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Perceived Phantoms: A Phenomenological Observation of Spirituality in *Atsumori*

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ABSTRACT

The paper examines the performance and embodiment of spirituality in Japanese Noh Drama during the Muromachi era from 1336 CE to 1573 CE. It also observes the art form from a modern perspective. Specifically, this research examines the classic Noh Drama play *Atsumori* by Zeami Motokiyo through the phenomenological lens. Phenomenology is a qualitative study that focuses on the perceptions of the human consciousness, and it allows me to examine the impact of subjective experiences on a person's sense of truth. This paper examines the spirituality present through the various religious influences that went into the development of Noh Drama and how phenomenology connects to spirituality and an individual's experience of this world. I will utilize the subjective experience of phenomenology as described by Phenomenological Philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty to argue the innate spirituality of Noh. This lens will be used alongside the concept of Yugen, a traditional Japanese aesthetic that parallels phenomenology with its use of observation of nature. These lenses for viewing subjective experience explain how performance elicits an emotional response that transcends any explanation from the viewer. It ultimately highlights how theatre with religious imagery and messages employs performance techniques to pleasurably shift and even expand subjective experiences as part of its spiritual and entertainment practice.

Keywords: Theatre, Noh, Phenomenology, Spirituality, Zeami Motokiyo

Introduction

There is a performative nature within spirituality. While Western modes of performance do not have much spiritual influence, Eastern performances like Noh Drama are rooted in spirituality. Phenomenology is a useful lens to examine spirituality within the medium. It focuses on how we, as individual humans, perceive a phenomenon and how that impacts our sense of self and actions. Specifically, in *The Primacy of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty stated that "To perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body" (42). The approach works well with theatrical performance which foregrounds

our subjective experience and how we individually experience an event. While we can analyze modern performances with this lens, it is intriguing to see what happens when we look to classical theatrical texts heavily influenced by religion and spirituality in the context of when it was created. By examining Noh Drama in *Atsumori* with a phenomenological lens, this paper will illustrate the original intent of Noh. It will also examine the relevance of *Atsumori* and explain how differing perspectives of a perceived truth from various people enhance each experience. With this information, both classical and modern live performances of

Noh are cemented as a beneficial part of society both then and now.

Methodology

Phenomenology does not focus on how the world exists as it is, but how people see the world from their point of view. It may seem odd to connect the performative nature of theatre to phenomenology. Similar to Western performance methods, Noh Drama performers embody the text presented by various playwrights. However, they not only perform the experience of the character, but also the writer's own experiences and influences. This allows viewers to witness a collection of events that are a form of truth from subjective experience. This subjectivity of truth follows how philosopher Søren Kierkegaard regarded that "for subjective reflection the truth becomes appropriation, inwardness, subjectivity, and the thing is precisely, in existing, to deepen oneself in subjectivity" (Kierkegaard 161). People may argue that a play such as *Atsumori* is fictionalized, but phenomenologist Bert O. States says that "the actor is living proof that the play is true" (127). Theatre is about exploring the human condition, so researchers believe that it would be disrespectful to discredit one experience because of personal bias (States; Yarrow; Edelman). There is also no denying what is seen and heard before someone participating in these spaces, so to deny this as truth is to also deny how another person feels and is changed as a result of what is seen. States also argues that "what the audience shares...is less important than what isolates each spectator vicariously in the experience" (171). Phenomenology is focused on the experience of the individual. Though performance spaces bring people together, the beginning of the show causes a shift of focus to happen. Different lines, movements, or sounds can elicit any number of different responses from audience members which

creates a sense of isolation in a positive manner that allows the performance to speak directly to the viewer.

Spirituality is a difficult concept to cover within a secular context, which is another reason why phenomenology serves as the best lens for this research because as Ralph Yarrow describes in his research on consciousness and performance, "the sacred [is] a phenomenon that is bound up with questions of individual and collective identity" (35). Phenomenology is based on the idea of phenomena, so if the events in a play have a character go through sacred or spiritual events, the experiences tie into their identity making, the truth for the character, the actor, and the audience observing. In Noh, the stories focus on impacting the collective identity of the audience through the individual identity of the main character. The morals presented in this art form and how performances are conducted allow for the audience themselves to make and answer the questions further supporting the idea of spirituality through phenomenology. Mark Fortier states, "phenomenologists often posit the possibility of a more authentic way for humans to exist in the world, one which brings them in fuller touch with things and themselves and which ultimately gives access to truth and even a spiritual realm" (42). Fortier explains that there are many ways in which people may experience their realities, which can lead to spiritual experiences for some. This kind of truth is experiential and individualized. While this spiritual realm may or may not be linked to religion, it is the subjective experience that allows for any of this to be truth to an individual.

While this supports a Western and Eurocentric set of ideologies, Buddhism, which directly influenced the creation of Noh, addresses a similar concept of subjective truth through the use of the Eightfold Path. The first of the eight parts is

known as the “right view,” which is “The first part of the Noble Eightfold Path is right view, which is the understanding of the nature of ourselves and of phenomena that is wisdom” (Rinpoche 4). Zeami, influenced by this practice of Buddhism, also infused a concept similar to phenomenology into his works called *Yugen* which is focused on this world and how we experience “the beauty of gentle gracefulness” (Tsubaki 55). This beauty witnessed by the viewer elicits a response that goes beyond what any language could hope to describe. This concept takes the idea of Zen and ties it into a transformative experience for the viewer. *Yugen* allows us to combine the theoretical aspects of phenomenology about our perception of the world and how that plays into our own personal truths while tying in spirituality through performance. This concept of *Yugen* also addresses the mental space a person goes into for growth because “In the Buddhist tradition, all things are considered as either evolving from or dissolving into nothingness. This ‘nothingness’ is not empty space. It is rather a space of potentiality” (Chase). It is in this space of nothingness that Noh Drama calls the audience to participate in the performance through their own thoughts. This “nothingness” serves to bring those in the performance space to a sense of equilibrium. Zeami framed his works in such a way to give the tools for this kind of enlightenment to help guide the audience, much like the characters’ journeys in *Atsumori*.

Spirituality, as explored in this paper, uses the context of the religious background of Noh while also addressing it in the sense that it is the process and the result of one’s transformation. This transformation, whether emotional, physical, or intellectual, comes from both audience and performer alike by engaging with the performance. Many religions consider their form of spirituality as an ultimate or absolute truth, but spirituality

through performance is defined by action, observation, and an open willingness to participate and reflect on what a performance presents. While Noh is influenced by various religions, one’s subjective experience of watching a performance on stage offers a spiritual experience no matter a person’s creed or the varied amount this experience may impact them. The performance of spirituality is unique in that spirituality gets conveyed to others and to oneself through performative acts such as rituals, prayers, and dances. From this lens, spirituality can be seen as needing performance to properly convey its truths which in turn allows performance itself to be seen as innately spiritual.

Context

The theatrical development of Classical Japanese Noh Drama occurred during the Muromachi era which ran from 1336 CE to 1573 CE in Japan (Zarrilli et al. 120-121). Noh began its life from variety acts that made their way from China to Japan. As performances of singing and dancing spread across the country, the various religions, specifically Shintoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism, within Japan began to influence and shape the developing art. In the early stages, Noh performance was adopted by priests and monks as a way of performing sacred rituals. Later, it would still be mounted within and near Shinto and Buddhist temples, but not specifically for rituals. Zeami formalized and finalized what the art form would be which brought about a connection to one’s spirituality through the teachings of various religions and the embodiment of a living mythos.

This classical Japanese art form is a highly stylized, intensely emotional mode of performance, characterized by highly performative and ornate productions (Bullard). The storylines focus on dramatic tales drawing upon supernatural, historic, or noble characters with a mixture of these done traditionally in a sequence of five plays. Within Noh, there are four main types of performers: shite, waki, hayashi, and kyogen. A shite is the main character of the play, and he is typically the only one to wear a mask unless the character has a companion referred to as the tsure. The waki is a character that supports the main character. The hayashi consist of four musicians alongside a chorus called the jiutai which includes eight to ten singers. The kyogen actors offer occasional narration roles and perform short comedic “kyogen” acts in between the dramas. While these categories define the larger scope of Noh, there are different archetypes and types of characters for the shite, waki, and kyogen performers with each mask being unique. It is also important to note that this was a male-dominated art form until the twentieth century when women started to be seen more on stage.

While the masks and costumes are intricate, the sceneries of Noh dramas are minimalistic. There is typically little to no set other than the stage itself. These stages are designed to look like the Shinto temples where Noh was first practiced during its infancy. There are three areas that make up the Noh stage: the hashigakari, the main stage, and a porch area. The hashigakari is a bridge that connects the off-stage area to the main stage. While some scenes may be staged here, the significance of this bridge mainly serves to show the audience the transference of characters from the spirit world to this world. The main stage is where the majority of the action of the play takes place, and each portion of the stage holds significant value and meaning depending on

what role an actor would play. The porch, which is located slightly off the main stage, is where the musicians perform. Accompanying the stage are three smaller pine trees that line the hashigakari that lead to a painting of a Yogo pine tree on the back wall of the main stage. This “is understood as symbolizing the gods sanctifying the first performance of Noh” (Holley and Muscato). All these elements that comprise Noh, from its stage (see fig. 1) to its performers, allow for this theatrical art to be a transformative and reflective experience.



Fig. 1 Noh Stage

Analysis

The combination of text and performance in Noh creates a spiritual and transformative experience. Looking at *Atsumori*, Zeami depicts the tale of the young samurai as he attempts to pass on from this existence after being confronted with his killer years after the battle he fought. In this form of theatre, the language is poetic and thought-provoking though short in written form. The text of the drama takes up about ten pages with poetic language brimming with imagery and religious symbols. Besides the presence of *Atsumori*'s ghost at the end of the show, Zeami includes religious influences into the characters and structure of the play. *Rensho*, for example, serves the role of the monk that acts as a spiritual guide for the events that transpire in the play. He is an

example of a *waki*. Throughout the performance, he guides the characters and audience members through what can be seen as a guided meditation and prayer. Prayers are written into the script and designated when they should be sung or spoken. Having characters like the *waki* and the presence of prayer within these plays serve as a way of legitimizing this type of performance. The performance of Noh also enhances the meaning of the text. Much of the dialogue in the show is sung in a chant which lengthens the play to be roughly an hour and a half performance. The movement and presentation may seem abnormal especially when coming from the common use of realism in performances today. However, “Noh’s minimalist, abstract style of presentation, which may seem to give access to truer or more intense spiritual and psychological realities than a more naturalistic performance style can offer...” (Mathews 31). This minimalism helps bring those in the theatre space closer to the message of the play. Treating the theatre space as sacred helps any movement and staging to have meaning. Most of the blocking remains still and powerful to heighten the text. Productions are cognizant of when the focus needs to be on the text or when the only way to express what a character is going through is by physicalizing how the events of the show feel through dancing and stylized movements.

In his article “The Japanese Noh Drama in Ritual Perspective,” Richard Pilgrim argues that while Noh was influenced by and portrayed religious ideals of the time, it does not belong to an institutionalized religion and holds little relevance to today’s society. He also claims that Noh dramas are “religious ritual art to the degree that [Noh] genuinely embodies a living mythos and evokes religious experience” (Pilgrim 54). He then goes on to explain how the stage of the performance plays a role in the spiritual

significance behind what is performed as compared to just another performance at a playhouse. The space Noh Dramas happen in have a particular power associated with the production. It was an art influenced by the religions of its time, but through a phenomenological lens of the spirituality of this art form, Noh holds significance in performances both past and present. Though the process by which people today may practice spirituality is different, Noh drama can still serve as a spiritual experience. Noh performances go beyond just embodying a mythos to evoke a religious experience because anything that evokes a change in ones being by participating, whether spectator or performer, is a true religious and spiritual experience similar to prayer and meditation. When people are present in a space together, that energy helps to amplify what is being witnessed and brings a balance between all parties involved. This balance experienced during Noh brings audiences closer to the idea of Yugen.

Combining all of this can now help us understand how religion in Noh Drama utilizes subjective experiences. In *Atsumori*, Rensho is praying and meditating when the ghost of Atsumori appears before him. Rensho begins to be doubtful of the vision when the supernatural presence responds, “Why need you take it for a dream? For I have come so far to be with you in order to clear karma that is real” (Zeami 45). In this line of dialogue, we have multiple truths being realized. First, there is the writer’s truth which sparks the whole play. The religious views of Zeami come into the picture specifically through the mentioning of karma. By having Atsumori talk about karma, Zeami provides how he and possibly many people in Japan at the time of its original production would have felt through the practice of Buddhism. Zeami grounds the play in experiences the audience understands to help people grasp this situation. Secondly,

Atsumori saying this legitimizes Rensho's work as a monk seeing that his prayers and soul searching through Buddhism has allowed for this meeting to be possible. Even though Atsumori appears as a ghost in this scene, we are experiencing the truth Rensho is observing and the truth coming from Zeami's thoughts.

As this scene continues, both Rensho and Atsumori attempt to reach their version of enlightenment with or without the teachings of Buddhism. Eventually, Atsumori begins to realize that what kept him trapped on this mortal plane was the pain, suffering, and hatred he held against the man that had killed him in battle. The two make peace and Atsumori is finally able to move on. This moment at the end of the play is narrated by the chorus, but the battle between vengeance and spiritual truth is told through the *Chū no mai*, a basic Noh dance. The script details key points in the *Chū no mai*, and Theatre Nohgaku gives an accurate depiction of this dance in their performance of *Atsumori* ("Atsumori (敦盛): Final Scene" 0:03-4:22)¹. The dance starts off with grand, slow gestures. While the chorus recounts the day of the battle, the audience can see the deliberation and thought behind the movement. Each move is precise and calculated. The events of the battle between the two rivals causes liveliness to come into the movement and dance with the Taiko drums playing a faster beat and Atsumori's stomping. He draws his sword in retaliation of Rensho, but is brought to his knees in this moment, much like how the chorus describes

Rensho brought him to his knees in battle (see fig. 2). Back then it was by force, but now it was the impact of Rensho's spiritual guidance in the moments before the dance. Atsumori gains enlightenment when he drops his sword in favor of bringing his hands together to pray. He sees how this continuation of violence will not bring him peace and doing so allows him to realize Rensho was never an enemy. This combination of stylized movement and minimalistic accompaniment allow for audience members and performers to experience an inner truth that may not be apparent under standard circumstances. After all, "Noh deals not with actors and actions but with states of being and moves beyond the psychologically real toward the spiritually intimate" (Haakenstad 40). Where words fail, the stylized movement is able to bring the truth of this spirituality to full focus. The ritualistic movement of *Chū no mai* provides a spiritual and religious context to the movement. From a phenomenological perspective, "we can understand the artistic experience as the method by which genuinely novel experiences are impressed onto the body" (Edelman 27). In this final dance, the audience sees the final moments of a life being physicalized by Atsumori. It is his final truth before his death. There are two combatting truths for Atsumori battling each other in this moment, which leads to the abstract movement in the storytelling. Though an actor is playing Atsumori, this phenomenological step allows for these truths to be portrayed properly.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DhSbe4Ctq64>



Fig. 2 Noh actor Mikata Shizuka as the ghost of Atsumori. London, 2009, Victoria and Albert Museum. Photo by Jonathan Greet

The text, the movement, and the music that accompanies the performance serve not only as a way to display intimate and spiritual truths of the performers and writers, but as a way of helping the audience to discover their own truths. For the society during the time *Atsumori* was written, “It was to remind the samurai of the transience of life, the honor of living, and Buddhist transcendence awaiting all” (Houseal). While samurai held their own codes relating to honor, it was important for audience members to come to their own conclusion on how violence can trap us much like they did Atsumori. With the reminder of Buddhist ideals and prayers from Rensho, many audience members may come to the same conclusion that Atsumori did. Even today when many are more separated from the original context Zeami wrote for, the innate spirituality of performance allows for the viewers’ subjective experiences to become truth under the phenomenological lens. The

reflective nature of Atsumori and Noh Drama allow for this deeper understanding of humans. While we’ll never be in samurai culture in modern times, the spiritual experience brought by Noh Drama speaks to something about the human condition. Even in performances from modern companies such as Theatre Nohgaku, this method of viewing allows for the religious aspects to still hold true and impact those participating in the space.

Looking at the final scene of this performance again, Atsumori forgives Rensho and begins to transcend from the mortal plane of existence. The methodical and precise movement alone provides a great example of the subjective experiences a Noh Drama can provide. The movements to display Atsumori’s anger and eventual realization are focused on grandiose outward movements that call upon the chanters and instrumentalists as well as the audience to witness and participate in the moment. Once the audience is fully enraptured by these movements, the actor is still, and the stage is silent letting the moment bounce back to the audience. These moments of stillness provided throughout the play allow for audience members to feel, react, and be in the moment. Atsumori then begins quicker-paced movements that are more personal allowing the audience to focus on themselves after the moment of realization until his eventual departure from the world. In addition to this moment, there is chanting that evokes a meditative state accompanied by the beating of high-pitched drums that brings the audience into a trance to aid your journey as well as the journey of the actor evoking Atsumori in this moment. This journey was carefully plotted out by Zeami to bring about the transformative space of nothingness that *Yugen* brings. As described by Zeami, “To wander on in a huge forest without thought of return. To stand upon the shore and gaze after a boat that disappears behind distant islands.

To contemplate the flight of wild geese seen and lost among the clouds..." These thoughts expressed by Zeami himself explicate his philosophy behind the making of Noh. The experience of these performances is rooted in some people's subjective experiences of the world. Once the moment subsides, each viewer, based upon their perception of what happened, has been transformed by the prayer and meditation in the performance that just occurred.

Conclusion

Through the philosophy and origins of this art form, Noh drama has served as a spiritual guide for audiences at its beginning and today. How audiences are moved by a piece during its stillness allows for these performances to become spiritual in nature. In today's environment, these moments can be seen as a luxury, and Noh allows for the audience to think which can act as a guided meditation on our own lives. This spiritual side of performance seen in Noh Drama with phenomenology allows for performances of all kinds to be a beneficial part of society, not only to entertain but to enlighten.

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