Staging Cultural Trauma in Genshigumo and Shiranui: Innovative Approaches Within Contemporary Mugen Nō Theatre
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Staging Cultural Trauma in *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui*

Innovative Approaches Within Contemporary *Mugen Nō* Theatre

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Introduction

Nō *Theatre and the Processing of Cultural Trauma*

> Although the night is moonless, the shore shines faintly, and what appear to be countless stars covering the sky and spreading out across the tides are in fact the spirits that are being raised to heaven; tranquil and released from their suffering and distress in this floating world. [1]

Japanese *nō* 能 theatre has always been employed as a means for reflecting on the universal human condition and the nature of existence. This form of drama deals with complex human emotions, which constantly remain present across time and space, thereby never losing its topicality. In this way, sadness, anger, longing, and the anguish of passion – particularly in relation to the spiritual world – are presented on stage in an effort to portray the fundamental elements that connect each and every one of us.

In particular, *mugen nō* 夢幻能 is a sub-category of *nō* theatre in which the invisible and the supernatural are intimately intertwined. According to *nō*'s greatest theorist and playwright, Zeami Motokiyo 世阿弥 元清 (1363?–1443?), it can be defined as the "*nō* of apparitions," [2] serving as a medium where the living and the dead face each other as stories from the past are recounted and intense emotions evoked. [3]

In my thesis, I examine how two contemporary *mugen nō* plays, *Heiwa no Inori – Genshigumo* 平和の祈り – 原子雲 (2003) by Udaka Michishige 宇高 通成 (1947–2020) and *Shiranui* 不知火 (2002) by Ishimure Michiko 石牟礼 道子 (1927–2018), process cultural trauma – respectively, the atomic bombings and the environmental disaster in Minamata Bay. Cultural trauma occurs when "members of a collectivity feel they have been

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[1] An excerpt from Yuko Aihara and Bruce Allen's English translation of Ishimure Michiko's new *nō* play *Shiranui*. See Aihara, Yuko, and Bruce Allen. 2016. "*Shiranui*: A Contemporary Noh Drama." In *Ishimure Michiko's Writing in Ecocritical Perspective: Between Sea and Sky*, edited by Bruce Allen and Yuki Masami, 193. Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group. The original script taken under consideration is: Ishimure, Michiko 石牟礼 道子. 2014. "*Shinsaku nō: Shiranui* 新作能「不知火」." In *Nihon bungaku zenshū* 日本文学全集 [Complete Collection of Japanese Literature] (vol. 24), edited by Natsuki Ikezawa 夏樹 池澤, 492. Tōkyō: Kawade Shobō Shinsha.

[2] Zeami, Motokiyo, and Thomas Blenman Hare. 2008. *Zeami : Performance Notes*, 485. New York: Columbia University Press.

[3] Scholz-Cionca, Stanca, and Nakajima Nanako. 2024. "Introduction." In *The Routledge Companion to Performance-Related Concepts in Non-European Languages*, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, and Astrid Schenka, 415. Abingdon: Routledge.

subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[4] By bringing these memories to the stage, I argue that the dramas under consideration recount and process the tragic historical events, as well as the related "group consciousness" – both elements of a dark and heavy collective heritage.

Within this context, my research question is: *In what ways do contemporary* mugen nō *plays employ innovative dramaturgical strategies to elaborate Japan's traumatic past?* To answer this, I explore how *nō* theatre undergoes concrete dramaturgical transformations to engage with a difficult past and an uncertain future, serving as a medium for both remembrance and reconciliation in the present. In dealing with contemporary issues that have left deep and painful memories, the new *nō* plays *Heiwa no Inori – Genshigumo* ("A Prayer for Peace – The Atomic Cloud")[5] and *Shiranui* ("Unknown Light") combine traditional conventions with innovative techniques – such as original *nō* masks or alternative staging – demonstrating how the emotions and themes evoked on stage are fundamentally timeless.

Phantasmal Nō *in Essence*

The Chinese characters which delineate the term *mugen* 夢幻 refer to a "dreamlike, illusory state": in fact, *mu* 夢 means dream, while *gen* 幻 is used to describe illusions or, more generally, the imaginary.[6] Thomas Hare, who has translated Zeami's work, claims that

> *Mugen* is "phantasmal *nō*" or "*nō* of apparitions," plays in which the *shite* シテ [lead role in a *nō* play] is a being from another dimension of existence, whether a god, demon, a plant or an animal spirit, or, most typically, the ghost of a human being. In many *mugen* plays, the *waki* ワキ [the deuteragonist – usually a travelling priest or official of the royal court – who witnesses and confronts the *shite*'s performance] is explicitly said to have gone to sleep, and the second act is a representation of his dream – thus the term "dreams and apparitions."[7]

[4] Alexander, Jeffrey C., Bernard Giesen, Piotr Sztompka, Neil J. Smelser, and Ron Eyerman. 2004. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma." In *Collective Trauma and Collective Identity*, 1. United States: University of California Press.
[5] Hereafter, *Genshigumo*.
[6] Lim, Beng Choo. 2012. "Dwelling in 'Mugen.'" In *Another Stage*, 121. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
[7] Zeami and Hare, *Zeami : Performance Notes*, 485.

The concept of "dream-fantasy" presented here, along with the two-act structure, permeates Zeami's plays, as the characters of the story interact in a dimension where time frequently moves in a non-linear fashion and reality merges with memory, dreams and visions. Within this context, Zeami skillfully "deployed the illusionary space between consciousness and dream to exercise his creativity in the aesthetics of *yūgen* 幽玄 ['profound elegance'[8]]."[9] *Mugen nō* often employs the concept of *yūgen* to create a surreal, dream-like atmosphere. An example would be *Matsukaze* 松風 ("Breeze through the Pines") by Zeami, which features the ghosts of two salt-making sisters at Suma Bay yearning for their aristocratic lover, who died after returning to the capital – sadness and melancholy imbue the scene, a landscape shrouded by clouds and mist. [10]

Now, what are the thematic aspects of these dreams and apparitions? And how do they concretely translate into the structure of *mugen* plays? As explained by Yokomichi and Omote in *Yōkyoku-shū* – here translated and annotated by Hoff and Flindt in 1973

> The way a typical *nō* play of the former type [*mugen nō*] develops is that a traveler visits some famous place. An inhabitant of the area comes along. The traveler asks to be told the story associated with the place. The inhabitant complies. At the end of the story he says that in actuality it is he who is the hero of the famous legend associated with the place. Then he disappears. […] The traveler waits. The performer, who had played the inhabitant of the area before, now appears in his true guise as the hero of his own story, a warrior who died there long ago, for example. He retells the story with gestures or dances. At dawn he disappears. What has taken place has been the traveler's dream. [11]

The characters are the inhabitant/spirit and the traveler, which respectively take up the leading (*shite*) and supporting (*waki*) roles in the *mugen* play. The structure of these plays is generally divided in two acts, with an interlude in between: *mae-ba* 前場 (first act), *nakairi-*

[8] *Yūgen* is the underlying, hidden beauty of things, the charm of the understated and the obscure. See Murata, Shin'ichi, and Stefano Aloe. 2024. "An Appointment with Japanese Noh Theatre in Verona and Milan." In *Memory and Performance. Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals*, edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino, and Eugenio Refini, 235. *Skenè. Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies* 10.1.
[9] Lim, *Dwelling in Mugen*, 123.
[10] McGaughey, Hanna. "YŪGEN 幽玄." In *The Routledge Companion to Performance-Related Concepts in Non-European Languages*, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Torsten Jost, and Astrid Schenka, 485. Abingdon: Routledge.
[11] Hoff, Frank, and Willi Flindt. 1973. "The Life Structure of Noh: An English Version of Yokomichi Mario's Analysis of the Structure of Noh." *Concerned Theatre Japan,* vol. 2 (no. 3–4): 214.

ba 中入場 (disappearance of the *shite* and appearance of the *kyōgen* 狂言 interlude), and *nochi-ba* 後場 (second act). [12]

In the first act, the *mae-shite* 前シテ (beginning *shite*) is in a disguised form – usually a local person – and interacts with the *waki*, who is a "representative of the audience and provides a platform for the main character to tell a story." [13] Then, he disappears for a costume change: in terms of stage production, this disappearance is called the *nakairi* 中入り, which refers to the performer either leaving the stage or remaining within a contained area. During this "disappearance," there is an *ai-kyōgen* アイ狂言 (*kyōgen* interlude) actor who explains the play's background, as to facilitate and deepen the audience's understanding of the story.

After this brief interlude that divides the two acts, the *nochi-shite* 後シテ (latter *shite*) reappears, disclosing his true, supernatural identity. As he narrates events from his past life by means of chant and dances, the *shite* becomes both the narrator and the protagonist of the story – the events recounted usually belong to a time in which the protagonist was alive or, in the case of a deity or spirit, to a mythical "time of the gods." [14]

With the *shite* disappearing at sunrise, it is revealed that what occurred in the second act was in reality the representation of the *waki*'s dream, crucial for the *shite* to obtain salvation. [15] Entering the dream of the *waki* is a significant passage, as it allows to "revisit historical events: battles, confessions of sins, forgiveness, revenge, enlightenment, and stories of unrequited love." [16] In this sense, *mugen* plays essentially revolve around the psychological and/or emotional dimension of the *shite*, who bears deep, traumatic memories that can often be traced back to a collective experience and consciousness.

[12] Yokomichi, Mario 横道 萬里雄, Nishino Haruo 西野 春雄 and Hata Hisashi 羽田 昶. 1987. *Nō no sakusha to sakuhin* 能の作者と作品 [*Nō*'s authors and works], 31. Tōkyō: Iwanami Shoten. Cited in Anno, Mariko. 2020. "The Role and Melodic Patterns of the Nohkan in Relation to Structural Principles." In *Piercing the Structure of Tradition*, 76–77. Cornell University Press.
[13] Yamanaka, Reiko. 2019. "Mugen Nô : Dreams, Memories and Recollections." *Nōgaku kenkyū* 能楽研究 [Journal of the Institute of Nōgaku Studies], vol. 43: 157(2).
[14] Pellecchia, Diego. 2021. "Introducing Genzai Nō: Categorization and Conventions, With a Focus on Ataka and Mochizuki." *Mime Journal*, vol. 27, article 3: 8.
[15] There are cases, however, in which salvation becomes irrelevant, as the ghost does not seem to have committed any great sins or crimes. Sometimes a play originates in the desire of the ghost to demonstrate that they lived a good and valuable life, or simply in the desire to explain past episodes and clarify them. See Yamanaka, *Dreams, Memories and Recollections*, 153(6).
[16] Anno, *Role Melodic Patterns Nohkan*, 76.

Investigating the Dark Heritage of Nō *Dramas*

My analysis is based on the notion of "dark heritage" in relation to the performing arts – more specifically, its visual and cultural representations through *nō* theatre. I examine both *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui* under the premise that *nō* theatre – with its dynamic and evolving nature – constitutes a living, intangible cultural heritage that actively fosters a site for transgenerational remembrance and reconciliation with the past in the present.

Within cultural heritage discourse, the concept of "dark heritage" generally revolves around places and times marked by death, suffering and disaster, as well as other "negative" forms – such as environmental pollution – inherited from the past and deeply affecting the present. [17] Turning to "dark heritage" and confronting unsettling pasts – in the case of *nō*, presenting them on stage as cultural expressions – contributes to the development of collective memory. [18] Specifically, I argue that these *nō* dramas address dark, traumatic experiences and adapt them into cultural heritage, allowing the audience to glimpse the specters embodying collective memory.

To investigate this, and following significant efforts to gather the necessary materials, I analyzed the scripts, *mise-en-scène* and recorded performances of *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui*, examining the specific theatrical techniques employed on stage. For *Genshigumo*, I focused on the evocative masks carved by Udaka. Through visual analysis of these masks and their use in key moments of the performance, I assessed how the traditional *nō* masks repertoire has evolved under Udaka's technical and artistic expertise. In the case of *Shiranui*, I explored the relevance of its alternative staging in the 2004 performance and, more broadly, the use of innovative staging properties – encompassing lighting and spatial aspects.

Ultimately, my aim is to contribute to the larger scholarship on heritage studies in relation to Japanese *nō* theatre by examining how contemporary *mugen nō* plays – through their songs, dances, masks, and props – offer a form of universal catharsis for processing the horrifying past, the uncertain future and transgenerational remembrance.

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[17] Thomas, Suzanne Elizabeth, Vesa-Pekka Herva, Oula Seitsonen, and Eerika Koskinen-Koivisto. 2019. "Dark Heritage." In *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*, edited by Claire Smith, 1. Springer, Cham.
[18] Macdonald, Sharon. 2015. "Is 'Difficult Heritage' Still 'Difficult'? Why Public Acknowledgment of Past Perpetration May No Longer Be So Unsettling to Collective Identities." *Museum International* 67 (1–4): 19.

Performing Arts as Cultural Heritage

Heritage studies scholarship acknowledged long ago that performances, as cultural expressions, can be explored through the lens of heritage studies. Building on Haldrup and Bærenholdt's notion of the "performance *of* heritage," this approach emerges from a "combination of social interaction, relational entanglements with material artefacts, and […] the sharing of the heritage experiences performed." [19] I apply this framework to the performing arts, particularly *nō* theatre.

First, the performing arts serve as a special site of interaction between actors and audience – even more so if considered that, for example, *nō* plays are normally one-time events. Moreover, they function as a medium through which people, the stage environment and the specific performance location can silently yet understandingly communicate. In fact, the audience's imagination is actively engaged through *nō*'s aesthetic of incompletion (間 *ma*, lit. "gap"). This use of empty spaces is evident in several elements – such as stage design, movement, music, the use of costumes, and masks – inviting the audience's dynamic participation in meaning-making. [20] As will be discussed in the following chapters, the performance location can also become a major factor when considering the nexus between performing arts and cultural heritage: transmitting collective memories in a place strongly associated with the event narrated carries profound symbolic and cultural value. In this sense, the performing arts ultimately serve as platforms where experiences of heritage – whether traumatic or not – are publicly staged and shared. Through performance, the past and the present are thus revived in a shared place, conveying resonant memories to the immediate audience and shaping them into narratives for the future.

Regarding the thesis structure, I begin by tracing the conventional features of *nō* theatre in order to more accurately identify the innovative strategies used within my case studies, *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui*. Comparing these two contemporary *nō* plays with their long-established counterparts highlights both similarities and differences. I then examine the broader characteristics of contemporary *nō* and its evolving role within the socio-cultural

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[19] Haldrup, Michael, and Jørgen O. Bœrenholdt. 2015. "Heritage as Performance." In *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research*, edited by Emma Waterton and Steve Watson, 55–56. Palgrave Macmillan, London.

[20] Nakao, Kaoru, and Diego Pellecchia. 2025. "Performance." In *Noh: Japanese Classical Dance-drama*, 110. *Forms of Drama*. London: Methuen Drama.

heritage sphere. Finally, I analyze *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui* in detail, focusing on their innovative dramaturgical elements and how they process cultural trauma.

Chapter 1 – Traditional Conventions in *Mugen* Plays

In this chapter, I outline the performance conventions of *nō* theatre to provide a foundation for the analytical comparison with *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui*. I also emphasize the interconnection between memory, remembrance and ghosts, particularly in relation to the internal and memory work involved in processing intense past experiences.

Chorus, Masks and Stage

Nō theatre performances are based on scripts and recount stories – in a stylized or chanted form – about distinctive characters, employing masks and costumes bearing elaborate symbolism, as well as minimalistic stage properties.

A *nō* play script consists of a combination of stylized speech and chanted poetry, delivered by actors in monologues or dialogues, or by a *jiutai* 地謡 (chorus). [21] The chorus is generally composed of eight members who kneel quietly in two rows in the *jiutai za* 地謡座, the chorus area (stage left or, if seen by the audience, right). Typically, it will be seated in this allocated area, not wearing masks or special costumes. In the case of *mugen* plays, a large part of the text is chanted by this group of people, singing the dream tale in the second act in parallel with the *shite*'s *shikata-banashi* 仕方話 (mimed narrative). [22]

In combination with the lyrics of the chants, this "mimed narrative" – which is the *shite*'s movement patterns or *kata* 型 – unfold rhythmically in front of the audience, whose "perception of time gradually changes, retrogressing to the past." [23] The extended monologue of the *shite* – delivered both as the character and about the character, as in "third person" – serves as a medium, transporting the audience into the past where the events originally occurred and are now being recounted. Therefore, the interpretation of the script mainly involves two specific delivery techniques: on the one hand, the chanted passages by the chorus which evolve into a long monologue by the *shite* and, on the other hand, the *kata* – the stylistically conventionalized dance – which depicts the *shite*'s gestures.

[21] Pellecchia, *Introducing Genzai Nō*, 8.
[22] Masaki, Dōmoto. 1997. "Dialogue and Monologue in Nō." In *No and Kyogen in the Contemporary World,* edited by James R. Brandon, 148. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
[23] Ibid.

Masks have always played a sustaining and crucial role in *nō* theatre.[24] Standing between the real and imaginary, Japanese *nōmen* 能面 (lit. "*nō* mask") are carved from wood (*hinoki* 檜, lit. "Japanese cypress") to fixed designs and, as a consequence, are not made for flexible facial expressions. However, contrary to all expectations, they ultimately convey countless different emotions (*mugen hyōjō* 無限表情, lit. "infinite facial expressions"), rendered through the subtle movements of expert *nō* actors.[25] In this sense, it is the actor who takes the mask and, by orientating the head/body to different angles and employing shadow changes, demonstrates its expressive potential.[26] The masks worn by the spirit characters are thus "expressive devices that conve[y] the individual characteristics of a particular ghost."[27] In the dual illusory representation provided by this genre, the transformative power of *nōmen* ultimately achieves its full potential, enhancing profoundly the "scenic reality that determines the theatrical meaning of the work."[28]

Nō performances begin with an empty stage and silence. Decorated with the painting of a pine tree on its back wall, the traditional *nō* stage (*nō butai* 能舞台) is composed of a special raised wooden structure that protrudes into the audience area. It is then connected to the backstage with a covered bridge, lined with banisters and three pines of different sizes as to provide a sense of distance. The stage's outdoor origins are exemplified by the four pillars located at the corners of the main stage's square, which are supporting a heavy roof.[29] Although fashioned indoors, *nō* is still performed outside. In this case, the outdoor stages are mainly situated in shrines and temples, accompanied by different natural elements: they could be surrounded by water (Miyajima, Hiroshima Prefecture), a moss garden (Higashi Hongan-ji, Kyōto) or even grass (Chūson-ji, Iwate Prefecture).

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[24] There are plays, however, that are performed without masks. A practice that dates back at least to the time of Zeami, performing a role unmasked – *hitamen* 直面 (lit. "bare face") – requires the actor to keep a straight, neutral face, becoming the mask himself. One example would be the *genzai nō* play *Ataka* 安宅, written in 1465 by Kanze Kojiro Nobumitsu, where Benkei (the *shite*) is unmasked. See Nakao and Pellecchia, *Performance*, 137 and Nakao, Kaoru, and Diego Pellecchia. "Plays." In *Noh: Japanese Classical Dance-drama*, 69. *Forms of Drama*. London: Methuen Drama.

[25] Miyata, Hiromitsu, Ritsuko Nishimura, Kazuo Okanoya, and Nobuyuki Kawai. 2012. "The Mysterious Noh Mask: Contribution of Multiple Facial Parts to the Recognition of Emotional Expressions." *PloS One* 7, no. 11: 1.

[26] Kawai, Nobuyuki, Hiromitsu Miyata, Ritsuko Nishimura, and Kazuo Okanoya. 2013. "Shadows Alter Facial Expressions of Noh Masks." *PloS One* 8, no. 8: 1.

[27] Kadowaki, Yukie. 2014. "Noh drama and the samurai." *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 88, no. 1/4: 107.

[28] Murata and Aloe, *Appointment with Japanese Noh*, 239–240.

[29] Bethe, Monica, and Diego Pellecchia. 2024. "Nō Performance." In *A Companion to Nō and Kyōgen Theatre* Vol. 19/1, edited by Yamanaka Reiko, Monica Bethe, Eike Grossmann, Thomas Hare, Diego Pellecchia and Michael Watson, 149. United States: BRILL.

It is important to note that the representation of spectrality – core theme in phantasmal *nō* – "makes no use of spectacular effects and dispenses of a technical apparatus inducing the illusion of the otherworldly." [30] To explain further, the two-act *mugen nō* occurs in its entirety on a bare, open stage to only musical accompaniment and dance – without resorting to any optical illusions or other lighting effects. The sense of otherworldliness is ultimately evoked through the chants of the chorus, the interactions between the actors, and the *shite*'s impactful movements. In other words, during a phantasmal *nō*'s performance "the invisible is conjured in full daylight by the suggestive power of the actor, sustained by the incantatory music, dance and the delicate flat masks." [31]

Ghosts, Memory and Remembrance

Mugen nō is a dramatic category with its own set of remarkable features – primarily, the dream – that distinctly separates it from the opposite genre, which focuses on the earthly world and living humans (*genzai nō* 現在能). Phantasmal *nō* has always provided a lens through which past events and their memories, charged with intense emotions, were recounted – whether they were historical, romantic or even spiritual. In this sense, this genre has always played a key role into the inner and memory work that collectively characterizes the human experience. Within this context, Hare acknowledges that, for example,

> Zeami's *mugen* plays most characteristically treat the interior life of a ghost. […] The […] *shite*, literally "doer" or "agent," remain in the world because of some deep attachment to a past love, anger, pride, or some other strong emotional tie or obsession. As ghosts they return to the world not to terrorize or haunt the living but to re-enact important and unfinished episodes in their lives. [32]

Here, ghosts, memory and remembrance are all closely intertwined with each other. In the case of Zeami, he "rejected the representation of ghosts, deities and demons as shows of sound and fury in favor of lyrical introspection." [33] The main purpose was, therefore, to portray these otherworldly beings not as furiously haunting the living, but as recollecting and reenacting their past lives and, more specifically, a certain moment that left them with lingering feelings – oftentimes traumatic ones – to the living world. In this respect, Zeami's

[30] Scholz-Cionca and Nakajima, *Introduction*, 416.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Zeami and Hare, *Zeami : Performance Notes*, 16.
[33] Scholz-Cionca and Nakajima, *Introduction*, 416.

mugen nō plays represented the internal landscape ("interior life") of the protagonists, delving deeply into the human mind – an aspect of *nō* theatre that is still fully applicable to contemporary dramas. Considering this, one could argue that many of the plays written by Zeami naturally fall under and can be referred to the category of phantasmal *nō*. But which are the plays in question?

Most of the warrior plays that have been attributed to Zeami – such as *Atsumori* 敦盛, *Sanemori* 実盛, *Kiyotsune* 清経, and *Tadanori* 忠度 – can be all classified as *mugen nō*. [34] These plays, that feature the defeated Taira clan warriors and their spirits, see the protagonists return to the living world and, by resuming their original warrior identity, recount some sorrowful stories of their lives. As the narration continues, it can be noticed that the spirits inconsolably emphasize the "deep attachment" – as explained by Hare – to specific events that impede their enlightenment and final release from their torments. The *shite* – who is afflicted with the memories of the past and distressed by the complexes born out of love or spite – will eventually find liberation by conversing with the *waki*. [35] By elaborating these emotional attachments, the *shite* will thus overcome his traumas and attain "liberation." Serving as a sort of healing device, this crucial aspect in *mugen nō* enables the ability to process both individual and collective trauma – essential for gaining consolation while facing or remembering, for example, contemporary tragedies.

This genre has never lost its ability to reconcile with the ghosts of the past and their memories, while enacting a significant process of remembrance in the present. As the subsequent chapter will demonstrate, it is still understood as central in today's modern theatre, presenting contemporary issues and sensibilities on stage in an effort to depict shared traumas, alongside a sense of hopefulness for the future.

[34] Lim, *Dwelling in Mugen*, 123. Most of the stories presented in these warrior plays – also known as *shura-mono* 修羅物 – are taken from the battles portrayed in the *Heike monogatari* 平家物語 ("The tale of the Heike"), which recounts the struggle between the Taira clan and Minamoto clan for control of Japan at the end of the 12th century in the Genpei War (1180–1185).
[35] Masaki, *Dialogue and Monologue in Nō*, 144.

Chapter 2 – *Shinsaku Nō* as a Living Intangible Heritage

In this chapter, I trace the characteristics of *shinsaku nō* 新作能 plays and discuss their pivotal role in engaging with difficult or traumatic pasts, thereby enacting a process of cultural revitalization within contemporary *nō* theatre.

Contemporary Spectrality

The term *shinsaku nō* (lit. "newly composed *nō*") generally embraces new drama pieces written from the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912) to the present. In this regard, a growing number of these plays is slowly being created and developed within the global sphere, encompassing over 400 works, some of which are written by foreign authors and in languages other than Japanese. [36]

It is, indeed, an area of innovation, where traditional structures and creative processes co-exist simultaneously: *shinsaku nō* plays "intentionally combine aspects of the surviving practice of *nō* with material that is either not currently in the active repertoire or new." [37] Specifically, these new *nō* plays draw on existing, well-established units – such as movement and melodic patterns – and, at the same time, offer creative opportunities by "allow[ing] the repertoire to reflect our time and potentially grow." [38] In fact, while certain *shinsaku nō* rework the classical repertoire, [39] others focus on addressing socio-cultural and environmental matters, together with sensitive political topics. [40] New *nō* plays tackle contemporary issues and sensibilities alike, oftentimes shaping their plots and structures in relation to the genre of phantasmal *nō*.

[36] See especially Richard Emmert, who has co-directed three English-language *nō* productions and for which he has composed – or recomposed – the music score: Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well* (1984), Janine Beichman's *Drifting Fires* (1985 and 1986), Arthur Little's *St. Francis* (1988), and Allan Marett's *Eliza* (1989).
[37] Anno, Mariko, and Judy Halebsky. 2014. "Innovation in Nō: Matsui Akira Continues a Tradition of Change." *Asian Theatre Journal* 31, no. 1: 134.
[38] Ibid.
[39] The active repertoire of *nō*'s five schools – *Kanze* 観世, *Hōsho* 宝生, *Konparu* 金春, *Kongō* 金剛 and *Kita* 喜多 – consists of 180 to 250 plays, mostly written during the Muromachi period (1336–1573), with three-fifths of this repertoire credited to Kan'ami and Zeami, founders of *nō*. See Emmert, Richard. 1997. "Expanding Nō's Horizons: Considerations for a New Nō Perspective." In *No and Kyogen in the Contemporary World*, edited by James R. Brandon, 21. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
[40] Rodowicz-Czechowska, Jadwiga. 2023. "The New Nō Drama (*Shinsakunō*) for the Appeasement of Spirits and Process of Reconciliation." In *Unique or universal. Japan and its Contribution to World Civilization*. Volume 2: 147–163. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego.

Some of the *shinsaku nō* created in the modern era, in fact, offer ways to not only express appeasement but also reconciliation with the souls of the dead. Specifically, they seem to be "aimed at healing some kind of a group trauma or a social tragedy," while also "deal[ing] with a sense of guilt and remorse."[41] By the same token, new *nō* plays associated with the element of spectrality can address "collective traumas and unsolved conflicts between the individual and society" by offering a stage to the spiritual carriers of those negative memories.[42] In other words, some of these contemporary performances, which are associated with the revival of *mugen nō*, act as a medium for supernatural elements to appear on stage, ultimately confronting the "dark heritage" and the painful memories of collective trauma.

Moreover, this necessity of reconciliation with the dead, together with their souls' appeasement, is a core theme to plays which typically revolve around the Pacific War (1941–1945) and its related dark experiences – the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki[43] and the Korean comfort women[44] – or even environmental disasters – the 3/11 Tōhoku earthquake-tsunami which caused the Fukushima nuclear accident.[45] Whether recalling a difficult past or anticipating a precarious future, the *shinsaku nō* works found within the *mugen nō* genre are adapted to the author's own time, sensibility and aesthetic – with various theatrical innovations being incorporated into the pre-existing, traditional units.

Between Tradition and Innovation

Now, what elements define a play as *nō*? When can a new *nō* be considered an integral part of that tradition? Drawing on Oda's classification of *shinsaku nō*, these new plays can be fundamentally divided into four categories: (1) the structure of the script; (2) the

[41] Ibid., 147.
[42] Scholz-Cionca and Nakajima, *Introduction*, 417.
[43] See for instance *Genbaku* 原爆 ("An Atomic Explosion"), the first text on the theme of nuclear bombing written by Takenaka Minoru in 1955. Another example would be Dōmoto Masaki's *Sadako genbaku no ko* サダコー原爆の子 ("Sadako – The Child of the Bomb"), which was written in 2001 and inspired by the true story of Sasaki Sadako, who died of post-radiation leukemia in 1955 at the age of twelve. In 2004, Tada Tomio also wrote two pieces of *shinsaku nō* dedicated to Hiroshima and Nagasaki on the 60th anniversary of the bombings: *Genbakuki* 原爆忌 ("Requiem for Hiroshima") and *Nagasaki no Seibō* 長崎の聖母 ("Our Lady of Nagasaki").
[44] See for instance *Bōkonka* 望恨歌 ("Lament of Everlasting Bitterness"), a drama featuring the ghost of a Korean "comfort woman" abused by the Japanese military in WWII, written by Tada Tomio in 1993.
[45] See for instance *Ukojenie dusz/Chinkon* ("The Repose of Souls"), a *shinsaku nō* written by polish author Jadwiga Rodowicz-Czechowska in 2012, which was staged after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that took place in Tōhoku in March 2011.

performance style (costumes, props, stage music, movements etc.); (3) the use of language (archaic words, poetry) and, finally, (4) the topic and source material (classical literature, tales etc.).

Following this categorization, the author claims that the act of composing a *shinsaku nō* leaves both the type of script (1) – in this case, the *mugen nō* genre – and the literary style (3) – such as the use of quotations from Japanese and Chinese poetry, along with rhetorical devices – largely unchanged. Instead, the impression that something deeply innovative is unfolding during the play comes from the changes in the performance style (2) – such as the introduction of original costumes – and in the topic presented (4), which does not draw on classical themes but rather addresses issues closely related to contemporary society, often with long-term impacts on cultural memory – for instance, the Hiroshima atomic bombing and Minamata disease. [46]

Richard Emmert, the founder and artistic director of Theatre Nohgaku, [47] also acknowledges the distinction between external and internal elements in *nō*

> External elements – stories, masks, costumes, stage – can be easily adopted or imitated by other forms that can then be called *nō*-inspired. But internal elements are not so easily copied: they demand time for study and training in order to make them come alive in each individual performer. In my opinion, a performance cannot be *nō* if it lacks these internal elements. With them, a performance becomes more clearly *nō* than anything else, no matter how story, masks, costumes, or stage differ from traditional *nō*. [48]

While "external elements" may change or differ completely in their outward appearance, the "internal elements" constitute the defining criteria of what makes *nō*, essentially, *nō* – even if, for example, a language other than Japanese is used. These "internal elements" – the movement and musical components – converge in the quiet tension that is created, revealed and communicated throughout the entire performance, making *nō* "alive and vibrant as a stage art." [49]

In recent years, however, there have been examples of contemporary *nō* in which internal aspects, such as movement patterns, have been altered through the incorporation of

[46] Oda, Sachiko. 2008. "On the characteristics of newly composed *nō* plays (*shinsaku nō*)." In *Nō Theatre Transversal*, edited by Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Christopher B. Balme, 99. München: Iudicium.
[47] Theatre Nohgaku is a theatre company dedicated to performing *nō* in English.
[48] Emmert, *Expanding Nō Horizons*, 29.
[49] Ibid.

new elements – sometimes not even *nō*-inspired, but instead originated from the Western world. Can such works still be considered *nō*?

A compelling example is the English-language *nō* version of William Butler Yeats' *At the Hawk's Well*, performed in September 2002 by Matsui Akira 松井 彬 (1946–) together with Theatre Nohgaku. Matsui, an actor and teacher of the Kita School, incorporated ballet movements into his performance – such as a plié with the legs while the hands are above the head – as well as horizontal movements across the stage with his body facing the audience, something that is "never seen in *nō*." [50] In this regard, Matsui insists that even when he adopts Western-inspired movements, he is still fundamentally performing *nō*. This, he explains, is due to the internal consistency of his performance and the way he uses his body – for instance, through his hip movements and center of gravity – which will always be a reflection of his artistry as a professional *nō* actor. [51] In other words, it is through his *nō*-cultivated body and aesthetic sensibility that the performance, despite experimenting with new elements and challenging the boundaries of *nō*, still remains within this category. As stated by Matsui himself in an interview

> I did perform [*At the Hawk's Well*] interestingly [by moving sideways], but my movements are still *nō*-like. I don't carry the same kind of weight that ballet dancers carry, nor do I perform the hip movements of ballet […] The difference is in how I bring forth the movement, how I reveal and communicate [the art with the audience].[52]

Another noteworthy *shinsaku nō* is Deborah Brevoort's *Blue Moon Over Memphis* (2010), an English-language *nō* about rock n'roll icon Elvis Presley. According to Emmert, who arranged the musical score, this play can be considered within the realm of *nō* because, on the one hand, it follows a classical two-part *nō* structure, and on the other, it portrays Elvis Presley in a deeply sensitive manner, focusing on themes of loneliness. [53]

In terms of "external elements," *Blue Moon Over Memphis* incorporates several innovations. For this performance, mask carver Kitazawa Hideta 北澤 秀太, Theatre

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[50] Anno and Halebsky, *Innovation in Nō*, 140–141.
[51] Ibid., 141.
[52] Ibid. Matsui Akira. 2009. Interview by Anno and Halebsky. 23 May. Tōkyō.
[53] Emmert, Richard. 2015. "Background to Creating Blue Moon Over Memphis : The 'Elvis' Noh." *Nōgaku no genzai to mirai (nōgaku kenkyū sōsho)* 能楽の現在と未来（能楽研究叢書）[The Present and Future of Noh Theatre (Noh Theatre Research Series)], vol. 5: 270.

Nohgaku's long-time collaborator, created a new mask specifically for the second-half *shite*, which, in Emmert's opinion, is "quite Elvis-like" (Figure 1). [54] As for the costumes, Emmert and his team combined both traditional and modified *nō* attire. The main *shite* costumes were traditionally ordered from the Sasaki *Nō* Costume Factory in Kyōtō, while the *waki* costume – a denim *kimono* designed by Theatre Nohgaku member Lluis Valls – was tailored to reflect the "denim" era in which Elvis rose to fame. [55]

Within this context, *shinsaku nō* plays can be seen as existing at the intersection of tradition and innovation. They build on pre-existing traditional structures and, while maintaining *nō*'s essential internal core, incorporate new elements into various aspects – such as movement patterns and actors' attire.

Figure 1. Elvis *nō* mask for *Blue Moon Over Memphis*. Source: Williams College. "Theatre Nohgaku's 'Blue Moon Over Memphis' – A Noh about Elvis Presley." *Japanese : News and Announcements*. Published in February 2017. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://japanese.williams.edu/2017/02/noh-elvis/.

[54] Ibid., 272.
[55] Ibid.

New Nō *as Cultural Heritage Engines of Renewal*

I argue that these newly created works position *nō* theatre – often mistakenly regarded as an "unchanging" and "unaltered" art form [56] – within the broader theatre world, ensuing its cultural revitalization as a living intangible heritage. Conceptually, *nō* theatre operates as a "dual-track" system, where experimental approaches extend beyond tradition without necessarily rejecting it. [57] This continuous cycle of fusion between the classical repertoire and contemporary theatre influences ultimately reaffirms *nō*'s adaptability and willingness to explore new ways of performing. In this sense, I consider *shinsaku nō* as cultural heritage engines of renewal, offering a fresh approach that undoubtedly "show[s] the topicality and modernity of the genre itself." [58]

Additionally, *nō* theatre's value has been acknowledged not simply as a traditional performing art, but also as a highly sophisticated artistic form of international relevance. More specifically, in 1957 the Japanese government first designated *nō* as an *Important Intangible Cultural Property*. In 2001, UNESCO proclaimed it a *Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity*, and in 2008, it was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of *Intangible Cultural Heritage* (ICH). [59] This designation emphasizes the relevance of embodied tradition and community participation as essential means of understanding and preserving the traditional heritage. [60]

Within this context, there exists a deep connection between *nō* theatre and the socio-cultural heritage sphere – particularly in the processing of traumatic experiences. As Alcantar notes, "intangible cultural heritage functions as an asset when exhuming an uneasy past difficult to come to terms with." [61] Through *nō* as ICH, unresolved conflicts and lingering emotions from a difficult past are evoked and gradually addressed on stage. These unfold

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[56] Bambling, Michele. 2005. "Japan's Living National Treasures Program: The Paradox of Remembering." In *Perspectives on Social Memory in Japan*, 1. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill.
[57] Guccini, Gerardo. 2012. "Editoriale – A partire dal Teatro *nō*: una dinamica a doppio binario." In *Teatro Nō, Orizzonti Possibili*, edited by Matteo Casari, 3. *Prove di Drammaturgia* XVII, n. 1.
[58] Kasai, Ken'ichi. 2008. "New plays (*shinsaku nō*) as an engine of renewal. From the experiments of *Mei no kai* to the staging of *Shiranui*." In *Nō Theatre Transversal*, edited by Stanca Scholz-Cionca and Christopher B. Balme, 91. München: Iudicium.
[59] UNESCO. "Nōgaku Theatre." *Intangible Heritage : Lists*. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/nogaku-theatre-00012.
[60] Alcantar, Monica. 2023. "International Cultural Heritage: The 2003 ICH in Context." *Antropologia e Teatro. Rivista Di Studi* 14, no. 16: 56.
[61] Ibid., 57.

before an audience whose silent yet deeply engaged presence reinforces the process of meaning-making, ultimately creating a moment of collective cultural memory.

Chapter 3 – Udaka Michishige's *Genshigumo* and the Masks that Reinvent Tradition

In this chapter, I analyze *Genshigumo* (first performed in 2003) by *shite* actor and *nō* mask carver Udaka Michishige (1947–2020), [62] who began composing this *nō* play around the 1970s, before finally completing it in 2001. I focus in particular on the most innovative element of the performance: the newly carved masks representing Japan's traumatic past – the atomic bombings. [63]

What is the message behind this dramaturgical innovation? How does it reflect the author's sensibility toward the tragedies of the atomic bombings and, in a greater sense, of his time? How does this play ultimately engage with and process the traumatic memories it evokes?

A Willow Tree for Remembering

Genshigumo presents on stage the sorrowful journey of a mother, looking for her young child who died in the bombing of Hiroshima. This search leads her to reach the Eastern Gate of the Underworld (*Yomi no Kuni* 黄泉の国, lit. "the Land of the Dead"). Here, after the hellish scenes and the horrors of the bombings are recounted, she is finally reunited with her daughter, who has been reborn as a young willow tree (*yanagi* 柳). [64] The Spirit of the Willow Tree expresses that, by remembering and praying, the countless lives that were

[62] In 1991 Udaka was designated as a "Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property" by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, in recognition of his proficiency, accomplishments and excellence in all aspects of *nō*. Specifically, in Japan, "Intangible Cultural Properties" refer to stage arts, music, craft techniques, and other intangible cultural assets that are considered to have significant historical or artistic value. The designation "Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Properties" is granted to individuals who demonstrate exceptional mastery and embodiment of a specific cultural technique, as part of a broader effort to preserve and transmit traditional artistry. See Agency for Cultural Affairs. "Intangible Cultural Properties." *Cultural Properties*. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/cultural_properties/introduction/intangible/.
[63] Udaka's experiments go beyond the use of unconventional masks. He decided to not employ a *waki* actor but two *kyōgen*, whose role was to interact with the *shite*. See Pellecchia, Diego. 2014. "Conservative Adaptation in Japanese Noh Theatre: Udaka Michishige in Conversation with Diego Pellecchia." In *Theatre and Adaptation : Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, edited by Margherita Laera, 85. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
[64] After meeting with her daughter, the Spirit of the Willow Tree bestows the Mother a "flowery robe to dance her transformation." The Mother's complex feelings of grief and happiness, ignited by this reunion, are thus beautifully displayed through the *haya-mai* 早舞 (lit. "fast/swift dance"). Excerpt from Ogamo Rebecca Teele's English translation of the original script. See Pellecchia, Diego. "Genshigumo Kokuritsu 2004 7 9." Published on March 27, 2025. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://youtu.be/cI9k7HFA8Is?si=wmovGFUUmXincdoz. By courtesy of Diego Pellecchia.

lost will be born again. The souls of the dead, therefore, are not forgotten and "peace is brought to flower in the world." [65]

> If only the world could feel
> compassion for all souls,
> and remember to pray for all
> for rebirth and world peace
> then dreams could be fulfilled
> in each heart a flower planted
> blossoming in true humanity. [66]

The moment the Mother finds her missing child, men and women from six countries – including some with family members who were *hibakusha* 被爆者 (lit. "bomb-affected-people") [67] – appear on stage as spirits of the dead, wearing evocative masks carved by Udaka. After listening to the fervent prayer declared by the Spirit of the Willow Tree, the Mother eventually returns to the world of the living.

A Memorial Requiem for All

At first glance, *Genshigumo* by Udaka Michishige appears to center on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. However, a closer examination of its underlying motifs reveals that the play aspires to something broader. The 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in 2001 had, in fact, a profound impact on Udaka, prompting in him an urgent need to respond artistically. Motivated by a desire to convey a plea for peace, he returned to a *nō* play he had begun thirty years earlier and completed it in 2001 so that it could serve as a "meditation on the spiritual effects of mass violence [taking into account multiple tragedies from various eras and regions]" as well as "a process of hope and healing."[68] In this sense, *Genshigumo* presents itself as an artistic medium through which

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[65] Teele, Ogamo R. 2005. "Noh: A Mirror of the Spirit." In *JAPAN SPOTLIGHT* (November/December Issue): 37.
[66] An excerpt of Ogamo Rebecca Teele's English translation of the original script.
[67] *Hibakusha* is a term to describe the survivors affected by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
[68] For further information on Udaka's life accomplishments, artistic works and legacy, see INI. "About Us: Performances of Traditional Noh and Original Noh." *The International Noh Institute*. Published on March 27, 2020. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://internationalnohinstitute.com/about-us/master-actor-udaka-michishige/.

reflection on and procession of contemporary traumatic experiences can ultimately take place.

In order to raise awareness of the universal importance of harmony and stability, this *mugen nō* play has been performed several times around the world. It was first performed in Kyōto (2003), followed by a rendition at the National *Nō* Theater in Tōkyō (2004) and, once again, in Kyōto (2004). Retitled *Inori* 祈り (lit. "Prayer"), Udaka performed this piece extensively throughout Europe, travelling to Paris, Dresden and Berlin (2007). [69] Most importantly, he then succeeded to stage *Genshigumo* in Hiroshima in 2010 (Figure 2) – an extremely significant location, for it had been Udaka's long-time wish to realize this new *nō* in the "sacred site of everlasting peace." [70]

Figure 2. The poster for the performance in Hiroshima in 2010 of the new *nō Genshigumo*, written and performed by Udaka Michishige. Source: INI. "About Us: Performances of Traditional Noh and Original Noh." *The International Noh Institute*. Published on March 27, 2020. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://internationalnohinstitute.com/about-us/master-actor-udaka-michishige/.

[69] Udaka hoped to stage *Genshigumo* in Japan and abroad, envisioning it as a "cornerstone for peace" (*heiwa no ishizue* 平和の礎). See Miyanishi, Naoko 宮西 ナオ子. 2005. "*Josei nōgaku no kanōsei* 女性能楽の可能性 [The Potential of Women's Noh]." *Yūgō bunka kenkyū* 融合文化研究, vol. 6: 10. This article cites comments by Udaka on *Genshigumo*, published by Archives Japan and the 60th Anniversary Commemorative Performance Executive Committee (2005).

[70] *Kōkyū heiwa no seichi* 恒久平和の聖地. See Hiroshima Cultural Encyclopedia. "Event: Shinsaku nō *A Prayer for Peace – The Atomic Cloud* Hiroshima Performance." Published on June 16, 2010. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://www.hiroshima-bunka.jp/modules/news/article.php?storyid=63.

Moreover, *Genshigumo* distances itself from merely re-enacting the tragic event in a narrative style. In this sense, it is a memorial requiem not only for those who perished in the atomic bombings but also for "the souls of the victims in the various misadventures that have occurred since the development of nuclear weapons" and those who have suffered from "the terrorism that is so prevalent in our world today." [71] As claimed by Udaka himself

> Through performances not only in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also around the world, I hope to console the countless souls still being lost due to incidents like Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and hydrogen bomb tests. At the same time, I wish to use *nō* – the world's intangible heritage – to advocate for the human themes, eternally valid, of the dignity and harmony of life and the soul. [72]

Therefore, on the one hand, *Genshigumo* is a "prayer offered to those suffering spirits trapped between this and the other world." On the other hand, it becomes a ritual, a site for transmitting the collective memory scarred by the bombs, and for prompting current and future generations to reflect on the absurdity of war. [73] This ritual aspect – akin to a funeral rite – can be associated with the Japanese cultural concept of *ichigo ichie* 一期一会 (lit. "one time, one meeting"). *Nō* performances are, in fact, one-time events, never repeated with the same cast nor rehearsed multiple times, a custom bearing profound symbolic value that is thought to "preserve the freshness and uniqueness of each performance" and of the message it carries. [74]

Now, what kind of artistic devices were employed on stage to concretely express this urgency for remembrance and reflection?

Udaka's Original Masks Depicting a Sense of Urgency

In *nō* theatre, as well as in other performing arts around the world, the mask is more than a mere artifact. In New Guinean performances, for example, the mask functions as the "conduit for a 'visiting' spiritual entity, coming from the past into the contemporary world of

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[71] Teele, *Noh: A Mirror of the Spirit*, 37. In this regard, *Genshigumo* was the first *shinsaku nō* that spoke directly of the victims of modern terrorism. See Rodowicz-Czechowska, *Shinsakunō Appeasement Reconciliatio*n, 151.
[72] Miyanishi, *Potential of Women's Noh*, 10–11.
[73] Diego Pellecchia, "Shinsaku Noh: Hiroshima's Prayer for Peace," *The Noh Diaries*, Published on July 7, 2010. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://diegopellecchia.com/tag/shinsaku-noh/.
[74] Pellecchia, Diego. 2017. "Noh Creativity? The Role of Amateurs in Japanese Noh Theatre." *Contemporary Theatre Review* 27, no. 1: 35.

the spectators."[75] Similarly, this concept applies to Japanese *nōmen*. Regarded as intrinsically "sacred,"[76] they present the opportunity for the phantasms or spirits of the past to come and "visit" the stage, deeply engaging with the audience. However, it is essential to understand that *nō* masks embody not only the specters from the past but also the "cumulative experiences of thousands of performances, connecting generations of actors in a continuous thread of cultural heritage and artistic expression."[77] In this sense, masks used in performing arts reveal themselves to be the perfect embodiment of both tangible and intangible cultural values. But what happens when these masks, characterized by fixed designs, are fundamentally altered?

In contemporary times, *nō* masks donned by *nō* practitioners generally originate from two sources: they are either heirloom pieces passed down through generations within a specific acting school – true cultural treasures – or they are newly carved by professional craftsmen. The process of making a *nō* mask demands not only profound diligence but also insight into the dramatic role, along with an original interpretation. Adding a personalized approach is necessary to convey the mask's full expressive potential and move the souls of the audience.[78] Having embodied an exceptional mastery of the artistic techniques, Udaka carved his own masks, reimagining the traditional repertoire or even experimenting with original designs – in both cases, they were expressions of his extensive knowledge and aesthetic insight on the art of *nō* theatre. In the case of *Genshigumo*, while firmly adhering to key aesthetic conventions of *nō* – such as the use of highly poetic language or stylized movement patterns – Udaka adopted a creative approach by carving new masks for the play's chorus, representing the victims' spirits.[79]

As mentioned before, the chorus' traditional role is to kneel quietly in a specific area, without masks or special costumes. *Genshigumo*, however, changes this conventional aspect in its entirety: the chorus is not only wearing a black robe but also donning experimental masks, sitting in the *jiutai za* as well as the *ato za* 後座 (lit. "rear area"), in front of the

[75] Emigh, John. 1996. "Playing and Masking: Observations on Masked Performance in Papua New Guinea and Beyond." In *Masked Performance : The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre*, 14. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
[76] A legacy of the religious roots in *nō*. See Hoaas, Solrun. 1982. "Noh Masks: The Legacy of Possession." *The Drama Review: TDR* 26, no. 4: 85.
[77] Nakao and Pellecchia, *Performance*, 136.
[78] Udaka, Michishige. 2018. "Preface." In *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, 9. Kodansha USA.
[79] He has also carved original masks for the three main characters.

musicians. Although creating original masks is not novel, [80] letting the chorus wear them is truly a remarkable achievement. This is because the value that the mask holds within *nō* tradition is incommensurable. Used to convey the aesthetic elegance of *nō*, it maintains a "direct connection with the higher and spiritual forces that inhabit it" and, as such, to alter a mask means to directly intervene on a fundamental cornerstone of *nō*. [81]

While partly adhering to the principles of tradition, Udaka made many of the features of these "faces" appear "deformed and anguished, distinctly marked by the burns caused by the atomic heat." [82] No signs of anger or resentment, but only a certain sense of tragedy can be perceived in them as they unmistakably reflect the atomic bombings' "dark heritage" (Figure 3–5). In an interview with Pellecchia (2014), Udaka stated that

> […] starting from classical *nō* masks, I distorted their features, took out teeth, scarred their skin, made the eyes bulge […]. [83]

Figure 3. *Genshigumo*'s chorus *nōmen* – carved by Udaka Michishige. Photo: Fabio Massimo Fioravanti. Source: Alcantar, Monica. 2023. "International Cultural Heritage: The 2003 ICH in Context." *Antropologia e Teatro. Rivista Di Studi*, no. 16: 57.

[80] One example would be the mask created for *Blue Moon Over Memphis* (2010), already mentioned in Chapter 2 on *shinsaku nō*. This mask was made by Theatre Nohgaku's affiliated artist, mask carver Kitazawa Hideta, specifically for the second-half *shite* of this English-*nō*.

[81] Even today, the actor – even the most reluctant to embrace this "sacredness" – bows to the *nōmen* in a gesture of deep respect before wearing it and never underestimates its impact on the performance. See Casari, Matteo. 2012. "Il nuovo nō: continuità di discontinuità." In *Teatro Nō, Orizzonti Possibili*, edited by Matteo Casari, 10. *Prove di Drammaturgia* XVII, n. 1.

[82] Casari, Matteo. 2011. "La tradizione oltre sé stessa. Il teatro classico giapponese e alcuni suoi sconfinamenti contemporanei." In *Culture del Giappone contemporaneo. Manga, anime, videogiochi, arti visive, cinema, letteratura, teatro, architettura*, 47. Tunué.

[83] Pellecchia, *Udaka in Conversation with Pellecchia*, 86.

Figure 4. Another *Genshigumo*'s chorus *nōmen* – carved by Udaka Michishige. Source: Casari, Matteo. 2012. "Il nuovo nō: continuità di discontinuità." In *Teatro Nō, Orizzonti Possibili*, edited by Matteo Casari, 5. *Prove di Drammaturgia* XVII, n. 1.

Figure 5. Comparison between traditional masks (top left and bottom right) and experimental masks created by Udaka Michishige for *Genshigumo*. Source: Casari, Matteo. 2012. "Il nuovo nō: continuità di discontinuità." In *Teatro Nō, Orizzonti Possibili*, edited by Matteo Casari, 7. Prove di Drammaturgia XVII, n. 1.

In light of this, the act of creating evocative masks is deeply connected to the author's personal sensibility, as relying on canonical masks – or their variations [84] – was neither powerful nor effective enough to convey the urgency of his time and the universality of his message. By carving new masks and extraordinarily assigning them to the chorus, Udaka shifts the focus toward the victims surrounding the main actors, serving as a constant reminder of what occurred and its tragic outcome – asserting that these lives are worthy of remembrance and deserve space on the stage. His primary purpose in creating and integrating these innovative masks is, then, to honor and commemorate those who lost their lives.

Additionally, the chorus in *nō* theatre typically describes the "action, scenery, and emotions of the characters from a third-person perspective," at times chanting together lines meant to depict the speech of the *shite* or *waki*. [85] In fact, it either speaks for the playwright or for the characters, thereby giving voice to multiple identities. The chorus is also meant to sing on behalf of the *shite* so that he can perform in front of the audience's enthusiastic focus. In this sense, what unfolds during the performing process is an "interaction between the group [the chorus] and the individual [the actor] for whom it speaks, such that often the distinctions between them disappear." [86] Although a formally distinct entity from the other characters, by serving as their mouthpiece, the chorus ends up not possessing any identity in its own right. Rarely expressing an opinion of its own, it unavoidably remains seated in the background, quietly, as a simple storyteller.

In *Genshigumo*, however, this conventional strategy also undergoes a striking transformation: the chorus – representing the spirits of the *hibakusha* – speaks from a first-person perspective. This groundbreaking aspect is encompassed within the concluding scene, where each member is moving with a slow yet powerful presence while delivering an intense plea – a kind of admonition directed toward all of humanity (Figure 6 and 7). These chants ultimately allow the chorus to assume the identity of the story's real protagonists – the victims who suffered and died from the tragedies that occurred around the world. By evoking

[84] Today, there are approximately sixty basic models of *nō* masks recorded. The number rises to over two hundred when subtle variations of these basic masks, as well as special ones created for specific plays, are included. See Udaka, Michishige, and Ruth Ozeki. 2018. *The Secrets of Noh Masks*, 153. Kodansha USA.
[85] Hare, Thomas and Yamanaka Reiko. 2024. "Introducing Nō and Kyōgen." In *A Companion to No and Kyogen Theatre* (vol. 1), 5. Brill.
[86] Smethurst, Mae. 2016. "Noh and Greek Tragedy." *Nōgaku kenkyūjo kiyō* 能楽研究所紀要 [Journal of the Institute of Nōgaku Studies] 41: 236(5).

and bringing to the stage their own intense emotions and deep desires, the spirits of the dead earnestly request the audience to

> Pray for us, pray for us, pray for us! Pray for us… Do not forget us!

Figure 6 and 7 (from left to right). *Genshigumo*'s experimental *nōmen* – carved by Udaka Michishige – performed at Kokuritsu Nōgakudō (09/07/2004). Source: Pellecchia, Diego. "Genshigumo Kokuritsu 2004 7 9." Published on March 27, 2025. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://youtu.be/cI9k7HFA8Is?si=wmovGFUUmXincdoz. By courtesy of Diego Pellecchia.

The lines that delineate the chorus and separate it from the *shite* or the *waki* are no longer blurry nor vague. Without singing in the other characters' stead or being overshadowed, the chorus now possesses a clear identity and a voice of its own, as it speaks directly and loudly – not resentfully, but always accompanied by a certain sense of tragedy – to the immediate audience. While shouldering a heavy burden, it finally has come to share – itself and not through the other actors – a message that transcends all limitations of space and time: to pray and to never forget the victims who lost their lives to human-made disasters, from the production of nuclear weapons to terrorist attacks.

Together with the innovative device constituted by the evocative masks, the chorus' act of reclaiming its own identity and, above all, agency through first-person narration – and not simply portraying the scene or speaking in unison with the *shite* – challenges well-established approaches. In this sense, by acknowledging *nō* theatre's evolving role as intangible cultural heritage, Udaka recognizes its potential to bring contemporary issues to the stage while also addressing emotions and themes – such as the dignity of life – that have long been central to the human experience and remain pivotal within *nō* theatre. Through the introduction of innovative performing elements, he ultimately creates a space where these concerns – alongside traumatic experiences tied to "dark heritage" – can take form, become

protagonists and resonate with a broader audience, helping the processing of collective cultural trauma.

Chapter 4 – Ishimure Michiko's *Shiranui* and the Fight for Recognition

In this chapter, I analyze *Shiranui* (2002), a new *nō* play by social activist and writer Ishimure Michiko (1927–2018), focusing on the creative elements incorporated in the performance – specifically, the 2004 outdoor stage and the innovative props.

This contemporary *nō* engages with a form of "dark heritage" centered on environmental pollution in Japan and, more broadly, the global destruction of the natural world – largely caused by rapid industrialization and reconstruction, particularly in the post-World War II period. Within this context, Ishimure's play both became a "lyrical lament on the irreversible destruction of pristine nature" and a significant part of her fight for public recognition of the victims of Minamata disease, caused by mercury pollution in the Shiranui Sea off the coast of Kyūshū. [87]

Rekindling the Fading Flame in the Sea

Shiranui has two main characters: a sister, named Shiranui 不知火 (the *shite*), [88] and her brother, Tokowaka 常若 (the *wakitsure* ワキツレ). [89] Shiranui is a shrine maiden at *Unadama no Miya* 海霊の宮 – the Shrine of the Sea God – and, along with her brother, she helps maintain a balanced state of nature, protecting respectively the seas and the lands. Following the instructions of their father Ryūjin 竜神 (the *tsure* ツレ), [90] the dragon-god, they constantly have ensured that all life would thrive by performing sacred rituals and offering devotions.

However, with the advent of modernity humans drastically disrupted this balance, contaminating the natural environment with pollutants and destroying it through aggressive practices. Within this degenerated world, Ryūjin sends a messenger, Onbō no Jō 隠亡の尉 (the *waki*), to help his children. As Shiranui and Tokowaka's efforts in trying to restore the

[87] Scholz-Cionca and Nakajima, *Introduction*, 415.

[88] The term "Shiranui" is extremely significant. It refers not only to the main character of the play, but also to the sea surrounding Minamata – the Shiranui Sea – which was poisoned by the methylmercury emissions of the Chisso Corporation, a leading chemical company. In this sense, "Shiranui" alludes to the new *nō*, the local area around Minamata and, ultimately, to the "fate of the oceans, heavens, and all the beings of the world." See Allen, Bruce. 2016. "The Noh Imagination in *Shiranui* and the Work of Ishimure Michiko." In *Ishimure Michiko's Writing in Ecocritical Perspective: Between Sea and Sky*, 179. Lanham: The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group.

[89] The *wakitsure* is the companion of the *waki*.

[90] The *tsure* is the companion of the *shite*.

lost balance no longer suffice, a more drastic action may be necessary to ensure that this present world – dominated by pollution and human greed – is recovered, leading to a total cleansing and rebirth of the earth. And this action is for Shiranui to sacrifice herself. Nonetheless, a world marked by irreversible destruction due to the nation-state's urgent push for industrialization can still be, at the very end, saved. As flawlessly written by Allen

> Even at this critical stage, hope is not completely lost. A slim chance remains that humans may wake up and act to avert this imminent fate of extinction. But even if humans cannot save things, there is still the promise that […] Shiranui and Tokowaka will be wed and that their union will bring forth the seeds from which a new beginning of life will spring. [91]

Shiranui's sacrifice, thus, can be replaced by the promised union of the two siblings in a hopeful attempt to generate a new world, along with the rebirth of life. On this note, following Aihara and Allen's translation of the original script, Tokowaka proclaims

> Then, with my sister Shiranui, shall I carry out the rite of rebirth to *rekindle the fading flame in the sea*. Let us, on the first day of August, call out to the heavens above for divine protection to restore the fire in the sea, for as long as there are sun and moon in the sky above. [92]

In the final scene, Onbō no Jō asks for the presence of a mythical character named Ki 夔 (the *ai* アイ), [93] who is "the bearer of music from ancient China" and "a spirit of trees and rocks." [94] The ancient musician reveals that

> […] If you hold these stones in your hands, you feel you are holding tiny seashells from the beginning of the world. Let us strike these stones together and sing. […] [95]

The sound, in fact, plays a crucial role within Ishimure's cosmology. Natural sounds and, above all, reverberations replace the conventional storytelling, constantly focused on the human voice. These sounds constitute a natural world full of life that clashes against the one

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[91] Allen, *The Noh Imagination in Shiranui*, 179.
[92] Aihara and Allen, *Shiranui: A Contemporary Noh*, 196 (my emphasis). In the original script, Ishimure, *Shinsaku nō: Shiranui*, 496.
[93] The *ai* can appear as a temple god, village person or even attendant, often recounting the history of the *shite*.
[94] Aihara and Allen, *Shiranui: A Contemporary Noh*, 196.
[95] Ibid., 197. In the original script, Ishimure, *Shinsaku nō: Shiranui*, 497.

destroyed by modernity, recognized instead as a "voiceless state" (*koenaki arisama* 声なき有様) and a "beach of no sounds" (*koenaki hama* 声なき浜).[96]

Through the musician's words, the rebirth of sounds is shown to be intrinsically connected with the rebirth of the earth and, by extension, of life itself. During the performance, this idea is embodied by Ki striking the "stones" (*ishi* 石) on stage – a sound that symbolizes the most primitive of all sounds, and thus the "beginning of the world" (*sousei no yo* 創世の世). It is only through this act, performed during both Ki's speech and dance, that the rebirth of true sound – and with it, the rebirth of all life, including those of the victims – may occur.[97]

By exploring the sense of displacement and uncertainty triggered by the push for industrialization, this contemporary play initially appears to invoke only the ruin of humankind ("[humans] go on to destroy and cause the deaths of all").[98] However, it ultimately delivers a heartfelt appeal for rebirth and the renewal of life on earth, calling for a collective effort ("let us strike these stones together and sing") and acknowledging the first ever victims of the disease.[99]

> […] You, O lovely and beloved cats who died such miserable deaths on this beach, come forward, before all the other beings, come out to dance. […][100]

Now, what other artistic devices were employed to express the victims' recognition process?

The Meaning Behind Shiranui*'s Staging by the Coast*

Shiranui's "basic spirit and artistic forms are fundamentally rooted in the traditions of *nō*," preserving many of its language and cosmological conventions – for instance, the use of archaic words and the concept of the *hashigakari* 橋掛り (*nō* bridge) standing between

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[96] Aihara and Allen, *Shiranui: A Contemporary Noh*, 193 and 196. In the original script, Ishimure, *Shinsaku nō: Shiranui*, 493 and 497.

[97] Ishimure, Michiko 石牟礼 道子, and Rokurō Umewaka 六郎 梅若. 2003. *Shiranui : Shinsaku nō* 不知火 : 新作能. Shohan. Tōkyō: Heibonsha. DVD. By courtesy of Kansas University Library.

[98] Aihara and Allen, *Shiranui: A Contemporary Noh*, 194. In the original script, Ishimure, *Shinsaku nō: Shiranui*, 493.

[99] The cats along the coast of Minamata Bay in the Shiranui Sea were the first animals to exhibit symptoms of Minamata disease – symptoms that would later also appear in the human population of the area.

[100] An excerpt of Ki's speech. See Aihara and Allen, *Shiranui: A Contemporary Noh*, 197. In the original script, Ishimure, *Shinsaku nō: Shiranui*, 497.

dream and reality, time and space. [101] Yet the play introduces an element that sets it apart from traditional *nō*, taking an innovative approach while incorporating a cultural heritage perspective – one intrinsically linked to "dark heritage."

As mentioned earlier, the traditional *nō* stage is typically bare and mostly fashioned indoors. In the case of Ishimure's *Shiranui*, however, significant changes were made to the location and method of performance. The play was in fact first performed indoors in Tōkyō (2002), then in Kumamoto (2003) and, most importantly, outdoors in Minamata (2004). In this 2004 performance, the play was staged along the coastline of Minamata Bay in Kumamoto Prefecture, facing the silhouette of Koiji Island (Figure 8 and 9).

Figure 8. *Shiranui* performed with Koiji Island in the background – around 7:24 p.m. on August 28, 2004 – at the waterside embankment on the reclaimed land in Minamata Bay. Source: Kumanichi. "Photos Archive." Last Accessed on May 9, 2025.
https://bp.kumanichi.com/photo/archives/list?sort=new&end_y=2012&start_m=9&end_m=9&start_y=1949&commit=検索&page=237.

Figure 9. *Shiranui* performed as an offering under the waxing moon of the Thirteenth Night. Source: Kumanichi. "Photos Archive." Last Accessed on May 9, 2025.
https://bp.kumanichi.com/photo/archives/list?sort=new&end_y=2012&start_m=9&end_m=9&start_y=1949&commit=検索&page=237.

[101] Allen, *The Noh Imagination in Shiranui*, 174.

Representing the play in this location, marked by death and disaster, served as an act of reclaiming the very space where the Minamata environmental tragedy occurred. It reflects Ishimure's activism while acknowledging and commemorating the victims' souls, in an effort to process all that past suffering in the present. In this sense, *Shiranui* transforms itself into Ishimure's "haunting requiem" for those who have been affected by the Minamata disease incident. [102]

This process of remembrance is of utmost significance precisely because the victims involved in the tragedy have been neglected and ignored in their suffering for years on end: they faced severe discrimination and endured painful ostracism from fellow residents and local authorities alike. [103] In fact, as a consequence of the Chisso Corporation's indifference toward the devastating environmental and health damage it caused, the cultural trauma – encompassing major social impacts, such as poverty and psychological distress – lasted for entire decades. Thus, with the exception of Ishimure's arduous fight for recognition, [104] the victims' suffering was never fully acknowledged; instead, they were treated as collateral damage in Japan's post-war industrial transformation. Deliberately concealing the consequences of this industrialization was to ensure that, in the first place, Japan's recovery of its industrial capacity would not be hindered. This resulted not only in the erasure of an entire community and its way of life but also in the lack of commemoration for those affected, an issue that has been publicly addressed fifty years later through several social initiatives – such as museum-building and other collective memorial practices.

Specifically, in Japan, environmental pollution is commonly referred to as *kōgai* 公害 (lit. "public damage"), a term that denotes not only harm to the physical environment – air, water, soil, and the human body – but also the breakdown of social and personal relationships within affected communities. [105] Within this context, Japan's urgency for modernization systematically led not only to the destruction of the natural environment surrounding

[102] Ibid.

[103] The spread of Minamata disease caused the disruption of fundamental community values – such as social cohesion and integration. These social divisions arose among patients, within families, and between agricultural producers and Minamata disease victims. Due to a series of lawsuits started in the 1970s, the conflicts between patient groups and the Chisso Corporation also became extremely tense. See Kusago, Takayoshi. 2011. "A sustainable well-being initiative: Social divisions and the recovery process in Minamata, Japan." In *Community Quality-of-Life Indicators: Best Cases* V, pp. 103–104. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

[104] For an accurate testimony on the victims' suffering and the movement to support them, see especially Ishimure Michiko, and Livia Monnet. 2003. *Paradise in the Sea of Sorrow : Our Minamata Disease*. Ann Arbor, Mich: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan.

[105] Yokemoto, Masafumi, Miho Hayashi, Mayuko Shimizu, and Keiji Fujiyoshi. 2023. *Environmental Pollution and Community Rebuilding in Modern Japan*, V–VI. Singapore: Springer.

Minamata but also to the collapse of the communities and livelihoods constructed around it. The victims of the pollution-related "dark heritage" therefore include the natural environment as well as the people who lived there.

By reclaiming what was lost or destroyed through *nō* theatre – an art aiming at appeasing the dead – this negative experience is ultimately transformed into a shared form of heritage. In this sense, staging this drama piece along the coastline, at the very place where everything began, allows Ishimure's message of hope to transcend the limits of the particular – the immediate audience – and reach the universal. In fact, *Shiranui* infers not only a "haunting requiem" to the victims involved in the tragedy but also a warning call to all humankind – the entire world of humans, together with the natural dimension.

Once again, recognition and remembrance presented through a *mugen nō* play are central to the processing of cultural trauma and to the transmission of collective memory. In this regard, the emotions and events evoked on stage ultimately fulfill the duty of reconciliation with those affected by this traumatic event and of warning to those suffering in the present world, endangered by a ceaseless rush to progress.

Flames of Spirits, Commemoration of Souls

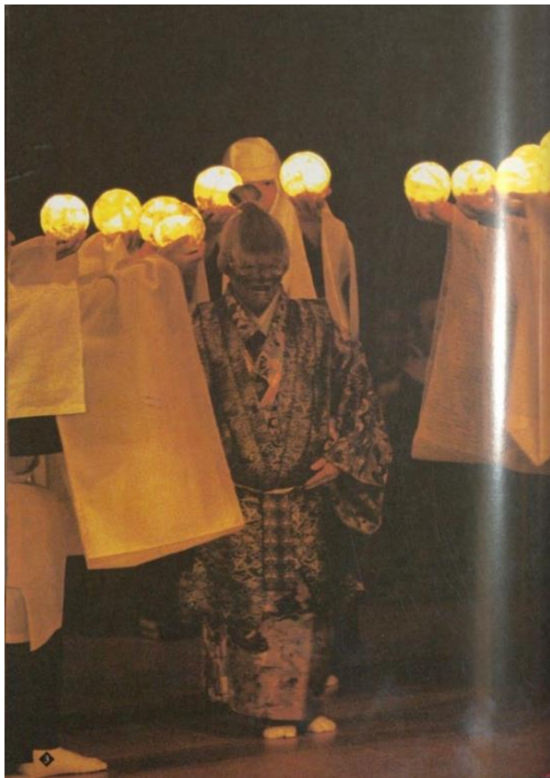
Another key artistic device in Ishimure's creative design is the paper lights carried by the chorus. As previously noted, the chorus in *nō* theatre traditionally consists of eight members seated quietly in two rows, clad in dark, formal attire and rarely moving – the chorus never stands up from its allocated area and does not participate in the movement patterns during the course of the performance.

Shiranui, however, decisively departs from this convention and brings to the stage a significant transformation. In this play, in fact, the chorus is dressed in white garments – only leaving the face visible – and, unexpectedly and extraordinarily, rises and moves around the main stage, often encircling the main actors. Each member also holds a "spiritual flame" [106] – a spherical light wrapped in *washi* paper [107] containing a fire – that symbolizes the souls of the dead (Figure 10). Moreover, the performance stage is made darker than in typical *nō*

[106] Kasai, *New plays as engine of renewal*, 90.
[107] *Washi* 和紙 is the Japanese word for the traditional papers processed by hand that use fibers from the inner bark of three different plants.

dramas – another innovative feature, since *nō* generally employs no special lighting effects – allowing the luminous flames to stand out and illuminate the characters. [108] These four elements – the white attire, the paper lights, the dimmer lighting, and the chorus' original movement patterns – constitute a significant innovation within *nō* theatre (Figure 11–15). [109]

Figure 10. *Shiranui* performed in prayer for the repose and rebirth of the lives taken by Minamata disease – October 2003, Kumamoto Prefectural Theater in Kumamoto City. Photo: Miyamoto Narumi 宮本 成美. Source: Shikoku News. "水俣病現地で鎮魂の能上演／石牟礼道子さん「不知火」 *Minamata-byō genchi de chinkon no nō jōen / Ishimure Michiko-san* '*Shiranui*' [Requiem *Nō* Performance at the Site of Minamata Disease / Ishimure Michiko's *Shiranui*]." Published on May 11, 2004. Last Accessed on May 9, 2025. https://www.shikoku-np.co.jp/national/culture_entertainment/photo.aspx?id=20040511000030&no=1.



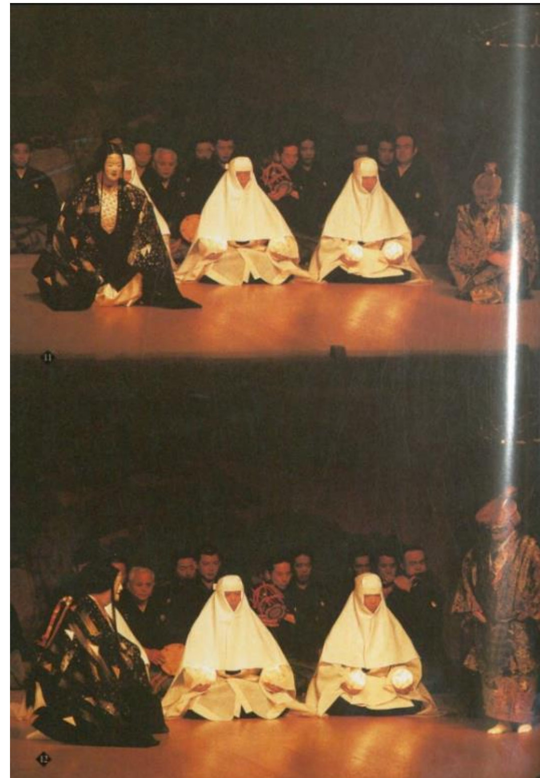


Figure 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 (from left to right). The chorus of *Shiranui* at Kokuritsu nōgakudo (18/07/2002). Source: Noboru, Takahashi 高橋 昇. 2003. "*Shashin* 写真 [Photos]." In *Shiranui* : *Shinsaku nō* 不知火 : 新作能, 1–41. Shohan. Tōkyō: Heibonsha. By courtesy of Kansas University Library.

[108] Scholz-Cionca and Nakajima, *Introduction*, 416.
[109] In Yokomichi's *The Hawk Princess* (1967), the chorus also moves about on stage and wears costumes as well as half-masks. See Emmert, *Expanding Nō Horizons*, 24.

Like *Genshigumo*, the chorus here actively engages with the stage, the main characters and the audience. This time, each member of the chorus is fully involved: from their white attire and the carrying of the spherical lights to the purposeful movements across the stage. By filling the space with action and luminous presence – enhanced by the dimmed lighting that plunges the stage into semi-darkness – the chorus asserts itself as a protagonist in its own right, no longer confined to quietly kneeling in the conventional *jiutai za*. But what message underlies these creative strategies?

The underlying motifs behind this innovative staging revolve around remembrance and, above all, recognition of the victims. The chorus' collective actions on stage – highlighted by the white clothes, the glowing spheres and the original movements – embody a shared message that, similar to *Genshigumo*, speaks to all humanity. Within this context, the paper lights – symbolic representations of the souls of the dead – serve as tangible acknowledgments of the countless lives lost to the Minamata disaster and, more broadly, to the contemporary world's deep spiritual and environmental crises. After years of discrimination, neglect and suffering caused by human greed – legacy of the Minamata cultural trauma – the long-overdue restoration of the victims' dignity finds an artistic expression through these "spiritual flame[s]." As they drift across the stage – between dream and reality – the performance enacts a dynamic ritual of recognition, commemoration and honoring of the victims, who have now tangibly become protagonists of their own story.

Conclusion

Throughout my thesis, I have argued that performances create a crucial site for the narration of traumatic memories – poetically and visually evoked on stage. They enable "the transmission of the multiple layers of sorrow and guilt that constitute personal trauma," while also contributing to the construction of collective memory. [110] In other words, recounting difficult past events – such as the atomic bombings or the Minamata disaster – and presenting them on stage can deeply move the audience to its core, urging the formation of a sense of interconnectedness that embraces all of humanity across time and space.

Drawing on the analysis of *Genshigumo* and *Shiranui*, *mugen nō* plays embody both tangible cultural expressions – the staged performance with costumes, masks and props – and intangible ones – the underlying messages that resonate with immediate and broader audiences. [111] In this sense, cultural performances act not only as sites of remembrance but also as spaces where processes of validation, denunciation, compensation, and the honoring of victims can take place. [112] These unfold within a continuum of recounting and reclaiming what has been taken away or lost, and what might still be found again. The performing arts thus play a vital role in representing "dark heritage" and processing collective cultural trauma, creating a transgenerational space for memory and healing.

It might happen that certain horrors constituting cultural trauma can never be resolved or fully healed. Nonetheless, a sense of hope remains: one established on the power of human relationships and shared presence – elements that can be found, in this case, on a performing stage. As the chorus carries the souls of the victims in *Shiranui* and prays for them in *Genshigumo*, we as humans carry a "responsibility to [be with the victims] physically if possible, and spiritually in all events." [113] Ishimure's comment on this theme will certainly serve as a powerful reminder

[110] Akagawa, Natsuko. 2020. "'Difficult Heritage', Silent Witnesses: Dismembering Traumatic Memories, Narratives and Emotions of Firebombing in Japan." In *Places of Traumatic Memory*, edited by Amy L. Hubbell, 39. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
[111] Alcantar, *The 2003 ICH in Context*, 56.
[112] Hubbell, Amy L., Sol Rojas-Lizana, Natsuko Akagawa, and Annie Pohlman. 2020. "Acknowledging Trauma in a Global Context: Narrative, Memory and Place." In *Places of Traumatic Memory*, 5. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
[113] Allen, *The Noh Imagination in Shiranui*, 185.

> We speak of "help in the midst of agony." But even if we do help out in times of agony, sometimes wounds may not heal, illnesses may not be cured, and terrible incidents may not be corrected. Such things can't be done with calculation. Just being together with a person and sharing the suffering together – that has been the common humanity of people. [114]

[114] Ibid. Quotation from Ishimure's autobiographical film. See Ishimure, Michiko. 2014. "*Hana no okudo e* 花の億土へ [Towards the Paradise of Flowers]." Documentary film (DVD) directed by Kim Tai, English translation by Bruce Allen. Tōkyō: Fujiwara Shoten. DVD.

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