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Masked performance in Bali and Japan

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The mask dances of Bali and Japan are some of the oldest continuous traditions of masked dance-drama in the world. There is epigraphic evidence of masked dance in Bali dating from the ninth century of the current era and records indicate that masked dances came to Japan from mainland Asia between the sixth and eighth centuries. The masked dance dramas performed in Bali and Japan today are different, of course, because they are living traditions, subject to development and change, but one can still see traces of the ancient dances, especially in performances associated with ritual. Masked performance is frequently associated with trance, possession and mediumship and thus bestrides the boundary between 'secular' and 'sacred'. This will be very much in evidence in some of the examples I present here. My aim is to provide a broad overview of at least some of the splendid variety of masked performance in these cultures, along with some idea of the cultural context in which these performances occur.

Japanese Folk Mask Traditions

Japan has a long history of mask use in ritual and drama, remnants of which are still visible today although any records of the origins of these traditions have been lost. Among the colourful and arresting masks of the folk traditions are the *Oni* (demon), *Tengu* (goblin) and *Oto* (comic female) masks as well as the *Shi-Shi* 'lion' mask, which bears a striking resemblance to the Balinese mask called Barong, which I will discuss later.

The *Oni* demon mask appears in various forms throughout Japan and, on Sado Island off the northwest coast, it is used in a trance dance with drumming called *Oni Daiko*. The function of these masked dances was once exorcistic, but they are now more often seen in festivals and performances for tourists, far removed from their original context. There are many versions of *oni,* described by one scholar as 'the most prolific and … diversified creatures in Japanese folk religion' (Pulvers 1978: 53).

Kagura is another ritual performance associated with traditional Japanese religious beliefs. These are dances of the gods, usually associated with sacred places, particularly mountains. The god is represented by the mask and is believed to enter into the dancer in the course of the ritual.

Court dances and popular entertainments

The court art of *gigaku,* a dance drama that promoted Buddhist philosophy, was at its height of popularity during the Nara period (645–781 CE) and derived from music and dances brought from the Asian mainland. The legends of its arrival in Japan cite both Korean and Chinese sources for the masks, but it is now thought that the dances may have originated outside China 'perhaps in West or Southeast Asia' (Nishikawa 1978: 21). The large wooden masks have some distinctive features that seem to indicate they could have come from India. Surviving records indicate that a *gigaku* entertainment consisted of masked dance-dramas accompanied by a small ensemble of flute, drum and gongs. There is some evidence of the content of these performances, which is perhaps rather surprising. Scholar Kyôtarô Nishikawa says:

> 'That the performances were not entirely solemn is suggested by one typical plot in which a barbarian man who falls in love with a princess is dragged around the stage by a rope tied to his sexual organ. Although this story would seem inappropriate for performance in front of a Buddhist altar, it does suggest that the plays were wide-ranging, explicit and popular in appeal' (Nishikawa 1978: 21).

Gigaku was superseded by *bugaku* in the ninth century when the latter was made the official court entertainment (Ortoloni 1995: 30). *Bugaku,* which had assimilated many aspects of *gigaku,* was at its height of popularity during the Heian period (782-1184 CE). It may still be seen today, mostly in special performances in shrines, temples and on New Year's Day at the emperor's palace. To the modern eye, these dances seem rather arcane and un-dramatic, but they have a stately grandeur entirely appropriate to an ancient art of the Imperial court. Many *bugaku* masks are very large though they do not cover the whole head, like those of *gigaku*. Some have a separate jaw that is attached with cords and some masks have moveable eyes as well, so that the whole apparatus moves with the dancer.

The Development of Nô Drama

Probably the best-known Japanese masked performance genre is the refined, poetic dance-drama of *nô*, but this art, which is now regarded as elite, has a chequered history. In its earliest incarnation its practitioners were itinerant entertainers at the bottom of the social scale who travelled from village to village performing magic tricks, acrobatics, juggling and, occasionally, sacred rituals or dances concerning local gods or spirits—there is a clear link to *kagura*. Gradually these companies came under the protection of monasteries and then, in the middle of the fourteenth century, a certain child actor in a well-known company was seen by the young shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu who immediately fell in love with the beautiful boy

player, who came to be known as Zeami. Under the tutelage of his father, Kanami (who was by all accounts a phenomenally talented actor and a highly skilled playwright) and the poets and artists of Yoshimitsu's court, Zeami transformed this vulgar popular entertainment into a court art of extraordinary sophistication. He wrote verse dramas based on classical epic poetry and Shinto legends and evolved an aesthetic (borrowed from court poetry) in which the measure of great artistry was neither spectacle nor emotional intensity, but *yûgen:* a profound grace, mysterious elegance. Zeami's fortunes waned with the demise of Yoshimitsu and he spent the last years of his life in exile. Significantly, however, he left a series of secret treatises on the art of *nô* drama, which were rediscovered and published in the twentieth century, and now stand as a kind of canon of *nô* technique and aesthetics.

After the fall of the shoguns in the late nineteenth century, *nô* had lost its patrons and nearly disappeared. Fortunately, however, it was championed by Western poets and artists like Ezra Pound and W.B. Yeats, who were fascinated by these beautiful, stylised, poetic dance-dramas. *Nô* survives as a beautiful, rarefied and carefully preserved theatrical form, adored by a coterie of mostly elderly cognoscenti in Japan and by a small but passionate community of foreign enthusiasts. It is as foreign to most contemporary Japanese as it is to the uninitiated Westerner.

However, the exquisite masks of *nô* are immediately recognisable and—when available—are highly sought-after as art objects. In Zeami's time, masks were only used for playing women, old men or supernatural characters, but gradually other mask types evolved, including a number of masks for young male characters. As dramatic tools, they are extraordinarily expressive and, ironically, when not wearing a mask the *nô* actor is instructed to keep his face utterly impassive. It seems clear that the movement language of *nô* has been largely determined by the demands made by the mask. The performer's vision is very limited and the bulky costume (another 'mask') also makes for some physical restriction. Thus, when the *nô* actor moves, his feet glide along the floor, the body is kept remarkably still and all gestures are highly stylised and simplified. Yet, although it can seem rather austere, the subtle grace of *nô* performance can be mesmerising even thrilling.

Traditional Balinese Masked Drama

Available sources indicate that masked dances have been a feature of Balinese culture since at least the ninth century (Bandem and de Boer 1981: 45), perhaps as a result of Javanese influence or more direct contact with the Indian subcontinent (Lansing 1977:8-10; Emigh 1996: 74-99). The Balinese Hindu religion is deeply ingrained in every aspect of Balinese life and culture and most particularly in performance, which is nearly always associated with temple rituals, providing entertainment for gods and demons as well as human beings. Masked performances may have evolved from aspects of early ancestor worship in Bali's prehistory and the forms seen in Bali today may be reliably traced back as far as the eighteenth century. However, as living traditions, these masked dance-dramas are continually developing and, even on this tiny island, there are distinct regional variations in style.

Traditional masked dramas performed in contemporary Bali fall broadly into three types:

- **Topeng** - a generic term for masked dramas based on chronicles of Balinese history. The word '*topen'* is synonymous with 'mask' and means, 'something pressed against the face'. *Topeng Sidha Karya,* also called *Topeng Wali,* is the term for Topeng performed in a sacred, ritual context and may use one to three performers. In *Topeng Pajegan* a single performer takes all the parts and there may be as many as 20 different mask characters to perform. *Topeng Panca* is performed by a company of five (or sometimes more), and *Topeng Prembon,* a secular version, is a hybrid form, which incorporates unmasked performers from other genres. A Topeng performance always begins with the *penglembar*—2 or 3 mask dances that are not strictly related to the 'plot'. It may be that these dances originally represented visits from the deified ancestors. For tourist entertainment, some of these masked characters are performed as virtuoso solo dances.

- **Wayang Wong** - Derived from the shadow-puppet tradition (Wayang Kulit), this version of the Ramayana epic is performed rarely, though it has been enjoying something of a revival in recent years. It is a very ancient form and the masks used are revered both for their age and their association with the sacred story. The main strand of the tale runs like this: Sita the beautiful wife of King Rama is kidnapped by the demon king, Rawana, and taken to his palace in Lanka. Hanoman, the magical white monkey who is the son of Vayu, god of the wind, flies to tell her of Rama's plans to rescue her and returns with his monkey army to defeat the demon.

- **Calonarang** is an exorcistic play often performed in conjunction with temple ceremonies. There are two principal masked figures: Rangda and Barong. Rangda, sometimes known as 'Queen of the Witches' is represented by a mask with a huge fanged mouth, bulging eyes, a long tongue decorated with gold markings and long, spiky hair. She is an apotropaic goddess—a protective force, but also dangerous, and the mask is usually danced by a man. Barong, while seemingly more benign, is also rather demonic—another apotropaic deity who is a magical protector. Barong is a large, shaggy creature operated by

two dancers; the mask most often seen *(Barong Ket)* has a lion or dog-like face with fangs, bulging eyes and a goatee beard of human hair. The body may be made of palm leaves or fibre, or even feathers with gilded leather ornaments at either end. Both coat and beard are believed to have magical or healing powers. In the Calonarang play, Barong represents the forces of 'white magic', against the 'black magic' of the demonic female witch, Rangda.

The 'Body Mask'

In both these masked dance genres, the mask and costume function together as a 'body-mask' enveloping the performer and altering both his outer appearance and the way in which he functions within this 'carapace' of the character. The performer's vision is impaired by the mask and the large, bulky costume restricts the body and the ways in which he/she is able to move about the stage. The effect of this is to transform the performer's consciousness and perception of self. It is my belief that the performer in the body-mask 'becomes the character' in a more profound way than the unmasked performer, since the he must submit to the mask and constantly visualise his performance from the outside. This 'dual consciousness' is achieved not only through effacing his own face and body in donning the body-mask, but also through a 'selfless' submission to the physical expression required to bring the mask to life. This abnegation of self is sometimes so profound that the performer achieves an altered state of consciousness in which he feels he is moved by the mask, rather than the other way around. It is perhaps for this reason that masks are so often associated with possession and mediumship.

Conclusion

Japanese and Balinese masked dance-dramas occupy a liminal space between sacred ritual and secular entertainment with themes that seek to attune the spiritual and moral well-being of their audiences. The mask is emblematic of this 'borderland' between sacred and secular, human and divine, past and present. It is the medium by which the performer is transformed into a special being and, through the mask, the performer transforms reality for the audience.

Notes

1. The novel *The House of Kanzê* (London: Century Publishing, 1985) by Nobuku Albery gives a fascinating fictionalised account of the life of Zeami and presents a vivid picture of the highly cultured court of Yoshimitsu.
2. Zeami's theoretical works have appeared in a number of English translations since they were first made available for publication in the early twentieth century. The translation by J. Thomas Rimer and Yamazaki Masakuzu is highly regarded and widely available, but does not contain all of the treatises. Mark J. Nearman's translations have been published over a period of years in issues of *Monumenta Nipponica* and include material not covered by Rimer and Yamazaki. Nearman's translations are held by many to be more thorough and precise.
3. 'The word *topeng* comes from the root *tup*, meaning 'cover, and refers to something pressed against the face, that is, a mask' (Bandem & de Boer 1981: 46).
4. 'During the troubled 1940s, the King of Gianyar, I Déda Mangis VIII, called together the dancers attached to his palace and asked them to create a Prembon (Combination). He asked that favourite type-characters be taken from Gambuh, Baris, Arja, Topeng and Parwa and a single story presented in which they all appeared. ... Once again, the Topeng repertoire, dealing with the historical kings and priests of Bali, was the source of subject-matter' (Bandem & de Boer 1981: 84–5.

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