

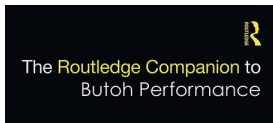
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### Butoh and Taboo

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# BUTOH AND TABOO

*Gunji Masakatsu (translated by Jane Traynor)*

### The horror of white

Why is it that when one sees the white-painted limbs of *ankoku butoh* troupes, one gets the feeling that one has been imprisoned within walls? You might think it is the color of punishment for the sin of treachery. It goes without saying that such whiteness is not clear and bright. The black of darkness is submerged in the depths of those naked bodies, and they are abnormally enveloped with the scent of repression.

Originally, we can say white has two meanings: on the one hand white represents a world with no color whatsoever and is a sign of the world of the dead; on the other hand it is a sign of the world of the living and denotes the white light of the sun.

The white face and body paint of the world of the *ankoku butoh* troupes gives one the strong impression that they are covered with white mud. I think it is possible that it brings to mind a mental image that has affinities with the image of living things covered with the ashes of death. It is likely that since the beginning, there has been an association between the color white and the bleached bones of the dead.

It is not unreasonable for those who have seen Ohno Kazuo's *butoh*, in which he wears a thin, white robe, to see the dance of a skeleton. However, his *butoh* does not have an uncanny muddled darkness. Rather, viewers feel only the passing of a serene, clean, white wind. A calm wonderful brightness that changes bad fortune to auspiciousness produces a world of stirring white light. We know without a doubt that the world is not one that has been plastered over with white, but rather he has [or we have] escaped into a world of a god playing with the white light.

In the traditional dance of this country, wearing a white robe is one of the conventions. This robe is called an *omigoromo* (small mourning robe). It can also be called a mourning robe, and it is worn by mediums in order to become possessed by a god. By wearing white cloth they satisfy one of the requirements for being possessed by a god. This is one of the reasons why white clothes are thought to be related to divinity. Originally the long robe (*nagaginu* or *chōken*) and the dance robe (*maiginu*) of *noh* were white, and the reason why they (along with the feather robe of the female deity [*miko*] in the legend of *Hagoromo*) are thought of as related to the legend of the swan lies in the use of the white color.

In the "white mountain rite" (*shirayama gyōji*) of the flower festival in the former Mikawa province, portable shrines pass through buildings adorned with white emblems, and it is said that by passing through the white world, humans are reborn, but if we look at this from a different

perspective, while still living, they experience the colorless world of the *avidya* (Buddhist concept of ignorance) of death. The *shirayama* (white mountain) worship was established on the basis of the image of a snowy mountain, however, I think that there can be meaning drawn from the idea of something being “covered,” as when one says that the mountain is covered in snow. The color of snow is the color of the death of the season, which has been covered by natural ashes of the dead. Perhaps we see this as divine, because we are suppressing a fear of the cold colors of death.

In this world, “*shirako*” (white child) is the common name for fish sperm sac (milt), however, humans born covered with that sperm are also called *shirako*. In the *Wakan sansaizue* (Illustrated Sino-Japanese Encyclopedia) which quotes the *Wuzazu* (a late Ming, 1602, encyclopedia), it says,

People: there are people born with white hair. They are close to supernatural beings. There was a small child in the first year of Yongning of the Jin dynasty. Even though he is only eight years old, his hair and body were all white and he did divination well. Also, in Min (present day Fujian), there was a person who only had white hair, not even a single strand was black. Both eyes were dim and he could not see anything at all.

In the *Wakan sansaizue* it says to call these *shiroko*. Such people were not just found in China, but also in Japan. In the same book it says,

When I think about it now: from time to time there are *shiroko*; they are completely white. Only the hair on their heads is light red and thin. There are times when both the mother and the child are *shiroko*, I saw this.<sup>1</sup>

The people who are colloquially called *shirako* (white child) in Japan became *misemono* (objects for show, but also public spectacle or freak show). In Asakura Musei’s *Research on Misemono* there were instances of *shirako misemono* in 1819, 1835, 1838, and 1853. In the second month of 1819, in Ōsu, Nagoya, there was exhibition (with an accompanying karmic tale) of a *shirako* that was said to have been born from an *ama* (female diver) and a *shōjō* (mythical Japanese sea spirit with red hair) who was billed as “Matsuura Fukujusai, the Great Shōjō all the way from Hizen” and its hair was believed to be entirely reddish-brown. The Great Shōjō danced a *shōjō* dance based on the *shirako* dance due to his coloration.

When people saw that freak, they believed it would bring health and longevity, which fanned the flames of its popularity.<sup>2</sup> In short, the people of the past had the idea that invalids were gods of longevity. Regarded as supernatural beings (*marebito*) who were different from ordinary people, they were welcomed as visitors from the land of eternity. These freaks fell in status due to science and medical theories. It is for this reason that I saw the *ankoku butoh* of today as possibly an upright posture which adds enmity to that white.

It seems that it can be also said that changing the taboo of the white face and body paint into enmity reminded us of a suspicious holy boundary. There is malice in whiteness. In remote areas, there is a practice called *shirabito* (white people) in which the faces of new-born children are covered in a white cloth and or wet white paper to abort them. It seems that they enshrine the spirits of the children in the practice of *shirabito kokumi* during the exorcism and purification rite (*oharai*) in June. This can be found in Ueda Akinari’s *Tandai shoshin roku*.

When the white-painted corpse bodies of *butoh* crouch, there is an association with returning to the womb. In Okinawa, childbirth is called *shirabujō* (white impurity). Because menstruation is called *akafujō* (red impurity), it suggests white blood. When humans were born, there were red children and white children. Let us say that the white children of *butoh* are the form of a world of darkness which is a taboo in the real world and must be destroyed.

The 800 Buddhist nuns of Wakasa have a legend which says eating the meat of a mermaid guarantees a long life; however, the 800 likely also refers to having lived for 800 years. However, originally they were called “white nuns,” and they propagated the *shirayama* (white mountain) belief. There is text called *o-shira saimon* chanted by the mediums in Tohoku and if you remove the honorific “o” in the *o-shira saimon*, it becomes *shira saimon*. It tells the origin of the silkworm god. However, apparently it is said that this story must be related to the *shirakami* (white god) of *shirayama* (white mountain). The transparent-white gems which are the eggs of a silkworm cocoon must also have been *shirako*. In the tale of the horse and the princess, *The Tale of the Marriage of the Horse and the Daughter (Bajō kon-in tan)*, there is the tale of the birth of an abnormal child, namely the birth of the silkworm god.

The white paint of *ankoku butoh* causes one to think of a fallen god. The *Wakan sansaizue* quote “Both eyes were dim and he could not see anything at all” could be recognized as indicating something like a cataract; however, instead, it could be that in the place where this world is not visible, one confirms the existence of darkness. It seems that the whiteness demonstrates the state of light closed off on the other side.

### On the topic of existence

In figures of butoh dancers, which rebel against prior dance forms, there is an ugliness which is opposed to refinement. Where did the postures that oppose the beauty of dance, such as bowed-legs, bent spines, clenched hands and feet, first originate? Is there a relationship between the roots of butoh and whether you (we) will approve of the existence of butoh? If we do not recognize this, butoh cannot exist. However, the conditions for accepting the beauty in such postures, in fact, lie in the traditional theater of kabuki. Boar necks (*ikubi*)<sup>3</sup> and hunched backs, as Tsubōchi Shōyō has already explained, are linked to the beauty of cruelty and obscenity and form the basis for the beauty of late Edo kabuki. That is likely the reason why Westerners often refer to *ankoku butoh* as kabuki. The rediscovery of Japan by butoh (which is established by transgressing the taboos of dance) lies here. This is because the thing which butoh arrived at, having broken through the Japanese climate, was the posture of the fetus, which has become the posture of malice in modern society. In addition, Shōyō (in *Reminiscing about kabuki plays I saw in childhood*) confirms the existence of a beauty of irrationality and artificiality by recognizing the sadism and masochism and acknowledging the eroticism and violence in late Edo kabuki (Tsubouchi 1920b). And to the extent that such passion is acknowledged, butoh, of course, becomes the confirmation of such.

Butoh can be accepted as having been established on the breaking of taboos of Western dance aesthetics, because it unknowingly received and passed along the transmission of folk beauty in traditional kabuki. Or rather, it is perhaps more correct to say that butoh desecrated kabuki.

In kabuki, there is a congratulatory scene called *danmari* (pantomime in the dark), in which the setting and technique have been formalized. In the dark, the actors who are unable to see each other make gestures of searching for each other. That space is one of darkness, not that of a typical space. There is only “darkness.” In kagura, there is a number in which the dancer gropes around in the eternal darkness saying “dark, dark.” It evokes a world of darkness which existed before the Sun Goddess Amaterasu appeared. This raises the question, “What is space?” On the noh stage, space appears when the dancer revolves (*mawaru*). The meaning of *mawaru* can be ascertained in the term *mau* (to dance).

On the stage of this country’s performing arts, it is not that there is space which the performer dances in, rather space appears through the revolving (*mawaru*) of the actors. Even if the performer has just one mat, like in kagura, they lay it out and it is the dancing which creates the

space. This is called *goza no mai*. Performers make the space round, and dance holding it in their hands. This is how metaphors work. One can see the whole world on the skin of a taiko drum.

The worldview of Indian Hinduism is similar to this one-mat-stage in that in the Mandala, the central lotus pedestal occupies the position of the center of the universe. That is to say, is it not the case that from the beginning, butoh has been no more than the top of a lotus pedestal or the space on the bottom of a foot?

Butoh is the wrath of the universe. At times it is sad, as times it is kind, at times it is eerie, at times it is fearful and anxious, and when that space is transformed into the universe, it towers above everything, but when the performer refuses to shoulder that space, and when the space becomes unsettled, the stage becomes simply a place and butoh loses its world.

### Notes

- 1 Editor's note: We have excised four lines of the quotation that are not germane to the argument about whiteness.
- 2 Editor's note: Andrew Markus presents a more pessimistic view of such spectacles, in which the karmic story is merely an excuse for the display of the freak. See his "The Carnival of Edo: Misemono Spectacles from Contemporary Accounts," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 45, no. 2 (1985): 529–530.
- 3 Editor's note: "Boar neck" (*ikubi*) refers to pushing the neck forward and extending the head out. Gunji does not cite a source here for Shōyō's observation about boar necks and the beauty of late kabuki, but Shōyō writes about this issue in Tsubouchi, 1920a, p. 113–116. Shōyō's understanding of such physical features as boar necks and hunched backs is very different from Gunji's because he approaches the issue from various specific angles such as stage acting techniques, and the physical aging of female impersonators.

### Translated from

Gunji Masakatsu. 1985. "Butoh to kinki (Butoh and taboo)." *Gendaishi techō* 28, no. 6 (May): 86–89.

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