Reflections on dance, its origins, and the value of comparative studies

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Trans, Frank Hoff

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Professor Honda yasuji occupies an eminent place in the world of Japanese scholarship centered upon the performing arts. The selected bibliography of his published works represents only a part of his accomplishments. The wealth of documentation of traditional forms of folk and ritual dance and theatre, in the collection of which Professor Honda was directly instrumental, is further evidence of his devotion to research in this area. The documentation is in the form of recorded tapes, photo-graphs, films, and indeotapes; the bulk of the collection is deposited with the NHK Broadcasting Company in Japan. This collec-tion is of great importance to all future research undertaken in this area, as are his publications. Professor Hondas paper at the Conference depended a great deal upon live demonstration; many of his remarks related directly to the demonstrations. Thus the portion of the paper published here does not fully represent his Conference presentation. Rather it includes his opening remarks, luhich giue a brief overview of the origins of dance and theatre in Japan, and preliminary indications of possibiliies for comparative research. It is surely of interest that, after devating himself for many decades to research in the area of dance and theatre in Japan, Professor Honda has, in his later years, taken a loider uieio of the performing arts and is very much aware of the significance of comparatiue studies. At the Conference, Professor Honda received the CORD/CADR Honorory Scroll, pre-sented by Genevieve Ostoald at a special banquet held at the Natsunoya Tea House on Friday, August 4, 1978.

—The Editor

The origins of dance in ]apan can be traced back to dances per-formed by male and female shamans to induce divine possession. In order to reach a state of trance, a female shamarv would circlf around and around in a designated purified area in time to th< accompaniment of persons Standing on its periphery. A mal shaman would leap repeatedly into the air to induce the gods t come and possess him. Although shamanic possession itself not dance, the Imitation of that state and the refining of its movements gave birth to dance. Dances descended from this type a still performed today in various regions of Japan.

A second source of dance may be found in the movements us to invite the gods to be present among men. Large groups of people, gathered together on the occasion of a festival of the gods, danced ecstatically to tin accompaniment of gongs and drums, stamping their feet and lifting both hands into the air as though beckoning. This type of dance is performed today mainly in Okinawa and Amami, but can be seen as well in Kyushu and Shikoku.

There is yet another method of praying for the gods to descend. This is to hold in the hand something for the god to alight upon—a paper wand, a catalpa bough, a sword, a halberd, or other pole-like object. As they dance, the participants move on linear paths, both circular and straight, from the center to each of the cardinal directions. The ritual dance form known as Kagura is distinguished by this type of geometric linear floor patterns and by the importanc c given to the directional nature of the path of the movement. It is believed to have been influenced by the dance and music of India, China, and Korea, which entered Japan from China and Korea at least as early as the seventh century.

A fourth source is the type of dance which sought to avert pestilence, to bring much needed rainfall, etc. Many people would assemble and dance about more or less randomly, beating on drums or ringing bells and singing, perhaps singing songs popular at the time, improvising verses as they wished. Or they would dance ecstatically, chanting the nembutsu prayer, praying for salvation in the life to come. Dance known as Furyu traces its descent from this sort of dancing. In due course this type of dance developed into kouta odori (literally, dance to "short songs" or kouta). The musical element became a beautiful kouta and elegant gestures were devised to accompany the song. This eventually developed into Kabuki Odori and came to be danced as a presentational art.

In the above dance types (with the exception of Kagura in which symbolic gestures are used), there is no meaning in the gestures, and even when a song is sung, it is essentially a rhythmic and melodic accompaniment to the dance.

We find a fifth source for dance in Japan in the gestures used in connection with a recited narrative. The Japanese people love to listen to storytelling. Blind priests and others used to recite popular stories before groups of people. These stories were later given literary form and epics such as Tales of the Heike would be recited to the accompaniment of the biwa. In order to give greater emphasis to what was expressed in the story, the narrator would intersperse gestures and mime as he stood and recited, often to the accompaniment of flute and drums. What are known as Kuse-mai and Kowaka-mai are performances of this type. In Kowaka-mai (which is a popular style of Kuse-mai), three men may divide one story appropriately among themselves and recite it, interspersing arm movements and some stamping of the feet. A further refinement was added to this. The storyteller, no longer in the guise of narrator but taking the role of one of the characters in the story, would come forward and relate those parts of the story associated with that character as though the character himself were telling it, adding gesture and mime to the sections he wished to emphasize. One part of the performance of present-day No is a version of this practice, further theatricalized and refined. The chorus sings a section as the shite dances, expressing the mood of the song. In many No plays, this section is called mai-guse (combining the words mat and kuse). A variation of this method is found in the puppet theatre known as Bunraku. The narrator sits at one side of the stage and recites (sometimes narrating, sometimes taking the part of one of the characters) to the accompaniment of the giffayu shamisen, while puppets appear on stage and enact the story.

As mentioned above, Kabuki Odori was originally a form of kouta odori. Eventually Kabuki dance was performed to the accompaniment of ballads called nagauta ("long songs") and to joruri, a type of sung narrative. Later, the dance ceased to be composed of only abstract movements, and interpretive gestures and mime were introduced to emphasize the meaning of the words. It is believed that the influence of significant gesture in No is largely responsible for this development, In this type of mime, at the mention of the word "letter," one imitates writing a letter; at the mention of "mountain," one shows the shape of the mountain with the fan one is holding. Thus, gestures of this type may be said to "translate" the words they accompany. There are other gestures from everyday life—for instance, looking upward at the moon when the word "moon" is mentioned, or putting the head to one side at the word "listen." The phrase ningyo hurt ("puppet gestures") refers to highly stylized movements in imitation of actual puppets, but largely based on such mimetic gestures. What is known today as Kabuki Buyo, or Kabuki dance, is performed to the accompaniment of a verbal text and combines appropriately dance with abstract gestures, dance with gestures that translate meaning, and dance with gestures from everyday life. Its choreographers strive to devise beautiful, constantly changing patterns and its lyricists seek to compose song texts that will lend themselves to the use of significant gesture.

I have had occasion in the recent past to consider the dance and dance-drama forms of other geographic areas. It is astonishing to find that many of the same basic principles that we find in Japanese dance and theatre can be seen also at work elsewhere. The use of gesture—from meaningless decorative gesture in pure or abstract dance, to expressive and symbolic gesture as well as stylized everyday gesture, used to interpret a text sung as accompaniment — is prominent particularly in the dance and theatre arts of India. Such gestures are used in Kathak dance of North India and in Bharata Natyam, which was refined in the temples of South India, as well as in Mohiniyattam of the Kerala district of Southwest India. The dancer performs to the accompaniment of singers and musicians who sit at one side of the stage, keeping the rhythm with cymbals and/or drums. Some of the items of the performance are pure or abstract dance; others are done entirely in expressive or imitative gestures to the accompaniment of short lyrical songs. The pieces involving meaningful gesture are called nritya, while those in which the gestures are merely decorative are called nritta. In the nritya pieces, the gestures are not necessarily the same each time the piece is performed; the dancer has a degree of freedom in the interpretation of the text. The dance forms of India seem to have their roots in an ancient period, and many beautiful dance poses from the past have been left behind, engraved on stone.

A performance of Kathakaji dance-drama which I saw in the outskirts of Cochin also comes to mind. The themes or plots of the narrative are often from the Ram&yana or Mahabharata, epics that have been told and retold in India from time immemorial. Again in Kathakali, the various types of gestures that I spoke of are used. In Kathakaji, however, the movement to sung narrative does not proceed uninterrupted from beginning to end. The narrative is broken off after the completion of one section, and the dancer performs a beautiful fast-tempo dance to the beat of drums and other percussion instruments. This passage of dance usually does not interpret any text but simply displays all manner of exquisite poses and movements. After the sequence of pure dance, the story is resumed and again the performer uses imitative or expressive gesture. The story may be told in one night, or it may continue for several nights until it is finally completed. The Kathakaji I saw was a story of Krisna; each actor-dancer played the role of one of the characters in the story, with appropriate costume and make-up. Certainly there are some similarities with a Japanese No or Kabuki play. Are we right in regarding this development as one that came about spontaneously in these two countries?

The Ramayana is also performed in dramatic dances of Thailand and Indonesia. There are some similarities with Kathakali, but the presentation seems to have been taken a step further toward completion. In the shadow puppet theatre of Indonesia, as in the Japanese puppet theatre, a narrator recites the story and dialogue as the puppets enact the drama.

A number of the pieces from the Bugaku repertoire are said to have entered Japan from India by way of China and Korea. Some of the dances known as hashiri-mai are thought to be based on fragments of a recited narrative from India. Examples are "Ran-Ryo-o" ("King Lan-Ling") and "Genjoraku" (sometimes called "Genjaraku" or "Finding a Snake," although the characters of the title are now written to mean "Return to the Castle"). No doubt it is not possible today to trace in detail the origins and development of these Bugaku pieces. Were it possible to do so, we might learn much about the cultural history of the countries through which they were transmitted.

And we should consider not only classical dance and theatre forms. It would no doubt be instructive to compare the folk and tribal dances of India or of other areas of Asia with such dances as Furyu Odori in Japan.

The many forms of dance and theatre which I have briefly mentioned above were developed after their traditional styles, each assuming the coloring of its place of origin. Even though some of them may have begun with similar basic principles of presentation, the local development, the details of staging, and the application of a variety of aesthetic principles, are of primary significance. Careful comparative studies can perhaps lead to the development of a theoretical framework from which to view the cultural life of man through what many believe to be the most revealing of art forms—that of dance and theatre.

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