

# Analysis of Physical Techniques through *Kashira* Puppets :

## A Comparison of Japanese and Chinese Puppets

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### 1. Introduction – Puppet Handling Techniques in Japan

Puppet shows in Japan are believed to have been imported from ancient China and the Korean Peninsula. Over history, numerous approaches to manipulating puppets, particularly by string and stick, have been devised. In *Bunraku*, a form of Japanese puppet-theater developed mostly during the Edo period, three men manipulate a single puppet; the *Ningyo Joruri Bunraku Puppet Theater* was listed as one of UNESCO's intangible cultural assets in 2003.

The graphic and aesthetic puppet maneuvers perfected in *bunraku* influenced string- and single-handler stick puppets, and made possible the creation of a distinctive Japanese method of expression in puppet shows.

In this report, I would like to describe some physical techniques seen during religious ceremonies and festive arts in China and Korea, and compare them to characteristics seen in Japanese show puppets which have religious connotations.

### 2. The “*Sambaso*” Puppet

Japanese puppet-theater features numerous performances with religious themes. But in the case of the *Sambaso* puppet, which figuratively represents an old man, the puppet itself holds religious implications. The character of *Sambaso* is seen not only in *bunraku*, but also in other forms of folk art throughout the country. As is obvious from its name, *Sambaso* has been greatly influenced by the sacred and celebratory performance of *Shikisamban* in *Noh* Theater. However, the range of *Sambaso* puppets used in rural areas show that in addition to the influence of *Shikisamban*, they share religious associations intrinsic to this particular puppet.)

#### ➤ The *Sambaso*'s different role in puppet and *Noh* theaters

It is clear then that the *Shikisamban* of puppet shows is heavily influenced by *Shikisamban* in *Noh*, but what they express is very different.

#### (1) In puppet shows, the *Sambaso* plays the central role.

##### a) The format of *Shikisamban*

The *Shikisamban* in *Noh* is performed by the three characters *Senzai*, *Okina*, and *Sambaso*, which all appear on stage together. In puppet shows, however, the *Sambaso* appears alone so often that the *Shikisamban* performance in puppet theater is often referred to simply as “the *Sambaso*”. In puppet *Shikisamban*, the play apparently centers on *Sambaso*. In addition, the following details also support the idea that *Sambaso* is indeed the lead role.

b) The mechanism of puppets

The style of *Sambaso* puppets is usually unchanging, which is not the case for *Senzai* or *Okina*. A lead *kashira* is often used for *Okina*, and a female or a boy *kashira* is used for *Senzai*.

c) The nodding style of puppets

The nodding style of the puppets, an important factor in expressing emotion in puppet-theater, is different between *Sambaso* and the other two roles of *Senzai* and *Okina*. There are several styles for achieving the nodding movement, each with its own distinctive structure and effects. Furthermore, these styles seem to have a front-to-back relationship, having evolved over time from one to another. There are four styles of manipulation: the “woodblock-sliding style”, currently in use in *bunraku* puppets, the “string-pulling style” seen in most *Awaji* puppets, “*kozaru* style” often seen in puppets in rural areas, and the “rod-pulling style”, which uses whalebone rods to manipulate movement. It is thought that the rod-pulling style developed first, followed by *kozaru*, string, then wood-block.

Photo Caption

<Styles>

Photo1 Wood-block sliding style

Photo2 *Kozaru* style,

Photo3 String-pulling style

Photo4 Rod-pulled *kashira*/rod-pulling style

In *Sambaso* puppets, *kashiras* featuring a rod-pulling mechanism or remnants of this mechanism are most common. *Senzai* and *Okina* puppets often do not use this mechanism, and display no uniformity. I believe therefore that the *Sambaso* plays a central role in the case of puppet shows.

**(2) Changes in facial expressions are also important features seen only in *Sambaso* puppets.**

The *Sambaso* puppet is usually equipped with a mechanism that allows the handler to move its eyes and open its mouth. The puppet’s normal expression – a smile – suddenly turns either intimidating or comical; the eyeballs rolling and the mouth cracking open. It is common for *Sambaso* puppet heads to be capable of expressing two distinctly different emotions, and there are few exceptions. This is a feature not seen in *Noh Sambaso*, which features smiling mask but never intimidating expressions.

<Changes in Facial Expression of *Sambaso* Puppet> Oyasawa *Sambaso* Puppet

Photo5 Smiling

Photo6 Intimidating/comical

### (3) *Sambaso* puppets have their faces painted in reddish colors.

Moreover, the *Sambaso* in puppet and *Noh* theaters have differently colored faces. The *Sambaso* puppet is painted in a reddish color, or in a variation of light yellow (close to skin color), unlike the face of the *Noh Sambaso*.

From these three characteristics, it is clear that although *Shikisamban* in puppet-theater has inherited some traits from *Shikisamban* in *Noh*, there are stark differences between the two, especially when considering *Shikisamban* puppets in rural areas. The fact that *Sambaso* plays the central role in puppet-theater, that they are capable of smiling and intimidating, and that they are painted in a reddish tone, are original characteristics which could not have been inherited from the *Shikisamban* in *Noh* theater.

#### ➤ The origin of *Sambaso* puppets

The original characteristics above show the intrinsic nature of *Sambaso* puppets. The essence of the *Sambaso* is the change from the smiling face to the suddenly rolling eyes, open mouth and expression of fierce intimidation. An inconsistency should be noted, however: a black mask is placed over the puppet, blocking its facial expressions. It should also be noted that the *Sambaso* puppet alone has an unchanging style of its own, whereas the *Senzai* and the *Okina* puppets are allowed a variety of styles, and that only the *Sambaso* puppet is allowed to perform alone on stage.

These suggest that the *Sambaso* initially existed on its own, with the roles of *Senzai* and *Okina* added afterwards. In other words, the *Shikisamban* may merely have been made up for form's sake later. It is possible to assume that the *Sambaso* puppet came first, a puppet with religious connotations similar to the *Yebisu* god in the *Yebisu-kaki* puppet show or the Buddha in *Hotoke-mawashi* puppet show. Later on, the puppets for the roles of *Senzai* and *Okina*, as well as the black and white masks, may have been added to make up the form of the *Shikisamban*. This change is believed to have taken place sometime in the late Edo period. The *Sambaso* puppet may have been a sacred figure with religious implications even before it came to be called by its current name.

#### ➤ Examples of physical expressions by *Sambaso* puppet:

“Oyasawa *Sambaso* Puppet” of Koumi-cho, Minami-Saku-gun, Nagano, and “Shimonagaiso Puppet-*Okina*-Style *Sambaso*” of Maebashi-shi, Gunma. Some characteristics of *Sambaso* movement include:

##### • Stomping (Photo7)

Stomping is an important movement in both puppet and *Noh* theaters. The puppet handler in charge of leg movements maneuvers the stomping in the four corners of the stage, possibly meant to pacify the earth spirit by firming the ground.

##### • Reddish color (Photo8)

The color may have been meant to ward off evil spirits.

- Rolling eyes and opening mouth (see Photo5,6, “Changes in Facial Expression of *Sambaso* Puppet”)

These are movements original to puppets, made by swinging the puppet swiftly right and left, then thrusting it forward. This action may also have been meant to ward off evil spirits.

- Nodding with the face moving upwards (rod-pulled *kashira*, rod-pulling style (Photo9))

The rod-pulling style is the oldest and earliest stage of the nodding style seen in puppets. The true nature of “nodding” is obvious in this early stage of development. With the rod-pulling style and the rod-pulled *kashira*, where a rod of whalebone is used for manipulation, the face looks up towards the heavens. Therefore it seems risky to assume that the nodding movement was employed merely to express the character’s expressions of yes or no, or for graphic expression. The act of directing the face towards the sky can also be seen in other forms of folk entertainment. For example, in “*Okonai*”, a form of celebratory performance played in Shizuoka the actor playing the part of *Okina* places his mask on top of his head, facing skyward, and reads a festive chant during the title song (Photo10). As for the *Sambaso* in puppet shows, rod-pulled *kashira* and the rod-pulling style of nodding were common. *Sambaso* puppets were, as mentioned before, originally figures with religious implications. We can therefore assume that nodding was a movement originally derived from acts of faith, and held religious implications in themselves.

#### Photo Caption

Photo9 Nodding with the face moving upwards (rod-pulled *kashira*, rod-pulling style)

Photo10 Terano Kannon-do, Hikisa-cho, Hikisa-gun, Shizuoka. “The “*Okonai*” in Terano”, *Okina* and its imitation (left photo), *Hi-oh* (King of Fire) and its imitation (right photo)

Photo11 Excerpts from “*Ko-Noh* (Ancient Noh)” by Hajime Goto and Shuzaburo Hagiwara (Kawade Publishings, 1970)

### 3. The Difference in Japanese and Chinese Puppets – the “Nodding”

The range of Chinese puppets studied by the author is by no means comprehensive, but to the best of my knowledge, the nodding movement is rare.

- Photo12 Chinese stick puppets owned by Konronsha (Mr. Kazuhiko Tagami, Fukuda-cho 414, Matsuzakashi, Mie Prefecture)

Wooden figures used in the Tengxian region of Guangxi, China – 249 pieces

Accessories (crown, cap, false beard, banner, sword, horse head, and other stage props) – 477 pieces

Photo12 Chinese stick puppets

#### 4. Conclusion / Issues for Further Study

The nodding movement plays an important part in the expression of puppet shows in Japan. This movement may have originated from a sense of faith, and developed to hold religious implications. If the technique indeed developed in Japan, it might be hugely significant when studying the origins of puppet shows here. These findings suggest that puppets in China, Korea, and throughout Asia should be further studied to verify my hypothesis.