

READING ABOUT PRACTICE: AMATEUR STUDENTS OF THE NOH FLUTE IN KYOTO

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Introduction

THE verbal description of a practice has certain limits, of which the describer is often aware: it destroys the practice's temporality, spatiality, and much else besides. An admission such as this seems to reinforce the idea of irreducible and impenetrable practice, whose logic can only be approached through the practice itself. It also gives the temporary illusion that the power to authenticate meaning is bestowed upon a certain group of people, be they 'natives' or 'practitioners', who are alleged to have a closer relationship with the practice and, therefore, a more profound knowledge of it. Such a sentiment is shared by writers on musical practice, as Bruno Nettl notes:

The blank wall ultimately facing the comparativist was verbalized eloquently by one of my teachers of Persian music who said, 'no matter how much you study, there are things about Persian music that you will never understand, and that are instinctively understood by Persians.' The viewpoint of many

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non-European scholars who concentrate on their own musical traditions maintains that it is only the 'insider' who is truly qualified for scholarship. (Nettl 1973: 149)

It is not just non-western musical traditions, as Nettl suggests, in which a similar view is expressed. Ronald Cavaye, referring to the teaching of western classical music in Japan, argues that it is almost impossible for a Japanese piano student who has not seen or danced a Viennese waltz, and whose culture does not share the history or the concept of the European salon, to grasp its grace and charm: it is easier for a European student to do so (see Cavaye and Nishiyama 1987: 148). Beneath such claims of the superior ability possessed by the insider to grasp the essence of a musical practice lies an idea that there is a specific kind of innate knowledge that instantly marks Persians from non-Persians, European piano students from Japanese piano students, or the insider from the outsider. What this knowledge actually is, however, remains unexplained in many cases, as the effort to capture it in words is thought to be futile.

Rather than looking for an ethnographic example to help answer the question of what such knowledge might consist of, this article focuses on the experience of those who are still in the process of acquiring an alleged specialist knowledge, namely the amateur novice learners of the *nohkan*, a Japanese traditional bamboo flute. Being neither professionals nor accomplished flautists, yet not being complete outsiders to the practice either, their unfolding experience of knowing and not knowing about flute playing and the particular style in which this process takes place present an image of the practitioner as an unconfident knower of the practice. For amateur novice learners, the true knowledge of *nohkan* playing, if there ever is such, is technically and socially beyond their reach. None the less, there is a series of established and accepted procedures through which they come to suspect there may be a truer knowledge of the practice, to which they do not yet have access, and perhaps never will have. By examining forms that give an amateur learner new insight into the practice while hinting at the possibility of an even deeper understanding, I aim to provide a picture of the practitioner not only as a distinctive knower, but also as a distinctive un-knower.

In this article, therefore, I present two of the sources of mystery and revelation that are experienced in the course of learning the *nohkan*. Both prominently involve an act of reading. The first is the musical notation of the *nohkan*. Musical notation is undoubtedly one of the most dominant forms of inscription in musical practice. The notation of the *nohkan*, colloquially called *shoka*, is quite particular, in the sense that it is a collection of onomatopoeic sounds written down in the linguistic syllables of everyday Japanese. This results in there being two ways to perform the notation, one with the voice and the other with the flute. The notation also leaves open which fingering the flautist may use, making it possible for the teacher to teach one set of fingerings to amateur students and to use another for his or her own stage performances. The nature of *shoka* as a notation with multiple

renderings fosters a learner's curiosity about how professionals were trained. The focus of the article then shifts to the second source available to amateur novice learners, that is, *geidan* (literally 'art conversation'), the memoirs of a practitioner as published in books, articles, or interviews in magazines. Characteristically, in *geidan* a practitioner will talk about his practice in very different ways from those he adopts in lessons with his students. Interestingly, one of the commonly addressed topics is the difficulties professionals themselves face in understanding old documents that are retained within practitioners' families.

Before examining *shoka* and *geidan* in detail, however, I want to discuss very briefly the social structure and environment within which amateur *nohkan* lessons take place. As is well known, Noh is a highly stylized classical drama dating from the fourteenth century, involving music provided on stage by a chorus, drummers, and a flautist. Contemporary Noh performers broadly comprise: *shitekata*, who provide the main characters (*shite*); *ji-utai* (the 'chorus'); *sanyaku*, including *wakikata*, who provide supporting roles (*waki*); *kyogenkata*, who perform only *kyogen* (or 'classical comedy'); and *hayashikata*, the musicians. There are currently five schools of *shite* performers, three schools of *wakikata*, and two schools of *kyogenkata*. The instruments played by the *hayashikata* include the *nohkan*, the *kotsuzumi* (hand-drum), the *otsuzumi* (large hand-drum), and the *taiko* (drum), for each of which there are a number of schools: four for the *kotsuzumi*, five for the *otsuzumi*, and two for the *taiko*. There are also three *nohkan* schools: Isso, Morita, and Fujita. The titles of Noh actors and musicians are often genealogically inherited, as is the title of the *iemoto* or head of school. The latter's authority includes control over scripts, notations, and the issuance of certificates, as well as the power to determine who can and cannot practice as a professional and when, where, and by whom a performance may be carried out (Yokomichi 1996). At the head of a Noh school, therefore, is the *iemoto*, the heir to the master family. Below him are the *shokubun*, representatives of the school's main families, followed by affiliated professional performers, and, at the bottom of the hierarchy, the amateurs who 'nourish' (Okouchi 1957) the others by taking tuition, purchasing certificates, and serving as an enthusiastic audience.

A prospective amateur student's choice of school is often determined by how professionally active each school is in the local Noh scene and the consequent availability of performers/teachers in the area. For instance, in Kyoto all the resident flautists are from the Morita school. Apart from giving lessons to apprentices, as well as Noh and *kyogen* actors and drummers, professional flautists take private students who are called *shirouto deshi* or 'amateur disciples'. They are usually classified into college- and university-student pupils (called *gakusei*, 'students') and 'non-student' pupils (called *ippan*, 'the general public'). These two groupings are taught at different times and charged different rates for lessons and for such social events as amateur recitals and New Year's parties. Among the 'non-student' pupils will be former students of the deceased master of the school,

whom his disciple, the current teacher, has 'inherited'. Other 'non-student' pupils will include those who have become interested in the flute after learning some other Noh-related skill or those who began lessons when they were still members of a university Noh society. Most of the student pupils, on the other hand, are members of their university, college, or (occasionally) high-school Noh societies. Such societies usually have weekly or fortnightly visits from a professional Noh actor who teaches chorus and gesticulation, while in order to learn Noh instruments, separate, personal lessons with professional musicians must be taken. The most common methods by which a potential amateur pupil gets in touch with a professional flautist are introduction and recommendation by fellow university Noh society members, friends, and relatives who have learned the instrument or know someone who has done so, by joining the local adult education centres that offer such courses, or by making an enquiry at a local Noh theatre.

The environment of Noh flute lessons for the amateur can vary according to the teacher, the region, or the institution to which the pupil or the teacher may be affiliated. In most cases, the lesson is not tailored for individual pupils, nor does it have a set time allocation (like half an hour) per person. Instead, the teacher sets a certain date and time in the manner of, for example, 'after two o'clock in the afternoon on the first and the third Wednesdays of the month'. Pupils will then come to the teacher's house at any time after two o'clock, as long as it is not too late (a time limit may be suggested by experienced fellow learners). Once the pupils arrive, each one is given an individual lesson in turn, on a first-come first-served basis, in front of others who arrive later. Those waiting sip tea, perhaps chat to each other, and watch those receiving lessons. The unstructured nature of the lesson seems somehow to foster the formation of a life-long bond between an individual student and a teacher. Although pupils who have been away from lessons for too long often avoid turning up again, a certain temporal flexibility in giving and receiving tuition takes some of the time-boundedness away from the teacher-student relationship: amateur students in their 'Noh lives' (as in their musical lives) often remain associated with their first teachers, just as professional apprentices do.

Such a network of professional practitioners and amateur learners, led by an *iemoto* and bound together as a school, is called the *iemoto* system. It is strongly evident in contemporary Noh, much as in many of the so-called Japanese traditional arts. It is frequently pointed out that the structure resembles the esoteric schools of Buddhism, as it is 'a system in which knowledge and training in an art form is transmitted only through designated houses or schools with "special knowledge" inherited from the past', where the devotees dedicate themselves to a semi-mystical 'way' of life and learning (Kumakura 1993: 101). However, there are also Japanese traditional arts, such as kabuki, another form of traditional drama, which do not adopt such a system of transmission. The major condition for the development of the *iemoto* system, Isao Kumakura claims, is therefore the

existence of amateur disciples who enjoy not only watching the professional performance as an audience, but also learning the art for themselves (Kumakura 1993).

This fits the character of the contemporary Noh audience. The majority of the audience in Noh theatres today comprises pupils or former pupils of performers and instrumentalists and, as someone from a Noh-text publishing company told me, many Noh-goers have received instrumental, chorus, or gesticulation tuition as students or youngsters, and have only returned to the Noh theatre after becoming financially comfortable in middle age. The *iemoto* system as a system of knowledge management is thus crucial for discussing the style through which any knowledge of the practice is disclosed, created, and circulated among professionals and amateurs. However, to present a review of the already voluminous debates on *iemoto* structure is beyond the compass of this article. Although it is important to examine the extent of the *iemoto*'s personal, structural, and symbolic influence over the knowledge and practice of an individual professional or amateur in the school, this article focuses on access to knowledge from the point of view of an amateur novice learner, who may not need the presence of the *iemoto* himself in daily lessons.

Reading Shoka

Learning is never restricted to the time of a lesson. As learning a practice can also be about hearing the gossip of professionals, accepting and adopting the mannerisms of fellow learners, and generally ensuring that one's own bodily movements are in tune with the environment, there may be signposts of various kinds by which an amateur learner can measure the depth of his or her knowledge about the practice that has been acquired or has yet to be acquired. Among these, I have chosen two forms through which the meaning of practice seems to emerge at the same time as it is hidden from the eyes of an amateur learner. The first is the onomatopoeia of the *nohkan* melodies, which, in a written form, serves as its musical notation.

Most Japanese traditional instruments have their own form of onomatopoeia, which is commonly used in a practising environment. The musicological term for such onomatopoeia is *kuchishoga* (or *shoga*), although in each musical arena it is known by a separate name (for example, *shofu* for the music played on the *shakuhachi*, a vertical bamboo flute, and *kuchiyamisen* for the music played on the *shamisen*, a three-stringed instrument). These kinds of onomatopoeia are usually not transferable between genres or instruments. For instance, one of the contexts in which the *nohkan* is played, other than in the Noh, is the renowned traditional Kyoto Gion festival. However, the onomatopoeia used by festival musicians for their *nohkan* melodies differs from that used by the Noh flautists for their

melodies. Even within the same genre of the Noh, the onomatopoeia of the *nohkan* cannot be used to refer to the beats of the Noh drums, as each Noh drum also has its own independent set of onomatopoeia.

The relevant one here, of course, is the onomatopoeia for the *nohkan* of the Noh, known as *shoka*. *Shoka* can be used orally as well as in writing. Apart from odd, slightly modified versions, *shoka* is written in *katakana* characters plotted on eight columns. The characters are those used in everyday Japanese, but the *shoka* itself is not heard in everyday conversation. In fact, the sight of these strings of characters appears so nonsensical to most people in Japan that they often cannot tell that they are a form of musical notation. For those who are familiar with it, however, *shoka* is the sole means of referring to *nohkan* melodies. In an emergency, *shoka* can also be 'performed' by the flautist on stage as a substitute for the actual flute sound.¹

Not surprisingly, then, the oral form of *shoka* is almost always included in teaching from the very first flute lessons. In the actual lesson, the teacher and the student normally sit on the floor, facing each other. There will be a small wooden box, which the teacher beats with a pair of glued fans imitating the Noh drums, and a small table in front of the student on which the flute notation, the *shoka*, may be placed. Once the beginner is able to make a sound on the flute, the teacher gives the *shoka* and the fingering for the first phrase of a melody, often in a manner of simulation: he takes one of the glued fans, holds it vertically with both hands, and recites the *shoka* while moving his fingers on it. The pupil watches until the teacher stops and then tries to repeat it on the real flute, remembering the fingering that the teacher has just demonstrated. The teacher may then write down the fingerings (which are represented by different symbols and marks, depending on individual flautists) next to the line of *shoka*.

The main problem for a beginner, however, is an apparent lack of relationship between the linguistic characters of the *shoka* and the choice of fingering. The learner frequently finds that a linguistic character that appears twice in a phrase of *shoka* needs to be played differently on the flute each time. Seeing the confusion of the beginner, the teacher tells the pupil not to worry about the correspondence between the *shoka* and the fingering, and even to ignore the *shoka*, and to concentrate instead on memorizing which fingering marks stand for which finger positions. However, it is difficult for the pupil to ignore the *shoka*, since the teacher continues to refer to all the phrases solely by reference to it. Thus, when the

¹ For instance, as there is a strict emphasis on continuity of performance in the Noh, in the unlikely event that an accident occurs on stage, such as a performer colliding with the flautist and causing him to drop the instrument, the flautist is expected to continue the performance by reciting the *shoka*. On one occasion during a university student Noh festival I was attending, a student playing the flute had clearly forgotten her piece. Her teacher, who was sitting behind her, started reciting *shoka*, not too loudly, but audibly enough to be heard by the audience in the theatre, and continued doing so until the student found her place again.

teacher points out the pupil's mistake, he recites the 'correct *shoka*' as if the answer were self-evident, although it is often the very connection between the *shoka* and actual finger positions that is troubling the pupil. The problem the beginners face is that they cannot see what the *shoka* is a representation of or an instruction for.

Despite initial puzzlement, after a series of lessons a beginner eventually comes to regard a piece as a particular collection of *shoka* and separately as a particular combination of fingering. As a Noh flute piece generally contains a large number of repetitive sections, the teacher can teach a new piece by either giving the instruction to 'play the same as *Chu-no-mai* up to this line', or by telling how it differs from it. In this way, the pupil widens his or her repertoire and knowledge of *nohkan* playing, without understanding the basic 'rule' governing the intrinsic association between *shoka* and fingering. Apprenticeship and a strong emphasis on face-to-face lessons help to standardize the fingering for each *shoka* among students taught by the same teacher. None the less, without the teacher, who gives the fingerings initially and tells the student what is a variation of what, a beginner can neither 'sight-read' the notation, nor teach himself the flute.

There are theories that the impression of an arbitrary relationship between *shoka* and actual fingering is a superficial one. Developing an analysis of sound symbolism by Jakobson, Fant, and Halle (1963), Junzo Kawada claims that there is a culturally specific causal relationship between the phonetic component of *shoka* and the intended instrumental sound (Kawada 1996, 1998). Dismantling *shoka* into individual phonemes, he claims that /t/ or /s/ are used to connote tense sounds, while /d/ or /dz/ are used for lax sounds. An acute timbre is often represented by /i/, /e/ or /a/, and deeper, grave ones by /o/ or /u/. Kawada also comments that the *nohkan*—originally a Chinese instrument that has been given a Japanese body—favours palatal syllables starting with /h/ (such as *hya*, *hyu*, or *hyo*), showing that it is primarily a rhythmic instrument with sharp, cutting sounds (Kawada 1998: 79). Although such an analysis may be useful in a cross-cultural comparison of the relationship between linguistic and non-linguistic sounds, a question still remains concerning the deliberate and obscure manner in which *shoka* and fingerings are actually presented to learners during lessons.

The cryptic connection between *shoka* and fingering has a further significance. Every piece that the learners learn is used on stage by professionals. Yet a performance by a professional sounds very different from one by a novice. This is because, apart from the artistic brilliance of the expert, professionals use a fingering which is literally different to the one they teach to the students. Students are conscious of the fact that their teachers use different fingerings for the same piece. They sometimes take tape recorders or DAT recorders to Noh theatres and intently watch the teachers on stage and try to copy their fingering. However, learners, especially novices, dare not try them in front of their teachers. The existence of these decorative fingerings, known as *sashi-yubi* and *soe-yubi*, is not usually mentioned

during the novices' lessons. Whether played by a professional or a novice, exactly the same piece is involved, or so the students are told.

For an amateur novice *nohkan* learner, then, reading a notation is a confusing task. At first, the *shoka* does not seem to help the pupil learn the practice, since it has an (apparently) arbitrary relationship with the actual fingering. The pupils will thus merely familiarize themselves with the idea that *shoka* is onomatopoeia as part of the outcome of their practice rather than being instructed in it. However, there is also another twist: the *shoka* is in fact onomatopoeia that stands for all the sounds produced under its name (as long as its production procedure has been supervised and approved by a legitimate teacher). To the eyes of a learner, the various techniques, decorative or alternative fingerings, artistic styles, timbre, or 'ad-libs' all relate to a single generic line of *shoka* that has no added dynamics or accidentals given or mentioned. The different characters of individual flautists are hidden, condensed, and invisible in its monolithic surface. By the same token, the learner comes to understand that to know just one way of playing the *shoka* with the flute does not mean that one can claim to have fully understood what is written in the notation. The learner is constantly reminded of this by the teacher's performance on stage, which sounds very different from his/her own. Thus, by receiving *nohkan* lessons, the learners become knowers of *nohkan* playing as well as unknowers, as they realise that whatever they have been taught is just one rendition among many, and that they are somehow being denied access to the others.

Reading Geidan (on the Subject of Reading Densho)

Some flautists claim that Noh flute notations have only been used in lessons with amateur pupils since the late nineteenth century. However, it is also known that most professionals have always owned and kept, privately and strictly for family members, books in which advice, tips, and notations of advanced performances have been recorded by former flautists. These books belong to an extensive category of *densho* ('transmitted documents'). *Densho*, by definition, are writings that have been transmitted over generations within a family, or documents containing 'secret transmissions like esoteric teaching of the way of the practice', which are recorded for the purpose of transmission to successors (Omote and Takemoto 1988: 5). The most famous *densho* of the Noh, and also the oldest remaining writing on the art, is *Fushikaden*, written by Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1443). This had been kept secret as a *densho* within the Kwanze and Konparu families of Noh actors until it was finally published in 1909 (Horikawa 1970, Omote and Takemoto 1988: 8).

The nature of a *densho* lies in the way its readership is restricted to family members or those who are regarded as the professional heirs of the family. A number of *densho* on Noh instruments have been disclosed to amateur apprentices

in the past (Omote 1987: 9), and even today excerpts from family *densho* are occasionally edited and published by individual flautists (e.g. Morita 1992). None the less a certain antipathy towards the intellectualized knowledge of Noh-related practices among practitioners (see Bethe and Brazell 1990), and indeed among some academics, means that *densho* are represented as only being meaningful in the hands of suitable professionals who truly and legitimately appreciate and understand them. This means that *densho* largely remain unapproachable by most contemporary amateur novice learners. For them, the easiest ways to get to know the existence and the content of *densho* are by hearsay, academic writings, and *geidan*, the second form to which I now turn.

The *geidan* (literally meaning ‘art conversation’) is the most widespread style of discourse on Japanese traditional practices. It takes the form of a conversation between a practitioner and a listener, and is often published in a book or an article in a magazine. Effectively, the *geidan* is also the most popular literary genre about such practices. Today, the occasions for a *geidan* may vary from a seminar talk given by a practitioner (Kondo and Tanaka 1970) to an interview with a practitioner on television or radio. Because of its prime significance as a talk, on paper a *geidan* becomes the listener’s transcription (or dictation) of the talk, a process which is called *kikigaki* in Japanese. The actual listening and transcription is often carried out by the practitioner’s disciples, relatives or, more recently in Noh and kabuki, theatre scholars, critics, and playwrights (Hakii 1970). Typically, the role of the writer is much less significant than that of a talker or listener, and in fact writers are invisible in most modern *geidan*, which are literal transcriptions of recorded interviews.

Geidans containing memoirs of Noh actors or technical and moral advice for amateur Noh lovers first started to appear in the mid-Meiji period, when the Noh actors and musicians were still struggling to cope with the loss of Shogunate patronage after the Meiji Restoration in 1868 (Omote and Takemoto 1988: 461). In other words, these *geidan* were written not only for existing Noh fans, but also to boost general interest in the art. Contemporary Noh, on the other hand, may still appear to most people in Japan today as an archaic art form that is irrelevant to their modern life-style. In such circumstances, *geidans* by contemporary Noh practitioners also have a similar incentive: the talk is supposed to appeal not only to apprentices and Noh lovers, but also to non-apprentices and would-be apprentices who do not know much about the art. In short, the *geidan* of Noh practices is spoken (and written down) especially for consumption outside the immediate learning context.

I now present an example of a *geidan* in the form of a note of an interview with a professional Noh flautist, Sugi Ichikazu. Throughout two phases of fieldwork in Kyoto, conducted in 1995–1997 and 2000–2001, I received flute lessons from the same teacher as an amateur ‘student’ pupil. The following excerpt is based on an interview I conducted with him in March 1997, and was initially

transcribed, translated, and edited for an ethnographic chapter of my thesis. Since then, its content has only been made public through my oral presentations at anthropological seminars, including those in Kyoto in the second phase of my fieldwork, which a few of my fellow flute students attended. Although Ichikazu was aware of the prospect of his words becoming a part of my thesis, I had control over what was to be presented as text, as with all parts of my ethnographic writing. However, the process surrounding this interview was unmistakably that of making a *geidan*. It is, after all, a talk given by a flautist, about his personal experiences and views on *nohkan* learning and teaching, which was listened to and noted by his (amateur) disciple.

The following is from my note of the interview:

Sugi Ichikazu was born to a flautist family in Kyoto. He emphasized his late start in showing an interest in the *nohkan*, although he was vaguely aware of his destined career. Ichikazu claimed that he had no keen interest in the *nohkan* until he entered university. He had already been receiving *nohkan* lessons from his grandfather at home, but around the time of his graduation the latter had taken him to Morita Mitsuharu, who was the headmaster of the Morita school at the time.

The lessons with Mitsuharu were, he said, 'the same style at the beginning'. New and more advanced pieces and their different versions with special subtitles (*kogaki*) were taught. However, towards the end, the lessons with Mitsuharu mostly involved reading old books. Such books consisted mainly of records and notes of performances hand-written in brush and ink by flautists of the past. *Shoka* written in forms that varied according to the recorder and the era, from an unabridged single line of *katakana* syllables to eight-column graphics, were used to show precise details of how one had or should have performed a certain version of a certain piece. To give precision, the hands of other drums, the chorus lyrics, and sometimes even the graphic movements of the main actor's foot were added on the paper as a supplement. Changes to pieces and details did occur over time, Ichikazu said, and he himself also wrote such notes for future records, not only for himself, but also for the next generation. Such books could be kept by each of the flautist families, and were referred to from time to time. In addition to the books of the Sugi family, Ichikazu also had what he had personally copied from Mitsuharu's books. Ichikazu said that usually these books were not to be shown off. The books included what were regarded as oral and secret transmissions.

An image of sacred pieces or techniques of the highest importance being transmitted orally in secret is very well circulated among the Japanese general public, fuelling romantic views of the arts of the past and of contemporary traditional art. Such features are popularly called oral transmission (*kuden*) or secret transmission (*hiden*). The ultimate in *hiden* was when only the headmaster of the school was allowed to possess the knowledge, which was then transmitted to just one person, his successor, a process colloquially known as heir transmission (*isshisouden*).

I had heard previously that, in the world of the Noh, these features had characterized the pieces that were performed, and the masks or costumes that were used. I asked Ichikazu if there really was anything of that sort in relation to the flute. He answered that there was. When a piece was regarded as the subject of heir transmission, he explained, it was usually a certain piece (which on its own would have been available to others) with a special *kogaki*, which required that its performer be a headmaster. However, he added, this did not seem to be a wholly inviolable truth today, as some members other than headmasters also played such special pieces. Otherwise, a teacher might recommend and teach a special way of playing a particular section literally as an oral transmission. Ichikazu, however, understood the process as ‘being taught that there were different ways of playing according to different teachers’, and stated that ‘whether it was good or bad was another matter’. It would be better to play what the teacher had told you when he was present, he added, but at the same time this did not mean that he should abandon playing what his grandfather taught him.

One of the most famous Noh pieces, *Dojoji*, was often noted for the amount of oral or necessarily secret transmission needed to perform it. Ichikazu pointed out that the notes of the oral transmission for the flute in *Dojoji* might be short in length and its notation might appear deceptively simple in the book. Nevertheless, it would be incredibly difficult to perform. That meant, Ichikazu said, that each performer had to find his or her own best way to put the notation into an actual performance, and this was done only through trial and error. This may result in the discovery of a certain knack, like his own way of counting the beats of a certain confusing phrase, in order to get the right timing, phrasing, or punctuation. Ichikazu also added that these ‘knacks’ might sound ridiculously simple and obvious to the ears of others when they were spoken aloud. He did not know what others did to get things right for the phrase, but there were things that worked for him and came to be established within him after numerous performances and painful experiences. These, he said, were oral transmissions. I asked him if he would show his notes and books of *shoka* to his son in order to teach him oral transmission. He said, ‘By the time a child needs to see these, he will be a fully-fledged performer. He will come to read them without being told to do so. But until then, I would not show them to him. I would teach him myself. I would teach him how I play it.’

Reading about Practice

As mentioned earlier, *geidan* talking is a stylized and deliberate verbalization of practice by a practitioner with an anticipation of its transcription.² The amateur

² Discussing the transmission of standardized oral forms, Jack Goody (1987) argues: ‘Before the coming of the transistorized tape recorder (and to a limited extent the earlier

novice students of the *nohkan* can sometimes find in their teacher's *geidan*, as a constructed performance on its own, things that they have not heard him say in person. The information Ichikazu provided in the interview was not mentioned in his lessons. In the lessons with his amateur students, he did not talk about his background, his thoughts on oral transmission or secret transmission, the existence of *densho* or their possible contents. Thus one thing for which I was envied by fellow flute students, most of whom had been learning the flute longer than I had, was the fact that I could confront our teacher with issues such as the meaning of oral transmission and heir transmission in the name of my research. They said, 'He might not want to spill anything out, but you can try. And tell me if you find out anything.' Also, what was told in *geidan* was not repeated in lessons, where the transmission of practice and knowledge was supposed to be carried out most vigorously.

Reading as a method of deepening one's knowledge of the practice, then, is a focal issue here. After all, that is what a reader of the *geidan* does, i.e. 'read' about the practice. Reading seems to form a significant part of a professional's advanced training too.³ What comes across clearly from Ichikazu's *geidan* is that the professionals find reading *densho* as burdensome a process as an amateur novice learner finds reading *shoka*. Admittedly, their circumstances are quite different, as the professionals read *densho* as exclusive documents available only to the legitimate heirs of professional families. None the less, just as amateur learners struggle with the (apparently) arbitrary relationship between the *shoka* and the movement of their fingers, professionals seem to struggle to correlate what is written in the *densho* (which in fact includes various types of *shoka*) with their artistry. Hence Ichikazu says, 'the line might be deceptively simple, but putting it into practice is incredibly difficult'.

Indeed, we find that the difficulty of 'reading' is almost a standard theme of the *geidan* of the Noh. Let us, for the sake of comparison, quote another *geidan* from a Noh actor. Kongo Iwao, a former head of the Kongo school, describes how, at the age of 27 when his father died, he inherited the *densho* of his school dating

gramophone), our knowledge of any except the shortest oral communication was confined to those produced under the third type of situation [a performance out of context], when an outsider was usually involved as the audience and transcriber' (Goody 1987: xi).

³ Talking of highly honoured pieces with old female characters, which allegedly may only be performed by those over 60 years old, Kondo Kenzo, an actor of the Hoshō school, says in an interview: 'So, by the time you are about to perform the plays with old characters, there is no one around to teach you. When we are about to do *Obasute* [one such play with an old female role], things are left up to us, by reading writings. If we performed the play at a younger age, there would have been a teacher who could instruct us to do this and that, but for these plays, which, at present, can only be performed at an age over 60, there would be none of our teachers alive to guide us. Still we are talking about special plays here. As for the chorus, we learn the lines of every piece while we are young' (Kondo and Tanaka 1970: 155).

from 1716, whose content he only grasped after he had a series of experiences and studied the pieces (see Bethe and Brazel 1990: 187). In the *densho*:

the language is obscure and meant to be understood intuitively. It reflects the writer's own feelings and struggle with the role and must have been very difficult to write. Often there is no explanation, but only an indication that a certain place in the plays is of importance—that is all that is written. (Kongo 1984: 80–81)

This resonates with what Ichikazu said about showing his *densho* to his son: these writings are not to be shown prematurely, even to a legitimate practitioner. He needs to 'come to it' from his own experience. Otherwise, he would be in possession of the right document without making any sense of it. From the *geidan* of both practitioners, then, reading appears not to be a retrieval of information that gives every reader an equal amount of knowledge. Instead, its significance and benefits are unveiled in accordance with the amount and quality of experience its reader has accumulated. Reading is a life-long endeavour, as it is who you are that determines what you read into it and not the other way round. What the practitioner says to the readers of the *geidan* is, then, that only a suitably equipped reader can recognize what is being written, and that it is possible to read on without becoming any more knowledgeable.

Conclusion

When it comes to the appreciation of a musical genre, we tend to think that there is a clear distinction between those who understand it and those who do not. Those who appreciate a certain kind of music are seen to possess the specific knowledge that enables them to do so. The same applies to the concept of culture. The distinction between those who belong to a particular culture and those who do not is described in such a way that the people concerned appear to possess (or lack) either verbalized or embodied 'knowledge'. In fact, we tend to look for the possession (or lack) of it to determine whether a person is indeed a member of that culture. Still, it is often difficult to pin down what exactly this 'knowledge' is, just as it is difficult to explain why and how you understand your favourite music. Neither will the opinions of 'knowers' be accepted immediately, as their trustworthiness will have to be weighed by the reader, who cross-examines the social, political, and personal conditioning of the practitioners in order to reach a more authentic, truer meaning of the practice provided by the allegedly most reliable respondents. As such an assessment of legitimacy as a knowledge-holder is carried out among seemingly unanimous 'natives' or 'practitioners', consequent feelings of certainty and uncertainty about the knowledge is also found within an individual practitioner.

This article has introduced two forms that make an amateur novice learner of the *nohkan* confident, as well as lacking in confidence, about his or her knowledge of *nohkan* playing. The first is the onomatopoeia for the *nohkan*, which is also its musical notation. Having learned the *nohkan* for a few years with a teacher, the student is able to play a couple of specific pieces, to recognize their *shoka* and fingerings, and to identify where and how to employ *shoka* in and out of private lessons. However, one thing that remains uncertain for the learner is the relevance of *shoka* to the actual bodily movement of the fingers. Such a feeling of uncertainty raises doubts about the ultimate authenticity of the fingering the learner has learned, as he or she further realizes that the professionals use very, sometimes completely, different fingerings from those they teach to their students.

This state of affairs fuels an interest in the training the professionals have received in the course of their lives. Although it is often said that the intensive training that those from the families of professional Noh performers receive from childhood makes a fundamental difference to their art and technique (Bethe and Brazil 1990), the exact details of it are rarely disclosed in the actual lessons for amateurs. One of the settings in which such matters are 'officially' spoken about by the teacher, however, is the making of his *geidan*. As well as revealing the hitherto unknown world of the professional flautist to its reader, the *geidan* can reveal the existence of the *densho* and its content, and most importantly the significance of competent reading. The *geidan* shows that to be able to read *densho* meaningfully requires years of experience and hard work, and that how to do this most effectively, and at the same time most economically in terms of time and effort, is beyond simple generalization.

Thus both forms, one a musical notation and the other a literary genre, provide an amateur novice learner with new information about flute playing. However, just as the *shoka* and *geidan* have distinctive ways of letting students learn about the practice, they have distinctive ways of keeping them feeling inexperienced. A feeling of frustration at one's incompetence may be common among novices of any practice, but the way *shoka* is used results in the learner remaining incapable of claiming a 'full' understanding of even a line of *shoka*. Similarly, the *geidan* warns its readers that reading is never a neutral, objective activity, but a bodily practice that alters the meaning of an inscription according to one's experience and training, just like playing the flute.

Finally, study of the *geidan* raises a question about how ethnography is supposed to provide its readers with an insight into a practice it aims to describe. As education, socialization, training, and apprenticeship have always been the most popular topics in Japanese studies, there are a number of popular accounts by authors who have themselves become apprentices (e.g. Herrigel 1953, Haase 1998). However, such self-reflective accounts of learning have often treated words uttered by teachers and masters as a delivery of doctrine, a dispensation of cultural essence, or a representation of the practitioners' worldview. The study of *geidan* is

important precisely because the utterances of practitioners may in fact be shaped by an already established convention of narrative, experience, authorship, and readership.

This also draws our attention to the possible conventions of ethnography as a literary genre. Fukushima claims that apprenticeship is interesting for anthropology because it is also the method by which an anthropologist learns about a different culture (1995: 27). An ethnographer is indeed a learner in the society he or she tries to understand. Like many previous fieldworkers in Japan, then, I was a learner in two senses: as an ethnographer and as an amateur *nohkan* disciple. Although the distinction was never as clear-cut as it is made to sound here, it was certainly evident at the time of the interview with Ichikazu, as there were two possible frames of reference into which its transcription could fall, i.e. ethnography or *geidan*. Both are established literary genres with different readerships (with some overlapping) who have different reading habits and different purposes in reading. The study of *geidan*, then, may provide a platform for exploring the distinctive way in which an ethnographic account of a society by its learner-cum-scribe reveals and hides from its readers the suspected 'true' knowledge about the society.

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