

Seventeenth Century Kabuki: Rationales of Control

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Abstract

During the course of the seventeenth century, kabuki was accommodated within the concurrently developing Tokugawa order. Starting as deviant, subversive, bawdy entertainment in the aftermath of the wars of unification, by the end of the century kabuki was effectively an established form of theatre undergoing formalization of its every aspect, with the important proviso that it was deemed fit only for commoners. This paper traces the ideological, historical and aesthetic pressures that came to bear on the development of this now iconic form of Japanese culture. A four-fold schema is proposed: public order concerns; policing the boundaries of the Tokugawa social order; maintaining samurai identity and pre-eminence; and long-standing samurai – merchant political contestation.

Key Words: Kabuki, control, seventeenth century, Tokugawa

Introduction

At the beginning of the seventeenth century great interest was aroused in Kyoto in a subversive new dance-based performance that came to be known as *kabuki*. In strong contrast to *nō*, the stately, refined drama patronised by upper samurai since its establishment as an elite art form two centuries earlier, kabuki was rough, bawdy, and multifarious in its elements. When the Tokugawa authorities issued edicts on performance arts, they deemed the smoothly-integrated, high aesthetics of *nō* appropriate viewing for the ruling samurai, and banned attendance at kabuki, which was thought to be low entertainment, fit only for commoners.

In the first two decades of the seventeenth century *kabuki* was less an art form than an attitude; associated with the so-called *kabuki-mono*, kabuki was part of a wider cultural movement that has been compared by serious scholars to the punk movement in Britain in the 1970s, though it was

more violent and subversive than punk even threatened to be. When the battle of Sekigahara secured the hegemony of Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1600, peace finally settled on the country after over a century of strife. A carnival eruption of “lust for life and extravagance” took place. *Kabuki-mono* with strange hairstyles roamed the streets wearing outlandish clothes and carrying exaggerated accoutrements such as absurdly long tobacco pipes (Ortolani 1990,153-4). It is in this immediate context that kabuki the performance art emerged.

At the time the slang word *kabuku*, meaning ‘to slant’, referred to a range of non-conformist activities ranging from unconventional appearance to political subversion. Many of the *kabuki-mono* were dispossessed samurai, known as *rōnin*, masterless and homeless after the recent wars of unification. They flocked to the cities, particularly Kyoto, some looking for entertainment and employment, some intent on political agitation against the newly powerful Tokugawa¹. In 1603 the governor of Kyoto in-

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troduced as a countermeasure a law that “divided all citizens into groups of ten and made all ten responsible for any crime committed by any member of that group” (Ortolani 1990,157). In the same year, skits and dances performed on the dry river-bed of Kyoto’s Kamo River by the legendary founder of kabuki and self-styled shrine maiden, Okuni, attracted the appellation ‘kabuki’ due to their risqué and subversive content. In the face of repressive government policies, theatricality was possibly the only safe mode of dissent.

In addition to *rōnin*, Okuni’s kabuki attracted the attention of merchants, who were subject to the indignity of being placed lowest on the hierarchy of classes (the *shinōkōshō* system: samurai *shi*; peasant farmers *nō*; artisans *kō*; and merchants *shō*). During the rule of Toyotomi Hideyoshi, samurai had been encouraged to move from villages to towns; under the Tokugawa this movement was enforced. Peasants were to live in the villages to farm the land, and the other classes were to live in towns and cities. Previously itinerant outcast performers also settled in the cities. Kabuki actors, while remaining outcasts, attracted the patronage and adoration of the *chōnin*, presenting a potent cultural challenge to the nascent Tokugawa order.

In the urban context, with which we are concerned, the most important social division was that between samurai, on the one hand, and artisans and merchants, collectively known as *chōnin* (townsmen), on the other. The authorities sought to distinguish samurai from *chōnin*, one direct method being frequently issued sumptuary regulations, another the containment of *chōnin* culture. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, wealthy townsmen, known as *machishū*, had created an urban culture centred around satirical *kyōgen* and ostentatious annual festivals such as that held at Gion in Kyoto. Just as the Ashikaga shoguns had been concerned to contain the development of a distinctive *machishū* cultural identity, the Tokugawa government was faced with the problem of dealing with a potentially disruptive focal point of *chōnin* identity, that of the pleasure quarters, of

which kabuki formed an integral part. Samurai – townsmen contestation was further complicated by the imperative of quarantining outcasts in their new urban context.

The purpose of this paper is to explicate the process whereby the new art form kabuki became accommodated in the emerging Tokugawa order. This should not be viewed simply as a successful neutering of fertile folk culture on the part of the *bakufu*. The extravagant show of force by the third Tokugawa shogun when, in 1632, he marched an army of 307,000 through the old capital, Kyoto, should not lead us to assume that the *bakufu* could behave with impunity in all fields. Cultural contestation is a more subtle business. To some extent, at least, power was distributed between different constituencies of Tokugawa society. In addition to the military and administrative power of the Tokugawa, there was the economic power of the merchants² and the symbolic power of marginal groups³.

In his book, *Representations of Power*, Michele Marra called for further research “on the neutralising forces of Tokugawa cultural institutions” and “further clarification of the cultural politics of the Tokugawa government” (1993,172). Interesting evidence of this exists in the form of edicts directed at kabuki, and it is the import of these prohibitions and stipulations that we will seek to clarify, though care must be taken not to over-emphasize official intervention. Considering kabuki’s origins, the question that requires answering is why the bakufu chose to accommodate kabuki rather than ban it outright as they did satirical *kyōgen* and as bakufu of previous centuries had done with other troublesome merchant-backed cultural forms. Unlike the Ashikaga bakufu, for example, which banned many *machishū* gatherings, the Tokugawa bakufu pursued successive strategies of toleration, containment, and then more active intervention, culminating in the institutionalisation of kabuki by the end of the century⁴.

Comparing the regularised glories of Genroku ka-

buki at century's end to its bawdy beginnings, it is clear that kabuki was accommodated (and, indeed, accommodated itself) within the Tokugawa order as it developed over the course of the seventeenth century. The story of that transformation is closely related to the theme of this paper but requires separate treatment. What is sought in this paper are the rationales of control for the exciting and seemingly anarchic dance-based performance art which emerged amid the chaos of the wars of unification.

Ikegami asserts: "The consolidation of the Tokugawa state and the rise of the kabuki theatre can be regarded as twin progeny of the preceding civil war period" (1997,156). Policies fundamental to the Tokugawa order were initially implemented in the context of late sixteenth century military, ideological, and symbolic conflict. This indicates the necessity of seeking rationales of control in the preceding decades. Before turning to that task, however, sketches of early and late seventeenth century kabuki will serve to illustrate the transformation of kabuki across the course of the seventeenth century that is part of the subject of our enquiry.

Early Kabuki

Pictures and screens of early kabuki give an idea of what kind of spectacle it was. Depictions of Okuni show her on a stage set up on the Kamo riverbed, dressed in masculine fashion, leaning casually on a long sword, with a short sword set in her *obi*⁵. Around her neck are slung a gold necklace and a Portuguese crucifix, and from her right hip hang gourds, *inrō*, a tobacco pouch, and other containers. Sometimes she wears Portuguese pants and a foreign hat, an odd and challenging get-up, especially for a woman. According to written sources⁶, she performed dances and skits, mixing religious *nenbutsu-odori* with profane popular dances, indulging in sexual innuendo, and invoking the spirit of the famed *rōnin*, Nagoya Sanza, according to "an unproven but persistent tradition....the lover and main collaborator" of Okuni, but more likely a notorious *kabuki-mono* whose daring exploits provided early kabuki with

thrilling subject matter (Ortolani 1990,158). An early kabuki song⁷ is markedly anti-Buddhist in tone, exhorting viewers to hedonism in the face of ephemeral existence, eschewing asceticism and praising human love above the dictates of authority, religious and temporal:

Be in a frenzy
In this dream-like floating world.
Even the thunder
That rumbles and rumbles
Cannot put you and me
Asunder.

It may be significant that despite evidence of origins in the Kansai area, Okuni claimed affiliation with *Izumo taisha*⁸, thereby giving herself an extra frisson of contrariety amidst the constraints of the times, at the same time gaining nominally official status as a putative shamaness. Travel restrictions of the day meant that it would have been difficult for Okuni and her troupe to move around without documents testifying to such affiliation (genuine or not). Was it the case that Okuni adopted the pose of a religious mendicant⁹ until a more acceptable role presented itself in the form of urban patronage?

In its new urban environment, Okuni's innovative performance style was quickly adopted by bordellos¹⁰, where the name of the game was eclecticism. Bordellos were in the business of attracting customers and to do so courtesan/prostitutes performed kabuki, *sarugaku*, *nenbutsu odori*, and even *nō*¹¹, in cavalier disregard of the stipulations of categorising aestheticians/ideologues. Religious institutions made way for the pleasure districts, bordellos stepped in to provide patronage, itinerant performers sought settled accommodation in the theatre districts, and religious ritual moved even further in the direction of entertainment.

Genroku Kabuki

From such humble beginnings, by the end of the seventeenth century the glories of Genroku Kabuki had developed. Kabuki was performed in officially

licensed theatres in the three main cities; plays had characteristic and easily recognised structures which tended to affirm official ideology even within a plebeian context; interaction with the audience had been formalised; actors were bound in a strict in-house hierarchy; female roles were played by men in increasingly codified fashion; famous actors endorsed products and were themselves objects of desire and veneration in a nascent consumer society; a trade in woodblock prints of actors flourished in symbiosis with kabuki as an integral component of urban Tokugawa life.

Having provided brief sketches of early and late seventeenth century kabuki, we can turn attention to the social, political and ideological dynamics that account for the way kabuki became accommodated within the Tokugawa order. Starting from the perspective of the bakufu, we consider on what grounds policy towards kabuki was formulated.

Ruling Ideology either side of 1600

It might be taken for granted that elucidation of rationales of control rests on explication of underlying ideology, and such an approach would have been mandatory when the received scholarly view was that the Tokugawa order rested on the foundation of a coherent body of neo-Confucian thought. However, Herman Ooms, among others, has questioned the existence of a neo-Confucian orthodoxy in the Tokugawa period, certainly in the seventeenth century. Contrary to the assertions of an anterior generation of historians, there was no official ideology, let alone an “epochal decision by Tokugawa Ieyasu to shift the spiritual authority from Buddhism to....neo-Confucianism” (quoted in Ooms 1984,31). The closest we have to an official statement of ideology is the Ieyasu testament, produced under Iemitsu for enshrinement in the Nikkō mausoleum. This document “indiscriminately uses Confucian, Shintō, and Buddhist terminology....with the sole purpose of sanctifying the political order” (Ooms 1985,66). Clear elucidation of rationales of control with reference to a single, coherent ideology (or even tradition of thought) is simply not possible.

The guiding principle of Tokugawa policy-makers was pragmatism. Confucianism certainly provided ideological support for socio-political policies such as *shinōkōshō* but, as we shall see later, *shinōkōshō* itself was instituted in the context of a political struggle between samurai and merchant going back to the fourteenth century. Decision-making before and after 1600 took place against the backdrop of a complex and shifting national scene. Ooms correctly portrays the three unifiers of Japan as opportunists, and it need scarcely be pointed out that opportunists are invariably pragmatists. At the same time, Ooms dates “the first stirrings of a discourse that took some one hundred years....to mature” to around 1570 (Ooms 1984,38). How is it that such a discourse came into being in the face of pragmatic leadership and the absence of an official ideology?

Utilising a conception of *hegemony* derived from Gramsci, one can avoid ascriptions of “aims and motivations of alleged main actors” in the creation of ideology (ibid.,36). Establishment of an ideology “is not an event but a....never-ending process of regularisation and situational adjustment in a climate of indeterminacy” (ibid.). This process of regularisation and situational adjustment took the form of “minute and precise status stipulations”, an issue directly addressed in the *Kiyomizu monogatari*¹² (Ooms 1985, 155). It is in this sense that specific edicts directed against kabuki have a relevance far beyond the theatrical world itself. Considered against a broader array of political, social, and religious controls, the accommodation of kabuki elucidates the ongoing (and to some extent non-conscious) construction of samurai identity, particularly in opposition to merchant culture.

Legitimising Samurai Rule

Samurai had ample opportunity to pursue their vocation during the wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Samurai identity was defined on the battlefield. Yet with national unification and the cessation of conflict samurai had to re-invent themselves as virtuous exemplars with a mandate to rule. The significance of samurai strategies of

administrative legitimacy for our theme is the influence of antagonistic relationships between the samurai and other sectors of Japanese society on social policy and what light that sheds on samurai - merchant contestation.

Nobunaga, upon his rise to prominence, employed two concepts of legitimisation, both of which were consonant with Confucianism: “*kōgi*, the public good, and *tenka*, the realm” (Ooms 1985,26). However, the efficacy of these legitimising strategies came under strain with Nobunaga’s confrontation with the *Ikkō-ikki*, a sect of warlords and associated peasant proprietors whose threat lay in the fact that they had a “full-fledged world view that legitimised...the stance they took against the new daimyo power” (ibid.,31). The confrontation between these two loci of sixteenth century power is significant because many innovations that later became part of the Tokugawa order (such as a disarmed peasantry, land surveys, and tying peasants to the land) “took shape as anti-*ikki* policies” (ibid.,30-1). *Ikkō-ikki* discourse was a threat to Nobunaga because followers recognised no intermediaries between themselves and the emperor. A comparable threat was posed by the *Hokke* sect, which since the fifteenth century had been generously patronised by Kyoto merchants in an attempt to “constitute themselves as an autonomous centre of power whose ideological legitimation they found in the epistemology of Nichiren’s followers” (Ooms 1985,37; Marra 1993,137).

Nobunaga’s response to this double-barrelled ideological challenge was to create a Shintō-inspired cult with himself as its presiding deity. By so doing, Nobunaga claimed power without reference to the imperial and shogunal institutions. This was a strategy of legitimisation befitting the expedencies of military rule, and as such also appealed to Hideyoshi. Ieyasu, however, saw fit to accept the title of shogun, thereby nominally deriving legitimacy from the imperial house. A parallel Tokugawa strategy of legitimisation was rule under the concept of *tendō* (the “Way of Heaven”) as stated in the Ieyasu testament housed at Nikkō (Ooms

1985,89). Furthermore, Iemitsu effectively balanced the grounds of legitimacy of his own title of shogun by subjecting the imperial institution to a number of coercive indignities, including annual observances at Nikkō, thus making it plain where true power lay.

The legitimising strategies of the three unifiers, and successive Tokugawa shoguns, ‘naturally’ placed merchants in a position of subservience. This was no accident: to a large extent such oppression was directed at the economic, political, ideological and religious challenge mounted by the merchant class¹³. *Shinōkōshō* was polemical, for all its Confucian justifications. It constituted a rationale of control of the bulk of society. Admittedly, the Confucian emphasis on the importance of production justified ideologically the superior social status of farmers over merchants, but the increasing power of the merchant class had been of great concern to the ruling elite for a long time and in this case the language of Confucianism fit the pragmatic aims of the authorities.

The *kiyomizu monogatari* identifies three ideological threats in seventeenth century Japan: “the Christians, the *Ikkō* believers, and the Nichiren followers” (Ooms 1985,155). The samurai were a warrior class. If a military solution was available, it would be pursued. Christians could be and were suppressed by violent means, as the *Ikkō-ikki* had been several decades earlier. But merchants in the cities had to be contained with less martial methods.

In a time of peace, samurai ethics and identity had to be recast, or, at the very least, maintained in a different way. Japan was changing from a medieval to a pre-modern society. Emblematic of this was the punctilious attention the Tokugawa bakufu came to pay to what different social groups were permitted to wear. A sudden switch from matters martial to those sartorial may appear abrupt and arbitrary, but is indicative of the epochal shift from Hideyoshi to Ieyasu, from a period of incessant conflict to the enforced political and social stability of the Tokugawa Era. Attire was one means by

which the Tokugawa bakufu protected the prerogatives of the samurai as a dominant class.

The social order & attire

Tokugawa Japan was a closed society, greatly concerned with the balance of its multifarious parts. Great energy was expended in ordering the most minute elements of the different social groups, with the aim of maintaining stability. Regulations directed at kabuki extended to the type of hat actors were required to wear when on the move, and which public toilets female impersonators were entitled to use. In such ways the authorities policed the body. Marks of the samurai were the *kamishimo* (starched shoulders), *hakama* (trousers), and long and short swords, the overall effect being one of vigorous agency. Forbidden to wear *hakama*, and restricted to a specified cut of kimono, merchants expressed their wealth through the quality of material, and became subject to a barrage of sumptuary regulations designed “to regulate the marginal population of the samurai class by drawing a clear line between samurai and commoners” (Ikegami 1989,128).

The significance of such policing of the body and its accoutrements can be approached in various ways. Fisher and Cleveland assert that “the whole concept of body-image boundaries has implicit in it the idea of the structuring of one’s relations with others” (Stallybrass & White 1986,10). According to Bourdieu, the reason societies control “[seemingly] insignificant details of dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners” is to encourage embodiment in subjects of the governing principles of the society (ibid.,88). The rationale behind *bakufu* edicts on class specific dress can be found in such twentieth century scholarship. This scholarship also explains why fashion became such a locus of contention during Tokugawa times (Ikegami 1989,116). Although, in terms of cut, urban fashion was largely unchanging, the entertainment districts centred on kabuki and the brothel engendered whatever invention was possible. Wealthy merchants, denied participation in politics, manifested mute resistance in the form of fashion, and

called forth a steady stream of repetitive edicts from the *bakufu*, which simultaneously bemoaned the disobedience of their target group. Moreover, the enduring political importance of *kabuki-mono* (Ikegami 1989,131) ensured that the policing of fashion remained a priority, the *bakufu* evidently taking the view that “body images ‘speak’ social relations and values with particular force” (Stallybrass & White 1986,10).

Without labouring the point, we have established that pragmatism was the name of the game for the Tokugawa *bakufu*. Rather than policy being consistently based on a solid and unchanging ideology, edicts were introduced ad hoc. A cynical view would be that samurai ideology, in the final analysis, came down to an assertion of samurai superiority¹⁴, and a consequent search for means by which such superiority was to be buttressed. Predicating pragmatism, then, we should turn to a historical approach, seeking precedents for cultural contestation in Ashikaga and Momoyama times.

Cultural Contestation in Preceding Centuries

Cultural contestation in the medieval period took place against the backdrop of a power struggle between the militarily strong samurai and the economically strong merchants. Political legitimacy rested on virtue (*kōgi*). One manifestation of such virtue was cultivation. Aspirations to legitimacy of Ashikaga shoguns and the samurai warrior class as a whole required the (appropriation and) utilisation of extant forms of culture (often with the aid of ambitious commoners) and the protection of cultural prerogatives from the challenge of the wealthy merchant class. Given the difficulty of direct political challenge in a political order that rested on military power, forms of culture played an important role in the struggle between samurai and *machishū*. We shall briefly consider three areas: *sarugaku* and its offshoots, *nō* and *tesarugaku*; public dancing; and *chanoyu*.

The first shoguns made use of commoners to gain credibility as cultivated rulers. Zeami’s “transfor-

mation of a popular/ religious/ magical/ pragmatic/ temple-oriented art form known as *sarugaku* into an elitist/ entertaining/ representational/ military-oriented artistic practice” involved deliberate “obfuscating of the popular origins of *nō*” (Marra 1993,56 & 55). In turn the popular antecedents of *nō* were patronised by *machishū* in the form of *tesarugaku*, which subsequently became subject to shogunal suppression. “The parodying nature of *tesarugaku*, combined with the energy of a blooming urban society, made it a perfect candidate for an act of silencing and erasure” (ibid.,138). It was not *tesarugaku* per se that concerned the authorities but “the creation of a cultural identity by [*machishū*] who were distinguishing themselves as a growing and threatening political competitor” (ibid.).

Public dancing in the capital constituted another important locus of contention. Amidst the chaos of the warring period the intent behind gatherings on the streets was not easily interpreted. Berry asserts that the “residents of Kyoto....saw political theatre in the conduct of popular mobilisations” (1994,253). There might be “circular processions of *Hokke* sectarians”, *fūryū* dancing, or possibly an assembly of *machishū* in a show of strength. Since *fūryū* dancing is one of the ascribed roots of kabuki, it is interesting that contemporary diarists describe the ‘havoc’ associated with public dancing with its “flute and percussion accompaniment.” Moreover, it was associated with “*nenbutsu odori* - ecstatic dancing invoking the Buddha Amida,” another supposed root of kabuki (ibid.,248).

In the absence of official channels for political energies, the *machishū* exploited public gatherings to display their power; the Gion festival being an extravagant example. Moreover, wealthy and influential merchant families patronised the Nichiren religious heritage in the form of the *Hokke* sect, which, as we have seen, was antithetical to samurai strategies of legitimisation. As Berry says, “*fūryū* deeply resembled the politics of demonstration” and posed a challenge to an “inadequate police force” (ibid.,254). The shogunate had

already come to rely on “independent corps of police”, funded by merchants, to suppress peasant unrest (Marra 1993,136). The *machishū*, then, posed a considerable threat, armed as they were with great wealth, religious and cultural underpinnings, and even their own quasi-military forces. It is this that accounts for the 1506 order that “forbade the performance of dances inside the city for fear that political criticism would arise from the gathering of the *machishū*” (ibid.,137).

Chanoyu (known in English as the ‘tea ceremony’) was exploited by powerful sixteenth century daimyo for its cultural cachet. This trend reached its apogee under the unifying warlords Nobunaga and Hideyoshi. However, patronage of *chanoyu* was not simply to demonstrate *kōgi*. In fact Bodart-Bailey goes so far as to assert that these two warlords could not have come to prominence without the close relationships they forged with the merchant tea masters of Sakai and Kyoto (1985,31). As well as cultural capital, *chanoyu* afforded contact with wealthy merchants who supplied Nobunaga, for example, with musket balls and other provisions necessary to quelling domestic dissent. Tea masters, moreover, were able to act as political intermediaries due to their freedom of movement. Here, ideological strategies of legitimisation, cultural appropriation, *machishū* - samurai contention and, indeed, co-operation, and hard-headed pragmatism came together. Tea masters were merchants, officially at the bottom of the social hierarchy, but through *chanoyu* and judicious attraction of patronage, negotiated a way into the corridors of power.

Dealing with Kabuki

Considering that the Tokugawa *bakufu* came down so hard on kabuki-mono, executing and banishing “a large number of the dangerous rebels” in the opening decades of Tokugawa rule, why was it that kabuki escaped prohibition? After all, *kyōgen*, long patronised by merchants, was banned. Part of the answer lies in the hoary old nugget of wisdom that popular energies cannot be quashed, and a people provided with ‘bread and circuses’ is a

people more amenable to control. Direct evidence for this proposition comes from a guide for bakufu policy known as Ieyasu's legacy:

[C]ourtesans, dancers, catamites, streetwalkers and the like always come to the cities and prospering places of the country. Although the conduct of many is corrupted by them, if they are rigorously suppressed, serious crimes will occur daily ... (quoted in Leiter 2002, 41)

The more overtly political, and long-established, *kyōgen* was chosen for suppression over the more allusively subversive kabuki. Kabuki, despite its novelty, was, in its origins, an overflowing of folk culture, a topsy-turvy world where gender, status, hierarchy, and mores were ebulliently subverted and erased, and as such would be instantly recognisable to scholars of European carnival. Policing kabuki simply was not a priority in the early days.

As for kabuki-mono, many were veterans of the recent wars of unification and the Hideyoshi-led invasion of Korea. Tens of thousands of dispossessed samurai (*rōnin*) flocked to the cities. We may speculate that pragmatism dictated that it was preferable that unsettled elements spent their energies in dissipation rather than political agitation, motivated by grievances against the new regime that many inevitably nurtured. As well as merchants, samurai and *rōnin* were attracted to the seamy world of gambling, prostitution and entertainment of which kabuki was an integral part. Admittedly, there was soon a veritable flood of edicts aimed at containing the popularity of kabuki and the trouble it attracted and caused, but in the early days, and arguably throughout its Tokugawa existence, kabuki was tolerated as a necessary evil, one of the two wheels of the chariot of pleasure, the other being prostitution.

A more subtle argument for tolerance, one that gains credence from a more extensive analysis of Genroku era kabuki than the brief sketch in this paper, is that kabuki was not so much subversive as containing a mere frisson of subversiveness.

The actor playing the merchant hero may win out over the samurai, but only because he is more closely adhering to samurai morality. By predicating performances on the moral structure of the ruling class, kabuki was consonant with Gluckmann's famous assertion that "while rites of reversal obviously include a protest against the established order they are *intended* to preserve and strengthen the established order" (S&W 13; my italics). Such *intention* can be attributed to both bakufu in its rationale of toleration and the merchants and outcasts of the established theatre itself, themselves having a considerable stake in the establishment, at least by Genroku times¹⁵.

In the first century of the Tokugawa period the city of Edo, effective if not official capital, vastly expanded its population. Edo needed to attract merchants and artisans in considerable numbers. Without thriving pleasure quarters this would have been practically impossible. Tokugawa officials took the view that 'low' entertainment was fit for the low social classes. However, there were two problems with this policy: it was not only *chōnin* who came to dwell in the great new city, outcasts and samurai came as well.

For centuries, itinerant performers, feared and potentially polluting outcast outsiders acting as mediators to the divine realm, came into the villages to perform rites of renewal and revitalisation in accordance with a divine calendar. Kabuki performers were of this ilk, part of a ritual purity system, frequently associated with Shintō, with origins in Japan's ancient past. The accommodation of kabuki in its new urban surroundings saw a reversal of motion. Outcasts were confined and quarantined. No longer did outcasts come into the village/urban area and leave after rituals/performances were complete. Now the non-outcast audience entered the outcast enclave. The psychology of invaded and invader was reversed.

The process of settlement of itinerant performers in theatres under the aegis of the Tokugawa is one of the crucial elements of control¹⁶ exercised by the

authorities in our period of interest. Though Tokugawa officials desisted from an outright ban of kabuki¹⁷, their attitude certainly could not be described as *laissez-faire*. Outcasts generally lost their prior freedom and “their place in society [became] rigidly fixed by laws of domicile, dress, and occupation”(Law 1997,69). The import of this was fresh housing for the chosen few outcasts and increased marginalisation for the rest, since a concomitant development was the increased suspicion and enmity afforded itinerant performers, their role as mediators having been usurped by official forms of entertainment¹⁸. In other words, the ritual purity system of the medieval period was recast in pre-modern Japan; transformed almost beyond recognition in the form of urban kabuki, and shifted further from even a symbolic centre in the village.

The majority of the hundreds of samurai who came to live in Edo were deprived of the society of their wives and children who remained in their home domains. Constrained by official mores of sobriety and frugality, and the more direct expedient of official edicts banning attendance at the pleasure districts, samurai themselves became susceptible to dissatisfaction with their station. Nominal high status was little compensation for what could be a barren existence in the capital. It is easy to appreciate the pull on the imagination that kabuki and its attendant pleasures could exert. Samurai gave in to their desires and in poignantly symbolic fashion exchanged their *kamishimo* and swords for merchant robes in booths specially set up for this purpose on the “Road of Transformation” that led to the entrance of the famed Yoshiwara pleasure quarters in Edo; then they could indulge themselves incognito.

Inside the pleasure quarters was a realm where outcast and merchant were sanctioned to consort. It would be false to claim that there was no hierarchy within the walls of Yoshiwara¹⁹, but once inside, samurai were effectively free of the normal prohibitions of their station and, as Shively so felicitously expresses it, “could ill afford to insist on the prerogatives of their class.” It is striking that

the alternative ‘culture’ of the pleasure quarters gave birth to a language known as *kuruwa kotoba*, which facilitated communication stripped of the demands of social hierarchy. Even present-day Japanese have to consider carefully the status of the person they are addressing and adjust their vocabulary accordingly, a custom that significantly inhibits communication between different generations and between people of different status. In Tokugawa times samurai were forbidden contact with merchants, let alone outcasts, yet in the pleasure quarters chatted, joked and flirted on a level of linguistic equality.

It was this challenge to the social boundaries so meticulously put in place by the ruling authorities that accounts for the cascade of apparently trivial edicts directed at kabuki throughout the seventeenth century and beyond, as we shall see in the next section. Public order was unquestionably a concern, but was more frequently the pretext for the implementation of policies conceived in a different spirit.

Intervention

The concern here is not to enumerate the innumerable interventions in kabuki made by the *bakufu*, which went so far as to stipulate, as mentioned above, exactly what kind of hat actors had to wear outside the theatre districts, but to seek rationales behind both minor and major interdictions. The sheer number of edicts directed at kabuki might seem to contradict the case for *bakufu* toleration put forward in this paper, but the numbing repetitiveness of the edicts reflects less the zealousness of control than the laxity of enforcement and the determination of those in the world of kabuki to defy the authorities.

Though it is true that the authorities paid special attention to kabuki, this point should not be exaggerated. Many of the edicts directed at kabuki were merely specific instances of general prohibitions aimed at all townsmen and outcasts. A case in point is the interdiction against riding in palanquins or on horseback, which was the prerogative

of samurai (Shively, 48). This was very much true of sumptuary regulations stipulating, among many other matters, the cut and type of material for kimono. Actors and theatre managers for obvious reasons sought ever more spectacular costumes and fought a never-ending battle with Tokugawa officials. Such push and pull, concession, disobedience and periodic crackdown, accounts for the minute detail of many kabuki regulations. It is also important not to ignore mundane matters of public safety when seeking rationales of regulations. Banning night performances of kabuki on windy nights is easily understood when one considers the method of illumination and the frequency of fires, known as the flowers of Edo, that ravaged the city. Having stated these caveats we should turn to two major interdictions the bakufu made against kabuki: the 1629 ban against *onna* kabuki and the 1652 banning of *wakashū* (youth) kabuki.

Some commentators interpret the 1629 ban as a means to put an end to public disorder (sometimes involving samurai) connected with kabuki. Others emphasise the intent to enforce proper separation of the professions, since, in the early days, *yūjo* kabuki and prostitution were barely distinguishable. Ortolani cites the immediate causes of the decree as prominent daimyo inviting kabuki troupes to their castles, and a riot involving rival samurai at a kabuki performance in Kyoto (1990,166-7).

It goes without saying that public order was a rationale of control; that is obviously a priority for any form of government. But we can infer (though not entirely at face value as the preceding analysis demonstrates) from an examination of the whole gamut of edicts that ‘contamination’ of the ‘high’ by the ‘low’ was of great concern to the bakufu. This is how a contemporary writer described the scene at an Edo performance of *yūjo* kabuki: “High and low thronged” to the performance, which was so exciting that “the people in the pit and in the boxes....rocked about forgetting themselves”. The writer himself was so spellbound, he wrote that one of the courtesan’s smiles “would throw the six

Imperial consorts into the shade” (Shively 1968,233). Stallybrass and White assert that, “points of antagonism, overlap and intersection between the high and the low....provide some of the richest and most powerful symbolic dissonances” in any culture (1986,25). Kabuki in the seventeenth century was just such a point. *Forgetting themselves*, those from the samurai elite lost their heads in worship and desire of lowly outcasts, an attitude entirely antithetical to the Tokugawa requirement of samurai self-restraint and physical and moral separation from the lower classes. Protection of samurai morality, thereby samurai identity and, implicitly, their fitness to rule, was part of a wider concern to police the social boundaries whereby Confucian morality was reified in the established Tokugawa order. Indeed, that is the import of the intent to separate the professions of actor and prostitute. It was a question of order.

From the point of view of the authorities, however, it was equally important to meet the challenge presented by the increasing economic, social, and cultural strength of the *chōnin*. It is no coincidence that the first decree under the Tokugawa specifying restrictions on swords for commoners was also issued in 1629 (Ikegami 1989,131). As *shinōkōshō* was a response to the sixteenth century challenge of the *machishū*, the 1629 ban was part of the continuing power struggle, carried out in the cultural arena, between samurai and merchant.

The second important intervention came in 1652 with the banning of *wakashū* kabuki, which was “intended to separate homosexual prostitution from kabuki and to relegate the kabuki theatres and actors’ residences to one or two quarters of the city” (Shively 1978,8). Within the confines of the samurai class, “during the early modern period, committed relationships between older men and younger boys were often considered the purest form of love in the samurai community” (Ikegami 1997,175). One of the meanings of the verb *kabuku* was ‘to bend over’, which has obvious sexual connotations, and *kabuki-mono*, with their background in comradeship in warfare, were strongly

associated with homosexuality. When they trampled on “convention and decency by performing such acts as playing the flute with one’s anus” (Ortolani 1990:164), they were also cocking a snook at those who opposed indiscriminate homosexuality. Playing the *shakuhachi* has long been a euphemism for fellatio. Penetrating the ‘samurai body’ with a *shakuhachi*, therefore, had multiple subversive valences. Exploiting the opportunities offered by the theatre, homosexuality was a realm of intercourse between men of different status, subverting the samurai ideal of intra-class *committed relationships*. A 1648 ban on homosexuality was designed to prevent this contact.

The Political Impotence of Kabuki

One of our points of departure was Marra’s challenge to examine the “neutralising forces of Tokugawa cultural institutions.” This paper has contended that one of the most important dynamics the Tokugawa government was concerned to neutralise was burgeoning merchant wealth and potential power. If it is true that the “history of political struggle has been the history of the attempts made to control significant sites of assembly and spaces of discourse” then we need to address the question: what of political significance came of kabuki as a *site of assembly* (Stallybrass & White 1986,80)?

To this end a brief comparison of Edo tea houses, known as *shibai-jaya*, connected (often literally) to kabuki theatres, with contemporary London coffee houses is instructive. Both were at root bourgeois institutions and aspired to be sites of at least a temporary social equality. Like the European coffee house, where “for one penny *any* man could sit and drink” and need not make way for his social superiors (Stallybrass & White 1986,96), the kabuki theatre was in a sense a democratic space. The existence of a separate discursive space centred on the pleasure quarters is most dramatically and literally demonstrated by the development of the “*kuruwa kotoba* used by prostitutes, geisha, and other entertainers and their customers during the Edo period,” as has already been mentioned

(Moeran 1989,13). As Yamaguchi Masao confirms, “the two worlds of the theatre and the geisha....had their own form of speech” (1977,173). *Kuruwa kotoba* “enabled guests to conceal their various social statuses, and hostesses their low-class regional accents” (Moeran 1989,13). It is easy to imagine that the very act of speaking *kuruwa kotoba* could free the mind to range beyond the constraints imposed by the norms of the Tokugawa order.

In the same century, the respective theatres in England and Japan were subject to a ‘civilising process’²⁰. As part of the same dynamic of a burgeoning bourgeoisie (it must be remembered that Edo grew into probably the largest city in the world during the eighteenth century), just as the theatre and coffee houses in London ‘cleansed’ themselves of the lower habits associated with the tavern and the burlesque, so kabuki and the *shibai-jaya* progressively insisted on increased standards of decorum. So far the comparison holds. However, whereas European coffee houses “had a habit of metamorphosing into professional or business institutions” such as Lloyd’s, the London Stock Exchange and the Royal Society, *shibai-jaya* conspicuously failed to spawn comparable institutions. Whereas the bourgeois discursive space centred on the English coffee house gave birth to *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, which provided an influential forum for discussion of national and international issues, kabuki and *shibai-jaya* publications, apart from visual representations of actors, theatres and performances, consisted merely of the politically irrelevant *hyōbanki*, which were little more than programs and guides to kabuki performances. The political impact of London coffee houses and the institutions they spawned was not matched by the equivalent discursive space in Japan. Of course, it is easy to account for this. We need look no further than an edict from the 1650s banning the use of real names in kabuki plays and related publications. Tokugawa policy remained firm on denying chōnin a political role.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the seventeenth century there

was no political will to stamp out the new performance art that came to be known as kabuki. A prolonged period of national unrest had come to an end in 1600 with the battle of Sekigahara, which ensured Tokugawa hegemony. Dispossessed samurai and veterans of the Korean campaigns of the 1590s flocked to the cities, and indulged in licentious pleasures centred on kabuki. Toleration was the only realistic option for the authorities. After all, the Tokugawa government had other priorities, including the final elimination of the military threat posed by the Toyotomi clan. It suited the Tokugawa for disgruntled samurai to dissipate their energies in worldly entertainment. The merest hint of political agitation on the part of *kabuki-mono*, on the other hand, was severely dealt with.

The case has been made in this paper for bakufu pragmatism, in itself an unremarkable assertion, though one necessitated by the priority that has tended to be given to ideology as a ground for Tokugawa policy. Even pragmatism, though, demands its expressive cast. A four-fold schema of rationales of control has been presented: public order; policing the boundaries of the Tokugawa social order; maintaining samurai identity and pre-eminence; and ongoing samurai - merchant contestation.

Public order is the concern of all governments and, considering the amount of trouble kabuki attracted, at least in the first half-century of its development, it would be foolish to deny its importance in the immediate framing of official policy. The remaining three rationales of control are closely related and interlinked and, indeed, specific to Japan in the seventeenth century. Samurai identity depended on distinction from the other social groups; in the field of culture, *nō* was for samurai, and kabuki was for non-samurai. Most representative of Tokugawa pragmatism was *shinōkōshō*, upon which the Tokugawa order was predicated, but which, as we have seen, though based on Confucian principles²¹, arose from the exigencies of Momoyama conflict. Be that as it may, much energy was expended by Tokugawa officials in policing the social boundaries, a rationale of control where

practicality and ideology met. Despite what may be described in modern idiom as their superstardom, kabuki actors were unable to escape the stigma of their outcast status and were subject to the indignity of intrusive edicts throughout the Tokugawa period.

Another development that troubled the authorities was the extent to which kabuki and the pleasure quarters became a focus for *chōnin* identity. After the very real *gekokujō*²² of the sixteenth century, exemplified by the rise to pre-eminence of the peasant Hideyoshi, and to which late sixteenth and early seventeenth century national policies were partly a response (*shinōkōshō* for example), the pleasure quarters threatened once more to turn the world upside down. Merchant identity centred on kabuki and the pleasure quarters, and backed up by great economic strength, threatened to become a politically challenging discursive space. Denied any direct political outlet, the energies of merchants were disproportionately funnelled into the cultural arena. The ever-increasing economic strength of urban merchants was rightly perceived as a threat to samurai rule, resulting in culture being used as a battlefield for power. This was the context of the accommodation of kabuki in the Tokugawa order in the seventeenth century.

Intervention in kabuki was undertaken to meet the threat of rising merchant power, denying the political potential of the new discursive space centred on the pleasure quarters, and ensuring that the *chōnin* confined their energies to economic affairs and 'licensed' cultural activities. Merchants, with their economic power were a tacit contradiction of Tokugawa ideology; a kind of cultural *gekokujō*. Some were as rich as the most powerful daimyo, and most were better off than a significant number of samurai foot soldiers, with no battles to fight, who, though nominally of high status, in fact "hardly had anything more than their pride and their swords" (Ortolani 1990,157). The bakufu recognised that the pleasure quarters, of which kabuki was an integral part, was a necessary playground for townsmen. There, money talked,

wealth could be displayed, and resentments could be palliated. The bakufu successfully confined the potentially significant threat of rising merchant wealth, restricting its expression to flamboyant, bawdy, irreverent, and mildly subversive entertainment and clamping down fiercely on any serious challenge to its authority.

The transformation of Kabuki across the course of the seventeenth century, what one might call its journey from anarchy to respectability, its establishment through an internal dynamic of transformation in interaction with pressure from above, created a kabuki that Okuni, for one, would have struggled to recognise.

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- 1 Incidents in 1607 and 1612 resulted in severe repression by the authorities; many *kabuki-mono* were executed (Ortolani 1990,155-6).
 - 2 The vitality of *Genroku* kabuki, at the turn of the eighteenth century, testified to "a middle-class bourgeoisie's erosion of the shogun's monopolistic rights over the field of cultural production" (Marra 1993,174).
 - 3 Shamanic elements endured in kabuki, even in its established form. This theme, however, will not be elaborated upon in this paper.
 - 4 As well as the external dynamic of intervention, the internal dynamic of hereditary theatre ownership, and resultant conservatism, within the rising *chōnin* class accounts for the transformation of kabuki by the turn of the eighteenth century.
 - 5 See, for example, Kano Hiroyuki 1991, *Kinsei fūzokuga*, Vol.4, *Matsuri to Shibai*, Tokyo; *Kinsei fūzoku zufu*, vol.10, 1983, Shogakkan.
 - 6 See, for example, Shively 1968.
 - 7 See Shively 1968,233.
 - 8 *Izumo taisha* had maintained a position of rivalry with the official centre of Shinto, *Ise jingu*, since the rise of the Yamato clan in the seventh century.
 - 9 And in the process laid claim to an ancient religious practice in which female priests were believed to lend their voices to a deity in order to convey sacred messages to the common people (Marra 1993,91). Connections between religious institutions and performance went back centuries. In the medieval period, what might broadly be termed folk culture, had been staged by religious institutions. For example, temples and shrines were the major sponsors of *sarugaku*, providing income through entertainment while retaining ritual elements. While on the face of it the slow, sliding movements of *sarugaku* dance and its offspring, *nō*, could barely be more dissimilar to the vigorous stamping characteristic of kabuki, some scholars cite *sarugaku* as a source of kabuki. Around 1600, the exact nature of *sarugaku* is hard to ascertain and so comparisons cannot be pursued.
 - 10 *Yōjo*, or young women's kabuki, was primarily sponsored by brothels. Performers were indistinguishable from prostitutes.
 - 11 In this connection it is worth noting that "the formal structure and subject matter of *nō* were finally codified [according to the aesthetics of Zeami] during the Tokugawa period"(Marra 1993,55).
 - 12 A polemical and didactic popular work published six months after the suppression of the 1637 Shimabara rebellion.
 - 13 The *Ikkō-Ikki* had been dealt with before 1600 & the Christian threat was ruthlessly suppressed in the first half of the seventeenth century..
 - 14 It is noteworthy that the most famous tract praising the virtue of samurai, the engaging and fascinating *Hagakure*, the thoughts of Yamamoto Tsunetomo (1659-1719) as recorded by a younger samurai, was written in a spirit of nostalgia after a century of peace had rendered such purported values an anachronism.
 - 15 Intentions, apart from purely venal ones, are rather more difficult to divine for early kabuki.
 - 16 Japanese scholars have recently argued for intentional manipulation of outcast groups by the Tokugawa government in order to provide "guards, executioners, and policemen to suppress peasant riots" (Law 1997,274 note 40).
 - 17 Although at one stage the appellation 'kabuki' itself became subject to prohibition.
 - 18 Kabuki never entirely shed elements of divine mediation, retaining them in crystallised form even in the present day.
 - 19 In fact courtesans ranged from lowly *teppō* to the majestic *oiran*, with numerous gradations between.
 - 20 See Norbert Elias 1978. *The Civilizing Process* (New York).
 - 21 Other Confucian principles were less amenable: the Tokugawa line of shoguns were happy to ignore, for example, that a mandate to rule depended on the virtue of the ruler. The fitness of Tokugawa rule was not subject to debate.
 - 22 *Gekokujō* refers to inferiors overthrowing their superiors, particularly prevalent during the warring period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.