Terayama Shûji's Theatre Work: His Experimental Use of the Traditional Kurogo

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English

Abstract: In Japanese classical theatre, two unique types of players are rarely given much attention by design. These are the kurogo stage attendants in kabuki, who help chief actors change costumes and look after stage props, and the puppeteers in bunraku who animate puppet characters. Their common trait is that they are completely dressed in a uniform-like black outfit. Although they appear onstage and move in a stylized manner, they are not considered actors, let alone characters, for their black robes signify the stage convention of invisibility. They play an important, unique role in ensuring that each performance unfolds smoothly and effectively. Despite their practical and artistically theatrical significance, there has been no full-scale research or literature on these kurogo.

This paper examines the historical and cultural origins of the convention of kurogo by tracing its links to primordial darkness in Japanese mythology. It also examines the convention's historical and cultural background by looking into the actual conditions of the candle-lit kabuki stage in the Edo Era. In so doing, this study focuses on the color symbolism, that is, the symbolism of black permeating Japanese traditional culture.

In addition, this article presents the preliminary findings of an investigation into the avant-garde dramatist Terayama Shüji's (1935-1983) provocative reinterpretation of the traditional kurogo as purposely visible stage attendants and puppeteers who dare participate in the action of the play

Key words: kurogo, stage convention, invisibility, black symbolism, Terayama Shüji

THE SYMBOLISM OF BLACK IN JAPANESE ANCIENT CULTURE

Although the dramatist Terayama Shûji tried tenaciously to subvert cultural or artistic traditions of Japanese as well as the western theatre, he was more than an iconoclast. What led him to success in the world counterculture theatre scene of the late 1960s through the early 1980s was not only his attempt to subvert the theatre establishment but also his pursuit of possible elements of what can be theatrical. One of these achievements is the experimental use of kurogo, the black-robed minor stage assistants in kabuki and bunraku. By convention the kurogo wear black in order to be inconspicuous. In the classical theatre of Japan the color black traditionally means nonexistence. Since they are believed to be unseen, during the performance the kurogo come on to the stage and help the actors. Terayama's artistic instincts, however, told him what might lie deep inside the invisible traditional kurogo. He sensed that the kurogo might be capable of being something other than inconspicuous, that is, self-assertive, even violent.

But his unconventional kurogo are not always provocative for they sometimes behave merely like traditional stage assistants. More accurately, his innovative use of kurogo includes their casting as characters who are actively engaged in the dramatic action. His dramaturgy often brought to the fore the powers of dark, evil or unseen forces. For him, the kurogo's anonymous invisibility and black costume were so fascinating that they suggested terrifying power which he sometimes pitted against the characters of his plays, and sometimes against the audience themselves.

Needless to say, since the focus here is on Terayama's experimental use of the black-clad kurogo, it is necessary to investigate what the traditional kurogo in classical Japanese theatre do as the basis on which Terayama's innovation was made possible. In addition, it is also important to examine the implications of blackness of both old and new kurogo in the historical context of Japanese culture. Although Terayama did not discuss the Japanese cultural history of blackness, his individualistic use of kurogo helps reveal Japan's subconscious liking for darkness. Before examining both the traditional kurogo and Terayama's unconventional kurogo, it is useful to look into the Japanese cultural notion of blackness and darkness.

The world has a wide variety of folk taxonomy of color, and precisely speaking, just as each culture categorizes individual colors in it is own way, so too does each age. Classification of colors involves not only recognition of color per se, but also a certain point of view of the surroundings. Since Harold C. Conklin's monumental work on color classification (1955), anthropologists such as Victor Turner have been exploring the issue of color categorization.[1] They have noted that identification of color is related to the viewing of things from a particular vantage point. Their research has developed into "vantage theory" and has helped reveal that a specific color categorization illustrates the way in which a particular cultural and historical group of people interpret their world.

While developing vantage points to recognize nature and society, ancient Japanese began to shape their own way of categorizing colors. Their color categorization developed into color terms that can be found in eighth-century literary and historical archives such as the Kojiki (Records of Ancient Matters), Nihonshoki (Chronicles of Japan), and Manyôshû (Anthology of Poetry).

By investigating these works, Japanese linguist Satake Akihiro argues that color categorization of an-

cient Japan consisted of four basic colors: red, black, white and blue.[2] His argument leads these four into two antonymous pairs: one of red and black, which indicates light/dark and the other of white and blue, which indicates conspicuous/inconspicuous. More important, Satake has formulated this classification by emphasizing the contrast between light and darkness. In the pair of red and black, light naturally contrasts with darkness. He further contends that in the other pair of white and blue, light also makes a contrast with shadow. Thus, color terms of the ancient Japanese are, Satake argues, much more concerned with their subtle differentiation between light and darkness or light and shadow rather than the distinctive articulation of specific colors.

To develop his hypothesis, Satake argues that these four elemental color terms did not originate in expressions of colors, but in adjectives that reflect different ways in which light makes visible individual objects. Each of these color terms is a faithful borrowing from a light/shadow-related adjective. The pair of adjectives, white and blue, exemplifies the contrast between light and shadow. As historic writings show, white (noun *shiro*, adjective *shiro-shi*) characterizes what is clear or distinct, whereas blue (noun *ao*, adjective *ao-shi*) does color-wise what is obscure or indistinct, and includes a wide range of neutral tints such as blue, green and gray. As for the other pair, red and black, the contrast between the two colors is much more striking since etymologically both can directly be traced back to light and darkness. The adjective red (*aka-shi*) refers not merely to the color red but also to that on which light is shed, that which is light, clear, distinct, or noticeable. On the other end of the scale of light, black represents not only the color black but darkness in general (*kura-shi*). This type of color classification demonstrates that the ancient Japanese were highly responsive to such distinction between light and darkness. They were not concerned with particular colors, or rather they did not have the rich color taxonomy that their descendants do. In their worldview, it made all the difference whether to recognize what is light or what is dark.

There is one more thing significantly unique to the ancient Japanese. That is, they had a subliminal leaning toward darkness. But this seems to be contradictory to a lifestyle primarily based on farming. Universally sunlight is crucial in agriculture. Even so, darkness was important to the ancient Japanese. For example, quasi-historical works such as the Kojiki help one to understand the ancient Japanese mentality with regard to light and darkness. The Kojiki includes impressive episodes about darkness which seem to suggest that not only light but darkness is indispensable to the mythological, primordial world of Japan. Examples include the myth of the Sun Goddess Amaterasu hiding in the cave (a fertility tale that is often cited as the mythical origin of performance in Japan), and Izanagi, one of the two Creators of Japan, in search of his deceased wife Izanami (also characterized as his younger sister) and the partner of creation, in the Land of Hades. In the latter, light was represented by a tiny burning comb tooth that flickered and made the dark underworld visible for a moment. Referring to Izanagi's visit to the land of the dead, the Kojiki reads:

> Then Her Augustness the Female-Who-Invites [Izanami] answered, saying: "Lamentable indeed that thou camest not sooner! I have eaten of the furnace of Hades. Nevertheless, as I reverence the entry here of Thine Augustness, my lovely elder brother, I wish to return. More-

> over, I will discuss it particularly with the deities of Hades. Look not at me!" Having thus spoken, she went back inside the palace; and as she tarried there very long, he could not wait. So having taken and broken off one of the end-teeth of the multitudinous and close-toothed comb stuck in the august left bunch of his hair, he lit one light and went in and looked. Maggots were swarming, and she was rotting, and in her head dwelt the Great-Thunder, in her breast dwelt the Fire-Thunder, in her left hand dwelt the Young-Thunder, in her right hand dwelt the Earth-Thunder, in her left foot dwelt the Rumbling-Thunder, in her right foot dwelt the Couchant-Thunder — altogether eight Thunder-deities had been born and dwelt there. Hereupon His Augustness the Male-Who-Invites [Izanagi], overawed at the sight, fled back, whereupon his younger sister, Her Augustness the Female-Who-Invites, said: "Thou hast put me to shame," and at once sent the Ugly-Female-of-Hades to pursue him.[3]

In the pitch-dark, such a small particle of light is so feeble that it looks as if the light were swallowed by the overwhelming pitch-black interior of Hades. As a matter of fact, the shimmering light helps to show that the darkness of Hades envelops what one hates to see. Thus, light only serves to underscore that darkness evidently overpowers light.

Such conspicuous darkness as that in Kojiki, has intrigued literary critic Matsuda Osamu. To note this striking presence of darkness in the Underworld, he argues,

> As far as color terms and color-related terms were concerned, it was not light but darkness that the ancient Japanese encountered. I would say that while perceiving primordial, mythical darkness, the Japanese began to develop a sense of color. But in the myths light, a beam of which pierces the darkness and which confronts it, is merely artificial fire, which is as a matter of fact a lighted comb tooth. That is primeval light. But one should question whether this light is so powerful as to strike against the darkness of the Under World. [….] In the beginning was darkness, I think.[4]

This darkness is not a sterile emptiness at all, but instead, he contends, it is capable of producing anything either good or bad, for the world itself originated there. In the mythological world, darkness prevails over light. By emphasizing the overpowering presence of the Netherworld darkness, Matsuda means to redress the conventionally negative interpretation of darkness and call attention to its generative power demonstrated by Japanese myths.

Matsuda elaborates his argument for the predominance of darkness over light in the myths by pointing out an aesthetic function of mythological darkness. He zeroes in on the second half of the Kojiki quoted above, which depicts what Izanagi sees for a moment by his makeshift torch, the frail lit comb tooth. The god finds his once beautiful wife now decaying and producing a foul putrid stench. Although many readers find horrendous the goddess' decomposed body in the dark Netherworld, Matsuda interprets it otherwise. The darkness reigning there, he argues, is so merciful as to enshroud her ugly rotten body. He deems such darkness as the most archaic form of cosmetic, although neither a white powder nor rouge is

required. He states:

> Initially cosmetic did not mean to put a colored cosmetic on the cheeks, lips and so on. But actually it was primal make-up to hide a decaying body by wearing darkness and painting it with darkness.[5]

As Matsuda's argument suggests, the ancient Japanese perceive darkness not as blank but as fertile and productive in terms of aesthetics and a world-view. The mythological darkness opens up a new perspective on life and death.

The notion of darkness also plays an important role in the history of ancient to premodern—the eighth-to-eighteenth-century—Japan. In these times, however, the notion of darkness was replaced by the color term black. The generally accepted notion of black then helped to shape the substructure of Japanese culture. By focusing on color symbolism, historian Kuroda Hideo examines how and why the color black became significant in terms of religion, culture, and geopolitics. Although the black symbolism waxed in one period and waned in another, he argues, it remained vital throughout the centuries mentioned above. The black symbolism first appeared in the late eighth century, the fact of which has been confirmed by historical records including documents of land development organized by regional rulers who wanted to improve and expand their domains. In such records the color black characterizes the mysterious, unearthly zone outside the cultivated area. Kuroda notes the term "*kuro-yama* [black mountain]" and argues that the Black Mountain located in many parts of Japan, formed the boundary between a cultivated and an uncultivated areas.[6] His analysis of the black symbolism can be supported by linguistic facts. Traditionally the word *kuro*, for example, means a boundary such as a footpath between rice paddies. Although it is archaic, it still remains in the dialect vocabulary of some areas.[7] But as the private land ownership grew in Japan with increasing land development, the black symbolism began to decline in the twelfth century.[8] On top of that, from the late twelfth century, centralization-oriented warrior governments flourished one after another, such as the Kamakura, Ashikaga, and Tokugawa shogunates, and they intended not to leave any part of their territories unmanageable. This political condition furthered the weakening of the black symbolism. Despite that, when there was growing popular anxiety about Japan's political situation, the dormant symbolism became active. Examples include popular worry with the decline of Tokugawa's reign about Commodore Perry's fleet of dark-colored battle ships, which the Japanese named *kuro-fune* (black ship). This image of black represented people's fear of what was indecipherable.

Among others, the black symbolism of the Black Mountain (kuro-yama) prior to the growing land development is of great importance because it reflects the ancient Japanese fascination with mythological, primordial darkness argued above. As Kuroda has argued, the black symbolism serves to signify the distinction between the non-black world where people live daily life and the Black Mountain world where they fear to tread. The Black Mountain here represents an awe-inspiring, even consecrated locale. By underscoring this nature of the Black Mountain, Kuroda reinterprets the term as a densely wooded mountainous area conventionally considered beyond human agency and sacred. In short he paraphrased it as the entrance to the Netherworld and Hell.[9] Thus, the Black Mountain refers to not only a geopolitical

borderland but also to a spiritual or religious one as conceived and visualized by the ancient Japanese mind.

Although greedy cultivation gradually weakened the ancient notion of the Black Mountain, Kuroda argues, it long continued to affect the Japanese subconscious.[10] In the sixteenth century and after, the symbolism of black as a boundary remained viable, and is dramatically illustrated by the "Black Ships (kuro-fune)." These ships, often from Portugal and which appeared for the first time in the late sixteenth century, amazed the Japanese people with their outlandish looks.[11] When Commodore Perry's iron battleships visited Japan in 1853 and 1854, the dark color of the vessels awakened the imagination of premodern Japanese people to perceive them as frightening and otherworldly. As was the case with the Black Mountain, the color of the western, i.e. Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch and the U. S., ships were coated with coal-tar which people those days described as black represented borderline or borderland. This terra incognita readily associated with fear and awe, monstrosity and mystery, pollution and holiness, and immortality and death. The Black Ship, *kuro-fune*, is not based on an objective description of the color black but a cultural and folk-religious product of a premodern Japanese mentality that tended to be frightened by what seems incomprehensible.[12]

Such black symbolism developed socio-culturally as above also influenced in part kabuki theatre for its traces could be identified in some stage conventions. The color black, when incorporated into kabuki, it seems, served to arouse some nameless fear in the audience of the Edo era, i. e. the late-seventeenth through the mid-nineteenth centuries. Examples are a black curtain indicating night-time (*kuromaku*), black costume of vicious characters, and black-clad stage assistants (*kurogo*). The traditional popular belief of that day had it that black and its etymologically related word "darkness," was frightening because people felt that in black and darkness lurked something vicious or wicked.

It should be noted, however, that although the traces of ancient black symbolism in kabuki are important, it is also true that black was not exclusively associated with evil and fear. But in the traditional culture of Japan, black had long been considered a special kind of color for it was the color of mourning of the aristocracy alone. Even after the samurai power had replaced the aristocracy, the samurai and the common people stuck to the old mourning color white. And especially for the commoner, the black-dyed cloth was expensive because of a toilsome dyeing process. In the Edo period the authorities banned the use of brilliant colors by both the samurai and the commoner. To avoid violating the decree, commoners skillfully invented so wide a variety of gray as to cover almost all possible colors. In this oppressive cultural context, kabuki carefully dealt with the color black.

To draw attention to kabuki's fearful black, Hattori Yukio observes:

> The technical term *kuromaku* [black curtain] has no longer been considered one peculiar to kabuki. Today it refers to those who, while remaining invisible, skillfully manipulate others for their own ends, behind the scenes. The hidden nuances behind the term are ominousness, anxiety, and fear which the unidentifiable causes.[13]

Hattori also notes that this psychological reaction of the eighteenth-century Japanese to black is deeply

rooted in their own cultural, religious character. He states:

> I would say that the feeling of the Japanese around the eighteenth century, who devised and had a convention of black curtain established, can be traced back to these people's fear of night's darkness which they really felt in everyday life.[14]

Thus, the use of black in kabuki reflects a contemporary cultural, religious, popular heritage from the mythological and historical ancient times as exemplified by the Black Mountain.

Unlike the black symbolism of the ancient times, kabuki's theatrical use of black (or darkness) produced highly mixed effects on audiences, especially in kabuki's heyday—the Edo era. On the one hand, though subliminally, black horrified the spectators with its gloomy mysteriousness; on the other, it deeply fascinated them with its beauty. To describe these mixed effects Hattori notes:

> It is certain that city dwellers of Edo era, while sensing in black something mysterious, unidentifiable and gloomy, something that makes them uneasy and frightened, had a sense of beauty to much appreciate the color.[15]

As the artistic development of kabuki in the Edo era suggests, an aesthetic of black was evolving in those embraced by refined urban culture. Out of a popular religion-based fear of darkness (and of black as its symbol) grew an aesthetic taste for black.

The Edo kabuki's aesthetic use of darkness has something in common with twentieth-century novelist Tanizaki Jun'ichrô's eulogy on a traditional Japanese idea of darkness in "In'ei raisan [In Praise of Shadows]."[16] Tanizaki calls attention to a critical role shadows and darkness play in the traditional culture of Japan. Tanizaki writes:

> A Japanese room might be likened to an inkwash painting, the paper-paneled shoji being the expanse where the ink is thinnest, and the alcove where it is darkest. Whenever I see the alcove of a tastefully built Japanese room, I marvel at our comprehension of the secrets of shadows, our sensitive use of shadows and light. For the beauty of the alcove is not the work of some clever device. An empty space is marked off with plain wood and plain walls, so that the light drawn into it forms dim shadows within emptiness. There is nothing more. And yet…we are overcome with the feeling that in this small corner of the atmosphere there reigns complete and utter silence, that here in the darkness immutable tranquility holds sway. The "mysterious Orient" of which Westerners speak probably refers to the uncanny silence of these dark places. And even we as children would feel an inexpressible chill as we peered into the depths of an alcove to which the sunlight had never penetrated.[17]

Tanizaki's interest in shadows focuses on its ability to make visible a hidden special beauty — "complete and utter silence" and "immutable tranquility" — that light, he argues, does not reveal. It may be that Tanizaki has inherited the traditional view of darkness and black illustrated by the historical terms such as "kuro-yama" and "kuro-fune," which primarily inspired fear or awe in the ancient Japanese. Much closer to the eighteenth-to-nineteenth century kabuki, however, Tanizaki puts a special emphasis on the aesthetic function that the darkness and shadows serve. Certainly contrary to the old popular views of darkness, he

has a modern sense of beauty. Even so, Tanizaki's modern aesthetic is still tinged with an almost subliminal but undeniable fear he feels for the darkness. He is in the cultural tradition of Japanese black symbolism.

From the age of Japanese nation-building myths such as those in Kojiki and Nihonshoki, [Chronicles of Japan] to the twentieth century, the cultural notion of darkness underlies Japanese culture and mentality. Initially, the folk religion-based conception of darkness essentially inspired fear, even awe in people. But, as kabuki and Tanizaki exemplify, it began to develop into a more sophisticated kind of darkness in such a way that while continuing to arousing fear, it awakens a sense of beauty.

It is likely that this historical cultural formation of black, blackness and darkness helped give birth to the stage convention of kurogo, both black-clad stage assistants of kabuki and the puppeteers in black of bunraku. The kurogo may be seen as both a product of traditional folk religion and an artistic device of traditional theatre of Japan. But actually the kurogo's origins and the process of its development remain unclarified. This is partly because historical evidence is scarce and partly because the black-robed kurogo's low profile has made them much less academically interesting than actors, costumes, stage settings, and other conspicuous elements of the traditional theatre.[18] So far as the scholarly literature today on kurogo is concerned, the notion of kurogo has mainly been associated with a stage convention of invisibility in the Japanese traditional theatre. The origin and development of this convention have not sufficiently been traced, however.

STAGE ASSISTANTS IN KABUKI

Before discussing the close relationship between kurogo and darkness, it is necessary to describe what the kurogo is in kabuki and, later, the kurogo of bunraku. The kurogo of kabuki are non-actor stage-assistants, whose names are not among the cast. They are dressed completely in black with a close-fitting kimono and a black gauze hood. To an audience's eye their dark outfits help them look as inconspicuous as possible. They execute various kinds of manual jobs onstage, such as handing the chief actor a small prop, helping him change costumes and removing from the stage already unnecessary props. In addition, a kurogo attendant carries out a fictive corpse, such as a slain character, by hiding it with a hanging cloth. Whatever task they do, the kurogo are always expected not to disrupt the audience's attention from what the actors are doing. They are supposed to make themselves unobtrusive, even invisible in a way. Any actual production clearly shows that while onstage, these kurogo stage assistants try very hard to shrink their own bodies as if they were hiding behind the actors they serve or stage set. Although during the performance they are physically visible, the kurogo are considered not present onstage. That is what makes the black-clad stage assistants idiosyncratic. As for their invisibility, their costumes are important. The kurogo wear black, and the color black of kabuki conventionally signifies nonexistence. This convention of black as invisibility has long been accepted by Japanese audiences.

There are three other variants of the black-clad kurogo. In order to develop visual illusionism rather than the traditional stage convention of invisibility, kabuki devised the new attendants, *namigo* [wave-

robe], *mizugo* [water-robe], and white *yukigo*[snow-robe]. By using an artificial camouflage, the namigo and mizugo wear pale blue in the water-related scenes, and the yukigo wears white in the snowy or snowfalling scene. Although no evidence is available, they were born to serve visual beauty perhaps around the eighteenth century when kabuki had already become mature. They are summoned up in only a limited number of plays and primarily function as artistic camouflage. In this sense namigo, mizugo and yukigo are not related to the kurogo which has inherited the tradition of primordial darkness. In addition, these new variants of kurogo cannot be traced back to one of the pairs of primeval colors, white and blue, for the non-black stage assistants were primarily devised for reasons of protective coloring. It was a mature audience that needed such an aesthetically satisfactory convention.

So far, kurogo alone has been described, but it should be noted that the kurogo is one type of non-actor stage attendant of kabuki theatre, generically called *kôken*[literally "guardian"], who assists the chief actor onstage, for example, by adjusting his costume and handing him props. Unlike kurogo, these types of kôken attendant wear not a closely-fit black robe with a face-hiding hood but a formal kind of kimono with a wig—in men's case, a topknot over the pale blue (i. e. clean-shaved) top of the head and in women's case, the differently arranged topknot without any unshaven part of the head.[19] The generic term kôken is not monopolized by kabuki. As a matter of fact, the kôken is characteristic of classical Japanese theatre, both kabuki and nô, and originated in nô, a highly developed theatre form on which kabuki primarily modeled itself.

Few have noted the kurogo in interpretative or theoretical terms, yet Watanabe Tamotsu has emphasized their importance in the development of kabuki. According to Watanabe, the convention of kurogo encourages the audience to look at not only actors whom they attend but also the structure of kabuki in a certain distance.[20] In other words, this convention serves to prevent the audience from seeing fictitious characters and events as merely bizarre but understandable and to help the audience to perceive what is unseeable in the everyday world, that is, inner truth or reality. Watanabe argues:

> The kurogo, one might say, is a shadowy being that in a way represents the inner nature of kabuki, the shadow of primal darkness from which kabuki emanates. Given that the kurogo is essential, kabuki is a special type of theatre that shows what is normally invisible.[21]

He suggests in a metaphysical way that the kurogo act as an intermediary between the outer truth and the inner truth. However, he does not elaborate on this interpretation of the kurogo, nor does any other critic. To further examine how the kurogo is associated with shadows or darkness, one has to have recourse to the investigation of concrete conditions of a theater building in relation to darkness.

THE EFFCT OF MODERN LIGHTING

It is necessary to note that the notion of kurogo characterized by invisibility is primarily based on what modern spectators consider this stage convention of invisibility. Unlike kabuki's early audience, these modern spectators are familiar with electric stage lighting. As to be argued later, perception of light and darkness is shaped by a specific culture. The old audience before the late 1800s perceived the kurogo on

a candle-lit stage differently from the one benefiting from electric stage lighting. All literature on kurogo available today is derived from observations supported by modern lighting technology. Although on the bright stage a group of non-actor kurogo are no doubt visible, the audience is supposed to see them unseen.

It should be clarified here how the convention of invisibility of kurogo is related to the other types of kôken (onstage assistants) that are formally attired and thus can be considered to be in the old tradition of nô theatre. Although technically the kurogo is categorized as generic kôken, the kurogo is unique in the family. On the one hand, precisely speaking, the dressed-up kôken were not considered invisible but unobtrusive, even in the daylight, for before the introduction of western theatre, the Japanese did not seek any type of illusionism or realism. Even after the Japanese became aware of illusionistic or realistic representations of man and society, they had been tolerant of the non-black kôken. On the other, the kurogo needed, and needs, to be as inconspicuous as possible, or rather practically invisible to the audience; otherwise they would be distracted from the performance. Thus, the kurogo is most likely to have been devised later than the other types of kôken that were originally invented for daylight performance in order not to be easily noticeable in an enclosed or candle-lit theater building. The New Kabuki Encyclopedia describes kôken as follows:s

> The more formal type of *kôken* is practically a dramatic character when he appears, while the *kurogo* type must be as unobtrusive as possible.[22]

As opposed to the seemly garbed kôken somewhat blending in with the fictitious world, the kurogo simply in black occupy an individualistic position in kabuki because they primarily cross over the boundary between illusion and reality.

How do the kurogo contribute to kabuki presented on the indoor stage? An influx of modern western culture and technology after Japan's mid-1800s political de-seclusion encouraged Japanese people to appreciate the brightly lit kabuki. With the modernization of stage lighting in the late nineteenth century, ways in which the kurogo had looked drastically changed. In his historical exploration of lighting methods of kabuki, Kamiyama Akira notes:

> People today tend to almost automatically assume that any historical audience either at home or abroad perceived stage lighting in the same way as they do now. [….] Needless to say, however, an audience in each era has their own way of perceiving how the stage is lighted.[23]

Among other things, he further argues, the stage lighting shift from natural light and candles (via gas and arc) to electricity in kabuki led the audience to reshape a conventional notion of light and darkness on the stage.[24] Lit by electric lighting, the glossy colors of actors' makeup, their costumes and sceneries are much more conspicuous than those of the premodern times were by daylight and candlelight.

But these emphatic theatrical techniques are not at all peculiar to Japan. It is worth noting that many cultures used them when the indoor stage was primarily lit by candles—specifically, the seventeenth-century French theatre with Corneille, Racine and Moliere, and the English Restration theatre, are prime

examples. In addition, western theatre—even when it is illusionistic—uses black curtains and stage hands clad in black so that they are less likely to be seen in the darkness when they are offstage or even onstage during a scene shift.

Despite this fact, kabuki in Japan has long made great use of these special techniques and conventions. As well as other devices, the kurogo is what characterizes kabuki. Initially the kurogo required such a special condition as the dimly lit stage. Today as stagea are more brightly lit, the kurogo, though their black robe used to obscure their presence, now are obviously visible. The kurogo is no longer physically inconspicuous. In other words, the electrically lighted stage requires that the old stage convention of invisible kurogo be reinforced so that the audience can see the visible kurogo as unseen. While the candle-lit theater made it possible for the kurogo to be almost invisible, the modern lighting method leads the kurogo to be easy to notice. Thus the modern audience is expected not to pay attention to the kurogo.

A historical investigation of kabuki stage lighting prior to the introduction of modern energy, such as gas and electricity, shows that unlike kabuki today, kabuki in the past was presented in prevailing shadows or half darkness for a long time. That was later than the mid-1720s when the then reform-centered Tokugawa shogunate ordained that theaters should be tile-roofed with its walls plastered for the purpose of fireproofing.[25] Since the theater was enclosed, the stage was dim even in daytime and poorly lit by candles after sunset. Off course, in the Edo era there was outdoor kabuki in rural areas where theater buildings were unaffordable, and on special occasions the shogun invited common city dwellers to kabuki presented in the courtyard of his castle in daytime, but this type of performance was exceptional. In addition, in its earliest days, kabuki was usually staged in the open-air, and perhaps the kabuki actor was attended not by the kurogo but by the stage assistants in quiet-colored kimono modeled on their counterparts of the nô theatre. Enclosed with the roof and walls, both stage and auditorium were dimly lit only with daylight barely coming through a few small openings of the upper wall of the house and with candles. The poor state of stage lighting at that time is far beyond the understanding of the modern audience who enjoys the benefit of electric lighting. As stage lighting technician Tôyama Shizuo argues, those days the stage lit by a limited amount of sunlight through the windows was about a tenth as bright as today's electric lighting, and lit by candles after dark, was less than one three thousandth as bright.[26] Audiences of the prime time of kabuki appreciated the performance under this primitive method of lighting that remained for a hundred and fifty years unchanged.

Accustomed to bright lighting, modern audiences would find the old theater of kabuki too dark to enjoy the gorgeousness of the stage set, acting and costumes. But such a modern critical comment on the premodern stage lighting does not make sense for, as Kamiyama argues, a perception of light and darkness varies from time to time and culture to culture.[27] Although theatergoers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might not have been satisfied with the lighting of their time, they were not uncomfortable with it. They did not feel that contemporary stage lighting was so dim as to decrease their pleasure. The history of kabuki demonstrates that the poor lighting of that period did not prevent the theatre from artistically developing and winning growing popularity. This is because the success of kabuki was sup-

ported by its cunning and clever use of colorful costumes. The bright-hued dress helped make up for the scarcity of lighting.[28] Hence, the main characters were supposed to wear luxurious, gaudy costumes as well as formal topknots or chignons. The specific colors and styles of their costumes and the specific types of topknots helped the audience to recognize the difference between good and bad. Such a half-dark stage worked in unison with the brightly and characteristically costumed actors who made a striking appearance.

Thus, modern technology of lighting, especially electricity, irrevocably changed the sense of seeing and formed a new perception of light and darkness. To call attention to the modern audience's biased perception of stage lighting, Kamiyama observes:

> Today a traditional stage set of a garish golden palace and varicolored costumes are praised as representation of "kabuki's original aesthetics," and nonrealistic and not meticulous costume design is considered "classical." But in fact the poorly lit theater of premodern times seriously required that kind of conspicuousness in order for the audience to recognize basic details of the play unfolding on the stage.[29]

Given this drastic change in stage lighting, the convention of kurogo cannot but function differently from its predecessors. Kabuki in modern times equipped with electronically-controlled electric lighting, has transformed the old kurogo lurking in the half darkness into stage-assistants in black working on the brightly lit stage today; this is now one of the kabuki's stylized conventions.

Worth noting is this marked difference between the two kinds of kurogo, one before and the other after the introduction of modern, i.e. gas and especially electric, stage lighting into kabuki in the 1880s. It seems, nonetheless, critics and scholars of kabuki only discuss the modern kurogo who are physically visible but by convention invisible. Usually they do not take into account that the bright electric stage lighting has changed the traditional definition of kurogo. They almost take it for granted that the stage is illuminated entirely and that the audience sees the kurogo but by convention ignores their presence. It is important to consider the kurogo in relation to the specific nature of stage lighting, however, since it makes considerable difference whether the kurogo is lit by candlelight or electric light.

Factually, the kurogo on the candle-lit stage was almost unseen to the audience. Keenly aware of the meager quality of stage lighting before the introduction of gas and electricity, Thomas Leims writes:

> The *kuroko* [a.k.a. kurogo] stage assistants, completely in black garments to make them 'invisible' to the audience, were at that time, really invisible.[30]

The old type of kurogo lurked about in the shadow. The way they were onstage supports the analogy between the black-robed kurogo and invisibility (or darkness). Thus, the quality of stage lighting is so important as to affect the audience's way of looking at what takes place on the stage and how the kurogo appear.

The shift of stage lighting from candlelight to electricity drastically changed the way in which the traditional kurogo function. Although it has yet to be ascertained by evidence whether electric lighting

has changed the definition of the kurogo, it is most likely that modern kurogo strive to efface themselves rather than suggesting Japanese culturally inherited familiarity and affinity with primordial darkness. The brightly lit stage of kabuki today has influenced the kurogo in the way that their black robe makes them artistically inconspicuous or by convention invisible.

BLACK-ROBED PERFORMERS IN BUNRAKU

Like kabuki, bunraku (formerly known as *ningyô-jôruri*[puppet plays accompanied by chanters]) today has its own kurogo, the black-clad puppeteer. There are two types of black-clad figures: one is a stage-hand who comes onstage only at the beginning of each act or scene to announce the title, chief puppeteers and musicians, and the other is a puppet operator dressed in black. Apart from one-man puppets playing small parts, each puppet of a major character is manipulated by three puppeteers, the principal operator controlling the puppet's right hand, the head and the face, each of the other two dealing with the left hand and the feet. In principle, all operators including the chief ones, are dressed completely in black with their faces covered with black gauzy hoods since their black robes serve to efface their presence, or at least to make them as unobtrusive as possible, for the purpose of bringing to the fore their puppets. The kurogo's black robe primarily helps the puppeteers keep a low profile so that the puppets may look true-to-life.

An important historical source, Jinrin-kinmô-zui [The Illustrated Lexicon of Manners-and-Customs and Occupations High and Low Alike] (1690), indicates that a black outfit, though showing the puppeteer's face, arms and legs, was considered typical of the puppeteers of the late seventeenth century.[31] The book includes a picture in which the chanter and musician dress nicely, while the puppeteers are clad in black. The picture shows the puppeteers who handled one-man puppets, standing behind the hiding screen and holding the puppet above their heads. Interestingly enough, although they are thus unseen to the audience, they wore dark colored kimono with their sleeves and the lower part of their garbs tucked up so that perhaps they could operate their puppets smoothly. It may be that by wearing black the puppeteers try to psychologically be inconspicuous in order to direct the audience's attention to their puppets.

For the purpose of self-effacement, the puppeteer's black robe is believed to be conventional. Although it is generally assumed that this convention of invisibility helps the puppet appear real, the literature on the early bunraku from the late sixteenth century through the mid-eighteenth century when the three-man puppet began to flourish, does not necessarily support the idea. According to monochrome historical iconography available today, there is a variety of puppeteer's costume, not only a black robe but also stylish kimono.[32] Many of these pieces of iconography show that whether visible to the audience or not, the puppeteers are dressed up. This suggests that the puppeteers, i. e. one-man puppet operators, of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries were not necessarily supposed to wear black in order to be unobtrusive. The point is that before the three-man puppet was introduced, it had not mattered whether the puppeteers were dressed in black or not, but it did matter whether they showed themselves on the stage or were hiding behind the curtain.

It is then worth questioning why puppet operators in general are capable of being not only visible at one

time but unseen at another. Scholar of Japanese traditional puppetry Tsunoda Ichirô has argued that in the entire history of Japanese puppetry, including pre-bunraku, the puppeteers have alternately been visible and invisible.[33] In his analysis, although the puppeteer in the earliest days did not dress in black nor hide themselves, the introduction of new Chinese puppetry in the fourteenth century led the puppeteer of Japan to try to hide themselves behind the curtain. By noting the two modes of the puppeteer's presence, Tsunoda postulates that the puppeteer's self-effacement and self-exhibition have alternated. He also notes an interesting variation from the norm. By this variation he means that since the mid-1700s introduction of the three-man puppets the use of kurogo, who are visible to the audience, has functioned as pseudo-self-effacement, i. e. a mixture of semi-self-effacement (the wearing of a black robe) and semi-self-exhibition (the appearing onstage).[34] In his view, even this mixture observed in the black-robed puppeteers onstage does not show that the two opposing tendencies for the puppeteer to reveal and conceal his physical presence has ended, but rather it indicates that the double urge of the puppeteer has been competing with each other.

Tsunoda has not clarified why these conflicting methods coexisted, developing alternately and eventually almost merged in the black-clad puppeteers who, though present onstage, are considered unseen. But perhaps one of the possible explanations is that since the Japanese puppeteer's indigenous mode of self-exhibition was naturally inclined to be shamanistic, it needed an entertainment-oriented Chinese mode of self-effacement in order to appeal to the popular mind. Off course, it is true that Japanese native puppetry included amusement which served to draw the audience's attention to a performer/lay preacher who sold talismans, amulets and so on. But it was useful to incorporate the imported self-effacing performing method in order for Japanese puppetry to develop into a more sophisticated form. Although both methods tried to join together, each struggled to display its own identity. It might seem that this conflict helped traditional Japanese puppetry to develop in its own way. Since the convention of kurogo's invisibility was formalized in the mid-1700s, this rivalry between the two contenders, that is, the puppeteer's ambivalent drive for self-assertion and self-denial has not been dissolved but grafted on to the formalized convention of kurogo. Although this double urge usually appears unnoticeable, or at least low-key, it still remains viable in the kurogo convention.

As if to exemplify this viability, both rival elements today assert themselves by coming into view at the same time, though only in a certain occasion. While the two assistant operators always dress in black with their faces covered by hoods, the principal operator of a three-man puppet may have his face exposed and wear formal black kimono adorned with a colored vest, even chic, colored kimono. The conventional anonymity of bunraku puppeteers is thus defied, though to some extent, for this iconoclastic uncovering of the principal puppeteer is limited to the purpose of livening up climactic, romantic scenes alone such as elopement. The chief operator's disobedience to the convention can be seen as more than a means of achieving recognition as a star performer. In other words, the explicit challenge beginning in the mid-1800s to the tradition of anonymity,[35] betrays the two conflicting aspects of traditional Japanese puppetry that alternate, that is, the puppeteer's self-exhibition and self-effacement, the theory of which Tsunoda has

posited. This occasional iconoclasm not only shows an aesthetic contrast between the color-robed puppeteer and his assistant puppeteers clad completely in black but also implies that the two inherently opposing forces, that is, self-effacement and self-expression, vie with each other.

The pairing of opposites fits in with the convention of invisible black because its twofoldness illustrates the paradoxical image of primeval black/darkness epitomized by ancient Japanese myths. In the myths, darkness functions not only as an all-purpose covering that blots out everything but also as a powerful dynamo that generates energy. In like manner the kurogo puppeteer acts as both servant and manipulator.

It may be possible to say that the kurogo of bunraku associated with the mythological darkness would correspond to the kurogo of kabuki in one way or another, or rather that kabuki might have imitated bunraku's kurogo and recast it for their own use. Unlike the black-robed puppeteer, the kabuki stage assistant as kurogo is merely a derivative of the kôken in general. However, for audiences today, a kôken dressed almost like an actor might be a variant of the kurogo, and since he blends in with a group of actors at one occasion and looks after the actor at another, he might be both self-effacing and self-assertive. With this in mind, one might say that to modern audiences' eyes, the kôken is also associated with the mythological darkness which includes both destructive and generative forces.

CONCLUSION

In Japanese traditional theatre, the stage assistant who stays on the stage and assists the actor, has played an essential role in the development of each theatrical form. Although the concept of the stage assistant existed prior to kabuki and bunraku, both refined it into their own forms. In the process of refinement they invented the convention of kurogo, out of necessity, that is, for the purpose of making the kabuki stage assistants and the puppeteers significantly unobtrusive. This practical need for the color black as nothingness, at least partly, derives from Japanese notion of mythological darkness. As argued earlier, Japanese ancient myths italicize the importance of darkness in their world-view. In the subconscious of premodern audiences who flocked to the dimly lit stage remained their culturally inherited penchant for primordial darkness. Perhaps the same holds true with even today's audiences sitting in front of the highly illuminated stage for they have inherited this cultural preference from their own ancestors. While they see blackness/darkness as non-existent, the modern Japanese perceive its vital force. In part, it is this usually latent self-assertive force lurking in the kurogo's self-denying black outfits that, as a dramatist, Terayama Shûji played up in his own way to subvert cultural and artistic traditions and thereby revolutionize modern Japanese theatre.

Notes

[1] Harold C. Conklin, "Hanunoo Color Categories," Southwestern Journal of Anthropology 11.4 (1955): 339-344, and "Color Categorization," American Anthropologist 75 (1973): 931-942. Turner, "Color Classification in Ndembu ritual," Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion, ed. Michael Banton (London: Tavistock, 1966) 47-87.

[2] Satake Akihiro, "Kodai nihongo ni okeru shikimei no seikaku [What Characterizes Color Categorization of the Ancient Japanese Language]," Kokugo-kokubun [The Japanese Language and Literature]24.6 (1955): 14-15.

[3] The "Kojiki" or Records of Ancient Matters, trans. Basil Hall Chamberlain, vol. 6 (Yokohama, Japan: R. Meiklejohn and Co., 1882) 42-43.

[4] Matsuda Osamu, Ôbayashi Tarô and Tanigawa Ken'ichi, "Iro no shôchô to henyô [Color Symbolism and Its Change]," Is, special issue: Colors (June 1982): 10.

[5] "Iro no shôchô to henyô [Color Symbolism and Its Change]," Is, special issue: Colors (June 1982): 13.

[6] Kuroda Hideo, Kyôkai no chûsei, shôchô no chûsei [The Idea of a Boundary and Its Symbolism in Medieval Period] (Tokyo: University of Tokyo P, 1986) 16-21. The Vocabulary of Mountain Village Life [Sanson bunrui goi] compiled by Yanagida Kunio et al defines the Black Mountain as "age-old dense natural woodland" (1941; Tokyo: Kokusho kankôkai, 1975) 38.

[7] References include Zenkoku hôgen jiten [Dictionary of Japanese Dialects], ed. Tôjô Misao (Tokyo: Tôkyôdô shuppan, 1951) and Kobayashi Tadao, Shikisai no fôkuroa [Folklore of Colors](Tokyo: Yûzankaku, 1993) 46.

[8] Kuroda, 24-29.

[9] Kuroda, 20.

[10] Kuroda, 114.

[11] Tanaka Takeo, Taigai kankei to bunka kôryû [Foreign Relations and Cultural Exchanges Between Countries] (Kyoto: Shibunkaku, 1991)351-352.

[12] Tanaka Takeo argues that contemporary people simply described the color of Portuguese ships that came to Japan in the 15th century as black because they thought the vessels black. Kuroda Hideo is critical of this interpretation since Tanaka fails to explore the implication of the color black (Kuroda, 113-114).

[13] Hattori Yukio, "Henkai no iro: kabuki no 'kuro' ni tuite no oboegaki [The Color of the Marginalized Quarters: A Note on 'the Color Black' of Kabuki," Is, special issue: Colors (June 1982): 64.

[14] Hattori, 64.

[15] Hattori, 67.

[16] Tanizaki Jun'ichirô zenshû [The Complete Works of Tanizaki Jun'ichirô], vol. 20 (1933-1934; Tokyo: Chûôkôronsha, 1974) 517-557. In Praise of Shadows, trans. Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker (Stony Creek, CT: Leete's Island, 1977).

[17] In Praise of Shadows, 20.

[18] A brief account is provided by encyclopedias such as Kabuki jiten [Kabuki Encyclopedia], eds. Hattori Yukio et al (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1983), Samuel L. Leiter, New Kabuki Encyclopedia: A Revised Adaptation of *Kabuki Jiten* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1997), and Gunji Masakatsu Kabuki, trans. John Bester (Tokyo: Kôdansha International, 1969.

[19] "Katsura," New Kabuki Encyclopedia.

[20] Watanabe Tamotsu gives an analytical description of kurogo in Kabuki (Tokyo Chikuma Shobô, 1989)147-153.

[21] Watanabe 152.

[22] “Kôken,” The New Kabuki Encyclopedia.

[23] Kamiyama Akira, “Kurayami no kôgaku [Optics of Darkness],” Iwanami kôza: kabuki-bunraku, ed. Torigoe Bunzô vol. 6 (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998) 147.

[24] Kamiyama 147.

[25] Kabuki jiten 164.

[26] Tôyama Shizuo, Butai-shômei to sono shûhen [Stage Lighting and Related Issues] (Tokyo: Shimazu Shobô, 1986) 31 and 53. He also points out that genuine candles were too expensive to burn more than twenty at once and that candles made of fish oil stank so foully (46-48) as to annoy actors and spectators. Having seen a 1922 kabuki performance Tôyama found out that even authentic candles produce choking smoke (41).

[27] Kamiyama 152.

[28] Kamiyama 165.

[29] Kamiyama 151

[30] Thomas Leims, “Kabuki Goes to Hollywood,” The Dramatic Touch of Difference: Theatre, Own and Foreign, eds. Erika Fischer-Lichte et al (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1990) 113.

[31] Jinrin-kinmô-zui, ed. Asakura Haruhiko (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1990) 262-263.

[32] Useful iconography is included, for instance, in Wakatsuki Yasuji’s Jôruri chosakushû [The Treatise on Puppet Theatre] (Tokyo: Kuresu shuppan, 1998) 2 vols. and Skaguchi Hiroyuki, ed., Jôruri no sekai [The World of Puppet Theatre] (Kyoto: Sekai bunkasha, 1992).

[33] Tsunoda Ichirô, Ningyôgeki no seiritsu ni kansuru kenkyû [A Study on the Formation of Puppetry], (Osaka: Asahiya Shoten, 1963) 592-597.

[34] Tsunoda 594.

[35] Toita Yasuji, “Ningyô-jôruri,” in Heibonsha’s Sekai-daihaykka jiten [The World Encyclopedia of Heibonsha Publishers], 1972 ed.

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