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Original Articles

Performing the Faith: Modernization and the Tale of Tenjū in *Amida no Munewari*

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【Abstract】

This paper undertakes a literary, textual, and performative analysis of the Tale of Tenjū in *Amida no Munewari*, one of the oldest Japanese puppet plays, first performed on stage in the early Edo era. The oldest version of the text has been recently rediscovered and transcribed, and the play resuscitated and newly performed. Tracing its historical evolution, this paper uses both traditional textual analysis and participant-observer primary research with a drama troupe to describe the modernization of the drama. *Amida no Munewari* is a pivotal text for understanding the historical impact of the renewal of performing arts in Japan, and it raises questions that are difficult to imagine from a purely textual perspective. The author provides a holistic overview and offers historical and contemporary insights into the text and the creative process leading to its revival in the present day.

Key words: Japanese traditional performing art, Puppet, *Jōruri*, Buddhism

研究論文

『阿弥陀胸割』と天寿物語の近代化における信徳上演問題

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【要　旨】

『阿弥陀胸割』は、江戸時代初期まで盛んに上演され、その後に途絶えた初期人形浄瑠璃の一様式を現在に伝える作品であり、近年佐渡の文弥人形の系譜を引く芸能集団により復活上演がなされた。本稿では、この上演の際に校訂された人形浄瑠璃本の系統を明らかにし、浄瑠璃諸本の歴史的生成を実証するため、同本を他の諸本と校合してその歴史的・地域的・文化的文脈を検証、広範囲にわたる通時的な分析を行う。また演出を通じてその作品受容の諸条件を明らかにしようとした演者たちとのフィールドワークを通じ、初期人形浄瑠璃の手法の特異性を再構築しようと試みる。

キーワード：人形浄瑠璃、日本芸能興行、猿八座、阿弥陀胸割、説経節

1. Introduction

This article explores the modernization and urbanization of the performing arts, focusing on *Amida no Munewari*, the very first puppet theater play performed for the emperor of Japan and his courtiers at the beginning of 17th century. I will demonstrate that Pure Land Buddhism is at the core of Japanese puppet theater, but also that new social standards led to an artform that was less religious and more focused on entertainment, with minor roles for female characters.

My motivation for centering this discussion on

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Amida no Munewari is to show how the performing arts evolved during the 17th century, a time when authorship was not an important issue and librettos were adapted and transformed over the years; plot, structure, and language have all underwent fundamental shifts in this period. This paper is based on several primary sources, including the oldest version of the libretto. Furthermore, as a puppeteer with the Saruhachi-za Company, which undertook a revival of the oldest version of the play, I have unique insights into the process of enacting this play that may not have been possible solely through analyzing the libretto.

I will first introduce the characteristics of the play and explain its critical role in the history of Japanese performing arts using a diachronic comparison of texts. This comparison will show how the structure of puppet librettos evolved from the beginning of the 17th century and demonstrates how reenacting the earliest version of the libretto provided an opportunity to more fully understand Japanese puppetry.

In order to document the challenges faced when reviving the play, I will also show the process of puppeteers and case studies of certain problems that arose during performances.

2. Historical Context: An Early Edo Era Puppet Play

Researchers consider *Amida no Munewari* to be the oldest Japanese puppet play[1]. It was performed in the Imperial Palace at the beginning of the 17th century, when puppetry was considered a lesser art form, usually enjoyed by commoners.

In the early Edo era (1603-1868), an itinerant puppet group was invited for the very first time to perform in the capital for the Emperor Go-yōzei (1571-1617). For the occasion, the head of the group received the purely formal rank of *jō*, without which the troupe would not have been allowed to perform for the emperor. For this unusual event, *Amida no Munewari*, and three Noh plays *Kamo*, *Daibutsu kuyō* and Takasago, were adapted for puppet performances.

In his journal, the courtier Yamashina Tokio (1577-1620) mentions[2]:

> Rain. Went to the Imperial palace. Attended puppet performances including *Amida Munewari* and other plays.

Another courtier and poet Nishinotōin Tokiyoshi (1552-1640), describes what he saw and felt during the performance:

> 21st day of the 9th month. Rain. I went to the palace of the retired emperor. After eating, I attended the performance entitled *Amida's Riven Breast*', *Amida munewari-kiri*. Ebisu-kaki like puppeteers were allowed to perform in the palace. They set up their screens and stage in the garden and played. It was wonderful.

Noh puppets (*nō ningyō*) or "Noh performed by puppets" (*nō-ayatsuri*), had been popular since 1556. Ebisukaki manipulators mastered this art and were good enough to draw the attention of the emperor.

Nishinotōin Tokiyoshi stressed the fact that he was both delighted and surprised by *Amida no Munewari* because the play was not directly related to Noh themes and a new performing style was used. Ebisukaki puppeteers normally manipulated small figures in a box, but for 1614 performance the puppets were operated (*ayatsuri*) behind screens. The audience reacted enthusiastically to this new genre named *ayatsuri jōruri* (recitation accompanied by puppets). Muroki Yatarō[3] stresses that this performance of *Amida no Munewari* heralded the coming of a new type of performing art.

The increasing popularity of *ningyo jōruri* was recorded in the documents and visual arts of the time. For instance, two folding screens representing Kyoto in the beginning of 17th century called the Funaki-hon[4], were painted around 1615 by Iwasa Matabee (1578-1650). In these works, the imperial capital is shown at its best. Each part of the city is carefully depicted, from Nijo-jō Castle to Hōkōji Temple, with a teeming crowd of 2,728 people. The right-hand screen mainly shows the Kamo River and the eastern part of the city, whereas the left-hand side depicts the center part of the capital. On the right screen (2nd panel from the left) we can see small figures on the riverbank of the 4th Avenue district. Along with kabuki and other open-air theaters, two puppet stages are visible. Around twenty people crouch down in the open-air playhouse. The caption on the right reads Yamanaka *Tokiwa Ayatsuri*, while the second one on the left reads *Munewari Ayatsuri*. Kuroda notes that the two men to the right of the stage of *Munewari* may be the chanter and a musician.

In 1587, Yamashina Tokitsune (1543-1611), first mentioned the use of a shamisen in his Journal *Tokitsune Kyōki*. This instrument was imported to southern Japan in 1560 and slowly spread north to Kyoto. In the painting the puppeteers cannot be seen. The two puppets on the right are the protagonists: the siblings who have come to sell themselves to Lord Daiman, pictured on the left. The audience is watching the scene, mouths agape with emotion.

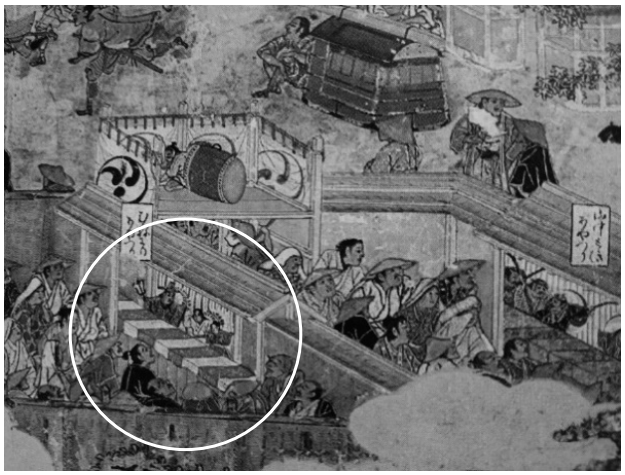

Figure 1: The *Munewari* stage on the left[5]

Iwasa Matabee painted another scene showing the play. On the right-hand side of the stage, two children are asleep next to an altar. A prop Amida triad statue is on a little pedestal. Lord Daiman and his escort arrive from the left, a few minutes before the key part of the play, when a miracle occurs.

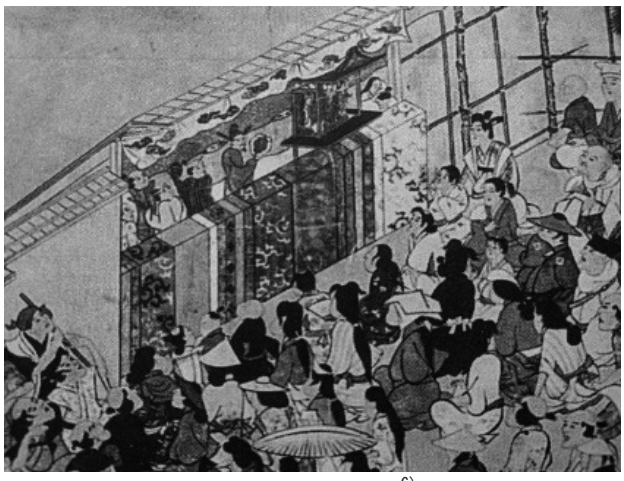

Figure 2: *Amida no Munewari*[6]

3. Religious Context: Performing Arts and Buddhism

Until the Edo era, most plays were meant to deliver inspiring Buddhist messages, encouraging devotion, filial duty, and self-sacrifice. Many older works explain the origin of statues or objects of worship enshrined in temples and celebrate their power to lead the faithful to salvation. For example, the play called *Karukaya* relates the origin of the Jizō statue, which is worshipped in Zenkōji temple. Likewise, the very first play of *Sanshō Dayū* (Sanshō the Bailiff) tells the story of a Jizō statue in Tango Province. Also, *Aigo no Waka* details the origin of the deity Sannōdai Gongen enshrined in Hiyoshi Daisha Temple. The play *Kōchi Hōin Godenki* is a hagiography of a monk worshipped for

being the first Japanese hermit to succeed in mummifying himself [7].

As for *Amida no Munewari*, I will give a short synopsis of the play and briefly comment on the structural principles of the drama. I will then provide a fuller synopsis of each scene, analyzing key points and focusing on patterns of critical differentiation between the classical and more recent versions that open new discursive avenues.

Amida no Munewari starts in a place named Tenjiku, which is the old Japanese word for the cradle of Buddhism in India. In its oldest form, the play starts with these lines:

> Well then, there was once, in the outskirts of Tenjiku, a miraculous Buddha called Munewari Amida (Split Chest Amida). Ask me about the detailed account of the Buddhist triad origins, a heartbreaking story[8].

The lord Kanshi Byōe owns seven treasures, the third being a magic tree. Anyone who sits under this *otowa* pine is rejuvenated. Why then worry about salvation if there is no need to be afraid of death? This sacrilegious lord burns down temples, and Buddha decides to punish him by sending demons after him. But the lord's fourth treasure is a set of powerful demon-killing swords that are hard to defeat. However, Buddha's forces are victorious, and the irreligious lord is condemned to torture and molten iron is poured down his throat. After he dies, he and his wife are thrown into hell. But the lord's two orphans, Tenjū and Teirei are allowed to live, and they set out on a long journey, begging as they wander. They decide to sell themselves into bondage in order to gain enough money to erect a temple to save the soul of their parents. No one will have them at first, but while they are resting in a temple Amida visits them in their dreams, suggesting they travel to the home of Lord Daiman, whose son is gravely ill. This poor boy needs to be cured, but the only remedy is the liver of a girl born at exactly the same moment. The girl will have to be sacrificed and her liver taken from her body to be turned into a medicine.

The siblings reach lord Daiman's place and Tenjū accepts the sacrifice if it means a temple with a statue of Amida will be built and her brother will be put up for adoption. After she prays, warriors carry out the execution. The medicine made out her liver cures the sick boy. Later, when Daiman's warriors come to pray at the place Tenjū died, her body has disappeared. Finally, they find her with her brother asleep in the temple, close to the altar of the Buddha. She is alive. The statue splits open at the breast and bleeds crimson blood. The pure and virtuous Tenjū has been saved by a miracle, rewarding her faith in Amida, and the tragedy culminates in redemption. The heroic pattern of the young girl ends on a happy note.

Figure 3: The miracle of *Amida no Munewari*[9]

Donald Keene suggested that a Christian influence can be observed in this story[10], as a deity gives itself for the sake of a true believer. But sacrificing oneself for the sake of an another (*mi-gawari*) is often seen in Japanese popular beliefs without any relation to Christian spirituality. Muraki Yatarō

argues that the real originality of the play may lie elsewhere: the audience attending the performance was eager to see the stagecraft of the split chest spilling blood.

Before urbanization came to have a central influence on the arts, temples were at the core of community living, and they held performances to promote their teachings. The origin (*engi*) of *Amida no Munewari* is often thought of as emerging from the *sekkyō-bushi* genre which includes art related to Buddhist proselytizing, first carried out by priests acting as itinerant chanters (*sekkyō-shi*).

At this time, the concept of the playwright as a profession had yet to develop in Japan, and the original author of *Amida no Munewari*'s libretto is not mentioned. As Morrison underscores, some scholars (Orikuchi Shinobu, Shigeru Araki, Yamamoto Kichizō, Iwaki Takeo, Barbara Ruch and Imai Masaharu) make consistent claims that promulgators of *sekkyō* in Muromachi era were women, while others are even more insistent (Usuda Jingorō, Fukuda Akira, Takada Mamoru, Muroki Yatarō, Susan Matisoff). Some researchers think that *Amida no Munewari* could have been written by a woman called Rokuji Namuemon. Rokuji means "six characters," which is another way of signifying the six syllables of central prayer of Pure Land Buddhism: *Na-mu-a-mi-da-butsu*. As her name suggests, she would have likely belonged to the school of Pure Land Buddhism. At the end of 16th century, this sect had amassed such a large following that its strength was even a danger to some warlords, which was why Shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu decided to split it into two sects to curb its influence in 1602.

Namuemon was a successful chanter, well known on the banks of the Kamo River. In his book *Hyakugi Jutsuryaku*, Saitō Gesshin (1804-1878) writes:

> During the Kan.ei era (1624-43), the chanter Rokuji Namuemon was reciting *sekkyō* plays along with Buddhist stories which made the audience cry[11].

At that time women chanters were highly appreciated. Muraki Yatarō argues that the rise of this star-system was also one key to the success of this new performing-style called *ayatsuri jōruri*[12]. Namuemon may also be the playwright of famous librettos such as *Yashima* and *Soga*. Her career ended around 1629 because of the law forbidding women on stage. She created a style called *namuemon-bushi* and dedicated herself to teaching numerous disciples.

Jacqueline Pigeot writes in her central study of *michiyuki-bun* how Buddhism influenced Japanese literary history by describing the rise of *honji-mono*, "books recounting the life of beings before they reach the state of god or Buddha[13]. In this play, during a journey full of pathos, the orphans courageously endure the hardships of the impermanent world (*mujō*). Because life is so precarious, faith in Amida is a kind of reassurance, the best walking stick available to man.

In plays like *Sansho Dayū* or *Karukaya*, children desperately search for their father and endure great hardships. In line with the *sekkyō* canon, the protagonists in *Amida no Munewari* undergo a very long journey (*michiyuki*) from South India to China across Mount Everest, and then back again. Since the Heian era, traveling in stories was a symbolic process. Place names were meant to be allegoric or selected for their melodic sounds. Travel was a metaphor for time passing and for difficult experiences. They were more trials of initiation than actual trips. In this play, the siblings go from one symbolic Buddhist place to another: when Amida comes to visit them in their dreams, they are in a temple near Benares, a sacred city which played an

important role in the development of Buddhism; the next leg of their journey brings the children across the Kikusui, a symbolic river on the other side of Mount Everest; then they reach the town where Lord Daimon lives. He is settled in a fictitious place called Kō-yume. In Japanese, *yume* means dream: their final destination is a metaphorical topos of illusion, an essential Buddhist concept.

Their journey of initiation is emphasized by the elegiac soundscape of the chanter. The bunya musical style of Sado Island (*naki-bushi*) fits with the dramatic scenes thanks to its poignant tone.

As a puppeteer, I participated in several performances with the Saruhachi-za company, both in theaters and in temples. Performing in the larger spaces of a theater requires a different style of puppeteering, more emphatic, with bigger moves and less interaction with the audience. Although *Amida no Munewari* had originally been performed for religious purposes, in the 17th century, as a result of urbanization and the new custom of performing in theaters, performing conditions and styles changed, with the puppets getting bigger and plot themes changing as well.

4. Topicality and Performance

The socio-cultural context that led to the success of the oldest version of the play also determined important aspects of the scenography of the revival performance by Saruhachi-za several centuries later.

At the very heart of the play stands a statue of Amida, who saved the young and beautiful Tenju, redeeming her pure heart and faith. In the oldest version of the libretto, the statue is identified as an *ikkō sanzon amida nyorai*, which is a specific type of statue where Amida Nyōrai is surrounded by two consorts: on his left stands the boddhisattva of Mercy, Kannon Bosatsu, and on his right stands the boddhisattva of Wisdom, Seishi Bosatsu. This triad is ensconced inside a single mandala, a shape symbolizing light (*kōhai*). This unusual composition unites the three characters within a single halo, whereas usually each bodhisattva stands in its own mandala. This kind of triad can be found in the northeastern part of Japan and such statues are usually thought to be replicas of one of the oldest Buddhist statues brought to Japan, which is enshrined in the famous Zenkōji Temple in Nagano Prefecture. At the end of the Kamakura era (1185-1333), temples with a lineage to Zenkōji often enshrined similar statues. Approximately two hundred still remain, including one exhibited in the Tokyo National Museum that was created in 1254.

The original statue in Zenkōji has not actually been seen since 654, and even the head of the temple cannot access this secret Buddha (*hibutsu*). Zenkōji Temple has its own replica (*maedachi honzon*) that was created in the 14th century and is also kept hidden from view.

The statue would have been first created in ancient India.

Supposedly, a wealthy merchant wanted to thank Amida, who cured his only child of disease. This triad statue was then taken to the Korean Peninsula, and then on to Japan along with the ideas of

Figure 4: Replica of the first Buddhist statue brought to Japan[14)]

Buddhism itself. However, the original triad statue was thrown into a moat, and Honda Yoshimitsu from Shinano later found and rescued it. Obeying a message from Amida, Yoshimitsu built a temple to enshrine to statue, which became Zenkōji Temple.

This temple became embroiled in the struggles of the Sengoku era (1467-1600). To save it from destruction, another temple was built, the triad statue was moved and then brought back to Nagano Prefecture in 1598. The various tribulations of the famous statue of Zenkōji Temple was a topical issue in the 16th century, exactly when the play *Amida no Munewari* was created. Contemporary audiences would have had vivid memories of the events that had threated the statue.

Telling the history of an object of worship and its powers of salvation was one key pattern of the *sekkyō*[15]. But in later versions of the play, references to the triad statue (*ikkō sanzon*) disappear. In 1651, the very first lines of the libretto changed:

> There was once a vast realm on the outskirts of India known as the Land of Bishari. In a place called Katahira Village in the Enta district, there was a great wealthy man by the name of Kanshi Byōe[16].

These revised lines do not contain a single mention of the Buddhist triad statue, which, forty years before, was at the heart of the plot.

The original playwright had ridden a wave of topicality and benefitted from Namuemon's inspiring voice and acclaimed chanting. But when the popularity of the subject faded, the story evolved. The reference to a particular statue was no longer indispensable. Thereafter, in the illustrations accompanying the libretto, Amida was represented alone, and innovative puppetry became sufficient for the success of the play.

5. Diachronic Analysis: Emergence of a New Performing Paradigm

Up until now I have explained the origins and the first shifts that *Amida no Munewari* underwent. Below, I compare four different versions of the libretto to demonstrate how puppet play standards continued to evolve during the Edo era.

By the late 17th century, when the famous chanter Tenma Hachitayū (?-1704) added *Amida no Munewari* to his repertoire, the play had undergone a significant transformation. Analyzing the style of the rewritten libretto, Muroki Yatarō shows that linguistically the evolution is unquestionable. Moreover, Yatarō's thesis can be strengthened by analyzing the oldest version of the libretto. The old *sekkyō-bushi* style texts are identified by ending inflections like *-teni or -woba*; but in the Tenma version, these typical expressions are not present. *Jōruri*'s stylistic characteristics are similar to the *tōkaidō-bushi*[17], but these features cannot be found there either. The successive versions of the libretto showcase the stylistic evolution.

Yokoyama Shigeru confirms this analysis when he describes later versions of the libretto:

> Can the play entitled *Amida no Munewari* be classified as a true libretto (*shōhon*) of old *jōruri?* I do not think it belongs to *sekkyō*. No stylistic element of *sekkyō* can be found, that is why it has been cataloged as the 31st play of old *jōruri*[18].

Older versions of the play are not structured into acts, but the incipits of some scenes[19] have led to the identification of six parts. In *sekkyō* style, if a scene ends, after the break the next scene begins with the end of the previous scene. The flow of action is more important than the unity of an act. When a scene ends, the chapter is not finished, it is a just a brief interlude in the story. The scene ends

before the action is completed in order to provoke the audience's curiosity. The characters are the key to the coherence of the plot, as they embody the connections between the different actions and their return to the stage indicates that the story is still ongoing.

But in the more recent versions of *Amida no Munewari*, each scene becomes a stand-alone entity, and the lines of dialogue are much longer. After 1650, the text was reorganized: the completeness of each act prevails, and each part of the play acquires its own unique stage design and narrative autonomy. In this form, the play can still be said to belong to *sekkyō* due its religious themes, but it already also belongs to *jōruri* in terms of its performing style.

At the time, shifts in the performing arts reflected the fact that Japanese society was evolving very quickly. In the 17th century, women were forbidden from performing on stage and tougher legislation against itinerant artists sparked radical changes, encouraging the spread of new categories of artists who were more urban and innovative. Performing arts evolved from the poignant chanted recitation of religious themed texts[20] to an independent art form more adapted to stage.

Saruhachi-za is the only troupe using the oldest known version of the libretto, which was only recently rediscovered[21]. Our performance brings the audience back to the very beginning of the 17th century, before 1630, back to a key moment in the history of Japanese performing arts.

We can see the evolution of the libretto by comparing different versions of the play from 1624, 1651, 1660, and 1704[22]. This provides insight into how the performing arts evolved during the 17th century.

First example: end of act I, the demons ask Buddha what to do with the children of the irreligious couple.

・*1600 Libretto*

Buddha suggests: "Save them."

Staging: Tenjū and her brother Teirei appear on stage, they are alive, and getting ready for their long journey.

・*1704 Libretto*

Nothing sadder. How to describe the dying (body) of Kanshi Byōe.

Staging: Demons are torturing the guilty parents. Buddha interferes and forbids them from hurting the children. The demons agree and go back to Hell.

Second example: start of Act II, continuing from Act I.

・*1660 Libretto*

How pathetic are the siblings left on their own, Tenjū, Teirei, their situation was so miserable!

Staging: At the beginning of the new scene, the two children stand exactly in the same way and in the exact position they were standing at the end of the former scene. Then they start their journey.

・*1704 Libretto*

Now, what can be more pitiful than those two little siblings[23]?

Staging: the preceding scene told the story of the guilty parents; the children appear now to be the new protagonists of the play.

These two examples illustrate the emergence of a new performing paradigm that is summarized in five points below:

(1) In the 1624 version, old textual structures are still prominent, but in the mid-17th the restructuring of the narration is already significant: between scenes the new elements are upheld for the next stage of the story.

(2) In the oldest version of the play the phrase *tote oba* are often used whereas in the more recent ones, "*Mōsu bakari (wa) nakari keri*" is the new

stylistic paradigm.

(3) In the first part of the earliest version, there are only four lines of dialogue inserted into the long narration, but in later librettos, these lines become a complete dialogue and large parts of the narration's content are also put into lines of dialogue. As a result, there are 14 lines of dialogue, representing three times more dialog than before. Puppets were first used to enliven the text, but over time they came to embody the story. The text evolves from a literary recitation to interactions between the puppets, who speak their own lines.

(4) The story took place first in India, and the siblings had to endure a very long journey through China. In later versions, the action is more focused, the crossing of the River Kikusui in act two is no longer mentioned, and their trip through China is gone. As a result, the play is confined to one location.

(5) The scope of the Buddhist message is altered. The symbolic places are changed. For example, in the first act, Buddha is no longer on Vulture Peak (Holy Eagle Peak) where he used to give sermons, especially the Lotus Sutra. He now stands on Mount Dand(al)oka (Dandoku in Japanese) a place where Shakyamuni undertook his austerities after renouncing the secular world. These two versions correspond to two different teachings: the first place refers to the only sutra considered as authentic by all Buddhist branches, integrating different Buddhas and teachings, showing that all human beings should be respected as they will become Buddha in the future. However, the second location is a reference to the commonly recited Heart Sutra, which explains emptiness. While the first version suggests a more historical approach, the second version has a more philosophical dimension.

There are also changes to the ending of the play.

Third example: end of Act III.

・*1704 Libretto*

Woes were their only fate, the unaware siblings Tenjū and Teirei go to lord Daiman's place to sell themselves. How pitiful their situation is!

Staging: A sign stands in the middle of the stage announcing that a specially born girl is wanted. No contender is suitable. Scene sets change, Tenjū and her brother Teirei arrive, the siblings look for lord Daiman's place.

・*1670 Libretto*

Anyway, Kagetsu no Jiro's fate is so terrible that words cannot describe his situation.

Staging: a new character is added to the story. Gendabyōe wants to marry his daughter to the son of lord Daiman, who refuses because of the sickliness of his child. Gendabyōe consults with his captain and Kagetsu Jirō suggests mounting an offensive. The battle rages but Kagetsu is taken prisoner and beheaded. More heroic male patterns are introduced to the story.

Fourth example: start of Act IV, Tenjū and Teirei are walking towards Lord Daiman's place as Buddha told them to in dreams.

・*1651 Libretto*

Now what could be more pitiful than our two little siblings? As the dawn had already broken, the sister called a brother to her side and spoke. How about it, Teirei[24)]?

・*1660 Libretto*

Not even one young lady fulfills the conditions, they are sent back home.

・*1670 Libretto*

Then, lord Daiman has won the battle, but his only son, the young Matsuwaka, begins to suffer from a strange ailment, he is confined in bed waiting for death.

These examples illustrate a change in the plot

structuring, which I summarize below.

(1) In the earlier versions, Act III ends with the siblings arriving at Lord Daiman's place unaware of the illness of his son, and the audience already knows what the girl's fate will be. In more recent versions, new events interfere. In the 1651 libretto, the timeline is broken, and the protagonists do not reappear. Whereas in the 1671 libretto, a flashback introduces a completely new episode: the boy's sickness is due to a malediction, an enemy of lord Daiman who wanted revenge. The arrow of time is twisted and an unusual digression in the narration interrupts the timeline.

(2) In more recent versions the motif of the heroic girl is attenuated.

(3) In the oldest libretto, at the moment of her sacrifice, Tenjū scrolls through the sutras' text, to great visual effect. In later versions the chanter sings the verses of the sutra. In the oldest libretto, after the sacrifice, flower petals fall and a violet cloud was shown on the stage to express that a miracle is coming, that the girl will be saved. These visual effects disappear in later versions.

The play gradually evolved from a text with entertaining aspects combined with spectacular stage effects (impossible trips, exotic places, battles, miracles shown for their symbolic and imaginary dimensions) to an integrated performance object where the balance of narration, music and dialogue, description and action, and visual effects and message is more fully elaborated. In addition, the general tendency is to place greater stress on filial piety than in a faith in a particular statue. The play evolved from the singing of a written text to the performance of lines of dialogue written for the stage and from a piece of religious literature to a secularized performance art.

Original enough to catch the eye of the emperor, the play is a protean piece of art. It attracted the attention of chanters who continually adapted it over the years. Around 1625, thanks to the resurgence of audiences, the conditions of performing arts, the eviction of the women from the stage, and the eagerness for change, puppet plays evolved from the performance of a narrative text to a complete performing art. They questioned the logic of storytelling standards, from the unity of narration and text to the primacy of stage settings. Chanters elaborated new textual strategies. Stage setting and the choreography of the puppets began to be considered assets. By the mid-17th century, the librettos were freed from medieval canons and the amount of dialogue was expanded. Amida's play is a milestone, a reference text to track the evolution of performing arts, giving us precious insights into the revolution that occurred during the 17th century.

For me, reenacting the earliest known libretto was essential to understanding of the originality of the play and the evolution of Japanese puppetry.

6. Re-enactment of the Play

In early spring 2019, on the 7th of April, Saruhachi-za, the traditional puppet company based in Niigata Prefecture, held a performance of *Amida no Munewari* in Shibata City. Inside the Rurisan Sankōji Temple (erected in 1582 and part of school of Pure Land Buddhism), more than one hundred parishioners waited for the curtain to open. Two strikes of wooden clappers drew the audience's attention and a voice sounded as the puppet master formally announced the play's title and the name of the chanter and the puppet troupe.

> *Tōzai, Kono tokoro Amida no Munewari Hai tsutomemasuru tayū Watanabe Hachi Tayū, Ningyō Saruhachi-za nite hai tsutomemasu, Tōzai tō …tōzai».*

The stage had been erected inside the main hall (*hondō*) of the temple, next to the statue of Shandao (613-681), the fifth patriarch of Pure Land Buddhism whose writings are very important to the

sect, as he was the first to suggest that salvation can be achieved by simply saying the name Amida, a key episode in the libretto of this play.

The head of the company, Nishihashi Hachirobee (1948-), lives on Sado Island. He created the Saruhachi-za puppet company in order to bring back to life forgotten puppet plays loved by commoners at the end of the 16th century, years before the rise of the so-called Japanese Shakespeare, Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1725). His art is called "the old *jōruri*" (*kojōruri*) where *jōruri* stands for both the old narrative and the puppet art, which existed long before the well-known bunraku of Osaka.

Sado Island is a sanctuary for arts like Noh and *bunya* puppetry. Its Galapagos-like isolation allowed old practices to remain alive. The island was a shelter for many talents, such as the Noh master Zeami (1363-1443), who spent the end of his life (1434-42?) exiled there.

The old art of puppet genre called bunya *ningyō* is based upon the singing style created by Okamoto Bunya (1633-1694), whose celebrity goes back to the Enpo Era (1673-1681). Sado Island is one of the four places in Japan where this style is still practiced. Whereas in the city of Osaka, *bunya* declined, and new performing styles supplanted it, the people of Sado continued loving this old tradition with its long chants full of sadness. The island was then fairly prosperous, thanks to the prominent gold mine, which provided the wherewithal for the encouragement and conservation of artistic culture. Saruhachi-za maintains this tradition and continues to revive forgotten plays.

Tailoring *Amida no Munewari* to a 21st-century audience meant dealing with two different challenges. First, respecting the essence of the play and being able to retrace and recreate it as performed 400 years ago. Secondly, making sure the audience could directly engage with the show—not only as a testimony of the past—but for its own qualities and mystery.

Almost ten years have passed since I became a puppeteer in this traditional Japanese puppet company in late 2009. I participated in this revival of *Amida no Munewari* and gained first-hand knowledge of the many challenges faced by the head of the troupe.

The first step was to edit the libretto, which had not been published or transcribed. No printed edition existed in October 2011, when Nishihashi Hachirobee and Watanabe Hachitayū completed the transcription. The very first performance was scheduled for the 13th of April 2012. Five minutes before curtain time, work was still being done on the set. As preparations for part one were not yet complete, the *kuroko* puppeteers, dressed entirely in black and wearing a black hood (*zukin*) to hide their faces, performed only the second and third parts.

Then in October 2012, thanks to funding from Jōetsu University, the troupe performed the whole play. In September 2013, the troupe was invited to perform for the 13th Story Telling festival in Toyota City, Aichi Prefecture. Then, thanks to funding from the Regional Culture Liaison Center of the Niigata University Faculty of Humanities, a free of charge performance was held at the Niigata Prefectural Civic Center in October 2014. In April 2019, the play was scheduled for a performance at Sankōji Temple.

Even though preparations were not complete, it was important to hold the first performance because it was a special anniversary. The plot of the play is based on the birthday of the protagonist (the dragon hour, of the dragon day of the dragon month of the dragon-water year). According to the Chinese zodiac, the dragon-water year only occurs every 60 years. The year 1612, which may have been the year the play was first performed, was one such year, along with 2012. Everyone related to the project was excited about the idea of performing on that anniversary in April 2012. The performance was

held next to Tōkōji Temple in Seiro City, Niigata Prefecture, in the hall that has hosted the Saruhachi-za troupe since 2011.

Figure 5: Puppeteers setting the stage[25)]

The music and chanting parts were composed prior to the directing process. The first musical framework was in place by the time of rehearsals. Puppeteers improvised some moves under the discerning eye of the company puppet master who decided which to accept and which to decline or improve. As with jazz, the main outline was established, but each participant had freedom and leeway in performing. All moves respecting the rhythm and the sense of the chanted part are allowable, but they are not choreographed. Each puppet is manipulated by only one person.

The chanter also plays the shamisen and puppeteers use the *bunya* style puppet of Sado Island. Since the beginning of the 17th century, simple techniques like these have been used in performance.

7. Pragmatic Performing Problems: A Case Study

The first act of the play was the section that was least adaptable to stage performance. In less than 10 minutes of chanted narration—after the introduction and explanation of the seven treasures—the Indian lord burns the temple down, demons are sent for punishment, battles rage, magic swords appear, hundreds of peasants die, and the irreligious couple is tortured. If one sentence is enough for a reader to imagine the battles or the death of hundreds of persons, performing those same scenes requires much more time and space, and a multitude of props.

The text is written without any stage directions and presented some pragmatic problems. For instance, the performance of an epic narrative was not easily compatible with the small size of the stage. In his work Tsunoda Ichirō uses the expression *mai-katari* and explains the use of "narrative dance" or "danced narration[26)]" . This means that the puppets do not embody the action and act as if they were part of the story, rather, they dance (*mai*) the text, using body language similar to the kind used in other forms of Japanese dance like *buyō*. Therefore, when using this method there is no need to represent and perform all the steps of the action. The puppet is not acting in the sense that their movements are not a direct projection of the chanted text. The dancing evolves with its own logic, in concert with the lines of the chant.

The *bunya* puppet art of Ishikawa Prefecture is interesting to consider when discussing danced narration (*mai-katari*). This area is a refuge for two different kinds of old *bunya* puppet performances. One of them is called *dekumawashi* (mawashi means moving in a circle and *deku* is a local name for puppet). In this type of performance, little dolls are fixed to long sticks. At some points in the play, puppeteers make them turn again and again while the chanter sings the lines. These movement do not attempt to be realistic, and the dances are not even expressive; these dances do not tell the story, but the endless turning has a hypnotic effect on the audience listening to the recitation.

To perform *Amida no Munewari*, the puppeteers had to find a way to express the long, epic narration

of the first act. The idea of using a magic lantern projector was first considered then abandoned. Instead, to embody the narration, the play began with a puppet of a Buddhist priest standing in the middle of the stage. Behind him was a large scroll painting depicting each scene. The priest tells the story as the narration is chanted, explaining the paintings on the scroll one at a time, pointing out details with a thin stick in his hand.

This process is called *etoki* and is used in Buddhist lectures to explain and popularize sacred principles. There is even a tradition of music being used in such performances. During the Muromachi era (1333-1576) this storytelling practice was important to temple activities. A blind monk would play the biwa while another priest explained the meaning of the scroll painting in order to proselytize to laypeople.

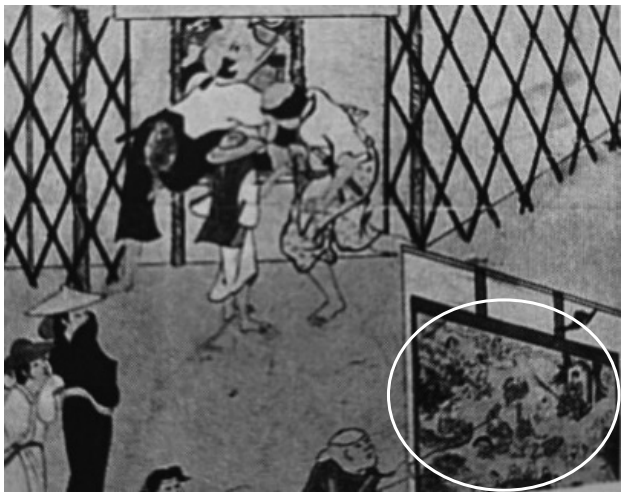

Figure 6: a monk explaining *etoki* at the entrance of the puppet performance[27)]

The puppeteers of Saruhachi-za participated in the creation of the *etoki* scroll prop. The key moments of the narration were painted, starting with the reproduction of the famous triad statue, followed by a map of old India. The next painting showed Kanshi Byōe's family and the seven wonderful treasures they possess[28)]. The following scene depicted temples surrounded by flames.

Figure 7: The priest etoki puppet[29)]

In the next scene, troubled by Kanshi Byōe's wrongdoing, the Shakyamuni Buddha speaks to his disciples and decides to send for the demon kings in order to punish this offender. At that moment in the *etoki*, two swords appear separately on stage. In order to maintain a balance between narration and performance, it was decided that, in addition to being portrayed on the *etoki*, the most spectacular scenes would be personified with puppets and props: thus, the two swords were seized by the breathing fire of the Shōki puppet (the demon who protects against evil spirits) and melted. This scene was performed in front of the scroll painting.

The performance enriched the *etoki* telling. The two swords props were attached to long sticks, each manipulated by a puppeteer. On the other hand, the 98,000 demons were only suggested by the chanter and the accompanying painting. Text and images (lines and pictures, music, and puppet performance) were thus interspersed and interpenetrated with each other. After the Shōki puppet came off the stage, the *etoki* continued, showing the irreligious couple tortured. The last picture depicted the two siblings, Tenjū and Teirei, and, as it was rolled up, the puppets of the two children appeared from behind the scroll. After the *etoki* ended, it was replaced by a full puppet performance.

Performing the first part of *Amida no Munewari* as a puppet play required a proper medium to depict it on stage; a priest puppet was used by Saruhachi-

za to illustrate important points. To further bring coherence to the play, the head of the company also used this puppet for the finale: after the moment of catharsis, when the performance ended with a living tableau, the main-character puppets stood still on stage while the priest puppet came on stage to explain the happy ending. In a few words, the priest puppet explained parts of the narrative that would not have been possible to perform completely. The chanter is the real narrator, but the puppet shoulders the role of the storyteller, providing a coherent picture of the ending and closing the play.

8. Conclusion

By analyzing *Amida no Munewari*, this article shows why the early 16th century is a key period for understanding the evolution of the Japanese performing arts. As performances changed through several phases, from simple chanted narrations to adaptations for the stage, new standards arose in dramaturgy including cutting parts of the playbook and the emergence of an "act" concept. The boundary between *sekkyō* and *ko-jōruri* was very porous. Because of a continuum of performing conceptions, the number of divisions in volumes for the *sekkyō* (dramatic and literary genre of sutra-explanation) or three or six acts for *ko-jōruri* are often used to assign a category, and a mixed category called *sekkyō-jōruri* was created. But *jōruri* or ballad dramas, as a genre of chant intoned to the music of the shamisen incorporating the use of puppets and free of Buddhist dogmas, finally eclipsed *sekkyō* in popularity. By the end of 17th century, religious formats (*honji*) were dropped and the length of the chants were shortened

In the wake of these shifts, new styles emerged, including modernized expressions and longer scripted parts. Diachronic scanning of the librettos showcases how performers first changed the puppetry techniques, drew on new cultural references and messages, changing the Buddhist allegories, and fading out old customs and cultural references

As the medium of transmission changed from an oral tradition to the use of edited *shōhon*, bound transcriptions "without a single mistake from a text derived directly from the chanter[30)]", the texts changed from "pure" *sekkyō* plays to *jōruri* librettos. In the case of *Amida no Munewari*, the libretto was written for a particular public, for whom the tale of the Buddhist triad statue's voyage to the temple Zenkōji was no longer a vivid memory. By this time, common representations of Amida had changed to something closer to the appearance that is conventional today. Likewise, the performances of these miracle narratives also began to undergo changes, as the plays moved out of the gardens of temples and the dry riverbeds adjoining the temples where they had first been enacted.

Medieval chanters reshaped the narratives, adding stock scenes or lines and their own rhythms. From a pragmatic point of view, scenography is also crucial to understanding performance logic, and through the study case of danced narration at the beginning of *Amida no Munewari*, I aimed to demonstrate how important the balance between narration and stage action was to reenacting the play in its original form.

Chikamatsu Monzaemon, the playwright who wrote more than 500 *jōruri* librettos, confessed that he preferred writing for puppets rather than for human kabuki actors. Similarly, Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) wrote a beautiful homage to puppet art. In his text *On the Marionette Theatre*, a principal dancer at the local opera explains to the narrator why puppets are more graceful than human body.

> "And what is the advantage your puppets would have over living dancers?"
>
> "The advantage? First of all, a negative one,

my friend: it would never be guilty of affectation … We see that in the *organic world*, as thought *grows dimmer* and *weaker, grace emerges more brilliantly and decisively*… Grace appears most purely in that human form which either has no consciousness or an infinite consciousness. That is, in the puppet or in the god.

"Does that mean," I said in some bewilderment, "that we must eat again of the tree of knowledge in order to return to the state of innocence?"

"Of course," he said, "but that's the final chapter in the history of the world."

Puppets and gods, and, in the Japan of long ago, puppets and Buddhas were tightly linked. Like Kleist's interlocutor, I have witnessed how puppets can seem weightless, gracious, free of affectation, and truly astonishing when operated by a master puppeteer like Nishihashi Hashirobee (or, as he would prefer to say, when he "serves" the puppets). The things that make a story "universal," endow it with transcultural potential, or make it feel timeless are difficult to grasp. But, in a way, puppets are a perfect medium for reviving old stories and, even more than living actors, can be a powerful sounding box for an audience's human emotions.

Resuscitating and adapting this play for the 21st century offers a rare occasion to travel through time. Rather than a pure reconstitution allowing the modern audience to intellectually understand the root of the *jōruri* as a performance art, Nishihashi Hachirobee is committed to choosing plays for their heartfelt message, seeking out works that have a poignant lesson. The first time Saruhachi-za played *Amida no Munewari* in 2012, the Chinese character for bond (kizuna) had been selected to idealize the dreadful disasters of 2011. In modern Japanese society, family bonds are weaker than ever, and the tradition of generations caring for one another seems to have faded. Against this backdrop, *Amida no Munewari* advocates for Confucian filial piety as a Buddhist practice. The protagonist is a young girl in a world of greedy men; Tenjū surpasses her father, the lord, her brother and even the magus in loyalty, faith, generosity, and fortitude.

16th-18th Librettos

1596-1615 *Amida no Munewari*, illustrated *kokatsuji-ban* text. Photographically reproduced. Transcribed version by Nishihashi and Watanabe in 2011.
http://www.nijl.ac.jp/pages/articles/200712/

1651 Munewari. illustrated *tanrokubon* in six acts, two volumes bound into one. Published by Sōshiya Kahei (Kyoto, 1651). Typeset and annoted in SNKBT 90:387-411. Photographically reproduced in TTZS 9:309-38. Facsimile reproduction by Yoneyamadō (1932); photographically reproduced in SKFS 15:65-98

1704 *Amida no Munewari*, illustrated woodblock-printed *shōhon* in six acts, attributed to Tenma Hachidayū and published by the Murataya publishing house of Edo. Subtitled *Shakuson Fushimi no Hōben* (Shakyamuni's Mysterious Buddhist Ways).

1704 *Urokogataya Amida no Munewari*, illustrated woodblock-printed *shōhon* in 6 acts, attributed to Tenma Hachidayū. Subtitled *Shakuson fushimi no hōben*. Published by Urokogataya Magobe of Edo.

1721 *Amida no Munewari*, woodblock-printed *shōhon* in six acts, attributed to « Dayū ». Published by Murataya publishing house of Edo. Typeset in Hirotani Yūtarō, ed., Tokugawa bungei ruijū (Tokyo: Yokotani kokusho kankōkai, 1925), 8:98-105

Footnotes

1) Torigoe B. & al (1970), p.40. Muroki Y. (1998), p.55, Dunn C.J. (1966), p.21.
2) *Tokio-kyōki*, quoted in *Ningyō jōruri butaishi*

(1991), p. 12

3) Torigoe, B. & al (1970), op. cit., p. 42.
4) Rakuchū rakugai-zu Byōbu Funaki Hon (1614-1616), 162,7 × 342 cm. Pair of six-folding screens. Tokyo National Museum 1-11168
5) Rakuchūrakugai-zu byōbu Funakihon, Tokyo National Museum
6) Matabei-fū yūraku-zu quoted in *Ningyō butaishi kenkyūkai*, op. cit., p. 15.
7) Viatte, C. (2011), p. 119-134.
8) Illustrated text. (1596-1615). Recently rediscovered. Typeset by Nishihashi Hachirobee and Watanabe Hachitayū in 2011.
9) Saruhachiza performance (13th april, 2012)
10) Keene, D. (1965).
11) Muroki (1970), p.24.
12) Torigoe, B. et al. (1998), p.49.
13) Pigeot, J. (1982), p. 313
14) *Maedachi honzon* of Zenkōji Temple in *Yokuwakaru zenkōji mairi* (2008).
15) Viatte, C. (2011), p. 119-134.
16) Translated by Kimbrough K. (2015), p.216.
17) *Monogatari no kenkyū*, op. cit., p. 24.
18) *Ibid*. p. 253.
19) Idioms like like *sate* (well), *satemo* (then), *satemo sono nochi* (thereafter).
20) Tsunoda I. (1963).
21) The libretto was rediscovered (*Kokubungaku kenkyū shiryōkan zōhō*, no 52, May 2010). The typeset transcription was achieved by Nishihashi and Watanabe on the 13th of October 2011
22) Krimbough K. and Sakaguchi H. analyze the latter versions of the play.
23) Translated by Kimbrough K. (2015), p.220
24) Translated by Kimbrough K. (2015), p.224
25) Main Hall of Sankōji Temple (April 2019), Shibata-shi, Niigata Prefecture
26) Tsunoda, I. (1963).
27) Detail of Matabee-fū yuraku-zu
28) The seven treasures are nine gold-gushing mountains, seven silver-streaming mountains, one ever-young *otowa* pine, two demon-killing swords, one magic *kantan* prosperity pillow, twelve water-springing urns, and five musk deer.
29) Saruhachi-za, performance (13th April 2012)
30) Colophon transcribed in Shigeo Sorimachi, *Catalog of Japanese Illustrated Books and Manuscripts* (1978), in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library, Tokyo Kōbunsō, cat 322.

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