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HIRANORI RHYTHM IN JAPANESE *NŌ* DRAMA AND ITS POSSIBLE CONTINENTAL ROOTS

The study analyses the hiranori rhythm known in the nō drama, in which the asymetrical (7-5) syllabic metre of the Japanese poetry is fitted into a symetrical 8-beat rhythm of noh melodic singing (fushi). It discloses its resemblance with the Greek quantitative metre of hexameter and tries to put the two into a historical connection by tracing back the origin of the hiranori rhythm on the Japanese soil. It hypothesizes that the two might have been historically connected and tries to explain how.

Japanese poetry is based on syllabism, which means that the rhythm of the verse is created by means of syllable counts. Unlike Chinese classical poetry in which all the lines of the poem have the same number of syllables, Japanese metre consist in lines of 5 and 7 syllables which alterate in specific patterns for each type of poetry.

The latest offspring of the syllabism known in the classical Japanese *nō* drama of the 14th to 15th centuries, is to be found in the rhythmical chanting in the later *jōruri* puppet theatre which emerged in the 17th century:

haru ni sakidatsu。
fuyu ume wa。
yuki wo ugachite
kanbashiku。
tsuma ni okururu
adashi mi wa。
goke tote tatsuru
ie mo nashi。
(...).[1]

These verses are from the sung part of Act Four, Scene 3 of the jōruri *Futago Sumidagawa* by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

[1] "(*sung*) In late winter, the plum (*ume*) is the harbinger of spring, with its sweet blossoms peeking through the melting snow. Left alone in this fickle world after the death of her husband, (*cadence*) Karaito is a lonely widow, without even a home to take care of" (transl. Gerstle 2001: 105).

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The syllabic rhythm of alterating 7-syllable and 5-syllable lines seen here represents a direct heritage from *nō*. In *nō*, the syllabic line combination 7+5 is termed as "*ku*" (= a specific line combination, "*a stanza*"). This *nō ku* is the fundamental building block for all syllabically bound passages and has a long history of close connection with the unique musical rhythm in *nō*, *hiranori*.

The hiranori rhythm is designated as specific for *nō*. Out of the three rhythmical patterns used in *nō* – *ōnori*, *chūnori* and *hiranori* – the latter is the most common. It is often stated that the specificity of hiranori consists in the fact that seemingly incongruous elements are put in harmony by it – that of odd syllabic rhythm and even musical rhythm.

The basic *nō* time is generally described in terms of an eight-beat bar (*yatsubyōshi*). It is often, however, more useful to conceive of the eight beats as 16 halfbeats, as will be shown below. The three kinds of rhythm are characterised by how many syllables of the text fall on one beat. In *ōnori*, it is one syllable per one beat (eight syllables per bar). In *chūnori*, it is two syllables per beat (i. e. one syllable per halfbeat – 16 syllables per bar). In *hiranori*, the rhythm is, unlike the previous two, asymetrical, consisting of a unique combination of alterating two-halfbeat syllables with halfbeat syllables in a pattern designed to match the *nō* stanza to the eight-beat bar.

Let us take a concrete *ku* as an example. The following data is based on my recording of the performance (*shimai*) of the *kuse* section of the *nō Yamamba* at the Hōshō *Nō* Theatre, Tokyo, in autumn 2008. This is a typical regular *ku* from the *kuse* (narrative dance song) of Yamamba:

sato made okuru
ori mo ari
("she may even accompany them down to their village at times")

It is sung:

sa-**A**to **ma-**a**DE** o**KU**ru-**U** *o**RI*** mo **a** ri **x**

The syllables that are worth two halfbeats (i. e. the actual drum beat falls on just one of its halves) are underlined and their vowels united by a hyphen to show they are one syllable (sa-**A**, **ma-**a). The times on which the beats of the drums fall are indicated by bold type: **BOLD CAPITALS** for the "larger hand-drum" *ōtsuzumi*, **bold small** for the "smaller hand-drum" and ***BOLD ITALICS*** for both. The last beat (**x**) falls on the time right after the last syllable. The *ku* can be rhythmically analysed and the times numbered in this way:

sa-**A** to **ma-**a **DE** o **KU** ru-**U** *o **RI*** mo **a** ri **x**

.-...1..-...2....-...3...-....4...-...5..-...6....-..7..-..8

Although in this particular *ku*, the eight-beat structure comes out very clear and evident, in most cases it is not so. There might be lack of some of the concrete beats, like in the *ku* immediately preceding the above-mentioned. It sounds like this:

tsu ki **mo-**o ro to **MO** ni-**I** ja ***MA*** o **i** de **x**

.-.1.-...2....-..3...-....4....-..5..-...6....-..7.-...8

Regularities can be observed for both these *ku* – what both illustrations share is that the beats 2, 7 and 8 are on the smaller hand-drum while 4, 5 and 6 on the larger hand-drum; yet beats 1 and 3 differ as to whether actually being struck (on larger drum in the first-mentioned *ku*) or remaining silent (in the second mentioned *ku*). This six-beat-per-stanza variant is termed *kataji* in Japanese musical theory (Hirano 1989: 463).

The *ku* immediately ensuing after the above-mentioned two has still more irregularities:

ma ta a ru **TO** ki wa **o** ri hi **me** mo ***X***

.-.1.-.2.-.3....-...4..-.5.-..6..-...7....-....8

The common point with the preceding two is the smaller drum (*kotsuzumi*) beating on beats 7 and 8. The four-beat-per-stanza variant is termed *tori* (ibid.).

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Despite these actual dissimilarities in the correlation between syllables and drum beats in these three *ku* in the Hōshō performance that served for the above analysis, the usual way of characterizing hiranori in Japanese musicology looks very neat and is termed *jibyōshi* (ibid.), and indeed Bethe states the three above-mentioned *ku* stanzas as appearing in this regular pattern (Bethe 1977: 51):

("===" indicates the continuation of the syllable through more than one halfbeat)

.....-...1...-....2.....-....3...-...4.....-...5....-....6.....-....7.....-.....8

57.tsu==ki..mo..ro===to..mo..ni===ya..ma..o....i.....de...*

58.sa===to..ma.de===o...ku...ru===o...ri....mo..a....ri.....*

59.ma==ta...a....ru===to..ki....wa===o..ri....hi...me..mo..*

As these formulas show, the underlying rhythm alternates prolonged and short syllables. Although neither old Japanese, nor probably medieval, had vocalic quantity as a distinctive phonological feature, this rhythm in its quantitative pattern is nevertheless reminiscent of the system of *quantitative metre* as preserved in ancient Indo-European poetry. If we tentatively use the terminology of this metre, each *hiranori* stanza in the regular *jibyōshi* rhythm is interpretable as composed of three successive dactyls followed by three light (short) syllables. These dactyls are, of course, purely musical, not phonological, since the syllables would be equally long in natural speech, the initial strong beats only made so by musical rhythmical prolongation.

If compared with how the stanzas were performed in the Hōshō performance, the discrepancy comes out clearly:

tsu ki mo== ro to mo ni== ya ma o i de x

sa== to ma== de o ku ru== o ri mo a ri x

ma ta a ru to ki wa o ri hi me mo x

The first two lines preserve (at least some of) the prolongations (though not always in the same place, e.g. "ma== de" in the stead of "ma de=="), but the last one does not show any prolongation at all. The discrepancy may be due to differences of performative practice in the five schools of *nō* chanting, the rhythm shown in Bethe

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being based on a school different from Hōshō, but it may well be the discrepancy between the theoretical pattern and the actual modern *nō* practice. There were, indeed, even in the Hōshō performance some stanzas in which the basic *jibyōshi* rhythm was acoustically very distinct, yet they were rather scarce. Japanese musical theory has terminology for these variants; the first two stanzas can be classified as the "*mochi o kakusu*" variant and the third as the "*mitsu jiutai*" variant (Hirano 1989 p463).

What is the cause to these irregularities, this discrepancy between the basic ("ideal"?) pattern and the seemingly distorted variants appearing in actual performative practice? The explanation can be searched for in the broader context of performative goals. Japanese artists, in the many branches of Japanese arts, operate with the substantial rhythmical concept of *henka* – change, variation. This concept encapsulates the general Japanese sense of, and sensitivity to, harmonious asymmetry. After all, avoiding monotony is one of the ways to achieve the *omoshiromi*-appeal, the viewer's emotional response. On the basis of this, it can be inferred that since *hiranori* takes up most of the rhythmical (*hyōshiai*) sung parts (*fushi*) of any *nō* play, the regular repetition of the basic *hiranori* pattern would result in dull monotony, and that is something the authors and composers of the plays, or the actors later on, tried to avoid. *Hiranori* with its fundamental odd-numbered asymmetry excellently contrasts with the other two rhythms; the strictly regular even-numbered *ōnori* and *chūnori* passages. Due to these latter's special role in the play (with *ōnori* being quite rare and *chūnori very* rare indeed), however, they are scarce and the majority of the rhythmical passages are hiranori; this is probably why *hiranori* itself was made to show variations within its own asymetrical regularity: in contrast to the distorted, subdued, even non-existent, rhythm in most of them, the rhythmical regularity of those *hiranori* stanzas, which are actually enunciated in the *jibyōshi* dactyl-based rhythm, serves as a powerful performative tool to express climax or emphasis, setting them off all the more clearly against the less distinct rhythm in the other neighbouring stanzas of the passage.

This tendency towards irregularity can also be seen on the textual level, in how the syllabic metre of the *ku* is dealt with: it is often deliberately shortened against the

prescribed and expected count, which, again, is considered to contribute to the welcome asymmetry and variation – the *henka*.

Even today, one often experiences that due to the volume level of the accompaniment, the speech of the actor, especially if he wears the mask, is hard to perceive, often utterly inaudible. The present-day system of hiranori (*gendai no hiranori*, Hirano 1989: 463) is believed to have come about in an attempt to avoid to some extent the coincidence of the beating of the drum and the start of the syllable: in it, three out of the seven drum beats fall on the second half of a prolonged syllable, so only the five short syllables remain coinciding with the drumbeats:

sa-**a**..to..**ma**..de-**e**..o..**ku**..ru-**u**..o..**ri**..mo..**a**..ri..**x**

The original, pre-1600 pattern (*Edo jidai made no hiranori*, Hirano ibid.) is considered to have all the seven drumbeats falling on the beginning of the syllables:

sa..**to**-o..**ma**..de..**o**-o..**ku**..ru..**o**-o..**ri**..mo..**a**..ri..**x**

This shift probably occurred during the 17th century and further research should examine in more detail any possible connections between this process and the practice in the *jōruri* tradition that was in its formation just in this period and leant heavily on *nō*, yet appropriating *nō*'s elements in an independent way, and whether there might be some back-influences from *jōruri* on *nō* in this respect.

Despite this rhythmical halfbeat shift, the basic quantitative characteristics remained unchanged, because the new long syllables arose from original short ones which preceded the long ones, at the expense of the latter's length. By means of this new prolongation the following drumbeat fell on the second half of the prolonged preceding (originally short) syllable, while the start of the following (originally long) syllable avoided this beat by being shifted right *after* it, so to be more audible, and thus the original long syllable was only left with a half of its original time, its length superseded by the length of the previous syllable.

As can be seen, despite the shift, the three-dactyl structure was clearly present in the old system of *hiranori* rhythm too, only with something which in the quantitative metre could be defined as an iambic start to the verse: sa..to-o.

The introduction of quantitative metre terminology might seem incongruous when talking about Japanese performing arts and Japanese poetry for which this way of producing acoustic rhythm is not typical. It is even contradictory to it, what with the characteristics of the pre-modern Japanese vocalism as stated above. Japanese poetry had always been syllabic and when recited aloud, it was traditionally chanted in a distinct pitch modulation characterizable as melody but without a specific rhythmical pattern in terms of regular beats. Thus the unique combination of syllabic *ku* stanza with quantitative metre must originate in other – musical rather than literary –sources of *nō*.

The sources are generally looked for in the *kusemai* dance, a song and dance performance of which very little is known except from references by contemporary observers who were outsiders not belonging to the *kusemai* tradition. One of the earliest references dates back to 1349. It is known that Kannami, founder of the classical *nō*, had around 1370 studied *kusemai* with Otozuru, a representative of the female line of *kusemai* in Nara, and did himself compose *kusemai* Gradually, this form found its way into the structure of the *nō* play as the *shōdan* called by the abbreviation of its predecessor – *kuse*. Except for often being an epic (narrative) dance piece, the *kuse* of *nō* seems to have only little in common with the scanty yet distinct characteristics of what *kusemai* is known to have been like.

There are various references suggesting that it was the rhythm of *kusemai* that was its most conspicuous feature, along with a specific kind of music: “[T]he beat in the dance defies description, being strange in the extreme” (Go-hōkōin-ki in O’Neill 1958: 43) and “the retired emperor Go-Komatsu [(r. 1392-1412) said, IR] that it was the music of an age of turmoil” (Tōyashū kikigaki in O’Neill 1958: 43). Zeami was strongly preoccupied with its connection to *nō* because his father Kannami was the one who had adopted *kusemai* and started the process of its appropriation to the needs of their family art. Zeami wrote that “kusemai are sung with the beat as the main consideration, the words are carried along by the beat” (Ongyoku kuwadashi kuden, in O’Neill 1958: 49), and “as they have been sung in more recent times in a softened form, with a mixture of Ko-uta style, they have a very great appeal” (*ibid*.). *Kouta* was the melodic song form on which the *nō* melody was based, and this latter note of Zeami’s is valuable as proof that *kusemai* had been undergoing a change of

style, adopting the *kouta* singing style too. This means that previously, it had been more rhythm-based than melody-based. "Now, when the Kusemai style of singing is softened and approaches that of the Ko-uta (...)" (*ibid*.: 55). About the appropriation of kusemai in *nō*, Zeami said:

> "Sarugaku [=*nō*, IR] was wholly in the Ko-uta style, with Kusemai quite distinct. But ever since Kan-a [= Kannami, IR] sang the Kusemai *Shirahige*[2] in Sarugaku, both styles have been sung. Since it consists only of a rising and falling [of the voice, ours] is not a thorough-going Kusemai style, for it has been softened down" (Sarugaku-dangi, in: O'Neill 1958: 55).

Zeami's words indicate that *kusemai* used to be of a coarser nature, less melodic and more distinctly rhythmical. The "softening down" of this notorious *kusemai* coarseness might be exactly the process that eventually led to the scarcity of distinctly audible *hiranori* that characterizes the rhythm of *nō* performance nowadays, because it is exactly the *kusemai* rhythm that is generally believed as the predecessor to the specific *nō* rhythm of *hiranori*.

Kusemai is, in turn, mentioned in close connection with older song-dance forms *shirabyōshi* and *sōga*, with which its rhythm had probably a lot in common, thus the origins of *hiranori* can be further traced back along this line.

Shirabyōshi, dating back to the Heian period, was in the Japanese Middle Ages one of the most universally accepted forms of musical entertainment, and because this and *kusemai* are often mentioned together in works of the Muromachi period, it is very certain that the latter stemmed directly from the other. The performance would consist of several numbers, starting with an introductory song, followed by other songs, and the second half was characterized by being in a quick tempo marked by stamping of the feet.

Similarly to *kusemai*, *shirabyōshi* dance was also criticized by the music theoretician Fujiwara no Moronaga in the 12th century, when the art must have been relatively new, for its music and the turning movements of the dancer. Later years, however,

[2] *Shirahige* was the first kusemai that Kannami had composed as an independent dance-song. It seems it was only later that he started incorporating a kusemai into his new plays as an innovative element.

brought respectability to *shirabyōshi* and their songs in the 7-5 metre, even at the imperial court, and came to be popularly known as *imayō* (“modern songs”).

O’Neill mentions that the *shirabyōshi* rhythm might have been similar to the like-named rhythm in *shōmyō* Buddhist chanting and the *tadabyōshi* rhythm of *bugaku*. As Moronaga was a *shōmyō* theoretician and musician, the usage of Buddhist rhythm in such secular performance might have stood behind his critical opinion.

A little later *sōga* songs (fast songs, also called *geniya-saba* or *ririura*) are known to have been popular in the Kamakura period as banquet entertainment for both courtiers and warriors. Among their topics were *mono tsukushi* (a list of items joined by a common theme) and *michiyuki* (a travel song).

What is important is that both these forms had their verses in the basic 7-5 syllabic structure – the later *nō ku* we have seen above. The irregularity seen in *nō* was known here too, with the common practice of having occasionally one or two syllables more (*ji amari*) or less (*ji tarazu*). *Sōga* singing was probably accompanied by beats with the folding fan and sometimes by the *shakuhachi* flute. Its rhythm resembled the *hiranori* rhythm in many features and that is why it is supposed that some kind of connection must have existed between *sōga* and *kusemai*.

Although the syllabic metre was common to the various genres of poetry and songs, the 7-5 *ku* differed distinctly from the metre of the classical poetry which always started with the shorter verse of five: *tanka* (*waka*) consisted of two stanzas (*ku*), both of which can be interpreted as originally having this ascending rhythm –the upper *ku* of 5-7 and the lower *ku* of 5-7-7 (in the classical division 5-7-5 : 7-7, only the upper *ku* was ascending); the more ancient forms which had nearly got extinct by the 10th century included *sedōka*, equally with the ascending rhythm of 5-7-7 : 5-7-7, and the long epic *chōka* which was virtually a prolongation of *tanka* by an unlimited number of upper stanzas of 5-7 ended by one lower stanza 5-7-7). On the other hand, the *descending* syllabic metre starting with the longer verse of seven was the domaine of Buddhist poetry. The 7-5 *ku* form is known from the Heian period, appearing after Japanese had established itself as a literary language and started to be used also in Buddhist poetry (*wasan* “hymns in Japanese”), thus emulating Chinese and sinicized Sanskrit which were until then the exclusive media for

Buddhist poetry. One of the earliest examples of this Buddhist syllabic metre is the well-known *Iroha uta*, an encapsulation of Buddhist doctrine into four Buddhist *ku* stanzas. It is traditionally ascribed to Kūkai (774 - 835), the prominent monk of the early Heian period. The connection with Kūkai, the venerated founder of *hiragana*, is chiefly seen in its being the alphabetical poem comprising all the syllables of the Japanese syllabary, but there is no evidence of the poem existing at such an early period, that is why more realistic estimations (Köjien 1991: 190) put its composition to a date a century or two later. What is known positively, is that this Buddhist syllabism of 7-5 was used at least by the prominent Buddhist novator Shinran (1173 – 1262), founder of the True Pure Land sect (*Jōdo Shinshū*) who established the double stanza form (7-5-7-5) of Buddhist verse. And it was this form that got adopted by secular singers including *shirabyōshi* and through them, over a century later, became the standard *nō* stanza.

Could it be assumed that the Buddhist syllabic metre of Shinran (or even Kūkai) had also anything in common with what would in the future become known as *hiranori* rhythm? The fact is that the Buddhist stanza, including the ancient *Iroha uta*, can be easily chanted in the regular *hiranori* rhythm, and what is more, it fits perfectly when recited in a full quantitative dactyl metre (dactylic tetrametre). If recited to rhythmical music, it leaves no space for in-breath, yet for a Buddhist chanting it can be imagined that several monks would chant the successive stanzas in turn, so no breathing break was necessary.

The circumstances were different for secular singers, soloists who would need a break to breathe in, and that might have led to the contrivance of turning the fourth dactyl into three short beats so that the fourth beat would be left free and provide a moment for inbreath. This adjustment of the final part of the stanza would also have provided the desired *henka* – variation: for the solemn Buddhist chanting, the dignified succession of unceasing dactyls would be the ideal rhythm, but a popular entertainer needed something more lively, allowing a shout or inflexion at the end of the stanza. Some of the *shirabyōshi* singers might thus have adjusted the final syllables of their stanzas, basically sung in the quantitative dactylic manner, and formed what was, by some conservatist contemporaries and connoisseurs of Buddhist chanting, judged as wild and disruptive music. The alternative iambic start,

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that eventually prevailed, might have been another innovation, nourished from both iambic and dactylic traditions, which it combined together.

These traditions might have been of continental origin and would have been brought over by Buddhist monks along with other Buddhist traditions. In the light of the legends about Kūkai and his two year stay in China (804 - 806) during which he is reputed to have acquired an immense amount of what was going on in the amazingly rich cultural life of Chang'an, it is not inconceivable that he brought this singing rhythm to Japan himself.

The establishing of an untypical syllabic descending metre in the Buddhist tradition might be connected with the fact that it fits perfectly with quantitative dactylic metre – the dactylic metre that, as a rare and exceptional rhythm in Japanese performing arts, got preserved in *kusemai* and finally in *nō* underlying the same form of syllabic stanza– and that it allowed actual singing in it. The origins of the quantitative metre in some of the Buddhist tradition in China[3] might be sought for in connection with an Indian or Hellenistic heritage. It is possible that the ancient Indian Sanskrit quantitative metres, which could be inherited from generation to generation in the Buddhist community, arrived along with the spread of Buddhism from India through Gandhara (eastern Afghanistan) and China. On the other hand, the repetition of dactyls would rather indicate the Greek tradition. The expansion of Alexander the Great introduced figural sculpture in Central Asia and its influence upon the Mahayana Buddhism that penetrated into these regions, is generally acknowledged as giving birth to the Mahayana practice of Buddhist images. The dactylic tradition could have penetrated into the Buddhist ritual in a similar way.

In a combination with the spondee (two long syllables), the dactyl (long + two shorts) is the rhythm of the monumental Homeric epics: Alexander is known to have carried with him his beloved Homer anywhere he went on his conquest, and he certainly was not the only one to do so; the Greek soldiers who settled in the conquered regions of Central Asia, most probably introduced the singing hexametric rhythm as well. Besides the great epics, Greek religious hymns (such as the so-called Homeric

[3] and elsewhere: the author has heard the dactylic rhythm (long-short-short) in Tibetan mantra chanting.

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hymns) were composed in this metre too, and with the introduction of Greek religious practice, the rhythm of Hellenistic ritual singing could have found home in Central Asia just in the same manner as did the practice of sculptural impersonation of gods and heroes. And it would not be surprising if the rhythm would get adopted by the new coming Mahayana Buddhism, possibly enriching the already inherited Indian tradition of quantitative metre.

There can even be seen a direct parallel between the pre-1600 *nō* ku ending in two short syllables, and the ending of the ancient Greek verses in a two-syllable foot (mostly spondee), both in the Homeric (Ionic) hexametre and Sapphic (Aiolic) strophe:

Homer[4]: AU-ta-rho / GYM-nō- / THĒ-rhake- / -ŌN poly- / MĒ-tis o- / ***DYS-seus***

Sappho[5]: POI-ki-LOTH-ro-NĀ-tha-na-TĀ-phro-***DĪ-TĀ***

Unlike the Greek two longs at the end of the line, the *nō ku* is ended in two *short* syllables. This final figure, whether a truncation of a dactyl or a shortening of a spondee, could have been an adjustment devised by dancers like *shirabyōshi* and *kusemai*: as mentioned above, this provided a rhythmical pause enabling both an in-breath and a space for an effective performative move – a dance round, a climactic gesture or a solo beat by the folded fan.

The spread of Buddhism from the Gandhara region across Central Asia to China and Japan was a process lasting several centuries. Equally long, or accompanying it, could have been the eastward shift of the specific quantitative rhythm; once it reached Japan, it did not matter that Japanese did not possess naturally long syllables – any syllable can, in singing, be prolonged to any length of time. The Japanese monks just learned to sing the melodies of the Buddhist chants from their continental masters and later used their rhythm for hymns written in Japanese, without having any idea of its quantitative origin. Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that Zeami, Kannami's son, acknowledged himself in his first treatise Fūshikaden that *monkey plays* (*sarugaku* = *nō*) have their roots in China and Yuezhi

[4] *Odyssey* X., 1st line

[5] Sappho Fr. 1. V., 1st line

– the name of the tribe who first lived in the Tarim Basin and later, after being conquered by the Huns (Xiongnu), moved to Bactria, and then perhaps even further south, taking part in the Kushan page of Indian and Mahayana history. In this way, the quantitative metre in *nō*'s *hiranori* rhythm might represent another deep streak of link between Japanese culture and the rest of the world.

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