

**Figurative Elements in Koto and Bunraku Music and
Their Analogues in Related Forms of Japanese Culture**

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Introduction

According to J. Blacking “Music, like language... is a specific trait of man”¹. With this paper I would like to exemplify and develop this thought further through examination of several things Japanese, namely *Waka* poetry, *Bunraku Shamisen* music, *Koto* music and the graphic system. Particularly interesting here is the fact that those forms of art belong to a cultural tradition which, although well known all over the world, seems to be quite unfamiliar not only to the Westerners but very often to the Japanese as well. This striking paradox stirred my curiosity and initiated the present examination, in which my Ariadne’s thread was the idiosyncratic aptitude of the Japanese mindset to work with ‘explicitly hidden’ meanings. I also retrace the way traversed by the generative factors that have led to the formation of such highly symbolic way of reasoning.

Another important point of this study is the capability of the above-mentioned traditional forms of Japanese art to communicate images without being evidently explicit of what is depicted. And, in my opinion, such ‘communication’ is possible to be achieved by means of preliminarily fixed meanings, signified by certain literary or musical tropes. In order to explain the reasons for such supposition, I make a parallel observation of the *Kakekotoba* device in *Waka* poetry and some symbolic techniques in *Bunraku* and *Koto* music.

My examination was methodologically facilitated by my ‘otherness’ to the culture in question. Thus, compared to the ‘usualness’ in the insider’s attitude, my being a foreign musicologist in Japan provides me with a wider perspective on the culture of the country and, not least, with the faculty of wonder. In other words, as a foreigner I do not take for granted, for mere facts, neither the strongly suggestive nature of the art nor the writing system of the country; and those two ‘advantages’ of mine played an important part in providing me with

¹ Blacking, J (1973), p7.

the hypothesis for ‘figurativeness’ as a main feature of Japanese imagination.

I liken the ‘visualising’ devices of Japanese art to jigsaws because of their distinctive capability to make meanings visible by means of incomplete visualisation, or without visualisation at all. I use the term ‘jigsaw’ because it refers to a collection of numerous interlocking pieces that have to be put together in order to unravel a particular image. Not infrequently, however, we are able to envisage what the final picture is going to look like even before we have seen the full assemblage of the components. And this is how the visualising devices of Japanese art work -- they set a scheme, guide our imagination to what is depicted and let it “play” in the Kantian sense of the word until it creates its own imaginary picture; a picture which is a result of the hints given and our mind’s own free associations. I firmly believe that such specific artistic devices were especially and absolutely necessary for the culture of a country such as Japan. Therefore, based on the supposition that an important feature of Japanese culture is the figurative character (as opposed to abstract) of both thinking and writing, I have tried to find out how the Japanese imagine, and how they construct and reconstruct the ideas encoded in their works of art.

The Hermeneutic Task Of The Outsider Ethnomusicologist

Foreign ethnomusicologists could be said to bridge the gap between the assets of the culture they explore and those of their own native culture. This breach in fact functions as a “productive distance”² to be travelled in order to attain the final goal - the appropriation of an originally alien culture. By reason of this “distance” outsiders have perforce to begin their examinations with a kind of archaeological activity; an activity of re-construction of meanings going back towards their origins. Such a reconstruction is absolutely necessary because for outsiders the foreign culture, and its music in particular, is not something that could be taken for granted; on the contrary, it is something that should be followed in its development in order to be fully understood. In this way the shortcoming of being ‘other’ turns out to be a benefit for the same reason: the ‘otherness’ spares the effort of overcoming the short-sightedness about the difference between text and context in which the music or any other cultural product appear.

²Rice, T. (1991), p.6.

Assuming I were Japanese I would have probably never asked myself about the *Shamisen* patterns in *Bunraku*; then those patterns would rather seem to be simply a thread in the texture of the theatrical text. I suppose so because to the best of my knowledge there are very few works in Japanese³ concerning the topic I discuss here. The ‘otherness’ serves both its bearer and the culture in regard to which it occurs. The former gains from the interpretative effort following the encounter with new and unfamiliar meanings; while the latter reaps the benefits of yet another view on it and of the new insight resulting from the work inspired by the researcher’s faculty of wonder.

POETICAL AND MUSICAL HINTS

Waka poetry⁴

Kakekotoba is a “pivot word”, a kind of pun in which a word has different meanings depending on whether a) the word is perceived as a part of the preceding or succeeding phrase (‘I wait below the *pine (ing)* for you’)⁵; or b) the word is only homophonically perceived (as in the example below). Pivot words were first employed in *Waka* poetry from the Heian period (784-1192). Technically speaking, the use of this word pattern allows the author to convey maximum information within a limited space. Aesthetically speaking, finding the key to unravel the verbal puzzle was considered at that time the highest pleasure one could get from poetry. Here is an example, which is a love letter written by an aristocrat suffering his unrequited love. The pivot words are italicised:

tsurezureno *naga-ameni* masaru namidagawa vs. tsurezureno *nagameni* masaru *namidagawa*
sodenomi nurete afuyoshimonashi sodenomi nurete afuyoshimonashi⁶

That Heian era is an important period in Japanese history because at that time the long process of adoption of the Chinese characters and their adjustment to the needs of the Japanese language was initiated. At the same time, a set of elements extracted from some of the complicated Chinese characters came into use. Those elements formed *Hiragana*, which is

³ See Tokumaru, Y. (1991), IN Japanese?

⁴ Lit. “Japanese song”.

⁵ Kato, S (1997), p.356.

⁶Fujiwara no Toshiyuki, d. 901. In: *Kokinshu: A Collection of Poems Ancient and Modern* (1984), p.226.

one of the two alphabets used in Japan today. On the other hand in poetry *Onnate*, or using exclusively *Hiragana*, was gradually established as a writing style. In this way the use of homophonous words, i.e. pivot words, was facilitated; and the 31-syllables of the *Waka*-pattern became the accepted poetic form in Japan.

In the example above the *Kakekotoba* device enriches the contents within the confines of the 31 syllables, meaning at the same time *naga-ame* (long, tedious rain) and *nagameru* (gazing pensively), and thus polysemically adding to the poem's multilayer structure. So if we first choose to read it as a "tedious rain" it combines with the word "gawa" (from "kawa" – river) and the image of rains and rivers in flood occurs to us.

Unable to meet you
I am lost in lonely thought
My sleeves drenched with tears,
Abundant as the waters
Of a rain-swollen river⁷

On the other hand, if we choose the second interpretation (gazing pensively), we get the image of misty eyes shedding tears like a river:

In idle reverie
I weep tears that overflow like
The long rains of spring
My sleeves are drenched with the stream
That flows when we cannot meet.⁸

According to Tzvetana Kristeva, in the end "the wordplay turns into a game between words, building up the polyvalence of the text".⁹ The rich figurativeness of the text is due to the reader's choice how to approach the poem's pivot word – whether to comprehend it as "long, tedious rain" or as referring to "gazing misty eyes". Another way to picture the poem, namely the way it appears to the Japanese reader, is to feel its animation-like structure: a gloomy Heian aristocrat, shedding tears over his beloved; a flood of tears soaking the sleeve of his kimono, making it ooze with the sorrow accumulated in the multilayer silk. This vivid image is made possible by

⁷ Craig, H (1985), p. 189.

⁸ *Kokinshu*, p.226.

⁹ Kristeva, T (1994), p.174.

the use of the *Kakekotoba* device, which like a glass prism breaks up the single word into two visions. The freedom of imagination is due to the absence of writing characters with fixed meanings.

Koto Music

A phenomenon closely resembling the pivot words with regard to figurativeness can also be found in Japanese music. In *Koto* music, for example, in the song cycle *Koto-Kumiuta*¹⁰ we can observe various symbolic playing techniques for producing sounds similar to the sounds of nature; and those symbolic representations of natural sounds, together with the lyrics, create a word-and-sound-pictured world that is an artistic replica of the real one.

Although the choice of symbolic techniques in *Koto-Kumiuta* is large, here I will adduce only one example – the technique called ‘namigaeshi’ (lit. ‘returning wave’). As a general rule this technique is combined with words referring to the sea, which leads to an impressive reinforcement of the nominal signal. Most often namigaeshi is found with the words ‘seashore’, ‘beach’, and ‘wave’, as in the example below:

It has long been famous
The fall
At the Bay of Akashi.
How wondrous
The moonlight, cold
And brightly reflected
Over the *waves* that
Wash upon the beach.¹¹

Technically, namigaeshi begins with a drawing stroke across the first and second strings. Then a second stroke is made – this time the movement is away from the performer and across all the strings. The technique ends with a repetition of the first stroke. In this way, in “*namigaeshi*” the wave is not only acoustically symbolised; it is also visually represented through the movement of the performer’s hand.

¹⁰ Lit. ‘Song cycle’. See Tsuge, G., (1981), p.110.

¹¹ Tsuge, G (1983), p2.

Kumi-uta is the oldest form of vocal *Koto* music consisting of short poems, which were set to music. The songs are “simple and unassuming, while the poems tend to be wistful and romantic”¹² And I think that this is a good reason to classify this musical form as narrative; because ‘telling about’, ‘being eloquent of’ and ‘expressing something’ are all narrative features. In our everyday life we need words in order to express ourselves Similarly, if we want to “tell” something by means of music, we need patterns with fixed meanings, which are recognisable for the critical listener. The meanings encoded in the *Kumi-uta* songs are even easier to unravel – the words of the poem show with certainty where the image is “hidden”, and the role of the musical technique that prompts the lyrics is to emotionally tinge and semantically intensify the suggestive qualities of the song. In this way, the hand, the voice and the *Koto* itself simultaneously “visualise” the musical message.

Shamisen Music

Bunraku Puppet Theatre, which is acknowledged as the most refined form of puppetry in the world, is a fascinating combination of three skills: puppet manipulation, *Joruri* narration and *Shamisen* music. The strong impact of *Bunraku* Theatre is due to its triple approach to suggestiveness. First, the narrator chants words and expresses with every part of his body what is being articulated in the lyrics. Secondly, the puppet manipulator uses the power of the visual appearance of the marionette. And, third, the *Shamisen* player intensifies the dramatic effect, elevates the atmosphere of the scene and provides various indications to the chanter.

For Seishiro Tsuruzawa (a professional *Bunraku Shamisen* player) “the music played by the *Shamisen* is a story-telling music”¹³. A statement like this is not surprising because the very beginning of *Shamisen* music is bound up with narration – the first *Shamisen* players were actually “converted storytellers from the *Biwa*¹² schools of the Osaka-Kyoto district. Naturally, then, the first music for the *Shamisen* was also of a narrative nature.”¹⁴ And this helps us understand another similar statement: “We [the musicians] depict the world [by our playing]”; because, similarly to *Koto* music, *Bunraku Shamisen* music makes use of certain musical patterns, which are closely connected with the stage characters and their actions.

¹² Malm, W (1959). p.203.

¹³ Here and hereafter all references are from a radio program : NHK_FM Ibuningu Myujikku Rain , 2002 July, 11th, 6 p.m. My interpretation is based also on further interviews with Seishiro.

¹⁴ Malm, op.cit. , p.188.

Those are stereotyped patterns¹⁵ that have been developed by generations of *Shamisen* players through extraction and encoding into musical phrases the most peculiar dynamic properties of things, animals and human behaviour and appearance. In other words, *Shamisen* music is often employed to represent such extra-musical objects as snow, battles, and temple bells¹⁶. And while the marionettes act and the narrator sings his words, the *Shamisen* “talks about” in its symbolic language. This suggests to me that the Japanese, who have exceptional feeling of sounds “reminiscent of something”¹⁷, piece together their *Bunraku* jigsaw with the good help of music that dynamically brings to mind images, which are semantically coherent with the picture evoked by the puppets’ play and the song. Those fixed meanings imperceptibly but successfully underprop the performance.

Hiding meanings, and at the same time explicitly leaving hints of them on the very artistic surface, is what I hold quintessential and characteristic of Japanese art. In my opinion, the roots of such an approach could be sought in the ancient times when Chinese characters were introduced to Japan and started making their way as a formative factor of the peculiar native mentality.

The Figurative Culture

In the beginning of my studying Japanese I used to think, like many other foreigners, that the Chinese characters I was trying to memorise are nothing but an alphabet consisting of a huge number of extremely complicated letters. With the gradual improvement in my understanding of the language, however, I got to realise that Chinese characters (*Kanji*¹⁸) are something more than mere letters. And, indeed, if we take for example the Latin alphabet, we can see that its letters express sounds; whereas the particular character, taken alone, has no meaning. Chinese characters, on the other hand, do not express sounds; they express meanings. Because one and the same Chinese character can have a number of different readings and, as a result, we can never know how to pronounce an isolated *Kanji*. But when we see the appearance of

¹⁵ Ibid., p.201.

¹⁶ Tokumaru, Y. (1991). p 217.

¹⁷ Japanese language is abundant in onomatopoeic (*giseigo*) and action imitating (*gitaigo*) words. *Gitaigo* have tremendous impact on the clarity and descriptiveness of Japanese language. They ensure the sensory input from inside the listener’s mind and increase the likelihood between their intended meaning and the meaning portrayed in the listener’s mind.

¹⁸ Lit. “Chinese letters”.

the character, we can have no doubt about its main idea, about its “core meaning”¹⁹.

Later on, I learned that *Kanji* are not just randomly combined strokes; and that some patterns (“significs”) in their structure can be observed, which enables us to classify and study Chinese characters more easily. For example, among the two thousand *Kanji*, restricted as “standard” in Japan in 1969²⁰, 85% belong to the so-called semasio-phonetic group. Those characters are “combination of a semantic element with a phonetic element, the former usually indicating the general nature of the item to be represented and the latter usually giving more specific information by lending its sound to express the pronunciation of a descriptive word”²¹. Thus, it can rightly be thought that *Kanji* visualise decipherable meaning by the virtue of the compound significs; and that their main function is to represent concepts independently of their phonetic aspect. In the same vein of ideographic thinking is the statement of the Russian scholar Evgenii Maevskii, who maintains that “*Kanji* are not just outer decoration, which should simply be applied on the speech” but are also an organic part of Japanese culture. He continues: “Japanese people to a considerable degree think in *Kanji*” and “for them is more important what they see, than what they hear”²².

I am of the opinion that the *image*-centred, or “figurative” nature of *Kanji* could be a starting point of an extensive and deep analysis of Japanese culture and music in particular; an examination that would focus our attention on a phenomenon, which I regard as archetypal of Japanese culture. I call this phenomenon ‘figurativeness’, taking ‘figurative’ as “representing forms that are recognisably derived from life”²³

The literary and music examples I adduced in the previous sections of this paper serve to provide hints for the imagination to guide the reader or listener towards an adequate understanding of the aesthetic message. The pivot words in *Waka* poetry, the symbolic playing techniques for *Koto* and the *Shamisen* melodic pattern all enable a stronger impression and point out to the image to become the core of our imaginative picture. And this gives me grounds to conclude that Japanese art not simply makes use of forms that are *symbolic of real*

¹⁹See: The Kodansha Kanji Learner’s Dictionary, (1999), p.25a.

²⁰ Küenenburg, M (1952), pp. 230-238.

²¹ Henshall, K. (1988). p.xvi.

²² All quotations from: Maevskii, E.V. *Ideography in Japanese Language*. (Electronic source). For the contrary opinion see Unger, J (1990).

²³Concise Oxford Dictionary (1997).

forms; it literally ‘depicts’ those forms. And this is due to the culture whose phenomenon Japanese art is – i.e. a culture deeply embedded in the tradition of *illustrating* meanings, of giving visual expression to the gist. In this way, the jigsaw puzzles of Japanese culture do not seem ‘puzzling’ at all; because the pieces are originally suggestive of the whole picture.

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