

Rethinking Nature in Contemporary Japan

From Tradition to Modernity

edited by Bonaventura Ruperti, Silvia Vesco and Carolina Negri

Fraternizing with the Spirits in the Noh Plays *Saigyōzakura* and *Yamanba*

Reiko Yamanaka
(Hōsei University, Japan)

Abstract Not rarely do spirits of trees and plants appear in Noh plays as main characters having lively conversations with human beings. Both – the common belief in medieval Japan that plants, trees and the land itself could possess the spirit of Buddha, and the cults of tree worship existing since ancient times – give some clues to enquire the significance of composing and performing Noh plays grounded on what previously had been described only by words or pictures, the fraternizing with the spirits. This paper aims to examine how Noh plays enacted the ‘life force’ (*sei*) believed to permeate nature on the stage, and further the effects that such dramatisation had on the audiences. To do so, two Noh plays will be examined: in *Saigyōzakura* (Saigyō’s Cherry Tree), the famous monk-poet Saigyō and the spirit of an old cherry tree elegantly debate how this world should be viewed. In *Yamanba* (The Mountain Crone), the spirit (or the phantom) of untamed nature of deep mountains makes its apparition.

Summary General Survey of Non-Sentient Spirit Noh Plays . – Saigyō-zakura. – Yamanba.

Keywords Noh. Non-sentient spirit. Saigyōzakura. Yamanba.

General Survey of Non-Sentient Spirit Noh Plays

When introducing Noh to people who are unfamiliar with it, it is usually explained in the following way. The repertoire of Noh consists of about 240 plays, half of which are regularly staged. The main characters of these plays are deities, spirits, ghosts, or people in tragic situations. While deities on stage express blessings, other characters, such as spirits or ghosts, talk about their memories, and enact their deep emotions – sorrow, resentment, nostalgia, love, etc.


This sort of explanation, however, tends to omit the fact that spirits of trees and plants (and other non-sentient beings) can also be important characters in Noh plays. So, using this opportunity, I would like to start by surveying Noh plays where non-sentient spirits appear, in a first step examining how Noh approaches nature and expresses it on stage.

Typical examples of the personification of non-sentient spirits include the morning glory of *Asagao* 朝顔, the plum of *Ume* 梅, the iris of *Kakitsubata* 杜

Ca’ Foscari Japanese Studies 7

DOI 10.14277/6969-171-3/CFJS-7-8 | Submission 2015-12-10 | Acceptance 2016-12-09

ISBN [ebook] 978-88-6969-171-3 | ISBN [print] 978-88-6969-172-0

© 2017 |  Creative Commons 4.0 Attribution alone

若, the cherry tree of *Sumizome-zakura* 墨染桜, the Japanese banana plant of *Bashō* 芭蕉, the wisteria of *Fuji* 藤, the maple of *Mutsura* 六浦, and the willow of *Yugyō-yanagi* 遊行柳. The cherry tree of *Saigyō-zakura* also belongs to this group. To it, we might add the plays *Akoya no matsu* 阿古屋松, *Oimatsu* 老松, and *Takasago* 高砂, in which deities appear as spirits of old pine trees. These plays are usually explained as ‘god Noh’, but the main characters are clearly the spirits of old trees. The fact that these old deities are also spirits of old pine trees is not expressed by their costumes, masks or wigs, but is written clearly in their texts. This is a characteristic feature of early ‘god Noh’.

In the world of Noh, even the spirits of inanimate substances are sometimes personified on stage. Examples are the snow in *Yuki* 雪 and the “killing stone” in *Sesshōseki* 殺生石; the latter, however, is a condensation of an evil spirit, not the spirit of the stone itself, and I have therefore omitted it from the chart that follows. Another play that should be classified in this group is *Yamanba*. While it is very difficult to define what the character *Yamanba* is, as far as the Noh play *Yamanba* is concerned it can be considered as the spirit of the deep mountains, or untamed nature itself.

So what ideas are expressed in these plays? As early as the thirties, Sanari Kentarō 佐成謙太郎 (1930-31, 424) argued that the attainment of buddhahood and literary interest are the two main themes of this sort of Noh play.¹

Besides these two, we can add the theme of blessing expressed in *Oimatsu*, *Takasago* and *Akoya no matsu* as a third. A fourth theme may be the expression on stage of the beauty of flowers, coloured leaves, snow and so on. The central aim of the Noh play *Yuki* (Snow) seems to be to demonstrate the spirit of snow dancing beautifully by whirling its sleeves, in what is both a literal expression as well as a three-dimensional portrayal of the phrase “sleeves of whirling snow” (*kaisetsu no sode* 回廻雪の袖), an idiom used to describe beautifully performed dances. Similarly, while watching the characters dance on stage, the audience can easily imagine beautiful scenes in which the petals of cherry blossoms or wisteria, or even coloured autumn leaves, flutter in the wind.

The chart (fig. 1) presents a summary of the above-mentioned ideas. Needless to say, the themes of the attainment of buddhahood and literary interest are mixed in each play, so the plays are tentatively placed according to which element is relatively stronger in each. Blessing (through the virtue of *waka* 和歌 poetry) and the expression of beauty are considered to be literary rather than religious – especially Buddhist – concerns, and have hence been included in the lower half of the chart. The relative ages of the main characters have been put on the horizontal axis, with younger characters on the left and older on the right.

1 In the introduction to *Ume*, Sanari (1930-31, 424) declares: “two intentions can be seen in these spirit plays, namely, the staging of a lyrical theme associated with a particular plant, or the demonstration of the Buddhist concept that plants, trees and the land itself possess the spirit of Buddha”.

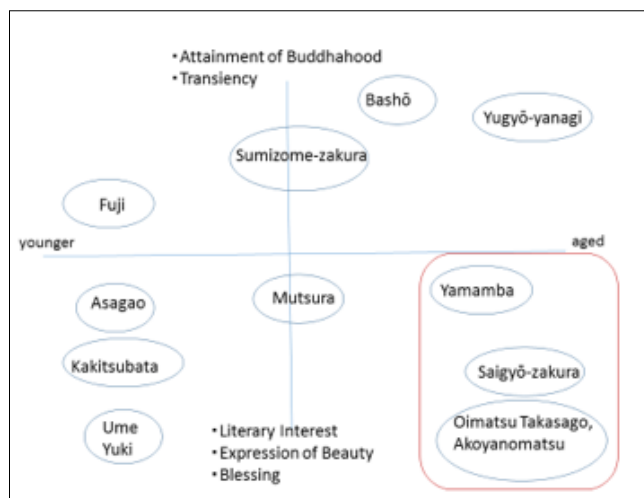


Figure 1. Features of the natural elements in Noh plays

We also need to consider differences that reflect changes in the times. The main characters Zeami 世阿弥 created for his non-sentient spirit Noh plays are all old male characters, while female characters – especially younger ones – become more common in later plays. Paul Atkins points out that it was Konparu Zenchiku 金春善禅竹 who started to associate plant spirits with the form of women, comparing Zenchiku's *Bashō* and *Kakitsubata* to Zeami's *Saigyō-zakura* (Atkins 2006). *Sumizome-zakura*, *Fuji*, *Mutsura*, *Yuki* and *Ume* were all written later, when sophisticated dances performed by beautifully costumed female characters helped audiences appreciate the essence of beauty we find in flowers or coloured leaves.

Within the box in the lower right are plays written by Zeami, which of course are older. Before moving on to *Saigyō-zakura* and *Yamanba*, let us discuss plays featuring main characters who are the spirits of old pine trees.

In his early days, Zeami tried to portray new deities, unlike those that had been depicted previously, who were considered as dreadful as demons. The following is Zeami's famous comment on the difference between the performances of demons and gods, written in *Fūshikaden* 風姿花伝 (Transmitting the Flower Through Effects and Attitudes, 1400):

Now this role has the look of the demonic. And if an element of wrath is in some way apparent in the portrayal, then depending on the god in question, there should be nothing wrong with that sense of the demonic. There is, however, something very different at the heart of this role. Gods are well suited to the graces of Dance. But demons have no impetus at all to Dance. (Hare 2008, 36)

“Gods suited to the graces of Dance” are gods associated with *waka* poetry and its literary tradition. Such being the case, the spirit of an old pine tree was ideal, because the tree had long been associated with blessing through the long history of *waka* poetry and poetic literature. We should note that Zeami chose the spirits of pine trees, not those of cedars, as the main characters in his new god Noh plays, even though many old cedars had also been worshipped as divine trees. In terms of the historical bond between poetry and blessing, pine trees were much more suitable for the new god Noh than Zeami envisaged. Any further treatment of this issue, however, would require a discussion of how Zeami undertook this creative process, which goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Having surveyed Noh plays featuring non-sentient main characters, we can now move to our main themes, the plays *Saigyō-zakura* and *Yamanba*.

Saigyō-zakura is the earliest Noh play where the spirit of a tree appears just as a spirit rather than as the embodiment of a deity. While it may be incorrect to call *Yamanba* a spirit, she is clearly neither a ghost nor a deity. We might well call her the essence of the mountains, or the nature of high mountains and deep valleys itself. What, then, is the theme of *Saigyō-zakura* and *Yamanba*? Why do the spirit of the old cherry tree and the spirit of the deep mountains appear in front of us? Anticipating my conclusion somewhat, I would like to suggest that both plays describe the moment when people and nature communicate profoundly, experiencing deep emotional exchange. As I argue below, I believe that this element should be added to the chart above as the fifth element of non-sentient spirit Noh plays.

Saigyō-zakura

In Noh plays, ghosts return to this world to tell stories about the most indelible moments in their lives. They also seek relief from their suffering. However, the reason why the spirit of this old cherry tree appears in front of *Saigyō* is completely different.

When his peaceful time for pondering is interrupted by cherry blossom viewers, *Saigyō* expresses his slight irritation in a *waka* poem:

‘Flowers! Do let’s look!’
and on they come,
amateurs in droves.
Ah, lovely blossoms,
this is all your fault!
(Tyler 1992, 219)

When night falls, an old man (the spirit of the old cherry tree) appears in front of *Saigyō* from the hollow of the tree. His long grey hair resem-

bles the weeping branches and white flowers of the old tree. As soon as it appears, the spirit questions Saigyō about the intention of his poem. As the spirit of an old tree, the main character (and the chorus who also represent it) of course refers to its attainment of buddhahood, but it is neither desperately seeking relief nor revealing any literary or religious secret. While saying that it wants to protest what Saigyō has expressed in this poem, the spirit does not seem to have any intention of blaming him. Indeed, the spirit appears in front of Saigyō and the audience just to show that, in possessing feelings and language, it is no different from humankind, with whom it is quite capable of communicating.

Then, the spirit performs a *kusemai* 曲舞/クセ舞 dance while enumerating famous cherry trees in Kyoto capital, with precisely the purpose of admiring beautiful cherry blossoms in Kyoto and sharing with Saigyō the joy of such a beautiful season, or even that very moment of beauty. Of course, Zeami makes good use of the rich imagery of cherry blossoms accumulated through the long history of *waka* poetry in this Noh as well.

An especially interesting point is that such an encounter was prompted by Saigyō's appeal to the cherry tree. It is not only that Saigyō just felt dissatisfied at heart, but that he expressed his emotion in *waka* style. By appealing through poetry to the old tree, which is an embodiment of nature, he was able to gain access to the spirit of both the tree and nature itself. This idea is close to the world view expressed in the *kana* introduction to the ancient *waka* anthology *Kokin Wakashū* 古今和歌集, namely that all creatures, great and small, have their own souls and express themselves in *waka* poetry.

It seems a miracle that a person and the spirit of cherry tree can communicate like this, but our affection for and dwelling on cherry blossoms can easily be compared to the attitude of loving a person. The last scene is at the break of dawn, when Saigyō is left alone and finds the old cherry tree still and silent again. Petals are scattered around like a carpet of snow. The lingering sentiment we feel in this scene after the precious moment of fraternizing is similar to what we feel when seeing cherry blossoms scattering at the end of the cherry season.

One point should be added. While the tree's speech is replete with literary riches, its Buddha-nature is suggested by the *taiko* 太鼓 *Jo-no-mai* 序ノ舞 (slow dance with stick drum) that the old spirit performs. In Zeami's era, this dance was considered to be a copy of a Bodhisattva's dance. It is only natural for the spirit of a plant to perform this dance to show that it has attained buddhahood.

Yamanba

What is a Yamanba? This is a very difficult question and the main theme of this play. The Yamanba is said to be an old woman or a female ogre who lives deep in the mountains. It is also considered to be the embodiment of untamed nature itself, in which case even its gender becomes uncertain. This is a major reason why many different kinds of masks are used to perform the main character of this play.

In Japanese folklore, there are many different kinds of legends about Yamanba, but Zeami largely refrains from adopting those legends for his Noh play. Instead, he seems to have invented new anecdotes about Yamanba's contact with humankind. In the Noh play *Yamanba*, it is said that Yamanba comes to the human world from time to time. These times are when the lives of humans are in tune with the nature that Yamanba represents.

Examples of this interaction with humankind that Yamanba mentions in her *kusemai* are "to lighten the woodcutter's load" and "to speed on the work of the weaver" (Tyler 1992, 313). She explains as follows in the *kuse*:

And when she tarries in the human realm,
she may, as on a forest trail
woodcutters rest beneath the blossoms,
shoulder their heavy load and, with the moon
rising, leave the hills to see them home.
Or she may pass in through the window
where a weaving maid has stood her loom
and, nightingale, the willow-weaver,
seat herself in the spinning room,
only to help the work along.
(Tyler 1992, 326-7)

Our ancestors lived in Mother Nature in accordance with the transition of the seasons. They must have known that there were moments when their labour seemed less trying or when it could be done surprisingly well. That might be because they happened to be walking along a path through cherry trees in full bloom or because they were enjoying the beautiful songs of birds as they worked. These experiences of feeling very close to nature, or of feeling nature very close to themselves, may have made them more susceptible to the idea that those miraculous moments were a manifestation of Yamanba. As we said, Yamanba is equivalent to nature.

The identity of Yamanba and nature is expressed more impressively in the last part of the play, where the text describes Yamanba's rounds of

mountains and valleys.² While pursuing cherry blossoms in spring, the shining moon in autumn or snow in winters, Yamanba travels all around the mountains. This description can, at the same time, be easily interpreted as the rounds, or transitions, of the seasons too. Or, more precisely, it looks as if Yamanba's rounds corresponded to the transitions of the seasons:

Now I must be off, back to the mountains,
in spring to watch, with bated breath,
every tree for those first signs
of the blossoms I pursue
all around the mountains;
in autumn to seek glorious light
and the best view of the moon
all around the mountains;
in wintertime, to welcome cold,
the lowering rainclouds,
then the snow, all around the mountains.
(Tyler 1992, 328)

The actor's movements also indicate that Yamanba's rounds of mountains overlap the shifting seasons. For example, the actor makes the slow movement of viewing distant mountains to the chorus's "[to watch] every tree for those first signs of the blossoms". With the help of that movement, we can visualise the image of cherry blossoms reaching full bloom from one mountain to another as the 'cherry blossom front' advances, as if watching images filmed with time-lapse photography.

Similar effects can be seen in the winter part. Assisted by the actor's movement called *men wo kiru* 面を切る (turning the face quickly and sharply from right to left or left to right), the audience can imagine the moment in which the drizzle of late autumn suddenly changes to snow.

In other words, the Yamanba portrayed in this way is as huge as nature itself. Yamanba – a life force equivalent to the essence of the deep mountains – watches the large-scale transitions of the seasons, as well as the moment-to-moment changes in the weather of a particular place.

Noh makes it possible for a character on stage to represent the spirit of nature, which is both merciful and fearful showing through that character's words the deep relationship between nature and people. Furthermore, the restrained and sophisticated movements in performances of today's Noh are even capable of expressing, somewhat paradoxically, the vastness of nature as well.

2 Tyler (1992, 313) says: "her rounds of the mountain become pure poetry, as she pursues blossoms and the moon. The fusion of her labour with the beauty of the seasons, in the closing lines of the play, sums up the aim and nature of classical poetry".

Bibliography

- Atkins, Paul S. (2006). *Revealed Identity. The Noh Plays of Komparu Ze-nchiku*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Hare, Tom (2008). *Zeami Performance Notes*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Itō Masayoshi (1983, 1986, 1988). “Yōkyokushū” (A Collection of Noh plays), 3 vols. *Shinchō Nihon Koten Shūsei* (Shinchō Japanese Classics Corpus). Tōkyō: Shinchōsha.
- Kojima Noriyuki, Arai Eizō (ed.) (1989) *Shin Nihon koten bungaku taikei: Kokin wakashū* (New Japanese Classic Literature Outline: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern Times). Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten.
- Sanari Kentarō (1930-31). *Yōkyoku taikan* (Encyclopedia of Noh Plays), 7 vols. Tōkyō: Meiji Shoin.
- Tyler, Royall (1992). *Japanese Noh Dramas*. London; New York: Penguin Books.
- Yokomichi Mario; Omote Akira (eds.) (1960, 1963). “Yōkyokushū” (A Collection of Noh plays). *Nihon koten bungaku taikei* (Japanese Classic Literature Systematic Edition). Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten, 40-1.