

Bunraku – intangible cultural heritage

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Abstract: Bunraku. Where puppets explain human emotions better than humans. Like Opera dei Pupi in Sicily, Italy, and Wayang in Indonesia, Ningyo Joruri Bunraku was designated a World Intangible Heritage by UNESCO in 2003 and enrolled on the list in 2008. It is one of Japan's traditional performing arts, starting in the 17th century and continuing until today through Japanese history and culture. It combines narrative, music, and puppets, each operated by three puppeteers. Because the puppets can show human emotions on the stage realistically, people all over the world are interested in it.

Keywords: Japan. Bunraku. Puppet Theatre.

Introduction: What is Bunraku?

It is a closely collaborated form which synchronizes narrative recitation, shamisen music and puppetry in performance. The origins of present-day bunraku date back to the seventeenth century, when older puppet shows (ayatsuriningyo) were integrated with medieval narratives (joruri) and called ningyojoruri, (puppet narratives). Its popularity peaked with the works of playwright Chikamatsu Monzaemon and narrator Takemoto Gidayu; and the founding of the Takemoto Theatre in Osaka in 1684 shared in a golden age. The Toyotake Theatre and others later joined the field. They had varying success until in the early-nineteenth century a native of Awaji named Bunrakuken opened a theatre

which became the toast of Osaka. His work was so great that his name became synonymous with the art form, which we call Bunraku today.

Narrator (Tayu) recitates gidayu-bushi style of epic balladry. He not only tells the tale but also sets the scenes, providing story background, and speaking the character's words. This last entails more than just the skillful creation of separate voices for the different puppet men and women, young and old, so that they sound believable and real. He gives voice to the full spectrum of human emotion.

The Shamisen which uses thicker strings and a larger plectrum than other types has the surprising power to set a mood or express an emotion. The narrator (Tayu) and shamisen player, in their twin positions, bring the dramatic narrative to life.

Three puppeteers are required to operate a bunraku puppet, making it unique in world puppetry. Puppets are stored in pieces, with their head and costumes all kept separately. For each production, the puppet is rebuilt. Limbs are attached to torsos, props and costumes fitted, and hair affixed and styled. It is the puppeteer's job to assemble his puppet for the role assigned to him.

There are many and varied Bunraku faces. Every puppet head (*Kashira*) is meant for a certain basic role type and used for all characters of the type. Representative types like "Bunshichi" (epic hero), "Genda" (handsome young man), "Musume" (maiden), or "Fukeokami" (matron) are popular. Wig (*Katsura*) is ready doing up its hair to the character.

The Costumes in bunraku are smaller than life-size and have openings in back where the puppeteer inserts his hand. Everything except the lightest summer wear has cotton padding to stiffen it, as there is no flesh and bone to give shape to the garments. The clothes in period plays (*jidaimono*) are dressed very opulently, the clothes in contemporary plays (*sewamono*) are more realistic.

Gadgets for puppet, like sword, fan and umbrella are made with special structure for puppet to use easily. With excellent stage setting and performers well and long training technique, Bunraku performs marvelous show for the people.

Content of Bunraku.

There are two types of titles for bunraku performances.

(1) *Jidaimono* (period plays):

Stages for historical heroes, complex and grotesque events and war, etc. Themes are loyalty in warriors' society, love, faithfulness and respect between parent and child.

Examples: *Ichinotani futabagunki*, 12th century: Famous battle between Genji and Heike families; *Oshuadachi ga hara*, 11th century: An old woman kills a pregnant girl without knowing she is her own daughter (2) *Sewamono* (contemporary plays):

Stages for showing common people's way of life. Themes are the tragedy of a lover who hoped for freedom, love and hatred in sudden events, suffering from duty and debt under the society of the feudal system.

Examples: *Sonezakishinju*, 1703: A young worker at a soy sauce company commits suicide with a prostitute); *Onnagoroshiaburajigoku*, 1721: The prodigal son of an oil company owner kills many people when he angrily broke an oil tub with sword and oil spilled out.

Compared with the characters in *Jidaimono*, in which appear warriors and princesses in luxurious costumes, the characters in *Sewamono* wear plain costumes. It is a conservative drama which shows happenings in simple towns people's lives, though because its sources come from real events that happened at that time, it created a great sensation then. Most of all are shown appealing human emotions between lovers, couples and parent and child. People realize that human sympathy and emotions are eternal, the same now as then. So the *bunraku* performance is never outdated even after being repeated hundreds of years. Performances last 2 to 4 hours nowadays, but were longer in the old days.

Most playwrights appeared in the Edo era (1603-1867). Of these, the names of twenty-four are known. Among these Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724) wrote the greatest volume of work. He was born in Echizen but moved to Kyoto following his father who became a masterless samurai. He learned *Joruri* plays under Uji Kaganojyo and wrote some *joruri* works. He also wrote scenarios for *Kabuki* though he had already succeeded in writing the *joruri* play *Shussekegekiyo* for Takemoto Gidayu the first, who had started the Takemoto Theatre in 1685. Next he wrote *Sonezakishinju*. This work gained popularity among young people because it dramatized the double suicide of a real man and woman. This was a memorable work of *joruri*, in that it made a drama from events of the day and not from an old story. It is said that the play enabled Gidayu to repay all his debts of 18 years since having

started his theatre. (KOSHIRO, 1981, p.98)

Chikamatsu was engaged as a playwright with the Takemoto Theatre and moved to Osaka to devote himself to writing. His big works *Horikawanaminotsuzumi* (1706) and *Meido no hikyaku* (1711) are masterpieces. Besides those, his work *Kokusenyagassen*, which he has wrote to help Gidayu the 2nd, had a great long run of 17 months. After that he wrote *Shinjuryutennoamijima* (1720), *Onnagoroshiaburajigoku* (1721) and won fame as “the god of playwrights”.

He is said to be a follower of Shakespeare (1564-1616) in England. He was the first man who first established the profession of a playwright. He left about 110 works when he died at age 71, and his influence is incalculable.

Especially, the success of performance of *shinjuu mono* (double suicide stories) invited lonely young people to imitate such dramatic deaths. So the government issued an ordinance forbidding such suicides. (HISAYA, 2001, p.175)

Fascinating charm of Bunraku

Puppets with beautiful, elaborately-made Kashira (heads) wearing beautiful costumes splendid in themselves. Joruri music, with its narrator “Tayu” talking and a musician playing Shamisen is quite powerful, like opera or orchestral music. And the puppet manipulated by three puppeteers shows contemporary human drama clearly. It is surprising that all three puppeteers who have black suite or fine Kamishimo and Hakama style as they manipulate the puppets seem to vanish after a few minutes of performance. After that, the whole stage is for the world of the puppets, who show human feelings better than humans can.

There are about 40 kinds of head used to Bunraku. Female characters are called Musume (girl), Fukeoyama (matron), Baba (old woman), and so on. Male characters are so called Bunhichi (hero with strong masculinity), koumei (hero with wisdom and intelligence), and Danhichi (a “heavy” with a bold face).

The heads are made from Kiso Hinoki (Japanese cypress from the Kiso region), and the skin of puppet is painted with Gofun (a white paste made from powdered shells). The heads are painted carefully, over and over again. They are lovingly hand made by famous puppet makers of Awaji or Shizuoka. The puppet’s heads are worthy of appreciation for their original face and design.

The material of the costume is usually expensive silk as it is soft and light and has good texture and deep color which other kinds of cloth cannot duplicate. Inside the puppet is just a cavity, so the costume is lined with cotton to give body to the puppet.

The Tayu and Shamisen player sit together side by side. The Tayu talks using different voices for each character from bottom of his belly. He cries, laughs, suffers with his whole body, full of abundant expression, which invites the audience into the world of Ningyo Joruri. The shamisen has a deep and heavy sound. It has only 3 strings, but when player plays it with his plectrum, it demonstrates the depth of feeling of the characters, as well as the atmosphere of the rain, the wind, indeed the whole universe. There are some Tayu and Shamisen players who have been named living national treasures of Japan, having mastered their skills through long experience. The practice of manipulating puppets by three puppeteers comes from past Japanese puppeteers experience in the 18th Century Edo Era.

Looking at world puppetry, most puppets are operated by strings or gloves like Pulcinella and Punch. Both invite people with their humorous light movements, though their hand and legs have no power and they cannot show strong feeling. Shadow plays of China and Wayang from Indonesia are fine and mysterious but cannot show realistic expressions. But in Japan people wanted to see “real life” on the stage and for that reason, the use of three puppeteers was devised.

The main puppeteer, Omozukai, thrusts his left hand from puppets back, and grasps the “dogushi”, which is connected to the puppets head. He moves his finger to nod the head up and down or open and shut the puppets mouth, and eyes, and raise and lower the eye brows. He also handles the puppets right hand. He has Butai Geta (wooden shoes) on his feet to hold the puppet higher.

The left-hand puppeteer, Hidarizukai, handles the puppets left hand with a stick, “sashigane”. The third puppeteer, Ashizukai, holds the puppet’s two feet and has it “walk.” To master puppet manipulation, it is said that it takes ten years to master the first foot 10 years, Second left hand 10 years and at last can handle head, he can be a full-fledged puppeteer. There are over 40 styles of manipulation and puppeteers learn them. Like a fashion model practices walking, a puppet needs to show its beautiful shapes through three puppeteers who are on the same wavelength.

Nowadays one of the most active puppeteers, Kiritake Kanjyuro, is a third-generation puppeteer. His father, Kiritake Kanjyuro the 2nd, was a living national treasure. Also his stage friend, Yoshida Tamao, is a second generation puppeteer, following his father, Yoshida Tamao the First, who was also a living national treasure. There are not a few who have made themselves second or third generation famous puppeteers or Joruri narrators or Shamisen players. That means the world of Bunraku has a deep and wide tradition.

Bunraku Theatre Performances

Organizer: Public Service Corporation Bunraku Association.

Address: 1-12-10 Nihonbashi, Chuo-ku, Osaka-shi 542-0073.

Members: Tayu 22, Shamisen 21, Puppeteer 43.

Every year perform Osaka, Tokyo and several cities in Japan. Sometimes when invited perform in foreign countries.

1. National Bunraku Theatre 1-12-10 Nihonbashi Chuo-ku Osaka

Performances: January, April, July to August, November (morning, from 11:00 a.m.; afternoon, from 16:00).

Caption (Japanese) appears on the upper part of stage.

The program sold in the shops has the text of the Joruri recitation.

There is an exhibition room for a collection of materials of Bunraku.

There is a 150-seat small hall for documentary movies on the 3rd floor.

The library is in the office on the 3rd floor.

1. National Theatre, Small Hall 4-1, Hayamachi, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo.

Performances: February, May, September, December. (11:00; 14:30; 17:30)

1. A road show, in May and October, visits about 20 cities.

Training system of Bunraku¹

Bunraku does not have a system of family descent like Kabuki but a system of offering positions to people with ability. So an ordinary person can become a member of the theatre.

The National Bunraku Theatre has the training course. Applicants must be boys who have graduated junior high school and are less than

¹ Kiritake Kanjyuro & Yoshida Tamame *Bunraku e Youkoso* (Welcome to Bunraku). P.112.

23 years of age. Course programs include, of course, Gidayu, Shamisen, and Ningyo (puppet), but Japanese dance, Noh singing, etc. are also available. Students study for two years, mainly at the Osaka National Bunraku Theatre.

After finishing the training course they join the Bunraku Association and become students of senior members.

For recruitment, there is an open house so that parents can see actual sessions. Recruitment is also opened at the theatre or through the theatre home page.

History of Bunraku Theatre

Puppet manipulation in Japan is said to have existed in ancient times. Also in the medieval period puppet players are said to have appeared at crowded shrines, temples, riversides, ports, among others. As early years towards the end of Heian Period (794-1185) travelling performers, known as *Kugutsu-shi* (puppeteer) have appeared, hanging small boxes on their necks and taking out puppets and playing.

Stories narrated with a particular rhythm and intonation, referred to as a *Joruri*, incorporated the musical accompaniment of the shamisen, said to have been brought over from China, made further development in the area of Kyoto, Osaka and Edo together with the introduction of *Ayatsuri Ningyo* (one puppeteers manipulation).

In Osaka narrator Takemoto Gidayu (1651-1714) was famous with *Gidayu-bushi* which he named it himself to his Joruri recitation. In 1685 he established Takemoto Theatre at Dotonbori, and started Ningyo Joruri which is integrating three forms of art-joruri, shamisen and one puppeteers manipulation into one, Ningyo Joruri, in a way as performing Shusse Kagekiyo, a program of performance originally created by Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the playwright who teamed up with Gidayu. This was an epoch making event. The success of Ningyo Joruri was followed by Takemoto Gidayu's junior and grand junior. They have presented Chikamatsu's program including *Sonezaki-shinju*, one of twenty-four *sewamono* Chikamatsu wrote, each play about ordinary town people.

In 1703 Gidayu's one of disciple Uneme has independent to set up a new theatre Toyotake-za and he named himself Toyotake Wakatayu. Both of the theatres existing in Osaka, good rivals of 64 year's standing,

with the former ending its 83 years history in 1771 and later passed into someone else's hands. While in 1730 Yoshida Bunzaburo and his company of Takemoto Theatre invented to perform with three puppeteers manipulation. This method was well-established and continued until today. (KOSHIRO, 1981, p. 112)

The person who appeared this world of *Ningyo Joruri* next was Narrator of Joruri Kidayu from Awaji, pen name Bunrakuken, real name Masai Yohei. He advanced into Osaka to start his show. In 1811 he opened his regular theatre in an Inari shrine in Hakurocho Osaka. This theatre was taken over to second and third Bunrakuken. Third Bunrakuken was efficient man of business; he moved this theatre to Matsushima and named the theatre Bunraku-za. He also changed his name to Uemura. Performance of Bunraku-za became so popular, people called Ningyo Joruri performance to Bunraku.

But Bunraku-za has fallen to administrative problem and in 1909 handed over its management into Shochiku, which is a famous production in Osaka managed by Shirai Matsujiro and Ootani Takejiro brother. At that time Bunraku-za theatre members were Tayu 38, Shamisen 51, puppeteer 24. (HIROSHI, 2003, p. 15) Shochiku has purchased all Bunraku-za and Ningyo Joruri from Uemura family. They made new theatre in Yotsuhashi and made effort to reform old general tendency towards the development of Bunraku theatre. But finally they had to give up by holding great amount of deficit financing. Besides there was another problem within the Bunraku-za company of about rivalry between two groups. To solve this difficulty they created *Foundation Bunraku Association* in 1963 after some negotiation.

This foundation is managed by Japan government, Osaka City and Japan Broadcast Association. All puppeteers, Tayu and Shamisen belong to this Bunraku Association. 1966 National Theatre was built in Hanzomon Tokyo and at the small hall Bunraku performed. In 1984 National Bunraku Theatre has opened in Nihonbashi Osaka. Foundation Bunraku Association organizes National Bunraku Theatre Club to get much fun throughout Japan by giving information of performance and several events.

In 2014 recently, 45 members of Bunraku Association (puppeteer, Taiyu, Shamisen) established NPO Bunraku-za to work for school or public facility to introduce Bunraku to people and make them to feel close.

In conclusion

For the last, I'd like to tell about local Bunraku theatres which are distributed through-out Japan. They are different from the Bunraku Association, which has much talented members like those who have been nominated to be living national treasures or who have received some kind of prize, but on a local level, people enjoy performing themselves and make people happy by puppetry.

It seems Bunraku, started in Osaka, has spread throughout Japan, and people keep it in their festivals as offerings to the gods and for their own pleasure. These groups have names from their region like Kuroda Ningyo (Nagano Prefecture), Anori Ningyo (Mie Prefecture), Maguwa Bunraku (Gifu Prefecture) and so on. The number is reported to be 141 places by the research of Kokichi Nagata, scholar of the history of performing arts. (KOKICHI, 1983, p.72)

According to the research of Koshiro Uno at Modern Puppet Center in 1981, the top five areas which are active now are Ehime Prefecture, with six theatres (seven previously); Kanagawa Prefecture, with five (previously seven); Tokushima Prefecture, with five (unchanged); Awaji Island, with four (seven before); and Nagano Prefecture, with three (originally ten). (KOSHIRO, 1981, p.126-130)

Most of these theatres have a roofed stage in the precincts of their local shrine. The audience enjoys watching sitting on a carpet spread on the ground. The participants, though working at mountainsides, the seaside or in the city, make time to practice puppetry with their companions in the approach to the days of festivals of their local shrines.

Especially in Tokushima Prefecture, the "Awa Ningyo Joruri" is strong. It has a stage and gallery in its hometown museum, Awa Jyurobei Yashiki. And also at a lot of theatres called Noson Butai which is built in the local shrine for village people bunraku is performed at their festival.

Close to my home in Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture, there is Chiryu Dashi Bunraku, which has inherited a tradition of over 260 years from the Edo Era. It has been chosen as a Japanese Intangible Heritage. The Chiryu festival is held once every two years in May. "Dashi" (festival floats) from the city's five towns gather at the Chiryu Shrine, and a *Dashi Bunraku* is performed to offer as a ceremonial dedication. For this, Bunraku is performed on a stage prepared specially on each Dashi. It is fun to see every Dashi from 4 towns perform a different title of play.

They often perform popular titles like *Ohichibi Hinomiyaguranodan*, *Tsubosakareigenki*. etc., which are loved by most people.

In old times, Chiryu City was a town located at the mid-point of the Tokaido Road, which led from Edo (Tokyo) to Osaka. So people were quick to catch the fashion of the time. There are old record books in Chiryu which tell how people tried to perform imitating new successful shows in Osaka. They were so earnest that they sometimes invited a teacher from the Bunraku-za to teach them Bunraku.

Thus Bunraku has penetrated into Japanese life to enrich people's sympathy and emotions. I'm happy about its authorization as a world Intangible Heritage and really hope it will descend from people to people and to the children of the future.

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