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Butoh Performance



Edited by Bruce Baird and Rosemary Candelario

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“INSERTING THE HIP/S” AND “LOWERING THE HIP/S”¹ EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 1, “THAT WHICH IS *NANBA*-LIKE” FROM *WHAT ARE TRADITIONAL ARTS? A DIALOGUE FOR CRITICISM AND CREATION*

Takechi Tetsuji and Tomioka Taeko
(translated and with an introductory essay by Maki Isaka)

TAKECHI: In order for the Japanese – rather than Westerners – to provide a new cultural value in the present, it’s critical to push to the extreme thinking through things in a *nanba*-like manner. That is, in a manner of rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, a thinking style that is available to nobody other than the Japanese. We have to be based on this *nanba*-like thinking style, or it’s impossible for a contemporary art to emerge, isn’t it? It was Hijikata Tatsumi who did that to a certain extent, you see. And then, rather than Hijikata himself, what’s called *ankoku butoh* has been appreciated overseas to some degree.

TOMIOKA: That’s why it has been, isn’t it?

TAKECHI: That’s the reason, I think. It was, after all, coming from the fact that Hijikata himself started *by* thinking about the essence of rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, at least abstractively. That certainly appealed [to audiences overseas], I think.

Yet, I can also say, as a critic, that Hijikata’s way of doing it was wrong in terms of methodology. But it’s not that everything about it was wrong, you see. He was partially wrong, and yet, in terms of orientation, it is really appropriate that he thought that the Japanese folk must do a dance that had arisen from muddy paddies. That fits the purpose of probing the origins of an ethnic tradition, or ethnic culture, I think.

TOMIOKA: At least he took that as his starting point, didn’t he?

TAKECHI: That’s the only method by which one can generate a global contemporary art, you see.

So there *might* be some elements in kabuki as well that could produce such a global art, but in order to do so, you have to trace back traditions not within kabuki itself but well back beyond that. That path would go back to noh, via *kyōgen*, and then, through noh, to martial arts, to entertainment arts, and return to rice-cropping agriculture in paddies. If you follow this line to the end, there can be something you can boast of to the world as a contemporary art. In short, through competition with the world, that is.

In a way, Japan didn't manage to have a renaissance, you see. Instead, Japan used renaissance-like effects while not achieving a renaissance. That I think is the reason why noh and kabuki are highly praised in the world nowadays.

TOMIOKA: I think Hijikata, too, started by returning to the point that was most native to him, that is, the land where he was born. What you just said means that that which is native most probably leads to that which is international, correct?

TAKECHI: I hear there's no word, world-wide, for principles of the people, an *-ism* of the people [folk].

TOMIOKA: Is that so?

TAKECHI: Only the Japanese people have that word, *minzoku-shugi* [folk-ism].

TOMIOKA: We are dealing with race, so you could say racism, though it sounds forced.

TAKECHI: But the word racism indicates discrimination.

TOMIOKA: Right, it's used to indicate discrimination.

TAKECHI: [The meaning of the word, *minzoku-shugi*] might be somehow expressed by a word like, say, racialism, though.

TOMIOKA: But if you praise a culture born out of the *-ism* of the people, or from the way of living specific to the said people alone, if you praise a culture born out of things like that, wouldn't it become a self-centric-cultural thought, thought centering on one's own culture?

TAKECHI: It's not so much a self-centric-cultural thought. Rather, the current situation where kabuki is being praised overseas, or noh is being praised, those situations indicate a situation where nothing contemporary is being generated among the Japanese. Foreigners might get stimulated by that [noh and kabuki] and might produce contemporary things, maybe. Most probably, inside kabuki and noh are things that foreigners have never ever thought of. Therefore, they can make a contemporary art [from them]. It wouldn't work for the Japanese, however, no matter how far back they go in noh and kabuki [alone]. What the Japanese have to think, in order to produce contemporary arts, is Hijikata's way of thinking, that is, "I'm a peasant, so I'm gonna crawl up from muddy paddies."

TOMIOKA: Does it mean that it won't at all become a self-centric-cultural thought?

TAKECHI: It won't, if you follow [that path].

TOMIOKA: Because you'd always have to go back to that point, I imagine.

TAKECHI: I think you ought to do it while always gazing at that very point of origin.

TOMIOKA: Though ideas of half-baked *-isms* of the people tend to fall into a self-centric thought, don't they?

TAKECHI: Like Japanese people who say "we're ok, cos we've got noh and kabuki that stand unrivaled in the world, cos foreigners are all imitating those, so we're fine."

TOMIOKA: Yes, then it would lead them to something like, say, "Japanese entertainment arts can't be understood anywhere else in the world, cos they are the best," wouldn't it?

TAKECHI: That would be a self-centric thought, yes, but that's not the case [for what we're talking about]. Rather, it's [as follows]. The origins of those traditions, of what's been transmitted, those origins partially lie in a culture associated with the spirituality of Zen, which in turn can be traced back to the productive and subdued arts (*haragei*: "acquired artistic technique")

[*gei*] of guts [*hara*]) of peasants, who were accustomed to crouching in muddy paddies and thinking deeply. We ought to think, by going back to that, and then to jump to contemporary times.

You can say that Hijikata did that, by grasping a certain clue. He and I were old friends since we were young.

TOMIOKA: I also saw most of his stage productions.

TAKECHI: In terms of *nanba* culture, the technique of “inserting the hip,” which we were talking about before, that’s a technique of walking, originally. [When walking in the *nanba* gait,] unless you insert your hip, the entire left part of your body would go forward when your left upper body and left leg move forward. And the right [half] would go forward when the right leg moves forward. But then, you can’t really walk in that manner. That’s why the people of Yamato² culture would “insert the hip.” And then Hijikata adopted it, and his version is thought to be none other than the true Japanese *nanba*, but it is a compromise in a Tōhoku-region manner. His is “lowering the hip” and not “inserting the hip.”

TOMIOKA: Is that so?

TAKECHI: The shape becomes flat like this, doesn’t it. People think of it as “inserting the hip.” But that’s an interpretation of Yamato culture in a Tōhoku manner. That figure is, in short, a figure of riding a horse in a saddle. The shape when one is astride a horse, isn’t it.

TOMIOKA: He was from Akita [prefecture]. Coming from a place where there are deep paddies, wasn’t he?

TAKECHI: But although Hijikata knew the touch of mud, had experience in pulling his legs out of that, and whatnot, but when you scrutinize it, it’s not a “inserting-the-hip”-kind of atavism that goes back to the ancestors, but the shape of horseback riding, the figure of riding a saddled horse, you know. By nature, *nanba*-that-inserts-the-hip would emerge inevitably from exclusive agriculture, coming from the wisdom of living with agriculture, the wisdom of walking. However, if an equestrian people, or a nomadic people learn it later, the original equestrian shape remains somewhere [in their version of *nanba*]. So the town of Kamakura is round while Kyoto is square, so they say, and round towns are somehow equestrian, you see.

TOMIOKA: I thought, though, that Hijikata was quite conscious about *nanba*.

TAKECHI: You see, it was an adoption of Yamato-*nanba* culture. When it’s understood in the Tōhoku manner, “inserting the hip” becomes “lowering the hip.”

TOMIOKA: That shocked the audiences who saw Hijikata’s dance at that time, including Mishima [Yukio], didn’t it? Does it mean, then, they didn’t know *nanba*?

TAKECHI: That’s right, they didn’t know *nanba* itself. They didn’t know that there was a much more refined *nanba*. And yet, Mishima sensed something. He felt keenly that in *kendō* [which Mishima practiced] you have to be able to do *tsugiashi* [“succeeding steps”: a martial-art gait related to *nanba*. With *tsugiashi*, when one leg moves, the other immediately follows it]. But what everybody is mistaken now about Hijikata-like stuff lies in the difference between “inserting the hip” and “lowering the hip.” “Lowering the hip” is the posture when you’re riding a horse. If you understand that by associating it with agricultural production, you’ll probably end up with that shape [lowering the hip], I think. So it differs from the shape of the people engaged in the true rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, I think.

TOMIOKA: But when I talked with Hijikata, he didn’t talk about the hips. When one pulls one’s totally worn-out legs from the paddies, and places them on firm ground, the joints are completely exhausted and don’t move, he said. So much so that one’s legs and arms are like poles, and one walks just like a pole. That’s what I heard from him.

TAKECHI: In a nutshell, there's no action of "lowering one's hip" in cultures originally born out of rice-cropping agriculture in paddies. There is "inserting one's hip," though.

TOMIOKA: So while it went up north [from Yamato to the Tōhoku regions] . . .

TAKECHI: It altered, while it was being gradually accepted by the equestrian ethnic characteristics. That's what Hijikata was, I think, which is somewhat different from [the cases of] *noh* and *kyōgen* in the basic sense. That's why Hijikata's feet got caught in rice paddies, right up to his knees. And then straighten . . .

TOMIOKA: They won't bend, just like straight poles. So he'd walk quickly just like that, so I heard. There was a dance piece [or pieces] in which the arms were also like sticks, wasn't there?

TAKECHI: There were some reactionary elements in it.

TOMIOKA: Is that so? So that wasn't a perfect *nanba*, was it?

TAKECHI: Not a perfect *nanba*, no. If your ancestors are an equestrian people, and they encounter rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, and if they need to digest it, it [that *nanba*] must have turned out like that, quite possibly. In the Kansai region [western part of Japanese archipelago where the Yamato culture comes from], there are hardly any deep paddies, you see. And the closer you come this way [the Eastern part of Japanese archipelago, including Tokyo, beyond which lies the Tōhoku region], the less suitable the land becomes for rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, essentially. And [Tōhoku] people made paddies out of such soil, which inevitably results in muddy paddies [specific to the Tōhoku region]. There's no way but to lower your hip, in order to stand straight in such muddy paddies, it turned out.

Commentary on the Text: Takechi Tetsuji, the *nanba* gait, and Japanese performing arts

Maki Isaka

The above excerpt is taken from the book titled *What Are Traditional Arts*²³ which in its entirety discusses *nanba* as one of the defining characteristics of traditional Japanese performing arts. *Nanba* (a.k.a. *nanban*) refers to a specific human locomotion, and the extract included here deals with *nanba* that was practiced by Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986). The book takes the form of a dialogue between theater director and critic Takechi Tetsuji (1912–1988) and poet/novelist/critic Tomioka Taeko (b. 1935), but it is nearly entirely Takechi's ideas that are explored in it, with Tomioka assuming the role of an interviewer but also sometimes acting as a check to Takechi's assertions. Takechi's primary claim in this book is that *nanba* is an integral part of traditional Japanese performing arts. In this section, his argument extends into contemporary arts. That is, he states that the *butoh* Hijikata initiated is a rare case for contemporary arts to use *nanba*, and that this feature made *butoh*'s success as a global, contemporary art possible; yet he also states that Hijikata's *nanba* is not an authentic *nanba* but a variant. Takechi was one of the earliest thinkers who introduced *nanba* into critical writings, along with dance critic Ashihara Eiryō (1907–1981). Due to the weight of *nanba* in the text, some discussion of it is necessary for our effective reading of the text.

According to the most popular and simple definition, *nanba* signifies the parallel gait: as the right leg moves forward, the right hand moves forward simultaneously. (A minority hold the opposite opinion that *nanba* refers to a diagonal gait.⁴) While his other texts on *nanba* also explore non-agricultural activities (e.g., mining), in this particular excerpt, Takechi claims that the most fundamental *nanba*, which provided Japanese performing arts with their basic principles and postures, inevitably came from lives spent in the paddies in wet-rice agriculture. Rice-cropping

agriculture in paddies is the key here, for not only is it the base for sustained, continuous tension that characterizes Japanese arts (9), but it is also the materialistic, physical condition that results in the bodily technique of “inserting one’s hip” (29), which in turn defines the most fundamental *nanba*. Noh and *kyōgen* retain this *nanba*. To be precise, they differ, says Takechi, with the *nanba* of *kyōgen* being faithful to gestures of agricultural production, while that of noh has been refined as abstract and symbolic, nonetheless the basics of *kyōgen*’s *nanba* and that of noh’s are the same (9).

According to Takechi, Hijikata’s *nanba* is a variant, marked by the vertical location of the hip (“lowering the hip”), differentiated from the authentic *nanba* characterized by a certain angle of the lower end of the spine (“inserting the hip”). Takechi connects this incongruity with two conditions of the Tōhoku region where Hijikata came from: (1) field conditions unsuitable for rice-cropping agriculture in paddies and (2) equestrian culture as a historical background. These conditions, says Takechi, determined Hijikata’s version of *nanba*.

One may say that, according to Takechi, Hijikata’s relationship with *nanba* is analogous to that of kabuki theater, albeit for different reasons. While I have no space here to detail his discussion on the case of kabuki, Takechi states that its status as an ever-changing contemporary theater caused kabuki to destroy *nanba* in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; in the present excerpt, Takechi recognizes another set of factors that caused in a comparable manner an alteration in Hijikata’s *nanba*. Differently put, butoh and kabuki display a shift in *nanba*, a kind of change that never happened to noh and *kyōgen*. For the case of butoh, the land of the Tōhoku region (northern part of Japanese archipelago), where Hijikata came from, was not ideal for rice-cropping agriculture in paddies, as it was in the Kansai region (western part of Japanese archipelago), and Tōhoku people had no choice but to create deep, muddy paddies specific to the Tōhoku region. This, states Takechi, was responsible for the change in posture, from *nanba*’s original “inserting one’s hip” posture to its variation: “lowering one’s hip.” In other words, “lowering the hip” is a somatic revision of “inserting the hip,” a revision that deeper and muddier paddies required for human locomotion. Furthermore, an equestrian background in the Tōhoku region further necessitated that Tōhoku people alter the posture of “inserting the hip” into that of “lowering the hip” when they adapted *nanba*. In short, according to Takechi, the geographic locus of the Tōhoku region and its equestrian cultural background in the past ended up affecting the acceptance of *nanba* in that region and, eventually, adjusting its fundamental posture.

Takechi’s categorical and unambiguous demarcation between the “agricultural inserting-the-hip/s” and the “equestrian lowering-the-hip/s” necessitates careful consideration, however. As indicated in the editor’s note, the distinction between “inserting” and “lowering” one’s hip/s is already cumbersome. Added to this is another can of worms, that is, the connection between them and “rice-cropping agriculture in paddies” and “equestrian culture” respectively. My current theory is as follows. First, on the level of language usage, the two phrases emphasize different *foci* of attention: “inserting the hip/s” pays attention to a certain *angle* of the lower end of the spine and “lowering the hip/s” to the *vertical location* of the hip. Accordingly, it does not mean that the lower end of the spine in the latter case does not have an angle. It might well be that the difference between the two lies in a matter of degree in a literal sense (e.g., degree x for “inserting the hip” as opposed to degree y for “lowering the hip”), and that there is no established consensus how distant x and y must be to make the two distinctive from each other. If that is the case, it is quite probable that the difference between x and y is big enough for Takechi to consider them separate, while small enough for some others to regard them as roughly the same. Incidentally, the alleged degree x of the lower end of the spine is to be achieved by “tucking the pelvis,” or, from a different perspective or focus, by “straightening and sinking the lower part of the spine.”

There remain several points of caution for the reader. *Nanba* has recently become a widely-discussed topic chiefly – if not exclusively – in popular discourse, such as trade books, magazines,

blogs, TV programs, and whatnot. Due to its distinctively visible nature, *nanba* tends to be explained (away) in a simple manner. That is to say, *nanba* is thought to have been the default gait of the Japanese, making it a *universal* feature that all the Japanese possessed in common, before the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), when the fledgling Meiji government – with its colonial agenda – modernized and westernized its subjects by correcting their *nanba* gait through military and educational apparatuses. In this kind of narrative, *nanba* easily accommodates Orientalist and reverse Orientalist discourses (e.g., *nihonjin-ron*, the theory of Japaneseness), which assert in one way or another that *nanba* is a specific feature particular to the Japanese, be it bizarre, unique, or superior. The above-mentioned narrative that *nanba* was instantly erased by the government’s westernization-and-modernization-policy is suited to such narratives of particularism and essentialism, whether Orientalist or reverse Orientalist.

On closer look, as a limited number of thinkers such as Takechi and Ashihara suggest, the *nanba* gait involves much more nuanced and complex issues. First, *nanba* entails not so much the limb combination alone as a holistic body operation including, but not limited to, the torso that is not twisted. Second, the *nanba* gait appears broadly in Asian performing, martial, ceremonial, and religious arts, as well as in Western sports and arts, such as on ancient Greek vases and in fencing, boxing, basketball, ballet, and the like. It was thus never unique to pre-modern Japan. Third, while it is certainly the case that the military and educational apparatuses affected the bodily carriage of people in Japan, there is no scholarly agreement regarding the said shift from premodern to modern locomotion. Suffice it to say that it did not happen in a black-and-white manner, as it is usually said to have, but rather must have entailed multiple kinds of ambiguity, phases, and variations of *nanba* (e.g., temporal overlaps, incongruity among the Japanese, etc.).

The impression that Takechi was in line with reverse Orientalist essentialism (i.e., *nihonjin-ron*) is substantial in the excerpt, and indeed, Takechi’s remarks are often cited in reverse Orientalist discourse. The presence of the variation of *nanba* indicates, however, a much more complicated situation than might first appear. This is because, while reverse Orientalist discourse posits *nanba* as a universal feature for the Japanese as a whole, the occurrence of diverse *nanba* – including such a variant lacking what is said to be the essential characteristic of an authentic *nanba* – simply negates such a universalist claim presupposed in this particularism. What is more, Takechi and Tomioka both mock such essentialists right in this excerpt. However, the fact that they both seem to uncritically accept the existence of the “perfect *nanba*” of the Yamato culture and see little problem with characterizing Hijikata’s variant as a mistake – and kabuki’s version as another devastating diversion for that matter – may mean that they share some similar attitudes with the very essentialists they mock.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Takechi’s reasoning for the diversity of *nanba* accords with a performative logic of cultivation (*shugyō*): a training system for performing arts (and beyond) in premodern Japan, in which repeated and devoted training (doing) will create body and mind (being). In the case of *nanba*, the field conditions of constant agricultural praxis determined respective types of *nanba* and the bodies that perform them. A convoluted relationship between essentialism and constructionism is apparent in the performative concept of cultivation, the details of which would need a much larger space to discuss.⁵

One more critical remark about the excerpt is needed regarding the parlance, “the spirituality of Zen” as the origins or source of entertainment-art traditions in Japan (29). Unless put into perspective, the remark in this extract would risk being anachronistic and misleading. This is *not* to be read as suggesting any causal relationship or any influence from X to Y, such as Zen spirituality *affecting* Japanese entertainment-art traditions. Such a question regarding a possibility of Zen’s influence *over* Japanese arts is indeed brought up by Tomioka later in the book, which

Takechi immediately negates, “That’s the other way around, isn’t it” (85). It is, Takechi continues, not so much influence as mutual resonance that was happening between Zen and the said traditions. Prior to the arrival of Zen, peasants had long been accustomed to holding a tense posture in agriculture (i.e., *nanba*) and thus to contemplate things in depth. This echoed with Zen when the latter was brought to Japan, states Takechi, and it was this confluence that led to Zen blossoming in Japan. (The etymology of Zen is meditation after all: Chan, which came from *dhyāna* [introspection into one’s consciousness].)

Notes

- 1 Editor’s note: These are literal translations of the original phrases, *koshi o ireru* (inserting the hip/s) and *koshi o otosu* (lowering the hip/s). Various scholars are split on whether the first, *koshi o ireru* (inserting the hip/s), is idiomatic for being aware of and engaging one’s core or idiomatic for lowering one’s center of gravity. One scholar refers to it as “a modified *demi plie*, 1st position, but with feet parallel and facing forward” (email to the editors from Laurence Kominz, May 8, 2017). Another scholar says that *koshi o ireru* “creates muscular tension all around the hips and center of the body and makes this area a dynamic place from which the impulse for the body to move originates” (email to the editors from Mark Oshima, May 8, 2017). Some scholars think that *koshi o ireru* (inserting the hip/s) and *koshi o otosu* (lowering the hip/s) mean the same thing, although Takechi is clearly using them to indicate different things in this excerpt. Dance scholars may find the terms “tucking the pelvis” and “lowering the pelvis” helpful in visualizing the possible difference between these two terms, although the body-mind conformation(s) suggested by this terminology are difficult to pin down exactly. See also the Commentary by the translator.
- 2 Editor’s note: This is the name for the dominant ethnic group in Japan stemming from the original clan that conquered rival clans and established control over the archipelago. It is the clan associated with the Imperial household.
- 3 Takechi Tetsuji and Tomioka Taeko, *Dentō geijutsu towa nani nanoka: hihyō to sōzō no tame no taiwa* [What Are Traditional Arts? A Dialogue for Criticism and Creation] (Tokyo: Gakugei Shorin, 1988). Hereafter, all references for citations from this work will be given as in-text documents of page numbers in parentheses.
- 4 For my discussion on *nanba*, including this alternative usage of the term, see Maki Isaka, “Naturally Disciplined,” in *Onnagata: A Labyrinth of Gendering in Kabuki Theater* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2016), 87–111. It is also noteworthy that *nanba* cannot be reduced to gait alone. Other parts of the translated book discuss *nanba* well beyond gait: feet, legs, hips, torsi, guts, lungs, diaphragm, vocal cords, etc. Such a holistic approach to subject matter is common in the paradigm of traditional performing arts in Japan. Practitioners of the Suzuki stamping method (by Suzuki Tadashi) might be reminded of a similar understanding that the foot stamping training is also to enhance voice projection.
- 5 See Isaka, *Onnagata*.

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