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# Life and Death in Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba*: Utilisation and Transformation of Traditional Concepts in a New Work

Yusuke SUZUMURA

## Introduction

The Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* (鬼滅の刃, Damon Slayer) is based on the manga by Gotouge Koyoharu (吾峠呼世晴) and was performed at the Kanze Noh Theatre in Tokyo in July 2022 and at the Otsuki Noh Theatre in Osaka in December 2022. A new Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsuno Yaiba – Tsugu –* (鬼滅の刃—継—) was performed at the Kanze Noh Theatre in December 2024.

The original manga is set in the Taisho Period. The story follows Kamado Tanjiro (竈門炭治郎), whose family was killed by demons, as he overcame various training and hardships to turn his sister Kamado Nezuko (竈門禰豆子), who has become a demon, back into a human, defeating the demons with his friends and finally confronting Kibutsuji Muzan (鬼辻舞無惨), the progenitor of all demons.

*Kimetsu no Yaiba* of the Noh and Kyogen bases on the content of the early part of the original manga and is supervised by Otsuki Bunzo (大槻文藏), directed and revised by Nomura Mansai (野村萬斎), composed Kamei Hirotada (亀井広忠), and with an original script by Kinoshita Yuichi (木ノ下裕一).

By the unique feature of the original work, the battles between humans and demons, and life and death take an important role in the Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba*. Furthermore, the issue of life and death forms a remarkable element in Noh itself. However, until now, there is no study of how the Noh

and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* reflects the perception of life and death in Noh. Therefore, we will examine the concept of life and death in Noh, particularly using *Mugen Noh* (夢幻能) as a clue, and discuss the significance of the transfer of *Kimetsu no Yaiba* from manga to the Noh and Kyogen.

## 1. Mugen Noh and Its Structure

Noh, a performing art developed by the father-son duo Kan'ami (観阿弥) and Zeami (世阿弥) during the Muromachi Period, consists of plays drawn from a wide range of sources including classics such as *The Tale of Genji* (源氏物語) and *The Tale of the Heike* (平家物語), as well as myths, legends, historical events from Japan and China, and folklore passed down across Japan. These sources form the basis for the *yōkyoku* (謡曲) or the Noh song, which serves as the script for their performances. Furthermore, according to Yokomichi Mario's research, these works are categorised into two types—Dream (*mugen*) Noh and Present-time (*genzai*) Noh (現在能)—depending on their structure.

Present-time Noh is a general term for Noh plays depicting events occurring in the real world. The lead role, the *shite* (シテ), is played by a real person, and the story progresses with the passage of real time. Dream Noh is structured as if the whole play is a dream or vision seen by the *waki* (ワキ), who is a supporting actor. They are characterised by having the *shite* play a god, ghost, spirit of a plant or animal, *yōkai*, or other unreal being, and several of the plots are told as recollections by the *shite* appearing before the *waki*, who is visiting a related place. If the *shite* is a ghost, in particular, the ghost appears in this world because it has certain feelings that make it unable to attain Buddhahood. The structure of a Dream Noh in which a *waki* from this world encounters a *shite* who is a lingering ghost is well represented in *Teika* (定家), a story about Fujiwara no Teika (藤原定家), who compiled the *Hyakunin Isshu* (百人一首), and Princess Shokushi (式子内親王). In it, a

travelling monk is taking refuge from the rain when a woman suddenly appears and guides him to an ivy-covered tomb. The woman recites the waka poem 'Tama no o yo/taenaba taene/nagaraeba/shinoburu koto no yowari mo zo suru' (玉の緒よ 絶えなば絶えね ながらえば 忍ぶことのよわりもぞする, Thread of life/if it will die, die now/if it lives on/my strength to conceal wanes). The waka expresses the love they were unable to achieve despite falling in love during their lives. The woman reciting the waka—which was included in the *Hyakunin Isshu*—is the ghost of the composer, Princess Shokushi, and has appeared to tell the travelling monk of her failure to attain Buddhahood because she has become entangled in the ivy growing from the grave of Fujiwara no Teika. After telling him of her feelings, the woman disappears near the grave. The monk chants a sutra, which loosens the ivy, and the ghost of Princess Shokushi performs a dance of gratitude. However, just as it seems the ivy has been untangled, it grows out again from the grave, pulling the woman under—thus bringing the story to an end.

## 2. Mugen Noh and Its Characteristics

This summary of *Teika* demonstrates that Dream Noh is a highly fantastical story, characterised by dreams and visions, as the name suggests. However, the term 'Dream Noh' was not in use when Kan'ami and Zeami were developing Noh. Rather, it has been in use since the Meiji Period and was popularised by Sanari Kentaro (佐成謙太郎) in the 1920s when he used it to categorise Noh styles and analyse concepts. Given that the history of Noh dates to the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century and continues to the present day, we can see that Dream Noh is a new concept. Furthermore, whether gods and ghosts are treated as the *waki*'s dream or illusion must be carefully considered when explaining a Dream Noh<sup>1)</sup>. This can help determine whether Zeami, when composing *Izutsu* (井筒) or other Noh plays that are now categorised as Dream Noh, intended the gods and ghosts to be dreams and illusions or as

tangible entities whose existence could be sensed despite their invisibility. Moreover, the point of recognising the existence of only what is visible can be considered an emphasis on the rational mind. This perspective is linked, for instance, to Plato in *Timaeus*, where the superiority of vision is highlighted by placing only sight, of all human senses, on the same level as intellect and soul. It can also be linked to Descartes, who upheld the mind's superiority in his mind-body dualism, highly valuing the eye of the mind that can grasp the essence of an object over the physical eye that often errs in perception<sup>2)</sup>.

However, regardless of the term Dream Noh, performing arts and theatrical pieces involving gods and ghosts as the main characters engaging with supporting human characters are rare in the world. The fact that Benjamin Britten composed the opera *Curlew River* after being highly impressed by the simple and succinct style of the story; the tension of the performers; the transcendent skill and movement; the beautiful decorations; and the excellent fusion of narration, chanting, and singing while watching *Tamura* (田村), *Sumidagawa* (隅田川), and *Genjō* (玄象) in Tokyo in 1956 suggests that there were no plays or operas with a structure similar to Dream Noh or that the opportunities to view such performances in the United Kingdom were few<sup>3)</sup>. Kurosawa Akira's film *Throne of Blood* (蜘蛛巣城, literally Spider Web Castle, 1957) is known for incorporating Noh elements into the makeup and performance of the actors, the decorations, and the architectural structure. The work begins with the remains of a castle and pillars on a hillside in deep fog, following which a wooden monument with the inscription 'Spider Web Castle Ruin' (蜘蛛巣城跡) appears. The monument also appears at the end, suggesting that it is an imitation of the structure of Dream Noh plays.

### 3. Life and Death for Japanese Culture

Of course, ghosts play important roles in some works, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, where the ghost of King Hamlet, the father of Hamlet, appears to tell

the truth about his death. Despite this, why are Dream Noh plays considered a characteristic form of Noh? Let us consider the reasons from the following three perspectives.

First, the relationship that the Japanese people have with the dead. In China, which has significantly influenced culture formation and development in the Japanese archipelago since ancient times, a custom was described in the *Book of Rites* (礼記, *Liji*) in the Chapter on the Conveyance of Rites (礼運篇, *Li Yun*). This custom suggested that upon death, family members and those close to the deceased would climb rooftops to call out the deceased's name to recall their souls, which were believed to have ascended to heaven. Similarly, as the poet Du Fu (杜甫) wrote in *Dēng gāo* (登高), there was a custom of climbing a high place, such as a hill, to pray for the dead on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month. Furthermore, the combined influence of Buddhism and ancestor worship led to the Urabon Festival (盂蘭盆会). Although the Urabon ceremony arrived in Japan in the second half of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century with the arrival of Buddhism, the rites were held as a ritual to call back the dead and spend a few days with them, differing from the memorial and mourning carried out in China. The Urabon Festival is celebrated even today in Japan as the Obon Festival and is one of the annual festivals of the country. Of course, while Pu Songling (蒲松齡) of the Qing Dynasty vividly depicted people travelling between this world and the land of the dead in *Strange Stories* (聊齋志異) from a Chinese studio, some emphasised a connection between the two worlds, which should be separate, as the Present and the Other World are on the Different Paths (幽明異路)<sup>4)</sup>. However, according to the indigenous customs of the Japanese archipelago, the dead were believed to exist close to the living, allowing them to return or go to the other world, as hinted by the verb depicting 'death' in Early Japanese literature. In other words, of the seven words primarily used as verbs to express death during the ancient period ('死ぬ' (to die), '隠る' (to disappear), '隠(こも)る' (to hide), '神上がる' (to ascend), '神避(かむさ)る' (to depart), '失(う)す' (to vanish), and '身罷る' (to pass

away), only the ‘死’ in ‘死ぬ’ was similar to the expression used in the Chinese language at the time. Furthermore, the word ‘死ぬ’ (*shinu*) is derived from the word ‘息往(しい)ぬ’ (*shiinu*), which originally referred to the physical phenomenon of being breathless and did not directly express the death of a person. In addition, as Motoori Norinaga (本居宣長) wrote in the *Kojiki-Den* (古事記伝, Commentary on the Kojiki), the Japanese pronunciation of the character ‘死’, ‘sh’ (Wu reading (*go-on*) and Han reading (*kan-on*), was only coincidentally similar to the stem of the verb ‘*shinu*’ meaning die’ and had nothing to do with the formation of the ancient verb ‘*shinu*’<sup>5</sup>). Therefore, the fact that ‘death’ itself was not expressed directly but was euphemistically expressed as hiding or departing this world left open the possibility for the hidden person to reappear or the departed person to return. Such ideas of ancestor worship led to the Japanese indigenisation of the Urabon festival, where ancestors were believed to return at certain times. This is one of the cultural backgrounds that led to the establishment of the style later conceptualised as Dream Noh in Japan.

Second, as represented by the visual techniques used to resemble something with other element widely enjoyed by people in the Edo Period, Japan tended to express things by combining different elements or attempting to see the invisible. Of course, special significance was still given to manmade, as evidenced by the First Qin Emperor (始皇帝), who, to represent his hopes of immortality, built a garden with a large lake called the Lanchi Gong (蘭池宮) or the Lake of Orchids in his capital Xianyang. In the ponds of this garden, he built the sacred mountains of Penglai (蓬萊) and Yingzhou (瀛洲), where the immortals are said to live. This was not limited to the grand efforts of powerful people: the practice of modelling something familiar to distinct places could also be seen in dry gardens in temples that expressed the sceneries of mountains and waters with simple sands and stones. This act required imaginative power to not only portray something using a different element but also comprehend it from the depiction.

The third element was the act of composing poetry. In China, one of the qualities required of intellectuals and readers was the ability to compose poetry. This reality changed over time. However, with the collapse of the aristocratic class from the end of the Tang Dynasty to the upheaval during the Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms Period, the China's Imperial Examination, which began in 598 during the Sui Dynasty, became established by the Northern Sung Dynasty as the primary method for recruiting bureaucrats. Those who passed the exam and became *Jinshi* (進士), advancing to the bureaucracy, or those who cleared the preliminary stages and became officials and local personages formed the core of the new society. However, those unable to take the examinations, which were open to all men except for certain professions and classes, were not considered intellectuals or readers. Furthermore, while the latter were expected to have a taste for poetry and writing even if they were not good, such habits were not expected of the former. This can be seen in the effect of differences in the social hierarchy on creative activities. It is also important to note that the *Man'yōshū* (万葉集) does not simply include works of distinguished people but records the poetry of soldiers and peasants as well. In other words, regardless of the quality of the work, the act of composing poetry was not limited to specific people within the hierarchy but rather involved a wide range of people if they had the opportunities and experience. This low barrier to participation in such creative activities was later widely enjoyed by ordinary people in the form of *kyōka* (狂歌, comic tanka) and *senryū* (川柳, comic haiku). Poetry in any form is a compressed mode of expression. For example, *utamakura* (歌枕) is an expressive technique in waka poetry, which involves referring to famous places and toponyms that have been mentioned in numerous poems since ancient times. Through this, both the composers and readers of the poetry can share a landscape through those names, regardless of whether they have seen the places mentioned in the poems. In other words, the *utamakura* is a compressing of the landscapes or mental images of the places and toponyms,



which appear before us with the memory of the place when the poem is composed and read. Poetry in China is also a highly symbolic form of expression, allowing individuals to share the breadth of their worlds by using words and phrases drawn from classical books and the works of famous poets of the past. However, given that only certain people could participate in this activity, the people of ancient Japan had more opportunities to engage with poetry as a method for expressing their own emotions.

In *Teika*, which was mentioned above, a travelling monk first appears, followed by a woman who is the ghost of Princess Shokushi. This depicts an interaction between this world and the world of the dead. Then, the ghost of Princess Shokushi recites poetry to the monk to display her pain, and the monk recites a sutra to free her from the ivy that entangles her ghost. The sight of Princess Shokushi's dance of gratitude no longer evokes the separation between the world of the dead and that of the living. However, the reappearance of the ivy returns the ghost of Princess Shokushi to the world of the dead where it belongs.

*Teika* depicts not only the interaction between the world of the dead and that of the living but also the appearance of a ghost that would normally be invisible. The ghost of the princess becomes visible through the strength of her thoughts about the real world and through the poem, which conveys the intensity of her passion.

#### 4. Relationship between *Kimetsu no Yaiba* and Life and Death

How, then, does the Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* reflect this kind of attitude towards the relationship between life and death? This work was performed as a five-play programme with an *Okina* (翁). Specifically, *Hinokami* corresponded to the *Okina*, followed by *Sagiridōji* (狭霧童子) as the Waki Noh, *Fujikasaneyama* (藤襲山) as the Shura Noh, *Katanakaji* (刀鍛冶) as the Kyogen, *Shirayuki* (白雪) as the Katsura Noh, an interlude by

Kibutsuji Muzan, *Kasugaigarasu* (鏝鴉) for the Kyogen, *Kimi ga tame* (君がため) as the Satsu Noh, and *Rui* (累) as the Kiri Noh, which were all performed as new works. These were accompanied by the sentence 'humans are demons; demons are humans', which was also used in the promotion of this work.

In *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, Kibutsuji Muzan can only turn humans into demons by sharing his blood. This is why Kibutsuji is called the progenitor of all demons. However, Kibutsuji was not born a demon but was born in the Heian Period as a child of aristocrats. He was sick, and a doctor gave him a medicine made from blue spider lilies to heal him. This did not immediately have an effect, and the angry Kibutsuji killed the doctor. However, just after killing the doctor he became a demon and recovered from his illness. Although Kibutsuji was thus able to survive, the price of his strong body was that he began to eat humans and could no longer go out in the sunlight. To overcome his weakness, he placed people who could accept his blood as demons under his control and spent a thousand years trying to locate the blue spider lilies used by the doctor.

What is important here is that even Kibutsuji, the progenitor of all demons, became a demon through medical techniques, and the existence of demons is considered a product of chance. Some who become demons do so because they do not have long to live, so becoming a demon gives them longevity, while others who despair of life become demons because Kibutsuji discovers their nature and turns them into demons. Lower rank demons lose memories of their life as humans, can no longer speak, and only want human blood, while the demons named in the *Jūni Kizuki* (十二鬼月, the Twelve Demon Moons), the highest rank of demons, retain their memories as human beings, can communicate verbally and even live their lives mingling with humans. At this point, the boundary between humans and demons is blurred. In fact, in the original manga, Dōma (童磨), who holds the second highest rank among the demons under Kibutsuji, coexists with humans as the leader of Bansei

Gokurakukyō (万世極楽教, Eternal Paradise Faith), a cult founded by his parents. The expression 'Humans Are Demons; Demons Are Humans' (人も鬼, 鬼も人) is the most symbolic characteristic of *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, in that people can become demons and demons were once human beings.

Simultaneously, it also alludes to how demons end their life as human beings by accepting Kibutsuji's blood and how they can obtain a new life as demons if they can withstand the blood. This illustrates the existence of humans and demons next to each other and the continuity of the world of the living and the world of the dead. In this respect, we can recognise the similarity with the world of Noh, where the dead are regarded as a familiar presence. Furthermore, the blue spider lilies provide a clue to the story because they are called 'aoi higanbana' (青い彼岸花) in Japanese, with 'higan' meaning the world of the dead, and the flowers open a path to the world of the dead in the human world, the world of the living.

In the Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba*, before the opening of *Hinokami*, Kibutsuji appears from behind the audience seats and walks towards the stage. This is a staging device that overturns the audience's expectations by having a major character appears from an unexpected place. Kibutsuji, a symbol of death, walking among the audience, the living, also represents to the audience how the two worlds of the living and the dead are intertwined.

## Conclusion

These characteristics depict the Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* as a work that faithfully follows the Noh style and structure. *Shirayuki* is set in the dream of Kamado Nezuko and has the typical characteristics of Dream Noh. The other works also emphasise the fantastical characters in Dream Noh, focusing on the relationship between life and death. These elements also illustrate how the Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* adheres to the rules of the stories of life and death while conveying the essence of Noh more clearly to contemporary audiences.

The original *Kimetsu no Yaiba* manga was written to reflect the three principles of friendship, effort, and victory, which are the guiding principles of *Weekly Shonen Jump*, the magazine in which it was serialised. The Noh and Kyogen *Kimetsu no Yaiba* is a highly advanced work incorporating the characteristics of Noh while closely reflecting these principles.

### Note

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### Notes

- 1) Michi Shigeta. “Mugen Nō Gainen no Saikō: Zeami to Sono Shūhen no Nō Sakusha ni yoru Yūrei Nō no Gekikōzō” (Reconsidering Mugen Noh: The Dramatic Constitution of the Ghost Noh Plays Written by Zeami and Those around Him). *The Zinbun Gakuhō*, 109, p. 114, 2016.
- 2) Martin Jay. *Downcast eyes: The denigration of vision in twentieth-century French thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, p. 82.
- 3) Makiko Shikimachi. “Nō Sumidagawa to Opera Curlew River no Shi no Kōzu ni tsuite” (Noh “Sumidagawa” and Opera “Curlew River”: The Composition of Death). *Nihon Bungaku Shiyō*, 73, pp. 53-54, 2006.
- 4) Masahiro Imai. “Ryōsaishii no Meikai Masahiro” (The Underworld of Liao Zhai Zhi Yi). *Bulletin of Gifu Women’s University*, 39, pp. 108-109, 2010.
- 5) Akira Kato. “Jōdaibungaku ni Arawasareta Shi no Toraekata ni tsuite no Kōsatsu” (A Study of “Death” Expressed in Japanese Ancient Literature). *Bulletin of Tokyo Women’s College of Physical Education and Tokyo Women’s Junior College of Physical Education*, 45, p. 44, 2010.

< 日本語要旨 >

## 能狂言『鬼滅の刃』における生と死 ——新作における伝統的な概念の活用と変容

鈴木 裕輔

能狂言『鬼滅の刃』は吾峠呼世晴の同名の漫画に基づき、大槻文藏の監修、野村萬斎の演出・謡本補綴、亀井広忠の作調、木ノ下裕一の下原案台本により創作された。2022年7月に東京の観世能楽堂において、2022年12月には大阪・大槻能楽堂において上演され、2024年12月には観世能楽堂で新作の能狂言「『鬼滅の刃』一継一」が上演されている。

漫画の『鬼滅の刃』の舞台は大正時代である。物語の梗概は鬼に家族を殺された主人公の竈門炭治郎が修業を積み、鬼となった妹・竈門禰豆子を人間に戻すため、様々な修業や苦難を乗り越え、仲間と共に鬼を退治し、最後は鬼の始祖である鬼舞辻無惨と対峙するというものである。能狂言『鬼滅の刃』は原作の序盤の内容を踏まえている。

人間と鬼の戦いという作品の特徴から、能狂言『鬼滅の刃』は生と死が重要な役割を果たしている。そして、生と死の問題は、能そのものにおいても重要な要素を形成している。しかし、これまで、能狂言『鬼滅の刃』について、能における生と死の捉え方がどのように反映されているかについて十分に研究されてこなかった。そこで、今回われわれは、特に夢幻能を手掛かりに能における生と死の考え方を考究することを通して、『鬼滅の刃』が漫画から能狂言へと作り変えられたことがどのような意味を持つかを検討した。