their original form, of the imported dances and music. The original Chinese and Korean forms have long since died out on the mainland, where they are known only through literary and pictorial sources. The Japanese, however, saved what they borrowed, as if to proclaim their pride in recognizing quality-no matter what its origin.

 In the Imperial Palace theater, gagaku and bugaku are performed on a square platform (measuring just under six yards per side) covered in green brocade and resting on a slightly larger square of black-lacquered wood, A red railing runs all around the larger square, During dance performances the orchestra sits in an alcove behind the stage, between two huge drums. Some bugaku dances depict legendary battles, others enact encounters with divine personages or mythical beasts like the phoenix; one famous set-piece shows two dragons frolicking. The splendid costumes include long flowing robes of solid blue or deep crimson, gold-brocade leggings lined with scarlet silk, elaborately embroidered breastplates, black-lacquered "stovepipe" hats or golden helmets, ceremonial swords, lances, and shields, and spectacular face masks: the two dragons, for example, frolic in hairy blue masks with sharp silver fangs. But whatever the subject matter, the dancers move almost imperceptibly through simple geometric floor patterns punctuated by long pauses in which the performers strike significant poses. Although most pieces are choreographed for two to eight dancers, they are actually a series of "solos" in which a single character may be represented by four identically-dressed dancers who repeat identical movements in the four cardinal directions.

 Repetition is as basic to the bugaku aesthetic as is the deliberately slow tempo. One Japanese commentator has compared the performing of bugaku to the process of making color woodblock prints: "When color printing is being done, the platen revolves several times putting on colors: first yellow, then blue, then red, and in the end black. The same idea is applied in the performance, repeating the same melody and the same patterns several times. .. the element of

sound and the element of movement are piled up on top of each other and create intensity."

 The musical accompaniment also works on the principle of achieving maximal effect with minimal material. Musicians are expected to play their instruments—drums, lutes, flutes, harps, reeds and pipes—as if they were themselves dancers, although they usually remain seated. For example, the player of the biwa, a short-necked, four-stringed lute, will lift his arms just so as he runs his ivory plectrum across the silk strings to produce both a pleasing sound and a pleasing gesture. And the pounder of the large drum that sets the tempo will shift his weight from heel to toe as he strikes the drumhead, making a grand gesture out of what might otherwise be a metronome-like operation. A centuries-old instruction manual gives some idea of the refinement of movement and posture that gagaku and bugaku strive for. In certain pieces, dancers are urged to emulate "tinted leaves blown about in a storm on a mountain in autumn," while in other pieces they should resemble "a willow waving in the spring breeze."

 The unchanging nature of gagaku and bugaku over the centuries manifests the role that the Imperial Court has played in Japanese history. The court retainers who developed these arts had time to shape and reshape each element of each piece until they were satisfied that something of lasting beauty had been created. At the brilliant eleventh century court described in The Tale of Genji (recognized as the world's first novel), emperors and nobles not only attended performances but took an active part in

them. But from the end of the twelfth to the middle of the nineteenth century the Imperial Court at Kyoto functioned solely as a symbol of Japanese unity while real power was wielded elsewhere by military leaders known as Shoguns. Although some Shogunate courts sponsored music and dance performances of their own, the survival of the Imperial Court depended on the perception that the soul of Japan resided in Kyoto. The regular production of gagaku and bugaku, with due attention to all the nuances, was essential to this perception, even if only a handful of people witnessed the performances. The Japanese not only revere the past, they feel a sense of duty to keep it alive.

 During the Onin Rebellion (1467-77) Kyoto itself was sacked, and court musicians and dancers scattered to take refuge in shrines and monasteries. Some stayed away even after order was restored, and to this day tneir descendants perform gagaku and bugaku at important shrines throughout Japan. When the Tokugawa Shogunate consolidated its power in the early seventeenth century, the third Shogun organized a gagaku and bugaku festival in Kyoto in 1626 to impress the people and the emperor with the power of the new rulers of Japan. In 1661 the Shogunate placed the production of court music and dance on a firm financial footing and ordered a competitive examination every three years to maintain a pool of talented performers.

 Having preserved their Imperial Court in a kind of suspended animation for so long, the Japanese turned to Kyoto when the Shogunate lost power in the middle of the nineteenth century. The precipitating event was the failure of government forces to defend the country against the incursions of Europeans. Rallying under the slogan "Revere the Emperor! Drive Out the Barbarians!" a broad political alliance restored direct imperial rule. In 1868 the emperor's residence was moved from Kyoto to the Shogunate capital of Edo, which was renamed Tokyo.

 In the rush of modernization that followed, the Gagaku Department of the Imperial Household Agency was reorganized, and performers were required to learn Western music, including polkas and military marches. The emperor also ordered his musicians to compose Western-style music with traditional melodies; one of these compositions evolved into the Japanese national anthem.

 Japan's defeat in the Second World War nearly brought about the end of gagaku and bugaku. There was agitation (which continues in some quarters) to abandon the performances as an expensive anachronism. But the Japanese reverence for tradition won out, and in 1955 the court musicians and dancers were declared Important Intangible Government Properties, more commonly known as "living national treasures." A six-week tour of the United States in 1959 brought worldwide acclaim and renewed interest in Japan itself.

 Today, Tadamaro Ono sees no more reason for gagaku and bugaku to die out than for the Japanese to turn their backs on the tea ceremony or the No theater which also, in his view, reflect "the Japanese national character." Court music and dance continue to be passed down from generation to generation of palace servants by a time-honored process of oral instruction. The families who have been entrusted with the tradition choose the most talented boys from each generation to be trained; their training in all the details of gagaku and bugaku may begin as early as the age of five. Ono himself was skeptical about the efficacy of this early selection when his turn came to judge the younger members of the family. "However," he says, "it must he done to keep the tradition, and our family, alive."