

I Dance the Body Cosmic: For a Metaphysics of Bugaku Performances

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This paper is an attempt to reconstruct a premodern ethno-ontology and an ethno-semiotics of dance, with special focus on Bugaku, a genre of Japanese ceremonial dance. In its various forms, Bugaku has been continuously performed at the imperial court, Buddhist temples, Shinto shrines, and samurai rituals since its inception in the sixth century; today, it also plays a new function as an art form. Despite its cultural and ceremonial importance, Bugaku has received little scholarly attention.

This paper is based on medieval and early modern sources (from the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries) written by some of the leading professional performers. It will also explore the special situation of Bugaku dancers, who are also multi-instrumentalists and singers, and who embody in their dances special historical or mythological figures through the help of costumes, masks, implements, and particular uses of their bodies.

I will show the relevance of metaphysics in this case for the understanding of both the meaning of the various dances and their performative power. The focus on metaphysics (ontology, apotropaic functions, etc.) is particularly relevant because this is how local practitioners thought of this dance genre and its significance. This approach will also contribute to a larger reflection on the role of ethnosemiotics in relativizing some of the supposedly universalistic tendencies of semiotics.

Prelude: some basic information on Bugaku

Bugaku (lit, "dance and music") is one of the most ancient and continuously performed dance genres in the entire world. Its repertory consists of dances originating in ancient Korea (*uhō no mai*, with musical accompaniment known as Komagaku, "Korean music"), in Tang China and other parts of Asia such as India, Central Asia, and Vietnam (collectively known as *sahō no mai*, danced to Tōgaku, "Tang music"), as well as dances from ancient regional traditions in the Japanese archipelago (*Azuma asobi*, *ninjōmai*, etc.) which were rearranged and perhaps also re-choreographed following international Bugaku conventions. Bugaku constitutes the dance repertory of Gagaku, the ceremonial performing arts of premodern East Asian polities (China, Korea, Japan, Ryūkyū, and Vietnam) since the times of the Han dynasty (second century BCE). In Japan, it was introduced in various waves beginning in the sixth century, in parallel with the large-scale process of adoption of continental culture that happened at the time. The first dances from the continent were known as Gigaku, a Sino-Japanese term that seems to refer to dances and pantomimes from China, Korea, and other parts of Asia; it is perhaps worth noting that Gigaku is the standard term used in Chinese translations of

the Buddhist scriptures to translate Indic terms referring to music and dance. It is possible that Gigaku was related to the wave of performing arts from India that spread all over Asia together with Buddhism.¹ Gigaku seems to have been abandoned around the ninth century—but it is possible that some dances were adopted/adapted into the newly formed Bugaku repertory, while others may have contributed to the formation of folk (non-elite) performing arts in the capital cities of Nara and Kyoto and in the provinces. An example of this little-known process is the Lion Dance (*shishi-mai*), originally part of the Gigaku repertory and still performed at the Shitennōji temple in Osaka as part of its Bugaku program. The Lion Dance is now part of many folk performing arts across Japan as is believed to be of Chinese origin; and while it did come from China as part of the original Gigaku repertory, its origins are in India (there were no lions in China).

Beginning in 701, Bugaku became part of the repertory of ceremonial dances performed at the imperial court as part of the duties of Bureau of Music and Dance (Gagakuryō), an office that was never disbanded and existed, in modified form, until today (as Gakubu, “Department of Music” in the Office of Ceremonies, a section of the Imperial Household Agency). New dances kept coming from Asia until around the ninth century, after which Japanese authors began to compose new music and choreographies strictly based on continental models. In the process, some dances, music compositions, and even music instruments were abandoned; what was left, about 200 compositions (several dozens of which had a dance choreography) became the standard repertory, a large part of which is still performed today. No new compositions were added after the tenth century.

From around the eleventh century, with the decreased importance of the Gagakuryō, hereditary families of musicians and dancers formed three separate Gagaku academies: one affiliated with the imperial court in Kyoto (Ōuchi gakuso), one with the Kōfukuji temple and Kasuga shrine in Nara (Nanto gakuso), and one with Shitennōji in Osaka (Tennōji gakuso). These three academies continued their activities, also collaborating in various ways, when they were unified in 1873 and their performers were relocated in the new imperial capital of Tokyo, where they formed the precursor of present-day imperial Gagaku orchestra. It is important to emphasize that the art of Bugaku (along with Gagaku music) has been continuously transmitted by the same hereditary families until today, using the same choreographies, costumes and props, accompanied by the same music based on the same scores performed at the same music instruments from the twelfth century. Until the modern period, these hereditary families were the sole depositaries of their art as a secret knowledge; Bugaku dances were considered particular secret and therefore hard to access for outsiders (In the 1600s, the procedures for teaching outsiders were codified.) As a side note, I would like to mention that all dances have a written choreography—in the same way as all parts of each music instrument have written notations, some dating back to the ninth century; choreographies (and music scores) however require oral instructions in order to be correctly performed; this connection of written and oral sources is at the basis of traditional learning of the performing arts. Today, many more people who do not belong to these families are able to perform this music and dance, also at very high artistic level, but the continuity of the tradition is perhaps something unparalleled in the entire

¹ Victor Mair, *Painting and Performance*.

world. We will see that this sociological aspect is relevant to our discussion of the metaphysics of Bugaku.²

Metaphysics of Bugaku

The starting point of this paper is the classical question posed by the metaphysics of art, namely, “If the Mona Lisa is at the Louvre, where is Othello?”³ I reformulate it as, “If the Mona Lisa is at the Louvre, where is Bairo (or any other Bugaku dance piece)?” Authors have given various answers to this question about the ontological status of works of art, which nonetheless has never been satisfactorily solved. People have pointed out, among other things, obvious differences between material art works (a painting or a sculpture) vs immaterial art works (a play or a symphony). This question goes to the heart of the ontology of the performing arts: what and where is the essence of dance? In the choreography, in the actual dance (and if so, in all performances or only in some?), in some interpreters, in the mind of the choreographer? These questions raise, in turn, a number of other related issues, for example regarding authorship, author’s intentionality, performance modes, techniques, and styles, creativity, and meaning of this dance genre.

Here, I do not pretend to generalize Bugaku and make universal claims about dance. To the contrary, I am very much against the universalizing attempts by scholars of western dance (who either universalize western dance by ignoring non-western dance forms, or create a sort of melting pot of random dances to universalize whatever perspective they want to present). Rather, I want to see how the custodians of the Bugaku tradition dealt with these and other questions, as a way to learn alternative ways to think about dance.

Origins

The origin of Bugaku is situated in the Buddhist universe of medieval Japan, with its rich and stratified metahuman dimensions.⁴ According to sources composed by professional performers from the early thirteenth through the late seventeenth centuries, Bugaku originated in the world of the buddhas (that is, on some cosmic plane), then was transmitted to India, and from there to China and Korea, and finally to Japan. The texts do not mention the first initiator of this heavenly cosmic dance, but they do refer to a Japanese myth, in which dance was the result of an improvised party, when goddess Ame no Uzume began to “dance” in order to avert a cosmic danger—the self-seclusion

² On Gagaku in general, including Bugaku, see Endō Tōru, *Gagaku wo shiru jiten*; Fabio Rambelli, *Gagaku: The cultural impact of Japanese ceremonial music*.

³ See Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

⁴ Throughout this paper, I use the term “metahuman” as defined by Marshall Sahlins in his *A New Science of the Enchanted Universe*, 2022.

of the sun goddess into the “heavenly cave”;⁵ they also name several human creators of various dance compositions.⁶

In any case, we have here a divine origin on some metahuman dimension (an initial emergence/event), and a chain of unbroken transmission from the metahuman realm to the human world across the ancient known world (India, China, Korea, and Japan); it is assumed that all existing dance compositions were “copies” (more or less exact reproductions) of these initial metahuman performances; even when human authors are mentioned, they are envisioned as mere continuators of the tradition, not as creators or even innovators. In this sense, humans are not creators, but custodians of this dance tradition.

This transmission process, in which an original event or act of creation that took place on a metahuman realm generates a chain of unadulterated transmission that ultimately reaches the human world, and Japan in particular, is the standard medieval Japanese account of the origin and transmission of most, if not all, types of knowledge and practices. It is based on descriptions of the transmission of Buddhist wisdom from the Buddha to the patriarchs and from masters to disciples in an unbroken chain—again, beginning in the metahuman world of the buddhas down to the human world in India first and from there to Japan.⁷ In medieval Japan, it was adopted in many other accounts of the origin and transmission of traditional arts and crafts and systems of knowledge: the origin of the first Buddha statue, the origin of professions and professional tools (*Hakari ho honji*),⁸ the origin of musical instruments (the goddess Nuwa and the *shō* mouthorgan).⁹

The Semiotics of Bugaku

In all these cases, we have a logic of metonymy, in which an object or a practice is a copy of an initial object or practice done by a metahuman being (buddhas, gods, mythological figures, etc.); this initial occurrence is a copy (or a double, or a sample, depending on the case) of an event or a thing in the original metahuman place. For example, the *shō* mouthorgan was created by the goddess Nuwa (one of the early Chinese gods who put order to the initial cosmic chaos and introduced civilization—i.e., semiotic systems) after seeing a flock of phoenixes singing; Nuwa used special bamboo from a grove on Mt. Kunlun, a sacred mountain; in this case, the *shō* is a copy of a phoenix and its sound (actually, of the sounds of that original flock) made by a divine being by using sacred materials from a sacred space; after that, humans have simply copied (and partly adjusted/simplified) that original object without major (significant) changes. The same could perhaps be said about Bugaku dance, which in their original setting, in the realm of the buddhas, must have been performed for specific purposes, after which they were transmitted, without significant changes, to the human world.

⁵ On this myth see Breen and Teeuwen, *A New History of Shinto*.

⁶ On the origin of Bugaku, see Koma no Chikazane, *Kyōkunshō*, XXX.

⁷ See to my work on *shabyō*, “pouring the content of a vase” in *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics*, p. 76.

⁸ On these two instances, see Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*, respectively pp. XX and pp. XX.

⁹ See Toyohara Muneaki, *Taigenshō*, pp. XX.

All this implies that there is no place in this dance for human creativity, at least as we understand it today; the role of humans is not that of creators but of faithful custodians and transmitters. Accordingly, the value (aesthetic or otherwise) of a dance does not depend on the originality of its choreography, costumes, props, or settings—those never change, and new dances (which are indeed being created for specific purposes) do not become part of the traditional, standard repertory, which has been fixed since at least the thirteenth century. At the same time, the virtuosity of a dancer consists not only in the control of its body, but also and especially in the perfection of his re-enactment of the choreographies that have been handed down for generations (going back all the way to that original dance in the metahuman world); this requires a vast and deep knowledge of narratives associated with each dance (which sometimes have competing versions), of performance precedents, of alternative performance techniques (which were developed by each hereditary family of dancers); in other words, a meta-dance competence (which involves manipulation of different types of texts and sign-systems: written, visual, oral, bodily, etc.) is as necessary to the performance as is the physical/bodily control of the dancer.

This also implies that each Bugaku performance is, in principle, exactly the same as any other performance, in the present, in the past, and in the future, and that all these localized performances are copies of the initial performance that took place at some metahuman level. This too has precedents in the Buddhist tradition, in particular in the way in which medieval East Asian Buddhist thinkers understood Buddhist scriptures. First of all, the Buddhist scriptures transmitted in the human world are just very short and abridged versions of texts that are stored in full in the Palace of the Dragon King, a metahuman realm located at the bottom of the ocean. The Dragon King versions, in turn, are just abbreviated versions of expanded versions that encompass the entire universe.¹⁰ The value and power of the human scriptures is not diminished, though, as they are envisioned as condensations of the fuller versions. When this doctrine of the multiple versions of the scriptures is adapted to the case of Bugaku dance, one could argue that Bugaku dances performed in the human world are only faded copies of their metahuman originals, but they still retain their value and their power. Moreover, the cosmic versions of the scriptures are always and continually being preached by some buddhas in various parts of the universe; human chanters and readers (along with chanters and readers in other metahuman realms) join this cosmic choir each in their own capacity and with their own version. Something similar can be inferred about Bugaku dances: human Bugaku is just an instantiation of a grander and all-pervasive dance performance at the cosmic level.

This would explain the fundamental attitude required of dancers: their role is essential that of “costume hangers”¹¹—or, more precisely, they have to let their masks, costumes, props, and steps reproduce the dance as it has been handed down over many generations throughout the centuries, and beyond that, re-produce the very original event at the basis of the dance.

¹⁰ On this, see Rambelli, *Buddhist Materiality*.

¹¹ See article by Terauchi Naoko.

A different look at Metaphysics: Ontology, Meaning, and Power

This interpretation of the scriptures is related to the Buddhological doctrine that the cosmic Buddha (Jp. *hosshin*, Sk. *dharmakāya*, lit. “dharma body”), continually and eternally preaches the Dharma by using multiple semiotic substances and systems; and since the Dharma Body of the Buddha is coextensive with (or rather, is) the totality of the universe, the totality of the universe is literally a pansemiotic cosmos, and there is nothing within this cosmic semiosphere that is not (i) part of the semiotic fabric of reality (as double, copy, or sample of such reality), (ii) endowed with signification of some kind, and (ii) endowed with a range of salvific powers.¹² When applied to Bugaku, one can say that Bugaku is, accordingly, (i) part of the semiotic fabric of reality (as double, copy, or sample of something), (ii) endowed with signification of some kind, and (ii) endowed with a range of salvific powers.

Regarding point (i), Bugaku is said to be a central component of several Buddhist metahuman realms, ranging from the higher heavens (such as Trayatrmsa Heaven, Jp. Tosotsuten) located above the top of the cosmic mountain Mt. Sumeru at the center of the human world, to the realms of celestial beings such as gandharvas, kimnaras, and apsaras (angelic beings dedicated to music-making and dance), all the way to the Pure Lands. Some medieval Japanese Buddhist authors envisioned the universe as a full-fledged mandala, in which phenomena were constituted by various and shifting configurations of entities organized in series of five elements, in which each series is correlated with all other series in a cosmic net of signatures,¹³ resonances, analogies; modern scholars have called this a “correlative cosmos.”¹⁴ The correlative aspect has never been applied to the understanding and interpretation of Bugaku dances, but it was fully implemented in the theory and practice of Gagaku (the music that accompanies Bugaku dances), in which each of the five notes of the pentatonic scale and of the five main modes of Gagaku are associated with components in other five-element series. The main reason for this lack of theorization lies perhaps in the fact that the correlative episteme was developed by Buddhist monks who were not directly or at least, organically, engaged with dance, while professional dancers were not experts in correlations; at the same times, correlations were also at the basis of Buddhist chanting or *shōmyō*, hence the monks’ interest in music theory, which the professional dancers also adopted. We also have to keep in mind that dancers were also musicians (and *vice versa*), and they saw dance as directly related to and indeed inseparable from music.

Regarding point (ii), scriptures, commentaries, and musicians’ texts only provide scant evidence, but it would appear that in those realms, dance, together with music, is an alloform (an alternative version in a different semiotic system) of expositions and teachings about emptiness and other Buddhist doctrines.¹⁵ More specifically, performers’ lore included narratives and explanations for most of the dances in the Bugaku repertory. However, in most cases dances are not necessarily (or obviously) descriptive of their narratives except in a very general sense. For example, *Bairo*

¹² I have explored this vision, which combines ontology, epistemology, and soteriology in *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics*.

¹³ As described in Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, first chapter.

¹⁴ See Rambelli, *A Buddhist Theory of Semiotics*.

¹⁵ See my “Sutra of Druma” article.

involves the use of halberds, as it is a dance of military valor, but it does not reproduce any specific battle. Interestingly, martial arts traditions, from at least the seventeenth century until today, claim that their steps when using halberds, are modeled after the dance steps in *Bairo* (not the other way around, as one would imagine). However, it is possible that *Bairo* is based on some version of military movements in Tang China or even prior to that, in medieval India, but that connection is now lost.

The dance *Somakusha*, in which the dancer wears a mask of a monkey and moves in jump-like and seemingly unpredictable movements, represents a mountain deity who appeared to Prince Shōtoku (the putative founder of Japanese Buddhism and at the same time the founder of the Bugaku tradition at Shitennōji temple in Osaka, where this dance was originally transmitted), attracted by the latter's beautiful playing of the flute. In this case, we have an original event involving the metahuman dimension (the encounter between Prince Shōtoku, a cultural hero, saint, and a manifestation of bodhisattva Kannon) and the mountain god) and its reproduction (copy) in the dance choreography, together with an unbroken transmission.

The dance *Sokō* celebrates the healing of Indian Emperor Ashoka thanks to the power of a special substance, known in Japanese as *sogōkō* (probably frankincense or storax); the substance is represented (metonymically) but the dancers' headgear, which purports to be a copy of it. Here too, the dance is related to a metahuman occurrence (the magical healing of a semi-divine figure and culture hero, Ashoka, in India, in itself a legendary and almost otherworldly place in medieval Japan, by a miraculous substance); but the dance choreography does not tell the story, it simply celebrates the emperor's healing.

The dance *Konju no ha* describes a "barbarian," that is, a person from Central Asia, Persia or perhaps India, all generally indicated by the first character of the title (Ch. *hu*, Jp. *ko*), who got drunk and moves clumsily; the prop held by the dancer, a drumstick used to play the taiko (large drum) represents (metonymically because of its shape) a wine vase. This dance was originally meant as "pure" entertainment (including entertainment for metahuman beings), and in this case, the title is purely descriptive of what the dance is about.

The dance *Nasori*, of ancient Korean origin, seems to enact two dragons playing, but neither costumes nor masks seems to have any connection to dragons. The original event at the basis of this dance, together with its initial meaning and function, have been long lost.

The dance *Shin Maka* is a Japanese adaptation of a dance from the medieval kingdom of Barhae (Jp. Bokkai), in what is now northern Korea and southern Manchuria; it was originally used in Japan to welcome and entertain embassies from that land, and its original function is now lost, together with any knowledge of the origins of this dance.

The dance *Konron hassen* ("the seven Immortals of Mt. Kunlun," affectionally nicknamed *Korobase*, "Let them fall to the ground!") somehow refers to a Chinese legend about Daoist Immortals, but the content is completely unintelligible from the choreography, costumes, and masks.

This connects us to point (iii) above, the salvific powers of Bugaku dances. Throughout history, Bugaku dances have been used not only as a ceremonial or entertainment performance, but very often, they have played ritual and religious

functions. They were performed as propitiation in battles (at the time of the Mongol Attacks in the late thirteenth century, or by warlords such as Oda Nobunaga or Toyotomi Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century: *Ranryōō*), for rainmaking purposes (*Ranryōō* again),¹⁶ for healing (*Sokō*), and as offerings to the buddhas and the Shinto gods (several dances in various ceremonies, such as *Shōryōe* at Shitennōji, Beroe at Tōshōdaiji, etc.). The dances' place in the heavenly realms and their function as ritual offerings was interpreted by premodern performers as a religious practice to secure rebirth in the Pure Land.¹⁷ In all these cases, the attribution of powers was never at random or unjustified; on the contrary, performers developed elaborate exegeses to rationalize these powers. It was also a way for the performers to assert their role and prerogatives as mediators between humans and the metahuman in their own right—when dancing and playing music in certain situations, the performers were operating at the interface of the human and metahuman world, producing specific effects thanks to their mediation efforts.

Performers (at least, the most experts in their art) would know most of what I just wrote here, as it is written in the texts they wrote and circulated among themselves; however, most of them would not have known the more specialized aspects of Buddhology and of the theory of mandala (which I also mentioned), because that knowledge was only available through advanced study and initiation rituals in Esoteric Buddhism (either Shingon or Tendai, in their respective versions).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen that understanding a specific cultural formation (Bugaku dance) requires familiarity with the particular ethno-semiotic configuration (the correlative episteme of the Buddhist mandalic world) in which it was originally situated. Additionally, this ethno-semiotic semiotic configuration is not vague, ill-conceived, or “mystical,” but extremely complex, finely articulated, and far-reaching. It allowed for, among other things, the idea that Bugaku was removed from human “original” “artistic” “creation” and amounted instead to a constant re-instantiation of an original metahuman event, handed down unchanged across ontological planes, space, and time. This is where Bugaku acquired its value and its apotropaic power. This understanding helps us relativize received contemporary models of general semiotics (which amount in fact to specific and local semiotic metaphysics) and perhaps allow us to recognize the existence of alternative (and perhaps incommensurable) forms of general semiotics, in which signs and semiotic systems operate in different ways.

¹⁶ See Fumi Ōuchi chapter.

¹⁷ See my article on medieval Gagaku and Buddhism; Minamitani Miho, etc.