INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY

A Shared Unity Amidst Diversity
Kathakali and Kabuki

by
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PREFACE

This Resource Paper on A Shared Unity Amidst Diversity tries to analyse the similarities between one of the traditional and highly valued and appreciated art forms of India and Japan - Kathakali and Kabuki. The Paper analyses the traditional dance theatres of the two performing arts from their origin to the current performance.

The author Ms. Geethanjali hails from Kerala, (Southern State) and is familiar with the Kathakali art, has grown up in the town famous for Kathakali art. She had an opportunity to enjoy a Kabuki performance in Japan recently and was impressed with the similarities of the two arts. This booklet is an outcome of her thoughts.

It is our earnest desire that the traditional arts of both the countries should be appreciated and treasured. We appeal to every one of the art lovers to help save art forms for posterity.

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N. Krishnaswami
Chairman

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Introduction

Both India and Japan share a deep love of traditional arts, be it visual or performance art - music and dance or theatre. Both countries are known for their long history of art and art promotion by the royal courts. Performing arts that may have experienced a decline for a few decades have seen a revival, with the state and citizens taking an active part in its promotion. From state-sponsored institutions to performance spaces and performing opportunities, both India and Japan have been delving deep into its folk and classical art history and taking initiatives to encourage traditional music, dance and theatre amongst the modern generation.

In India, Bharatanatyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi and other Classical dance traditions compete with the more modern cinema-based dance styles. Yet, there is a definite audience for traditional dances and many youngsters, both urban and rural, still take to learning the forms as well as appreciating them. But, in the long run, will the interest in these art forms still remain? In Japan too, traditional arts and performances compete with the kawaii culture and western pop culture, both being strong forces in their own right. This paper attempts to take a close look at two specific traditional dance theatre forms in both the cultures,

Kathakali in India and Kabuki in Japan, and compare the similarities in their forms and their different circumstances.

Kathakali : A brief historical perspective

The word 'Kathakali' is an amalgam of two words, katha meaning story and kali meaning play. From these two words has emerged one of the most captivating dance theatre forms of India. Said to have emerged around the 16th century, Kathakali sees the definite influence of other traditional performance forms and is said to have evolved from Chakkiarkuthu, Koodiyattam, Krishnanattam and Ramanattam, to name a few. It has elements of Kalaripayattu, the martial art form of Kerala too in its body movements and stances. Koodiyattam, the ancient performance form attached to temples is said to be the original ancestor of Kathakali. Legend has it that Krishnanattam, an earlier dance drama form was performed only in temples as an offering to Lord Krishna. When the Zamorin of Calicut (the then ruler) refused to send the Krishnanattam troupe for a performance to Travancore, the Ruler of Kottarakkara set forth to avenge the insult by coming up with Ramanattam, a performance form to enact the stories from the Ramayana.

Kathakali has traditional stories from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, and also represents the Puranas. Traditionally, the stories and legends were brought alive through performances that lasted from dusk to dawn. The long performances have now given way to shorter shows, keeping in mind the paucity of time in modern day life. Every performance is an amalgam of dance, song and percussion and has all three groups of performers. Each group requires specific training in that aspect of Kathakali. It is a case in point that Kathakali was mainly performed by men in earlier times, something that kabuki still shares with Kathakali.

The emergence of Kabuki

Kabuki, the highly stylized, traditional dance drama form of Japan has elements of dance, drama, music and theatre. The word 'Kabuki'

traditionally meant 'unorthodox entertainment' form and the word was derived to mean one who is bizarrely dressed or out of the ordinary. However, the kanji that represent Kabuki, now come to mean song, dance and skill. Traced back to the early 17th century, the Edo period, this form is seen as the first entertainment form that addressed the tastes of the common people. Okuni, a female dancer at the grand Shrine of Izumo is said to have founded this form. Her parodies of Buddhist prayer drew the attention of the common man. However, the all too sensuous nature of the dance by female dancers and their engagement in prostitution, led to a ban by the then government in 1629, the period of the Tokugawa Shogunate. The art was taken over by young boys (wakashuu kabuki), but the concern for failing morals among them too led to the downfall of Kabuki by 1652. The art form was at crossroads till it was taken over by older men (yarou kabuki) and a refinement in the skills and portrayals has seen it grow in stature to what it is today, with professional theatres and performances and impeccably run Kabuki theatres in the main cities of Japan, notably Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto. Today, Kabuki is recognised as one of the three classical performance forms in Japan, along with Noh and Bunraku. It has been given the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO.

Kabuki showcases stories from history, love stories, moral conflicts and well known tragedies. Often, it depicts only a part of the story, just as in Kathakali.

The Actors in Kathakali

Kathakali is a highly stylized form and much of its splendour lies in the acting and dance. However, a very good part of the appeal also lies in the elaborate makeup of the artistes and the costumes. The costumes and the makeup are intricately done and the characters are recognisable through their Vesham or makeup. The five main types of makeup are Pacha, Kathi, Kari, Thadi and Minukku. These are important in that there are colours associated with each of the styles and the actors are dressed according to their emotion and character (hero or villain, good or bad).

To bring it to a simplistic explanation,

Pacha denotes noble characters

Kathi (knife) denotes the villains

Thadi (beard) is of three types white beard (virtuous characters like Hanuman, the monkey God), red beard (evil characters), and black beard (hunters or people of the forest).

Kari is for demonesses.

Minukku (prettifying) represents female characters and some sages .

Other characters like the hamsa (swan) in Nala's love story, Garuda (Eagle God) or Jatayu in the Ramayana are considered to be messengers and are exceptions to the above classification.

The painted faces make it seem that a dancer is looking through a mask, although there isn't one. The colours of the mask and costume silently communicate qualities like virtuosity, sage- like renunciation or anger. Part of the makeup (teppu) is done by the artist himself and then, taken over by experts. Apart from the face colours, the eyebrows, lashes and lips are made to look prominent and they add to the Aharya (costume, makeup). The chutti or rice paste applied to the face characteristically enhances the face. Kathakali costumes are attractive and consist of a long white skirt worn over padding and colourful over jackets. These give the actors a larger than life appearance. Add to it, the kiritam or head gear that is mandatory for all actors, and the impact is complete. It is to be noted that the makeup in Kathakali, like Kabuki, allows for facial expressions to be displayed with great skill and makes the actor the central focus of all performances.

The Actors in Kabuki

Like Kathakali, the kesho or makeup in Kabuki is what makes the actor the focal point and cynosure of all eyes. The costumes are exquisitely crafted and sometimes, even flamboyant to suit the actor and the role. The kesho is heavy, elaborate and important, as is the case with

Kathakali. The makeup denotes the age, gender and even the mood of the character. A thick layer of oil to ensure that the makeup sticks to the face, is followed by the whitening of the face by oshiroi. The white paint is made of rice powder (as is the case with the chutti of Kathakali). The whiteness again is dictated by the character that is played. Over this, come the important face lines in red and black that enhance the eyes and mouth to give the dramatic effect. Supernatural characters are denoted by the use of kumadori style makeup which consists of shapes and lines in different colours. The colours on the face denote qualities. Red denoted anger and passion, while dark blue is sadness. Purple denotes noble qualities and pink perhaps, for youth. It is said that actors were required to put on their own makeup, so that they get to live their characters and understand them better.

The kumadori faces are an art form by themselves. When a Samurai fights evil to make the righteous triumph, he has to perform supernatural acts. This is the concept of being possessed by a kami (God) that makes him capable of the enormous task in front of him. The kesho is the vehicle that lets the actor depict this in Kabuki, especially in the Aragato style (rough style). Many of the Samurai characters are dressed in padded clothing and look larger than life. This is the intended effect in the stylized form that is Kabuki.

The costumes, wigs and even the props in Kabuki depend on the story and character being represented. Samurai (bushi) and nobles wear resplendent costumes and the the jidaimono stories are displayed in a highly flamboyant setting and with showy costumes and props (For example, an enormous sword to exaggerate the violent quality).

The Accompanists in Kathakali and Kabuki

Kathakali is danced to the accompanying music called geetam, which is the vocalist rendering the song in Malayalam, Sanskrit or more often, in Sanskritised Malayalam. The singing by the vocalist is accompanied by percussionists who may play the traditional percussion instruments of Kerala the maddalam, chenda, ilathalam, idakka, chengala or even the

conch (sankhu). For the most part, the dancers dance to the words of the song which in fact, is the story of the episode. However, artistes are given a chance to show their prowess and emote individually too, not in accordance to the words. This unrestricted individual adaptation is where the seniors (asan) truly excel.

Take the case of Kabuki, where the actor is the essential focus of the show. He too, has musicians and vocalists accompanying him. The high pitched singing by the singers is accompanied by the stringed instrument, shamisen. Apart from this, two oak boards are clapped together to get the ki and tsuke sounds. The musicians and singers are seated to the two opposite sides of the stage. There are other instruments too that accompany the singing like the drums (taiko) and fue (flute).

Just as the percussion drums up the atmosphere for a vatham (killing) towards the end of a story in Kathakali, the ongaku (music) is used deftly to create an atmosphere as well as set the action in kabuki.

The Stage

The performance space in Kathakali is a simple, almost bare entity which the actors bring alive with their skill and prowess. The space is not decorated except for a huge nelavillakku or traditional bronze lamp, lit with wicks fuelled by oil. In ancient times, the lamp was the only source of light and the entire performance was carried by the actors by conveying their emotions through the dimly lit space. Today, performances are done in auditorium spaces where electric lights are used. However, traditional spaces too exist in Kerala, where the dancer is the only embellishment in the performance.

Another notable point is the colourful silk curtain that is stitched together and held by two people at the beginning of the performance. The beginning of the performance has a theranottam or roughly translated, the curtain raiser. Here, the artiste is behind the handheld curtain and slowly, reveals himself. The entries and exits of the performers are all dependent on the part they play and may be dramatic or silent. The story is after all, greater than the artiste.

The stage in Kabuki as it exists today is a magnificent, technologically powered space. However, the stage remains simple to look at, with only the mandatory pine tree or matsu as a property. However, the stage is easily converted by lifts, trapdoors(seri), and even has a revolving mechanism! This facilitates dynamic stage changes today and here, Kabuki differs from Kathakali completely. Kabuki is more a theatre art in this aspect with property, scene and dynamic change of place as is the case in theatre. Kathakali remains a journey in the mind, where the dancer takes the audience forward with the might of his performance alone. This is not to undermine the all-powerful acting by Kabuki veterans. The case in point here is that they do have the support of beautiful, awe-inspiring stage settings which again, are a work of art in themselves.

The entry of some of the actors is through the hanamichi or the long raised path into the audience section. This gives a feeling of the actors walking through and interacting with the audience, leaving a lasting impression. In kathakali too, these types of entries through the audience may sometimes be used depending on the story, though no real hanamichi exists.

Stories in Kathakali and Kabuki

The Kathakali repertoire consisits of traditional themes and stories from the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. Notable among these are the stories that revolve around Lord Krishna and the Pandavas. The Puranas are represented in the dance form with a particular rasa (emotion) running through a piece. The characters in the performance are of three main types sattvik (the hero, the God, the good), tamasik (the anti-hero, the demon, the evil) and rajasik (the qualities that dominate here are lust, greed, vanity). Through all the stories, the central character is revealed and developed through the performance and in the end, it is the moral victory that is conveyed through the story good always wins over evil. The righteous always triumph. It is said that there are hundreds of Kathakali stories. Some notable stories are

Kalyana Sougandhikam, Bali Vijayam, Nala Charitam. All these stories are deeply rooted in the Hindu tradition.

In recent times, there has been a movement to incorporate new themes and stories that are secular into Kathakali. Many such attempts and successful experiments have taken off. Notable among these, is the adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello into Kathakali!

Kabuki stories can be broadly classified into two main types based on the content the jidaimono and the sewamono. The jidaimono consists of historical works about the Samurai and nobles. Most of them are set in earlier periods, even if written in the Edo period. The sewamono is more about the domestic stories of traders and their existence in the Edo period.

Some stories of kabuki were first written for a puppet performance and later, adapted for kabuki, whereas many others were written purely for the kabuki stage. Newer kabuki productions written after the Second World War are classified as the new kabuki style or Shin kabuki.

Performance and Acting Style

As has been mentioned, both these forms of performance in Asia are stylized forms. The performance rests on the square shoulders of the actors, especially the main character of the story. The very word "acting" is a minute word to describe the emoting in both the art forms, as it is a combination of both dance and drama.

In Kathakali, there are pure dance portions that are a combination of footwork, leaps, turns and are part of what is termed the kalasams. These are a joy to watch as the very basic stance in Kathakali requires the body weight to be balanced on the outer edges of the feet, with the legs being in a slightly curved position. This is probably the first challenge for a novice student to face! Along with the footwork, the hand gestures or mudras are a very important part of conveying of the story. These are based on the traditional classic dance text. The facial muscles, controlled eye movements eyebrow, eyeball and eyelids are

the mark of a good performer and veteran actors are known by their ability to convey complex emotions with just minute eye movements. Kathakali is played out with the body of the performer converting the song that is sung and the story that is told, into movements and this enthrals the audience along with the emotion, music, percussion and costume. In the lamplight, the audience in turn, interprets the story. There are times in the story where the vocal song ceases and the performer is allowed to describe a scene or take the story forward on his own with just the accompanying music. This too has powerful impact, especially when a knowledgeable audience is viewing the performance and they understand what is being said just by the gestures.

Kabuki acting has been passed on from generation to generation in families, from father to son or from teacher to student. In this, it is similar to Kathakali or any other traditional dance form in India, all of which have a guru shishya paramapara (teacher-student tradition). Certain families also are known to be famous for acting out specific stories in Kabuki. The Kabuki performance has many striking element like the poses (mie) that are frozen for a few moments for impact or the striking fighting techniques (tachimawari). Add to this, the unique dramatic acting technique that captivates the audience. Sometimes, an actor quickly changes roles in the sequence too. The character's walking style, sometimes very exaggerated, the way his entry or exit from the hanamichi or stage is done, has the audience shout out encouragement, just as is the case in Kathakali.

As in Kathakali, the importance of the curtain comes in here, but perhaps to a greater degree. There are curtains that reveal or conceal exits and entries or the stage setting as is required. This is very much part of the expression of the story. An interesting aspect of Kabuki is the presence of a stage assistant on the stage, at times. He aids in various ways with props, adjusting makeup and maybe even, mopping up the perspiration. He is clothed completely in black. In kabuki, it is believed that black is an invisible colour and the kurogo (stage assistant) is supposed to be invisible. In this, the audience is also part of the convention, in the willing suspension of disbelief!

Kathakali and Kabuki in the Present Times

Any traditional or classical performing art finds itself at the crossroads when popular entertainment is nearby. Today, the scenario is such that television and other forms of media compete with each other in bringing movies, dramas, soap operas, contemporary art forms and music to us. The younger generation is definitely far removed from older and more classical performing art forms, especially in the urban setting where they have access to the latest cinema, western thought and urban entertainment centres. This is true of every country in the world and here is where specific effort has to be taken to support traditional performing arts and encourage it among the youth of the country.

Japan has been in the forefront of art conservation and Kabuki is recognised as a traditional performing art with UNESCO granting it the Intangible Heritage status. This definitely gives it the pride of place in a society that reveres its culture and respects its history. Hence, even though there was a period after the occupation of Japan by the Allied forces when Kabuki was banned, it has seen resurgence. Many new pieces have been written and the Japan Arts Council has been at the forefront of building National Theatres across Japan and providing state of art facilities to perform Kabuki. In addition, it also has programs to fund and train Kabuki actors. Amongst the Japanese, going to a Kabuki show is still a formal event and the events are priced high, but a definitely appreciative audience exists. In addition, organizations like the Japan Foundation help in international tours and lectures on Kabuki which encourage the art form and makes sure that it remains a proud traditional part of the art fabric of a modernised nation.

In India too, classical dance forms compete with cinema and pop culture, with the unfortunate result of the latter completely obliterating many a traditional performing art form. To be fair, there is an audience for Kathakali too and in Kerala, many a performance is related to temple festivals. A recent resurgence in performances has been seen but is it enough? In the earlier days, most Kathakali performers were supported in the courts of the royal patrons. Today,The Ministry of Culture under the Government of India does run scholarships and grants for

traditional art forms and Kathakali is definitely part of the scheme. In Kerala, the Kerala Kalamandalam, started in 1930 by the famous poet Vellathol Narayana Menon, remains a premiere institution for the training and performance of Kathakali. It is a grant in aid centre under the Government of India. Kalamandalam attracts many international students too.

However, much has to be done to change the situation and circumstances of the artistes themselves. In Japan, many Kabuki actors appear on television. It is not the case in India with Kathakali. It is possible for the private sector in India to encourage and support art initiatives, as the access to funds lies with them. Maybe in partnership with the Government and art NGOs, corporate entities can step in to build performance spaces for traditional dance forms like Kathakali. In this, a leaf can be taken from the story of the preservation and development of Kabuki's performance spaces in Japan. In the future when there is adequate support for the encouragement and performance of traditional arts in India, we can hope that young India will respect, encourage and appreciate their abundant ethnic past.

Author's Note

In the summer of 2015, during a Japan Foundation Teacher Training Programme, I was taken to the imposing National Theatre at Tokyo to watch a spectacular show of Kabuki *Yoshitsune no senbon zakura*. This famous story of the Samurai has 5 acts but on show that day were two scenes. In the final moments of the unforgettable show, when the General Tomomori throws himself over a cliff with an anchor tied to himself, in order to end his own life as was considered Samurai- like in the past, I was taken to a memory of watching spectacular scenes of Kathakali, where many a story ends with a vatham or killing. The similarity of the two forms was striking to a lay person like me, who has no link to dance theatre forms, except as an avid spectator or rasika. Of course, the process of appreciating Kathakali or Kabuki also lies in understanding the story and the form. In my case, the Kabuki show was preceded by a half- day lecture session at the Japan Foundation

Japanese Language Centre at Kita Urawa, Saitama which serves as the basis of information for this article. My gratitude to Mr.Takeshi Kitamura of the Japan Foundation Language Centre at Kita Urawa for his illuminating talk on the history, form and elements of Kabuki. Much of my interest in Kathakali comes from having grown up in the town nearest to Kerala Kalamandalam, Shoranur, in a family of Kathakali aficionados.

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The following resources were used as references for the article

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