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Blind on Stage: Ridicule and Redemption in *Zatō Kyōgen*

DISSERTATION

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by

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DEDICATION

To my father, David Reynolds,

who we lost too soon during Covid.

Your silent encouragement continues to be a source of inspiration for me.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Blind on Stage: Ridicule and Redemption in *Zatō Kyōgen*

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Professor Emerita Susan Blakeley Klein, Chair

This dissertation examines the evolution of *zatō kyōgen* (blind man plays) within the Japanese *kyōgen* theatrical tradition from the Muromachi (1392–1568) to Edo (1603–1868) periods, tracing how these works mirror shifting cultural and ethical perceptions of blindness and disability in premodern Japan. Initially rooted in crude humor and mockery, early *zatō kyōgen* — such as *Tarashii Zatō* (Trick *Zatō*) and *Tachin Zatō* (Pack-horse Fare *Zatō*) from the earliest collection *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* (1578)—portrayed blind characters as targets of ridicule, reflecting a societal view of blindness as karmic retribution aligned with Buddhist doctrine of karma. Over time, however, these plays transitioned into narratives blending earthy comedy with philosophical depth, as seen in later works such as *Kawakami Zatō* (Blind Man at Kawakami) and *Tsukimi Zatō* (Moon-viewing Blind Man) from Edo period collections. Here, blind figures evolve into complex symbols of resilience, moral agency, and the human condition, challenging deterministic frameworks and emphasizing personal choice over fate.

This study explores how *zatō kyōgen* engaged with Buddhist concepts of karma and *anātman* (non-self), diverging from doctrinal fatalism to offer a more empathetic discourse on disability. This shift parallels broader Edo-period ethical trends, influenced by Zen and Neo-Confucian thought, which prioritized moral behavior and present agency over past-life determinism. Socio-historical contexts, including the monopolistic privileges of the *Tōdō-za* guild of the blind, and societal attitudes toward disability, further illuminate how these plays critiqued power dynamics and marginalization while retaining their comedic roots.

By bridging slapstick humor with refined aesthetics, *zatō kyōgen* transcend mere entertainment, serving as a lens into medieval and early modern Japan's negotiation of disability, religion, and identity. This research highlights *kyōgen*'s role as a cultural artifact that both reflected and shaped perceptions of the blind, contributing to Disability Studies by revealing the interplay between performance, societal values, and ethical transformation. Ultimately, *zatō kyōgen* underscore the resilience of marginalized voices, affirming *kyōgen'*s enduring relevance as a medium of humor, critique, and human insight.

Word Usage and Conventions

This dissertation follows the traditional convention for Japanese and Chinese names, with family name first, unless an author is publishing in English. Dates are given using either the Gregorian calendar (e.g., 1642) or the Japanese era system (e.g., Kan'ei 19), depending on the context. Japanese terms are introduced in italicized romaji, followed by their kanji and English translation, e.g., *zatō* (座頭, blind man). In cases where multiple spellings exist, I follow a standardized transliteration for consistency. For instance, both ざとう and さとう are rendered as *zatō*, reflecting their identical pronunciation in historical and modern contexts. In discussions of disability, this dissertation makes a key distinction in terminology: while blind individuals are often subsumed within the disabled community in common discourse, this study explicitly differentiates between the "disabled community" (which includes blind people) and the "non-blind disabled community," which refers specifically to members of the disabled population who are not blind.

Conventional period names are used in the text, without dates. For easy reference, here is a list of accepted dates:

Early Nara period	646-710
Late Nara period	710-94
Heian period	794-1185
Nanbokucho period	1336-1392
Muromachi period	1392-1568
Momoyama period	1568-1603
Edo period	1603-1868
Meiji period	1868-1912

Introduction

"My eyes, they hurt so much!" exclaims the blind man, clutching at his face in visible agony. His wife pleads with him to open his eyes, observing with alarm, "Your eyes looked black and clear until just now, but now they've become cloudy again." Overwhelmed by frustration, the blind man admonishes his wife, blaming her for their misfortune: "I'm blind again! If only you had listened to me, none of this would have happened." This moment marks a surprisingly tragic turn given that not long before the blind man had briefly recovered his sight after ten years of total darkness caused by some kind of unspecified affliction. Seeing his despair, his wife appeals to him for understanding: "I would never say anything to harm you on purpose. I spoke as I did because you are so precious to me. Please understand and forgive me." Earlier at Kawakami temple the man had met the protector Buddhist deity Jizō (地蔵) in a dream, who had explained that the blind man's loss of sight was due to the karmic bond he shared with his wife, described as an ill-fated match, and that to regain his sight he would have to divorce her. After his wife protests vehemently, the man decides not to leave her, but once he says so he immediately loses his sight again. At the end of the play, resigned to their destiny, the couple reflect on their plight, singing in unison: "This must be what they mean by the old saying, 'Blindness is brought on by the power of one's fate.'"

These closing lines from *Kawakami Zatō* (川上座頭, The *Zatō* at Kawakami, aka *Kawakami*), one of the most celebrated *kyōgen* plays, encapsulate the dual comic and tragic dimensions of the genre. While the husband and wife resign themselves to lamenting their karmic fate, the play's thematic complexity transcends the simplistic framework of karmic retribution. Instead, it offers a nuanced meditation on human agency, suffering, and the

inexorable power of fate, blending humor and pathos in a way that is characteristic of *kyōgen*'s unique dramatic form.

Zatō-mono (座頭物, Blind Man Plays) in *kyōgen* did not initially exhibit the thematic complexity evident in later works such as *Kawakami*. Early examples of these comic plays often relied on dark humor and crude ridicule targeting blind characters. For instance, in *Tarashii Zatō* (Trick *Zatō*), a woman inexplicably humiliates a blind man by stealing his clothes as they dry outside. Similarly, *Tachin Zatō* (Pack-horse Fare *Zatō*) begins with a priest deceiving a blind father and son into riding an ox and concludes grimly with the ox trampling the son. These early *zatō-mono* derive their humor from the mockery of blind individuals, with their suffering portrayed as a consequence of their disability and framed as a deserved misfortune rooted in their karmic fate. Such depictions reflect a reductive and often callous worldview, presenting blindness as a target of ridicule rather than a subject of deeper reflection.

By the late Edo period, however, *zatō-mono* had undergone a profound transformation. The figure of the blind man evolved into a more universal symbol, representing humanity's confrontation with an unjust and unpredictable universe. This thematic shift was accompanied by a reinterpretation of the Buddhist philosophical concepts, particularly those of karma (accumulated results of action) and *anatman* (non-self). Edo-period *kyōgen* thus began to offer a more nuanced discourse on disability, moving beyond the simplistic equation of physical impairment with karmic retribution. Instead, these later works engaged with broader existential questions, portraying blindness as a metaphor for the human condition and emphasizing shared experiences of suffering, impermanence, and resilience.

This evolution of *zatō-mono* exemplifies the broader trajectory of *kyōgen* as a theatrical form, transitioning from simplistic comedic tropes to narratives with greater philosophical and

ethical complexity. By doing so, *zatō-mono* not only enriched the genre's thematic repertoire but also contributed to a more empathetic and reflective engagement with the portrayal of disability. This transformation is exemplified in plays such as *Kawakami Zatō,* where the blind man character embodies a deeply philosophical perspective on fate. The husband's reflection on his misfortune, encapsulated in his resigned declaration—"I must think of it as destiny"—articulates a universal human response to the unpredictability of divine will and the inevitability of suffering. This thematic evolution underscores the genre's shift from mockery to a profound engagement with existential concerns, positioning the blind man as a figure of resilience and acceptance in the face of adversity.

These plays not only trace the development of the blind man character within *kyōgen* but also serve as a window into contemporaneous medieval and Edo-period attitudes toward disability—particularly blindness. My interest in *zatō-mono* lies in their capacity to illuminate the intricate intersections of performance, societal values, and religious thought. In the chapters that follow, I argue that *zatō-mono* underwent a gradual transformation between the medieval and early modern periods, reflecting broader shifts in popular perceptions of blindness and disability. Specifically, I will show how the representation of disability evolves in *kyōgen*, particularly focusing on how the portrayal of blind characters has shifted from crude mockery to more complex reflections on human agency, suffering, and societal values. In the process, I will explore how *kyōgen* plays serve as a lens through which to explore changing cultural perceptions of disability, ethical considerations related to karma and personal agency, and the broader interplay between performance, religion, and societal attitudes in medieval and early modern Japan. This study highlights the transformation in the depiction of disability from deterministic views to a more reflective and empathetic approach, reflecting the evolution of cultural

sensibilities towards the disabled, and emphasizing the role of the blind community within the historical and cultural context of pre-modern Japan.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 examines the social and religious organizations associated with the broader disabled community and specifically with the blind, alongside their artistic representations—literary, performative, and visual—during the Muromachi and Edo periods. This chapter investigates the unique social and political structures of the blind, focusing on monopolies, privileges, and institutional benefits that distinguished their experience from that of other disabled groups.

Chapter 2 analyzes shifts within the *kyōgen* repertoire, with particular attention to plot adaptations that reflect a gradual softening in the representation of blind and disabled individuals from the late Muromachi through the late Edo period. These changes are contextualized within broader social and religious developments, especially as they pertain to *zatō kyōgen*.

Chapter 3 explores the intricate relationship between humor and religion in *kyōgen*, positioning the genre as a contested cultural space where debates about karma and disability were enacted. This chapter examines how Buddhist doctrines often framed blindness as emblematic of universal suffering (*dukkha*), contrasting these interpretations with the more humanized and soteriological depictions of blindness in *kyōgen*. These portrayals reflect popular medieval Japanese thought, and the chapter considers how shifting Buddhist perspectives on karma and disability influenced public attitudes.

Chapter 4 addresses the historical stigma associated with certain forms of humor in Japan. By the early Edo period, *kyōgen* writers began crafting plays that appealed to a broad and diverse audience by blending aristocratic aesthetics with accessible, earthy humor. This chapter

investigates how these innovations contributed to the reimagining of *zatō-mono* as a genre that is both comedic and philosophically profound.

The remainder of this introduction provides the foundational context for this study. It begins with an overview of *kyōgen* as a theatrical genre, situating the research within the broader field of Disability Studies and engaging with relevant scholarship. This is followed by an exploration of the socio-economic dimensions of blindness during the Muromachi and Edo periods, alongside an analysis of basic Buddhist attitudes toward blindness and disability. Finally, the introduction addresses the performative and symbolic aspects of blindness in *kyōgen*, establishing a framework for the subsequent analysis of *zatō-mono* as a site of cultural, religious, and social significance.

An Introduction to *Kyōgen*

Scholars remain divided on the precise origins of *nō* and *kyogen,* mainly because there is so little textual evidence earlier than the Muromachi period. Generally, *kyōgen* is regarded as the comedic counterpart to *nō* theater, with both forms sharing a common origin in *sangaku*, which likely arrived in Japan from the Asian continent in the Nara period.[1] *Sangaku*'s repertoire was notably diverse, incorporating elements such as acrobatics, conjuring, juggling, and comic skits. During the Heian period, *sangaku* performers gained popularity in the capital and at court, and over time, it is thought that the comic skits of *sangaku* evolved into a separate tradition known as *sarugaku.*[2]

Sarugaku became known for its *monomane* (comic impersonations), which were considered a vital part of entertainment at the court.[3] The *Shinsarugakuki* (新猿楽記, New

[1] Pinnington, *A New History of Medieval Japanese Theater*, p. 28.
[2] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 776. However, note that in the Heian period it is difficult to distinguish between the terms *sarugaku* and *sangaku.*
[3] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 776-777.

Record of Sarugaku), attributed to the aristocrat and poet Fujiwara Akihira (989–1066), provides the earliest account of *sarugaku* as a professional performance art. This record details a series of entertainments staged in the Heian capital and includes critiques of the actors involved. *Sarugaku,* as described in the *Shinsarugakuki,* incorporated a variety of performances, including festive skits derived from *sangaku,* such as *shinadama* (juggling) and comic parodies, as well as dramatic narratives accompanied by the *biwa* (lute) and *dengaku* agricultural-themed dance performances.[4] Monica Bethe suggests that since these performances were taken up by the imperial court, this might have been one of the reasons for its later deemphasis on circus acts and its specialization on comic skits.[5]

Another possible source for *nō* and *kyōgen* is the *jushi* (masters of spells), Buddhist priests who began as esoteric ritualists performing at various New Year festivals (*shushōe*, *shunie*). By the late Heian period, however, the term *jushi* also referred to popular entertainers of the kind who appear in *Shinsarugakuki,* and who therefore may have been the forerunners of *nō* and *kyōgen* performers.[6] One argument is that *nō* evolved from the dramatic branch of *jushi*'s ritual performances, whereas *kyōgen* emerged from *sarugaku*'s comedic elements.

By the Kamakura period, the social, economic, and political realities in Japan had changed significantly, with power shifting to the shogunate in Kamakura and a reduced imperial court remaining active in Kyoto. Kyōgen began to emerge as a distinct genre in the 14th century, particularly during the social and political upheaval in Japan following the demise of the Kamakura shogunate in 1333. As *nō* developed into a highly refined and formalized art form, emphasizing themes of spirituality, mythology, and tragedy, *kyōgen* provided a counterbalance

[4] Salz, *A History of Japanese Theatre*. p. 6.
[5] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 777.
[6] For more on *jushi* as forerunners of *sarugaku nō,* see Pinnington, pp. 33-34.

through its lighter, comedic tone reminiscent of medieval European farce. Together, they formed the dual performance tradition known as *nōgaku*, though the term *sarugaku* continued to be used to refer to both until the Edo period. This dynamic interplay between the solemnity of *nō* and the humor of *kyōgen* became a defining feature of Japanese theatrical culture. Often parodying *nō*, *kyōgen* maintained a comedic spirit while occasionally achieving deeper emotional resonance.

Kyōgen plays are typically short, ranging from 10 to 20 minutes, and are performed in a minimalist style with limited use of props and set pieces. The language employed is relatively colloquial compared to the complex poetry of *nō*, enhancing accessibility for a broader audience. *Kyōgen* also maintained a more improvisational style throughout much of its early history. The comedy in *kyōgen* is grounded in slapstick, satire, and everyday life scenarios, with stock characters such as cunning servants, foolish masters, and loquacious villagers. Humor often arises from misunderstandings, wordplay, and exaggerated behavior.

While *kyōgen* maintained its role as the comic counterpart to *nō*, it gradually developed its own dedicated audience, with performances occasionally staged independently of *nō*. During the Edo period, *kyōgen* became increasingly formalized, and several schools were established, each with distinctive styles. The three main schools in the Edo period were the Ōkura, Sagi, and Izumi schools. Of these, the Ōkura was the first to be recognized by the Tokugawa shogunate as a *ryugi* (school, 流儀), and to establish themselves, they claimed a lineage traced back to Hie Yatarō in Ōmi Province.[7]

Key figures in the school include Ōkura Yaemon Torakiyo (1566-1646), who as a prominent actor helped solidify the school's reputation. His son, Ōkura Toraaki (1597-1662, aka

[7] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 789-790.

Toraakira), compiled scripts for many plays and authored the only discourse on *kyōgen* performance, *Waranbegusa* (わらんべ草, For My Young Successors). Toraaki's writings reflect the evolution of *kyōgen* and the transition from improvisational performances to more structured forms with written texts, and their establishment involved formalizing their repertory. The fact that the Ōkura was the first school to be formally recognized by the shogunate, may explain its emphasis on a more formalized style compared to the other schools. Monica Bethe notes that Toraaki's father, Torakiyo, probably "toned down" his performance style when *nō* became recognized as an official ceremonial performing art (*shikigaku)* of the shogunate.[8]

Another significant school during the Edo period was the Sagi school, which served as the in-house *kyōgen* school for the Tokugawa shogunate. Founded by Sagi Niemon Sōgen (1560-1650) for Tokugawa Ieyasu, the Sagi school was attached to the Kanze *nō* School and wielded significant influence as the official *kyōgen* troupe of the shogunate. The school was known for its experimental approach to kyogen, which involved mixing genres and appealing to a broader audience by incorporating elements from other forms of performance, such as *kabuki*. However, after the Meiji restoration led to *kyōgen* schools losing their government support, the Sagi school's unorthodox innovations led to its expulsion from the Nōgaku Kyōkai (The Nōgaku Performers Association).[9] Following the death of Sagi Gonnojo (d. 1897) and the last *iemoto* (headmaster) Sagi Ban'o (d. 1922), the school struggled to maintain its standing. The Sagi school transformed from an artistic tradition traced by family lineage into groups of nonprofessional volunteer performers on Sado Island in Niigata Prefecture and in the city of Yamaguchi, which continue to this day, but are no longer part of a traditional *iemoto* system.[10] Despite its

[8] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 789.
[9] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 793-794.
[10] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 829-831.

dissolution, surviving Sagi school manuscripts provide valuable insights into *kyōgen* practices in the Edo period.

The Ōkura and Sagi schools were respectively associated with the Konparu and Kanze *nō* troupes that had been formally established by the shogunate, whereas the Izumi school was formed by three actors from smaller troupes in the Kyoto area: Yamawaki Izumi Motoyoshi (1596-1569), Miyake Tokuro (d. 1708) and Nomura Matasaburo (active in the early 17th century).[11] Unlike the Ōkura and Sagi schools, which were affiliated with the official *nō* schools, the Izumi school was more independent and the texts associated with Izumi *kyogen* are thought to reflect an older performance style.[12] Today, the Izumi school continues to perform, and its members actively engage in preserving and promoting the art form through various means, such as performances, workshops, and educational outreach.

The Development of *Kyōgen* Play Collections

To be recognized as a school, the head of each school had to establish their lineage and provide a list of the plays in their repertory to the Tokugawa shogunate. This process led to the writing down of scripts that noted complete libretti of dialogue and action, marking a shift from improvisational performance to a more structured and codified form of the art. This period also marked the beginning of systematic documentation of scripts by individual *kyōgen* families. The earliest surviving collection of *kyōgen* plays, the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* (天正狂言本, also known as the *Tenshō-bon*), was published in 1578. Over the next two centuries, the Ōkura, Izumi, and

[11] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 790-791.
[12] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 790-791.

Sagi schools developed and maintained their own collections of scripts, ensuring the preservation and transmission of *kyōgen* as a rich comedic tradition within Japanese theater.

Kyōgen play collections were usually organized into categories based on the main character type, narrative theme, order within a program, or level of performance difficulty. These categories include Feudal Lord *Kyōgen*, featuring *daimyō* (feudal lords); God of Fortune *Kyōgen*, in which a deity bestows blessings; Farmer *Kyōgen*, focusing on farmers navigating issues such as tax payments; Minor Lord *Kyōgen*, highlighting lesser aristocrats; and plays centered on the servant Tarō Kaja. Other categories include Son-in-Law *Kyōgen*, depicting various situations related to weddings; Woman *Kyōgen*, which feature strong-willed female protagonists; Demon *Kyōgen*, offering humorous portrayals of demons or Emma, the King of Hell; Priest *Kyōgen*, in which priests become targets of comedic ridicule; and Mountain Priest *Kyōgen*, about *yamabushi* (mountain ascetics) with flawed magical abilities. Additional categories include Dance *Kyōgen*, which parody *nō* plays; Miscellaneous *Kyōgen*, a diverse group often featuring animal protagonists; and Blind Man *Kyōgen* (*zatō-mono*), centering on blind people.

The *zatō-mono* plays within these collections provide valuable insights into evolving societal attitudes toward blindness and disability. From the Muromachi to Edo periods, representations of blind characters shifted significantly. Earlier plays often emphasized themes of karmic retribution, portraying blindness as a consequence of deeds in a past life. However, over time, the focus expanded to include ethical and moral dilemmas faced by blind characters, alongside a more nuanced exploration of blindness and disability itself. These changes reflect broader popular Buddhist beliefs regarding disability, illustrating a transition from deterministic views to more humanistic and empathetic portrayals, as will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Disability Studies

It is imperative to acknowledge recent advances in the field of Disability Studies that have significantly informed this research. Disability Studies provides a critical framework for examining the lived experiences, cultural representations, and societal perceptions of disability, challenging traditional perspectives that reduce it solely to a medical or pathological condition. Collectively, these works emphasize the importance of understanding disability not as a limitation but as a fundamental aspect of identity, culture, and philosophy, offering new perspectives on the complexities of human experience.

The growing field of Disability Studies developed, in part, as a response to prior culturally prescribed meanings or models of disability and disability issues. A brief overview of some of the typical categories used to contextualize disability may help to integrate the diverse perspectives on religion and disability presented in this study. Disability Studies typically engages with three primary frameworks for understanding disability: the medical model, the social model, and the cultural model. Each framework provides a different perspective on how disability is conceptualized, experienced, and addressed in society.

Similar to the understanding of an afflicted body part during illness or injury, the impairment model defines disability in terms of its lack of normal functionality and the resulting disadvantages.[13] It emphasizes a disabled individual's functional deficits, such as impairments in sight, hearing, or speech. Disability is seen as an individual problem, located within the person, rather than influenced by external social or environmental factors. Within this framework, health is equated with normal function, and by extension, impaired individuals are viewed as lacking wholeness. Success is often measured by the extent to which an individual can "overcome" their

[13] Schumm and Stoltzfus, *Disability and World Religions,* p. 46.

impairment. By focusing solely on impairment, this model may reinforce negative stereotypes, portraying disabled individuals as “broken” or in need of fixing. It does not account for the social model’s perspective, which sees disability as a result of barriers created by society, such as discrimination, lack of accommodations, or inaccessible infrastructure.

The second framework, the medical model, builds on the impairment model by acknowledging its deficits but focuses more on the restoration of health. Much like a patient undergoing treatment at a clinic, the medical model perceives disability as an impairment to be addressed through a regimen of treatments and cures, with the ultimate goal of restoring the individual’s functionality and enabling their reintegration into society. Healthcare providers, therapists, and other specialists are central to this model. Their role is to diagnose, manage, and rehabilitate individuals to bring them as close as possible to what is considered "normal." The impairment model of disability is closely aligned with and sometimes considered a subset of, the medical model of disability, but the primary goal within this model is to minimize or manage the impairment through medical intervention, therapy, or assistive devices. As feminist critic Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains, the medical model views disability as “an inherent inferiority, pathology to cure, or undesirable trait to eliminate.”[14] In this view, the root problem is located within the individual’s body rather than in the social environment that stigmatizes and marginalizes disabled people.

The third framework, the social model, offers a markedly different perspective. It refrains from treating disability as an illness that requires a cure and instead attributes the negative effects of disability to societal discrimination and systemic barriers. Disability theorists working within

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[14] Garland-Thomson**,** “Feminist Disability Studies,” p. 1558.

this framework emphasize destabilizing social stigmas and oppressive interpretations of disability, arguing that economic hardships, inaccessible environments, and social prejudice are the most significant challenges faced by disabled individuals. The model distinguishes between *impairment* (a physical, mental, or sensory condition) and *disability* (the disadvantages or restrictions imposed by society). A component of the social model, variation theory, highlights the failure of society to accommodate diverse physical variations. Examples of accommodations discussed in this framework include wheelchair ramps and high-contrast monitors for individuals with vision impairments. Unlike the impairment and medical models, the social model provides a more neutral and inclusive understanding of disability. The model also calls for changes in society to remove barriers and create an inclusive environment.

A few individual works in Disability Studies have also significantly contributed to the foundation of this study. Karen Nakamura's *Deaf in Japan: Signing and the Politics of Identity* examines the socio-historical construction of deafness through generational narratives, illuminating the evolution of deaf communities in postwar Japan and their activism in identity and education. Nakamura offers a multifaceted exploration of deaf life, history, and activism in Japan, presenting an in-depth analysis of the community's development over time. Her work is distinctive in its focus on the socio-historical construction of deafness through the lens of three generations of deaf individuals. Particularly, she highlights the political dynamics surrounding identity, signing, and education within postwar deaf communities, which culminated in the emergence of mass organizational movements beginning in the 1970s.

Similarly, Rosemarie Garland Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* interrogates the representation of physical disability in American culture, advocating for a perspective that frames disability as a site of

cultural interpretation and identity formation rather than mere deficiency. Thomson examines the disconnect between cultural representations of disability and the lived realities of disabled individuals, suggesting that these representations often fail to capture the complexity of disability. Echoing my approach to *zatō* plays as complex representations of blindness, Thomson concludes by emphasizing the need to view disability not simply as a deficiency but as a locus of cultural interpretation and identity formation. She further argues for a layered understanding of disability's intersection with social categories such as race, gender, and class, calling for a paradigm shift from viewing disability as pathology to recognizing it as a critical aspect of identity politics.

These perspectives are further enriched by Darla Y. Schumm and Michael Stoltzfus's *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction*, which examines the intersection of Buddhism and disability, particularly the ways in which themes of suffering, impermanence, and interdependence challenge binary distinctions between ability and disability. The text explores Buddhism's engagement with disability from various perspectives, addressing both the challenges and insights that emerge at this intersection. Schumm and Stoltzfus discuss the linkage between illness, disability, and suffering—a central theme in Buddhism that I explore in Chapter 3. At the same time, Buddhism's emphasis on impermanence and radical interdependence suggests that distinctions between able-bodied and disabled individuals are less significant than commonly perceived. This perspective destabilizes the binary opposition typically associated with ability and disability. Much like my argument that *zatō* plays articulated an alternative Buddhist discourse, this text suggests that disability can offer unique insights into the fragility and impermanence of life, potentially deepening one's spiritual practice and understanding of suffering.

The Socio-Economics of Being Blind in the Muromachi and Edo Periods

To understand the transformation of *kyōgen* plays between the Muromachi and Edo periods, it is crucial to consider the socio-economic conditions that shaped the experiences of blind individuals during this time. A comprehensive analysis of this shift requires an exploration of the social and organizational history of the blind, as well as the broader societal challenges faced by disabled individuals. By situating these plays within their historical context, one gains insight into the interplay between performance, disability, and the evolving societal attitudes of the period.

One of the most frequently cited secondary sources on this subject is Ōkuma Miyoshi's *Mōjin no seikatsu* (Life of the Blind), which offers an extensive overview of the lives of visually impaired individuals in Japan, tracing their experiences from ancient times to the modern era. Similar to their roles in *kyōgen* plays, Ōkuma examines how blind individuals came to be seen not only as objects of pity but also as capable of spiritual insight. For instance, in ancient Japan, certain individuals known as *mōsō* (盲僧, blind monks) were deeply involved in the recitation of sacred texts and prayers. They played a pivotal role in rituals and ceremonies, using their musical expertise to accompany religious practices.

Another example is the *Jishinkyōyomi* (地神経読, Earth Deity Chanting) group, composed of blind musicians who performed prayers and invocations, often with instruments such as the *biwa* lute. These performances were not solely for entertainment but were integral to spiritual practices, believed to invoke blessings and ensure communal well-being. The presence of blind individuals in these spiritual contexts often evoked a sense of compassion and respect from the broader community. These groups show how blind practitioners were sometimes

regarded as possessing heightened spiritual abilities or unique insights, a perception that elevated their status in religious practices.

Although historical records on the societal treatment of blind individuals are limited, Ōkuma provides critical insights into their struggles. For instance, he highlights the systemic discrimination they faced, including the economic burdens imposed by the high-interest loans required to purchase official titles within the guild for the blind, the *Tōdō-za* (literally, the "our way" or "proper way" guild). Despite these challenges, blind individuals made significant contributions to spiritual life through their roles in music, prayer, and ritual, forming an indispensable part of Japan's religious and cultural fabric. This contextual understanding not only illuminates the historical experiences of blind individuals but also enriches our interpretation of *kyōgen* plays, offering a deeper appreciation of how performance, disability, and society intersected during these periods.

Hanada Harutaka's *Nihon no Shōgaisha — Sono Bunkashiteki Sokumen* (Disabled People in Japan: Their Cultural and Historical Aspects) is a comprehensive and frequently cited cultural history of disabled individuals in Japan. Spanning from ancient times to the modern era, Hanada's work examines the roles, perceptions, and contributions of disabled individuals throughout Japanese history. Central to his analysis is the concept of a "second Japan," which foregrounds the often-overlooked contributions of disabled people to Japanese culture and society. The text highlights the involvement of disabled individuals in various cultural forms, including the theater forms of *nō, kabuki, bunraku,* as well as music and literature, often in ways that were unacknowledged in official historical narratives.

Hanada emphasizes that blind performers were not only admired for their artistic talents but were also believed to possess supernatural abilities in ancient times. During the Edo period, they came to symbolize resilience and creativity in the face of adversity, traversing cities to engage in performances and actively participating in the cultural life of their communities. A distinctive feature of Hanada's study is its incorporation of personal accounts and anecdotal evidence from disabled individuals, shedding light on their challenges and triumphs within societal frameworks that frequently marginalized them. Hanada's research has significantly contributed to my work by providing a foundational framework for understanding how attitudes toward disability have evolved in Japan, particularly in relation to performance and theatrical representation. Hanada's examination of the stigmatization and discrimination faced by disabled individuals offers critical historical context for my analysis of *zatō kyōgen*. By tracing shifts in societal attitudes toward disability, Hanada's work supports my argument that changes in the *zatō kyōgen* repertoire—from unsympathetic portrayals in the Muromachi period to more compassionate representations in the Edo period—reflect broader ethical and religious transformations in Japanese society.

Gerald Groemer's "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan" serves as a counterpart to Hanada's broader cultural history. His study provides valuable insights into the complexities of blind individuals' lives, offering an understanding of their contributions to society and the challenges they encountered during a transformative period in Japanese history. Groemer's study provides a detailed examination of the lives of blind individuals from the medieval to the Edo periods, with a particular focus on their guilds, societal contributions, and the challenges they faced in an evolving world. Groemer documents how, beginning in medieval times, visually impaired individuals organized into guilds, with the *Tōdō-za* emerging as the most prominent

association that facilitated their economic and political activities. Although Groemer does not address *zatō* plays or the broader disabled community outside the *Tōdō-za*, his work remains a critical resource for understanding the political and social dynamics of the guild itself.

In *Mōjin no Rekishi* (The History of the Blind in Japan), Taniai Susumu examines the history and development of education and welfare for blind individuals in Japan, with a particular focus on their experiences from the Meiji period through the Showa era. Although the book provides a general history of disability, it also addresses the role of blind individuals in traditional Japanese theater during the premodern era, particularly focusing on the *biwa-hōshi* (blind lute playing priests) and blind female performers known as *goze*. This focus parallels Gerald Groemer's work, *Goze: Women, Musical Performance, and Visual Disability in Traditional Japan*, which offers a comprehensive examination of the *goze*—visually impaired Japanese women who, from the medieval period through the early twentieth century, traversed rural Japan as professional musicians.[15]

In addition to these themes, Taniai, like Ōkuma, provides detailed insights into the history of the *Tōdō-za*, particularly the conflicts and rivalries among different groups of blind musicians. For instance, he highlights the *Jishinkyōyomi* (Earth Deity Chanting) group,[16] which sought to preserve its traditional practices despite the growing influence of the *Tōdō-za*. Taniai also analyzes the bureaucratic structures implemented by the Tokugawa shogunate to regulate the lives of blind individuals, including the introduction of a hierarchical system within the

[15] Groemer delves into the lives, institutional structures, and musical contributions of the *goze*, highlighting the symbiotic relationship between the *goze* and rural society, illustrating how these women not only sought independence but also served as pivotal agents of cultural dissemination and development. *Goze* also appear in several *zatō kyogen*. Groemer, *Goze*.
[16] I provide further details on the *Jishinkyōyomi* in Chapter 2.

Tōdō-za. From lowest to highest the ranks were: *kentō* (検討), *han'uchikake (*半打掛*), zatō* (座頭)、*kōtō* (勾当), *bettō* (別当), and *kengyō (*検校), with the higher ranks corresponding to a higher salary.[17] The *kentō* rank was primarily an entry-level position, held by those who had received training but had not yet gained significant authority or privileges within the guild. The term *zatō* also functioned as a general term for any blind man. Like Groemer, Taniai underscores the critical role blind performers played in the transmission of cultural narratives and music, demonstrating how they navigated societal challenges while contributing significantly to the cultural landscape. While the study does not focus specifically on the depiction of blind characters in Japanese theater, it effectively illustrates how blind performers negotiated societal perceptions of disability while preserving and advancing their artistic practices. Additionally, Taniai explores their broader contributions to cultural preservation, their evolving rights, and their gradual recognition within Japanese society.

Nakayama Tarō's *Nihon Mōjinshi* (The History of the Blind in Japan) serves as both a historical account and a personal reflection on the importance of documenting the lives and contributions of blind individuals, emphasizing their integral role in Japanese culture and society throughout history. Nakayama examines societal perceptions of blind individuals, noting that they were often equated with beggars or the lower social classes. Like other histories of the blind, Nakayama reveals how these individuals nevertheless overcame societal challenges to play significant roles in cultural practices such as music and storytelling.

Nakayama's work provides particularly valuable details regarding the governance of the *Tōdō-za*, the roles of its officials, and the unique social dynamics within the guild. He also offers

[17] Groemer, "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan," p. 356.

insights into the legal status of blind individuals, including their rights and societal treatment. Similar to Ōkuma's analysis, Nakayama discusses how economic conditions led blind individuals to engage in high-interest lending practices, often as a means of financial survival. While this practice enabled some economic agency, it also led to societal conflicts and legal scrutiny. Nakayama's most distinctive contribution is his discussion of cultural festivals and rituals associated with blind individuals, which highlights their roles in communal activities and the significance of these events in preserving cultural heritage. However, Nakayama adopts a critical stance on the portrayal of blind characters in *kyōgen*. While he acknowledges the broader contributions of blind performers to the performing arts, he critiques the depiction of blind characters in *kyōgen* as largely derogatory. This negative portrayal, according to Nakayama, contrasts sharply with the otherwise significant and positive cultural roles played by blind individuals in Japanese history.

This comparative analysis across Taniai, Ōkuma, Groemer, and Nakayama provides a multifaceted understanding of the historical roles and societal perceptions of blind individuals, illustrating their challenges and contributions to Japan's cultural and social fabric.

Buddhism and Blindness

A crucial aspect of understanding the representation of blindness in *zatō* plays lies in examining how Buddhist attitudes toward karma affect the treatment of disabled individuals. While there have been only a few studies explicitly exploring the connection between Buddhism and *zatō*, many have examined how blindness functions as a symbolic stand-in for human suffering. Scholars such as Kim Nam-Joo and Junko Baba suggest that blind characters often

embody universal human qualities, such as resilience and the ability to navigate life's adversities, frequently employing humor as a means to address their challenges.

In *Zatō Kyōgen no Warai to Bukkyō* (The Laughter of *Zatō Kyōgen* and Buddhism), Kim Nam-Joo investigates the role of laughter in these comedic performances, particularly within a Buddhist context, and explores why blind characters take center stage in these narratives. Specifically, her analysis of the play *Kawakami Zatō* interprets its dynamic as a reflection of how traditional Buddhist beliefs and personal relationships were intertwined in the everyday lives of ordinary people. According to Kim, the plays often highlight the absurdity of human relationships and the social dynamics at play, with laughter serving as a coping mechanism for the struggles faced by marginalized individuals, including the blind. These characters are portrayed as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of negative societal attitudes toward marginalized groups.

Although Kim Nam-Joo's analysis aligns with traditional interpretations of *zatō* plays, she tends to present a somewhat homogeneous view of Buddhist belief, overlooking the diverse levels of religiosity and understanding of Buddhist doctrine within Japanese society. My own study seeks to address this limitation by demonstrating how certain representations of blindness in these plays articulate alternative Buddhist discourses, challenging more conventional frameworks.

In contrast, Hanaka Keisuke provides a more detailed examination of the relationship between disability and religion in "'Shōgaisha' to 'Shūkyō' – 'Nōmarizēshon' to 'Shūkyōkan Taiwa'" (Disability and Religion: The Issues of Normalization and Interreligious Dialogue). Hanaka's analysis reveals historical prejudices within religious traditions while also highlighting progressive movements that aimed to challenge these biases. He focuses particularly on Buddhist

views of disability, including the concept of karmic retribution (因果応報, *inga ōhō*), which has historically been used to justify discrimination against disabled individuals. This belief, rooted in the idea that disabilities are the result of past-life transgressions, had a profound influence on societal attitudes and is evident in early *kyōgen* plays.

While Hanaka acknowledges that some Buddhist practices emphasized inclusivity and compassion, his study underscores the complex and often contradictory relationship between religious teachings and societal treatment of disabled individuals. He also examines the *yugyō* (遊行) philosophy of certain wandering Buddhist sects, which emphasized community engagement and welfare—a stark contrast to the more detached approach of mainstream Buddhist institutions. This perspective provides a broader understanding of how Buddhist practices intersected with the lived experiences of disabled individuals, shedding light on the diversity of religious responses to disability across historical and social contexts.

Takano Shinji's "Sekimon Shingaku Dōwa ni Miru 'Shōgai' no Hiyuka: Kyōgen Daihon no Daizaika to no Hikaku" (Questioning the Nature of People: A Comparative Study of Disability through *Kyōgen* and *Shingaku* Stories) juxtaposes the representation of disabilities in *kyōgen* with their portrayal in Shingaku, a religious and ethical movement founded by Ishida Baigan (1685–1744). Shingaku integrates elements of Shintō, particularly devotion to the sun goddess Amaterasu and tutelary deities (*uji-gami*), with elements of Zen Buddhist and Neo-Confucian teachings. Takano emphasizes the dual nature of disabilities as both physical impairments and social constructs, analyzing how their representation varies across historical periods in Japan.

Through an examination of specific plays, Takano illustrates how characters with disabilities are often portrayed humorously, highlighting their misfortunes and

misunderstandings while simultaneously addressing broader societal issues regarding human nature and morality. For instance, in *Tsunbo Zatō* (*Deaf Man and Blind Man*), comedic misunderstandings between a deaf character and others underscore the communication barriers inherent in disabilities. Shingaku teachings, by contrast, approach disabilities through a moral and ethical lens, often employing metaphors involving disabilities to convey lessons about personal virtue and moral conduct. In this framework, disabilities are sometimes depicted as reflecting moral failings or serving as warnings against moral laxity.

Takano also explores how Shingaku intersects with the Buddhist concept of karma (因果, *inga*). While Buddhist thought often attributes disabilities to karmic retribution from past lives, Shingaku adopts a more practical focus, emphasizing the immediate impact of attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors on one's current life and relationships. This distinction highlights Shingaku's emphasis on moral action within the present moment, encouraging individuals to reflect on how their conduct affects their family, workplace, and community. In contrast, *kyōgen* employs humor to explore disabilities, blending ridicule and empathy to reflect societal attitudes. This dichotomy between Shingaku's moral seriousness and *kyōgen*'s comedic approach highlights societal perspectives on disability, oscillating between derision and moral contemplation.

Performance of Blindness in *Kyōgen*

The performance of blindness in *kyōgen* is a central focus of this study, tracing its evolution from the Muromachi period to the Edo period. During this time, portrayals of blindness transformed from crude, mocking caricatures to more nuanced reflections on the experiential

condition of blindness. While English-language scholarship on *zatō kyōgen* is relatively limited, several authors have explored the emotional complexity of these plays.

Jacqueline Golay, in "Pathos and Farce: *Zatō* Plays of the *Kyōgen* Repertoire," examines two specific plays, *Tsukimi Zatō* (*Moon-Viewing Blind Man*) and *Kawakami Zatō*, to highlight the interplay of comedy and tragedy in *kyōgen*. In *Tsukimi Zatō*, a blind priest ventures out to enjoy the sounds of insects during the harvest moon. His experience is characterized by a touching appreciation for the beauty of sound, contrasted with an unkind man's interruption, which elicits both laughter and empathy. Golay argues that *kyōgen* plays do not merely mock blind characters but instead reflect a deeper psychological understanding of human nature, balancing humor with pathos. Golay's analysis underscores *kyōgen*'s enduring relevance as both entertainment and subtle social critique, though it does not explicitly address historical changes in the genre.

Junko Baba, in *"Zatō* Plays in *Kyōgen*: Satire and Symbolism*,"* categorizes *zatō* plays into two types: satirical and symbolic. The satirical plays often depict confrontations between characters of differing social ranks, with the lower-ranking blind character ridiculing a higher-ranking counterpart. Baba notes that such confrontations become more prominent in later Edo collections, reflecting shifts in societal attitudes, points I will discuss further in Chapter 1. Symbolic plays, by contrast, explore themes such as marital love and societal hypocrisy, using blind characters as archetypes of flawed humanity and ignorance. Baba's work provides insight into the thematic diversity of *zatō* plays, though it does not address their evolution across historical contexts, a gap this study seeks to fill.

Taguchi Kazuo, in *"Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* no Shukke Zatō Kyōgen: Kyōgen no Keisei Josetsu*"* (The *Tenshō Kyōgen Bon*'s Monk *Zatō Kyōgen*: An Introduction to the Formation of

Kyōgen) examines the interplay between performance, literature, and sociocultural dynamics in *kyōgen*, with particular focus on *zatō* and monk characters. He compares the treatment of blind men and monks in the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, noting that traveling monks (*tabi no sō*) are often portrayed favorably, while resident monks (*jūjū sō*) are subject to ridicule, reflecting societal attitudes toward different strata within the Buddhist community. Taguchi situates *zatō* plays within this framework, describing them as embodying both comedic and tragic elements. He argues that these plays blend humor with serious societal critique, addressing themes of identity, struggle, and social roles.[18]

Taguchi also highlights the historical development of *kyōgen*, emphasizing how its themes and character portrayals were influenced by social changes and adapted to contemporary tastes. Many *zatō* plays, he notes, retain elements from earlier storytelling traditions while reflecting evolving societal norms. For example, portrayals of blind characters often critique societal attitudes toward disability, using humor to expose inequalities and challenge stereotypes. Taguchi's work situates *zatō* plays within a broader historical and cultural context, emphasizing their role in reflecting and shaping societal values.

Carolyn Morley's research connects the "poignancy" of *kyōgen* humor to societal attitudes in medieval Japan. Although her primary focus in *Transformations, Miracles, and Mischief* is on *yamabushi* (mountain priest) plays, her insights are equally applicable to *zatō kyōgen*. Morley identifies a recurring motif in *yamabushi* plays: characters are often mocked for their gullibility and lack of common sense rather than their societal roles as priests. This pattern extends to *zatō* plays, where blind characters are ridiculed not solely for their blindness but for their human flaws. Morley attributes this to what she terms the medieval audience's "healthy

[18] Taguchi, *"Tenshō Kyōgen Bon* no Shukke Zatō Kyōgen,*"* pp. 13-14.

skepticism," a worldview paradoxically paired with an unquestioning faith.[19] For instance, while audiences laugh at the ineptitude of particular *yamabushi* priests, they still accept their capacity to perform miracles.[20] Similarly, in *Kawakami Zatō*, the blind man's human frailty and the inexplicability of karmic fate are mocked, while at the same time the power of karma itself remains unquestioned. Morley argues that this interplay between skepticism and faith contributes to the distinctive poignancy of *kyōgen* humor.

Kogarimai Ken offers a complementary perspective on *zatō* humor in *Kyokugen no warai Zatō Kyōgen-kō* (On the Extreme Laughter of *Zatō Kyōgen*). His analysis focuses on the interactions between disability and humor in plays featuring Tarō Kaja (太郎冠者), a servant character, and blind protagonists. Kogarimai posits that *zatō kyōgen* embodies two contrasting forms of humor: the grotesque, which blends comedy with horror and serves as social critique, and the everyday, which resonates with audiences through its relatability. The unique quality of *zatō kyōgen*, he argues, lies in its ability to bridge these two types of humor, making it a sophisticated art form that reflects societal attitudes toward disability and otherness. Beyond mere entertainment, Kogarimai asserts that these performances engage in a deeper commentary on the marginalization and social acceptance of disabled individuals.

Similarly, William LeFleur, in *Karma of Words*, addresses *kyōgen*'s engagement with societal realities, describing the genre as emphasizing cleverness and cunning as essential tools for navigating a harsh medieval world. While initially dismissive of *zatō kyōgen* as a form of "dark humor," LeFleur ultimately aligns with Taguchi Kazuo in recognizing the genre's popular origins and its role in confronting societal realities, including the struggles of marginalized

[19] Morley, *Transformations, Miracles, and Mischief*, p. 9.
[20] Morley, *Transformations, Miracles, and Mischief*, p. 16.

individuals such as the poor, elderly, and disabled. LeFleur contrasts *zatō* plays with medieval *otogi-zōshi* tales, which often portray the weak as recipients of divine grace leading to happy resolutions. Instead, *zatō kyōgen* emphasizes resilience and human agency, underscoring *kyōgen*'s irreverence toward authority and its direct engagement with societal norms.

In *"*Visual Disability in *Kyōgen Zatōmono* Viewed in a Sociohistorical and Religious Context,*"* Stefanie Thomas explores the sociohistorical and religious dimensions of *zatō kyōgen*. She examines three plays—*Chakagi Zatō* (*The Tea-Sniffing Blind Men*), *Tsukimi Zatō* (*Moon-Viewing Blind Man*), and *Kawakami Zatō* arguing that blindness serves as an adjunct to broader comedic or serious elements, rather than the sole focus of ridicule. Thomas contends that these plays use humor as a vehicle for social commentary, offering reflections on human nature, societal norms, and psychological complexities. While Thomas sees *zatō kyōgen* as a medium for exploring broader themes, I argue that blindness itself becomes increasingly central to these plays, particularly in the late Edo period, where as we shall see it emerges as a focal theme.

Chapter 1

Organization and Representation of the Disabled in Japan

This chapter examines the social and religious organizations and artistic representations—literary, performative, and visual—of the broader disabled community, including the blind, from the Muromachi to the Edo period. A distinction is maintained throughout the chapter between the blind and the wider disabled community, underscoring the unique trajectory of the social and political organization of the blind, which resulted in distinct monopolies and privileges. The social, cultural, and institutional treatment of disabled individuals in Japan evolved significantly from the Muromachi to the Edo period, reflecting a complex interplay of reverence, marginalization, and systemic inequality. While the blind community gained status and economic privileges through guilds such as the *Tōdō-za*, for the most part the broader disabled community remained excluded from organized mutual aid and institutional support, shaped by historical attitudes, government policies, and cultural narratives. This divergence underscores the changing societal perceptions of disability and highlights the resilience and contributions of disabled individuals amidst systemic challenges.

Visual and Literary Representations of the Disabled in Japan

The greater disabled community occupies a prominent position in the Japanese cultural imagination, as evidenced by a literary tradition rich in their depictions. One of the earliest representations appears in the *Kojiki* (古事記, Record of Ancient Matters), the oldest extant historical chronicle in Japan. Compiled in the early 8th century, the *Kojiki* is a collection of myths, legends, hymns, genealogies, oral traditions, and semi-historical accounts commissioned by Empress Genmei (元明天皇, 660–721), Japan's 43rd monarch. This text served as a political

unification project, aiming to consolidate diverse traditions, familial lineages, and interests into a cohesive national mythology centered on the Yamato clan rulers. By tracing the divine lineage of Japan's emperors to heavenly deities, the *Kojiki* sought to legitimize imperial authority. Within this framework, the narrative offers insights into how the disabled and blind were situated within early Japanese society and its institutional structures.

Disability is a recurring motif in the *Kojiki*'s mythological framework, most notably in its creation myth. According to the text, the islands of Japan were birthed by the deities Izanagi-no-Mikoto (伊邪那岐命/伊弉諾尊, "He Who Invites") and Izanami-no-Mikoto (伊邪那美命/伊弉冉尊, "She Who Invites"), who embody the principles of yang and yin, as well as male and female duality. However, their flawed initial union represents the earliest recorded depiction of disability in Japanese literature. During the marriage ritual, Izanami mistakenly speaks first, resulting in the birth of a malformed child, Hiru-ko (蛭子), whose name translates to "leech child." Depending on the version of the tale, Hiru-ko is described as lacking bones or missing limbs, conditions suggestive of congenital physical deformities akin to modern understandings of cerebral palsy. At three years old, Hiru-ko could not walk or hold up his head, remaining in a limp state. Due to his gelatinous form and propensity for slurping blood, Hiru-ko was cast out to sea by his parents.

Hiru-ko's characterization and fate may be illustrative of early Japanese attitudes toward disability. As the offspring of the divine ancestors, Hiru-ko's deformity underscores a striking narrative choice: the first child of the creator deities is neither a future emperor nor an idealized human figure but a malformed and seemingly powerless being. The narrative indicates that Hiru-ko was ultimately cast adrift in a reed boat and disappeared, apparently aligning with the ways disabled individuals have often been marginalized or erased from societal narratives.

Nevertheless, Hiru-ko's story evolves in ways that complicate this initial rejection. Despite being abandoned by Izanagi and Izanami, who prioritized their nation-building efforts, Hiru-ko survives and transcends his physical limitations. By the age of three, he develops legs (and, possibly, a skeletal structure) and transforms into Ebisu (恵比寿), the God of Luck and Fishermen.[21] Significantly, Ebisu remains partially disabled, retaining a limp and deafness. This detail reflects an acceptance of disability as a persistent but not insurmountable characteristic, suggesting an acknowledgment of its unique qualities rather than a narrative of complete physical restoration.

Ebisu's enduring legacy as the "laughing god" and a symbol of prosperity points to complex societal attitudes toward disability in ancient Japan. While he is honored with shrines and celebrated as an auspicious figure, his early rejection by the creator gods and the denial of the divine title *Mikoto* parallel the likely marginalization faced by disabled individuals. Hiru-ko/Ebisu's narrative thus encapsulates the tension between exclusion and reverence, offering a possible perspective on how ancient Japanese society perceived and integrated disability.

The *Shichifukujin* and Representations of Disability in Japanese Mythology

In contemporary Japan, travelers frequently encounter Ebisu, one of the *Shichifukujin* (七福神, Seven Lucky Gods), displayed on souvenir shelves as a symbol of prosperity. This group of deities, who link good fortune with physical disability, is revered for bestowing blessings on various professions, particularly during the New Year. Worshippers seek their favor to attain the "seven happinesses" and avoid the "seven misfortunes." Although the collective concept of the Seven Lucky Gods was not documented until 1420, their individual origins span Japanese

[21] Hanada, *Nihon no Shōgaisha,* pp. 7-8.

mythology (Hiru-ko/Ebisu), Taoism (Jurōjin and Fukurokuju), Chinese and Indian Buddhism (Bishamonten and Hotei), and Hinduism (Daikokuten and Benzaiten).[22] Hanada Shunchō discusses the Seven Lucky Gods, particularly emphasizing that they are perceived as foreign or different due to their origins and individual characteristics.[23] The "foreignness" of the deities underscores the connection between difference and disability in Japanese culture.

A *senryū* (comic verse) describes the *Shichifukujin* as *katawa*—a term that can mean "incomplete" but also carries connotations of deformity or disability.[24] The *senryū* mentions that, apart from Benzaiten, all the other *Shichifukujin* are considered to have disabilities. This also highlights a humorous or critical perspective on the nature of the *Shichifukujin*. From a modern medical perspective, Jurōjin (old man of longevity) and Fukurokujin (deity of wisdom and prosperity) appear to have hydrocephalic heads; in the medieval period the kanji for *daikoku* (大黒, "great darkness") in the name Daikokuten (deity of wealth) was taken to mean "great ignorance," suggesting intellectual disability; Hotei is depicted as obese; and Bishamonten is associated with skin and bone ailments. As previously noted, Ebisu/Hiru-ko himself is thought to represent a form of cerebral palsy. This dual association of the *Shichifukujin* with both *fuku* (good fortune) and *fugu* (disability) underscores the same irony as Ebisu: these deities embody both blessings and physical limitations. In the case of Daikokuten, Bernard Faure notes that medieval exegetes offered both positive and negative interpretations of the deity. On one hand, he was associated with fundamental ignorance, a concept reinforced by the name *Daikoku* (大黒), which can be read as "great darkness." However, he was also understood as embodying the

[22] Chiba, *The Seven Lucky Gods of Japan*, p. 6.
[23] Hanada, pp. 155-156.
[24] [弁天をのぞけばあとはかたわなり] Hanada, p. 155.

nonduality of ignorance and enlightenment, with the character 黒 (black/darkness) symbolizing ignorance and 大 (great) signifying enlightenment. This dual interpretation reflects broader Buddhist philosophical perspectives on the interdependence of delusion and awakening.[25] The integration of the *Shichifukujin* into the daily lives of Edo-period citizens, as well as their continued presence in modern Japan, is symptomatic of complex historical attitudes toward the social inclusion of individuals with disabilities.

Disability in the *Kojiki* and Related Mythological Figures

Other deities from the *Kojiki* display characteristics reminiscent of Hiru-ko, such as Sukuna Bikona (少彦名神, "Little-Prince-the-Renowned-Deity") and Kuebiko (久延毘古), a god of wisdom, knowledge, and agriculture.[26] Sukuna Bikona is described as "the magician dwarf god," a portrayal evoking modern understandings of dwarfism.[27] He is depicted as a knowledgeable god associated with irrigation, farming, and medicinal herbs, showcasing his versatility and importance in the context of country-building and agricultural advancement. Kuebiko, whose name translates to "broken boy," is represented as a scarecrow deity unable to walk yet possessing full awareness—a depiction that aligns with contemporary descriptions of paraplegia.[28] Kuebiko is described as a one-legged god who possesses vast knowledge about the world,[29] indicating that despite his disability, he is very knowledgeable and aware of all matters under heaven.

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[25] Faure, *Protectors and Predators: Gods of Medieval Japan, Volume 2*. pp. 55–56.
[26] Chamberlain, B. H. *Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters*, p. 103.
[27] Chamberlain, B. H. *Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matters*, p. 103.
[28] Chamberlain, B. H. *Kojiki: Records of Ancient Matter*s, p. 103.
[29] 「此の神は、足は行かねども、尽(ことごと)に天の下の事を知れる神なり」Kurano and Takeda, *Kojiki,* p. 232.

In addition, Kuebiko is linked to the idea of community and support, as he is helped by a frog named Taniguku, who assists him in gathering information and sharing it, resembling the role of a volunteer. He is presented in the context of assisting the main deity, Ōkuninushi (大国主), in the construction of the country and is noted for his intelligence and capabilities in various fields, including agriculture and medicine. Kuebiko's story reflects themes of knowledge and the value of wisdom, even in the face of physical limitations. These figures, like Hiru-ko, reveal an enduring connection in Japanese mythology between divine power and physical disability.

While these portrayals are largely positive, ambiguity persists. For example, in the *Kojiki*, two princes—Prince Ake-tatsu and Prince Una-kami—are warned that encountering blind or lame individuals at Nara or the Ausaka Barrier (Ausaka no seki) would be a bad omen for travelers.[30] It remains unclear whether this superstition extended to all disabled individuals or was specific to travel contexts. Overall, the text conveys a dual perspective: while the disabled are portrayed as potentially valuable and powerful members of society, they are simultaneously regarded with apprehension in certain contexts.

Disability in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū*

During the Heian period, the blind continued to play a significant role in religious and literary narratives. The *Konjaku Monogatarishū*, (今昔物語集, Anthology of Tales from the Past and Present) also known as the *Konjaku Monogatari* (今昔物語), is a late Heian-period collection of over one thousand stories from Japan, India, and China. Arranged by geographic origin to mirror the path of Buddhism's introduction to Japan, the text draws heavily on Buddhist and popular folklore. The collection contains many themes, including those related to disability.

[30] Chamberlain, *The Kojiki*: *Records of Ancient Matters*, p. 336.

The tales often depict the lives and challenges faced by individuals with disabilities during the Heian period, particularly blind people who lived in poverty and relied on alms.

The *Konjaku Monogatarishū* contains seven instances of blind individuals, six of which appear in *setsuwa*—Buddhist didactic tales. These narratives often employ karmic retribution to explain disability within the medieval Buddhist worldview. A recurring theme is the intervention of divine beings to cure disabilities, as seen in stories of blind individuals praying to Yakushi (薬師, the Healing Buddha) or Kannon (観音, the Bodhisattva of Mercy) for restored sight. In *A Woman Who Could Not Speak Is Healed, Owing to the Grace of the Kannon of Ishiyama*,[31] the story tells of a woman who was unable to speak since birth.[32] Her parents and caregivers tried various methods to help her, but it was not until she prayed for healing at a temple and devoted herself to Kannon that she regained her speech. In *Minamoto no Hiromasa Visits the Blind Man Living in Ausaka*,[33] discussed in more detail below, a high-ranking court noble, Minamoto no Hiromasa, seeks out a blind man named Semimaru, who is an excellent *biwa* lute player. Despite his blindness, Semimaru is skilled in music and teaches Hiromasa, showcasing that he has adapted to his disability and continues to pursue his art.[34]

These miracle stories reinforce the didactic function of *setsuwa*, highlighting the power of Buddhist devotion to rectify karmic consequences. Unlike the *Kojiki*, where disabled figures like Hiru-ko achieve success through perseverance, the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* emphasizes divine intervention as the primary means for overcoming disability. This shift reflects a broader

[31] Volume 16, Tale 22 唖女依石山観音助得言語
[32] Yamamoto, Yoshiro, ed. *Konjaku Monogatari-shū* 3. Iwanami Shoten, 1961. pp. 470-473.
[33] Volume 24, Tale 23　源博雅朝臣行会坂盲許語
[34] Nagazumi, Yasuaki, and Jun'ichi Ikegami, *Konjaku Monogatarishū* 4*: Honchō-bu 4*. vol. 104, pp. 143-146.

change in societal attitudes during the Heian period, aligning success with religious piety and *taraki* (external supernatural aid) rather than individual effort.

Disability in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* and Beyond

The *Konjaku Monogatarishū* provides intriguing insights into the activities of blind individuals in medieval Japan. One tale features a blind priest who heals people, prays for rain, and plays the drums, reflecting earlier associations of blindness with religious authority and supernatural power. Among the most significant stories in the collection is the account of Semimaru, considered the legendary progenitor of the *biwa-hōshi* (blind lute players).

The historical status of Semimaru is difficult to ascertain, as he appears to be an amalgamation of multiple blind figures.[35] His name first appears in the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu*[36] (小倉百人一首, One Hundred Poems by One Hundred Poets), which identifies him as either Prince Atsumi, a son of Emperor Uda or the fourth son of Emperor Daigo.[37] However, as Susan Matisoff notes, there is no one historical figure that matches his many descriptions.[38] In the *Konjaku Monogatarishū*, Semimaru is depicted as a blind musician and poet who learns to play the lute from Prince Atsumi, a master of wind and string instruments. He lives alone in a straw hut at Ausaka (Meeting Slope), a mountain pass separating Kyoto from Lake Biwa, a site historically significant as a checkpoint barrier known as the Ausaka no Seki, established in 646.[39]

[35] Matisoff, *The Legend of Semimaru, Blind Musician of Japan*, p. 21.
[36] The *Ogura Hyakunin Isshu* is a classical Japanese anthology of 100 waka poems by 100 different poets, compiled in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) but said to contain poems from the 7th century. It is traditionally attributed to Fujiwara no Teika (藤原定家, 1162–1241), who is believed to have compiled it around 1235 CE while residing at his villa on Mount Ogura in Kyoto.
[37] Matisoff, p. 75.
[38] Matisoff, p. 5.
[39] Matisoff, pp. 6-7.

The Ausaka Pass was frequented by mendicant beggars who played music to collect alms, which lends credence to Matisoff's hypothesis that the name "Semimaru" may represent a collective identity for these performers. Another version of the tale in the *Genpei Seisuiki* diverges from the *Konjaku,* suggesting that Semimaru learned to play the *biwa* at the Ausaka barrier under the tutelage of a heavenly being who taught him the secret melodies, which he subsequently guarded and preserved.[40]

By the 13th century, the story of Semimaru had gained widespread recognition, eventually inspiring Zeami's *nō* play *Semimaru,* which is still performed today. In this dramatic adaptation, Semimaru is portrayed as a blind prince exiled to a small hut at Ausaka Pass, where he spends his days playing the *biwa* lute. There are multiple other theatrical versions of the Semimaru story; in total, there were about a dozen plays inspired by the Semimaru legend during the Tokugawa period, including *kabuki* and *jōruri* puppet adaptations. Of these, Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *jōruri* play *Semimaru,* although no longer performed today, was very successful in the late 17th century.

The legend of Semimaru was seen as the origin of the blind storytellers, known as *biwa-hōshi* (琵琶法師, blind lute playing priests), who traveled the countryside, chanting narratives in exchange for alms. By the 8th century, they had established reputations as skilled performers and religious specialists. The legacy of Semimaru became central to the identity of the *Tōdō-za* guild, which claimed him as their founder and the ancestral figure of all blind *biwa* players. Other performing groups also traced their lineage to him. Further analysis of Semimaru's role and the *Tōdō-za* is provided in Chapter 4 and later sections of this chapter.

[40] Ikebe, *Genpei Seisuiki,* pp. 172-174.

Disability and Visual Arts in the Edo Period

The Edo period witnessed the expansion of visual arts into depictions of everyday life, offering a more multi-faceted representation of disability. Katsushika Hokusai's *ukiyo-e* prints are particularly illustrative of these developments. One of his sketches depicts an *izariguruma*—a flat wooden plank with wheels propelled by scraping a stick against the ground. The figure operating this device is portrayed as impoverished and appears to be begging, reflecting the common practice of disabled individuals soliciting alms in entertainment districts and temple precincts.[41]

Despite such somber depictions, physical disabilities were occasionally celebrated in *haiku* poetry, a short form that emphasized *wabi-sabi*—the appreciation of imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. *Haiku* poets found beauty in life's transient and flawed elements, extending this aesthetic to representations of the human body. Kobayashi Issa's (1763–1828) *haiku* poetry is remarkable for its humanistic and empathetic portrayal of individuals with disabilities. His *haiku* frequently depict the struggles and resilience of ordinary people, particularly those living in hardship, including the poor, elderly, and disabled. His *haiku* about blind, deaf, and physically disabled individuals often highlight their perseverance, their participation in social life, and the way they navigate a world that is not always accommodating to their needs:

(*Yūdachi no/ mannaka ni/ tatsu zatō kana*)

> Standing dead center
> In the downpour…
> a blind man.[42]

[41] Katsushika, "Izariguruma" in *Hokusai Manga*, vol. 5, p. 43.
[42] Kobayashi, *A Taste of Issa: Haiku*, p. 152.

Here Issa gives focus to individuals ordinarily ignored by the world. Unlike some of his predecessors who sought aesthetic detachment in *haiku*, Issa's works are deeply personal, reflecting his own experiences with suffering, loss, and social injustice. Rather than reducing them to mere objects of pity or humor, he presents disabled individuals as integral members of the human experience, depicting their struggles and joys with dignity.

Other poems highlight the positive aspects of blindness:

(*Hashi wataru /mekura no ato/no kawazu kana*)

> Crossing the Bridge
> Behind the Blind man...
> a Frog[43]

The imagery of a blind man crossing a bridge recalls Hakuin Ekaku's (1685–1768 *zenga* (Zen paintings), which often depict blind figures navigating a precarious path.[44] In Zen thought, blindness can symbolize attachment to illusions, but it can also suggest an inward vision—an ability to perceive beyond the distractions of the material world. The presence of the frog reinforces this theme; in haiku tradition, frogs are frequently associated with a sudden awakening.[45] By positioning the frog behind the blind man, Issa subtly suggests that enlightenment follows those who walk without reliance on external sight, emphasizing the idea that true perception comes from within. This interpretation aligns with Buddhist teachings that stress non-attachment and inner awareness over sensory experience. Additionally, the poem reflects Issa's characteristic empathy for marginalized individuals, particularly the disabled. Rather than presenting blindness as a limitation, Issa elevates it as a condition that invites deeper understanding. His *haiku* finds dignity in the ordinary, affirming the idea that suffering and

[43] Kobayashi, p. 94.
[44] See Seo and Addiss. *The Sound of One Hand: Paintings and Calligraphy by Zen Master Hakuin*.
[45] Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*, p. 15.

enlightenment are interconnected. Poems like these reflect a profound appreciation for the humility and resilience of ordinary individuals, resonating with the lives of the blind and disabled.

Disabled Artists and Writers in the Edo Period

Disability did not preclude success in the literary and artistic fields during the Edo period. For instance, Ueda Akinari (1734–1809), a renowned short fiction author, contracted smallpox in his youth, which left him with deformed fingers. Despite this physical limitation, Akinari became a prominent writer whose works significantly shaped Japanese literature.

Similarly, Iwasa Matabei (1578–1650), a celebrated painter and illustrator, is believed to have had a hunched back, possibly due to a medical condition. Matabei achieved considerable acclaim for his contributions to Japanese art, particularly in the development of *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. However, disabilities were often stigmatized during this period, and artists like Matabei may not have been openly acknowledged for their physical challenges. This erasure complicates efforts to document the lives of disabled artists and highlights the societal ambivalence toward disability.

The multifaceted portrayals of disability in Japanese literature and art—from the supernatural associations of blind priests in the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* to the humble dignity of disabled individuals in Edo-period *haiku*—underscore the complexity of historical attitudes. While disabilities were sometimes stigmatized, they were also integrated into cultural narratives that valued resilience, creativity, and transcendence. These contradictions foreshadow the intricate organizational history of disabled communities, explored further in subsequent chapters.

Social and Religious Organization of the Blind and Greater Disabled Community

In early Japan, disabilities were widespread, often resulting from disease, agricultural accidents, or poor nutrition. Societal attitudes toward individuals with disabilities varied, ranging from their marginalization as pariahs to their veneration in religious contexts. Over time, social and religious organizations emerged to address the disabled community's place in Japanese society. This section examines the historical trajectory of the disabled community, their societal roles, and their interactions with various institutions.

Early Roles of the Disabled in Premodern Japanese Communities

Hanada Shunchō believes that from the earliest times, individuals with disabilities would have occupied central roles in preserving oral traditions. He posits that disabled individuals would have stayed at home to guard the *irori no hi* (イロリの火), a traditional Japanese sunken hearth used for heating and cooking and a communal gathering point where families shared stories, and as guardians of this cultural hub, the disabled would have become esteemed as keepers of knowledge and tradition.[46] From there, he argues that blind individuals would have often taken on roles as entertainers, showcasing their talents in storytelling and music at festivals and ceremonies, where their skills in music and performance provided them with a sense of autonomy and livelihood.[47] This active participation in society was a significant aspect of their early roles, reflecting a broader acceptance and integration of disabled individuals into community life.[48]

[46] Hanada, pp. 30-31.
[47] Hanada, pp. 44-50.
[48] Hanada, pp. 44-46.

Legends regarding a *fukuko* (福子, lucky child) reinforce this perspective. These stories describe how a child born with disabilities brings good fortune to their family, encouraging the child's care and prosperity as a form of communal support. Komatsu Kazuhiko states that in the past, people sought the cause of the emergence of physical and mental characteristics that they considered "abnormal" in the spiritual world.[49] They believed that in this other world, there were good spirits who were friendly towards humans and evil spirits who were ill-willed. "Lucky children" are abnormal children given by divine spirits to make certain families or villages wealthy. However, Gerald Groemer notes that, despite these apparently supportive narratives, traditional society would have been poorly equipped to address sensory disabilities. As a result, most disabled individuals were likely confined to the home and cared for by parents or relatives.[50]

Institutional Support in the Nara Period

The establishment of Japan's first permanent capital in Nara in 710 marked a turning point for the institutional support of disabled individuals. The Nara period saw the establishment of certain structures for their care and support, including the allocation of resources by the state. For example, Ōkuma Miyoshi mentions that "blind people" were classified as "sick" and were given provisions, which implies a level of state care or support.[51] However, she indicates that the actual support provided was limited, and the lives of the visually impaired were often marked by poverty and marginalization. The mention of the blind receiving resources, such as rice or other

[49] Komatsu, *Fuku no Kami to Binbōgami*. p. 167.
[50] Groemer. "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan." p. 349.
[51] Ōkuma and Namase, *Mōjin no Seikatsu*. pp. 17-21.

forms of aid, suggests that there was an intention to provide support, but the effectiveness and sufficiency of such measures are implied to be inadequate.

As Buddhism became the state religion, temples integrated care for the elderly and disabled into their community services. Empress Kōmyō (701-760) established the Seya-in (施薬院), which functioned as a hospital or care facility for the sick, including lepers and others in need. This institution was part of a broader Buddhist approach to welfare, reflecting the emperor's commitment to Buddhist values of compassion and care for the suffering.[52] Buddhist institutions filled critical gaps in societal care, offering aid to those without familial protection. However, this support remained limited, reflecting the nascent stage of institutional care in Japan. Overall, the institutional support during the Nara Period was present but not robust, leading to continued struggles for those affected by blindness.

The arrival of figures like the blind monk Ganjin (鑑真, 688-763) brought hope to the blind community, demonstrating that even blind individuals could achieve significant status and contribute to society.[53] Ganjin was known for his significant influence on the development of Buddhism in Japan. He came from China and dedicated himself to spreading Buddhist teachings, especially the teachings of the Ritsu sect of Buddhism. Ganjin attempted to travel to Japan six times over the course of twelve years (743–754), facing shipwrecks, storms, political resistance, and physical hardship. On his fifth attempt, he became blind due to an infection, but despite his visual impairment, he continued his efforts to spread teachings, symbolizing his dedication and spiritual strength. Legends and anecdotes about Ganjin have been preserved, and his name is engraved on many temples and statues as a symbol of faith.

[52] Hanada, p. 45.
[53] Hanada, pp. 46-49.

Decline in Status During the Heian Period

Hanada argues that the Heian period marked a decline in the societal standing of disabled individuals and attributes this shift to the aristocratic culture of the era, which emphasized elegance and conformity, leaving little room for physical imperfections.[54] He notes that the aristocratic society was highly formalized with strict rules governing behavior, dress, and artistic expression. The aesthetic values of the time were centered around seasonal themes, and there was a collective emphasis on shared cultural norms, such as the appreciation of nature and the arts. This period also saw the emergence of a distinct Japanese cultural identity, as the aristocrats sought to develop their own traditions separate from Chinese influences. However, Hanada also notes that this culture was exclusive and removed from the realities of the common people, suggesting an inevitable disconnection between the elite and the broader society, especially the disabled. Literary salons, central to elite social life, excluded most disabled individuals, further marginalizing them. Ōkuma mentions that individuals with disabilities were sometimes seen as "unclean" or were subjected to superstitions, which contributed to their social exclusion.[55] Overall, the historical context of the Heian period was characterized by a lack of formal support systems for the disabled, leading to a struggle for their basic rights and sustenance. While there were some avenues for participation in society, disabled individuals in the Heian period faced significant challenges, including social stigma, marginalization, and economic hardship.

Social Practices Benefiting the Disabled

[54] Hanada, pp. 27-28.
[55] Ōkuma, p. 24.

Although not extensively documented in the Heian period, practices concerning land allocation and duties, such as provisions for those unable to work due to disabilities, indicate an early form of recognition of the needs of disabled individuals.[56] While institutional support remained limited, other social practices benefited disabled individuals. There were informal support networks within communities that looked after individuals with disabilities. Such support likely stemmed from social and familial obligations, as well as Buddhist teachings that emphasized compassion and care for those in need.[57] For instance, individuals with intellectual disabilities and mental health issues found a place of refuge and care in the Iwakura area, which is situated to the north of Kyoto. This phenomenon began during the reign of Emperor Go-Sanjō (1034-1073), when the emperor's daughter suffered from a mental illness, described at the time as possession illness caused by a *mononoke* (supernatural entity). Traditional treatments and prayers were ineffective, leading to the suggestion that she undergo a purifying ritual involving standing under a waterfall in Iwakura, which ultimately resulted in her recovery. As news of her recovery spread, others suffering from similar afflictions began to visit Iwakura, seeking the same healing experience. However, not everyone experienced the same miraculous results, leading to longer stays and an eventual need for housing. This arrangement led to a mutually beneficial partnership with local farming families, who provided accommodation for the children. For the noble families, this system allowed them to conceal their disabled children from public view, thereby preserving their social status. Meanwhile, the farming families gained powerful allies, strengthening their social and economic standing through their association with

[56] Hanada, p. 14.
[57] Hanada, p. 11.

the aristocracy.[58] This relationship between the nobility and those with mental disabilities persisted for over a thousand years, with Iwakura becoming a place of healing and solace.[59]

Medieval Period: The Rise of Guilds and Karmic Retribution

The medieval period saw the rise of warrior governments and a feudal system alongside the spread of Buddhism into rural areas. However, Buddhist doctrines such as *inga ōhō* (因果応報, karmic retribution) profoundly shaped attitudes toward disability. This belief system attributed disabilities and physical conditions to immoral actions in a previous life (*zense*, 前世), framing them as just punishment in the present (*gense*, 現世). While this doctrine provided a theological rationale for inequality, it often justified discrimination against disabled individuals and other marginalized groups, such as lepers and those categorized as *hinin* (非人, "non-human"[60]).

Moreover, it discouraged societal support, as individuals were seen as responsible for their conditions due to their past actions. However, the belief in accruing merit through good deeds led to the practice of giving to those in need. While this custom motivated some

[58] Hanada, pp. 47-48.
[59] Hanada, pp. 48-49.
[60] The terms *eta* and *hinin* refer to two distinct but sometimes overlapping groups within the social hierarchy of Japan during the Edo period. *Eta* primarily consisted of individuals whose professions were considered unclean or impure, such as executioners, tanners, and butchers. The term *eta* itself is derogatory, meaning "filthy." *Eta* were a hereditary caste, meaning their status was passed down through generations. In contrast, the *hinin* were often referred to as "fallen people" and included beggars, vagabonds, street performers, low-class prostitutes, and individuals suffering from diseases like Hansen's disease (leprosy). Unlike the *eta*, the *hinin* did not have a specific occupational identity tied to impure work. Both groups were marginalized and faced severe discrimination, but they occupied different positions within the societal structure of the time, with *eta* being more closely associated with specific unclean occupations and *hinin* being a broader category of socially excluded individuals. For more information, see James Miura, "Not Even Human: The Birth of the Outcaste in Tokugawa Japan."

individuals, including monks and temples, to undertake small-scale relief efforts, large-scale institutional support for disabled individuals remained absent during this period.

By the medieval period, the broader disabled community largely disappeared from historical records. In contrast, the blind community secured a distinct and influential role as *biwa-hōshi*. As early as the Kamakura period, blind individuals formed support groups to defend against political and societal persecution. These groups often allied themselves with powerful institutions such as the government, temples, and shrines. However, their growing influence occasionally alarmed political authorities. For instance, the historical chronicle *Azuma Kagami* (吾妻鏡/東鑑, Mirror of the East, ca. 1266) records a shogunal edict in Kamakura banning blind priests (*mōjin hōshi* 盲人法師) within the city, highlighting the tensions between these groups and the ruling elite.[61]

The *biwa-hōshi* are most renowned as reciters of the *Heike Monogatari* (平家物語, Tale of the Heike). The origins of the traveling blind performer tradition are believed to be traced back to China, where blind priests played the lute.[62] Although these mendicant priests arrived in Japan in the 6th century, the *biwa-hōshi* were not firmly established until the 14th century, coinciding with the emergence of the *Heike Monogatari*. This epic is widely regarded as the most significant work of medieval Japanese literature, recounting the late 12th-century conflict between the Taira (平) or Heike (平家) and Minamoto (源) or Genji (源氏) clans.[63] The narrative details the rise and ultimate defeat of the Taira clan by the Minamoto, who subsequently founded the Kamakura government. The *Heike Monogatari* is a chanted narrative

[61] *Azuma Kagami,* pp. 256-257.
[62] Matisoff, pp. 19-22.
[63] Heike (平家) refers to the Taira since *hei* is the *on'yomi* reading of 平, and *ke* for the character for family 家. The Minamoto clan (源氏) is often referred to by the on'yomi reading "*gen*" 源 and "*ji*" 氏.

structured in verses and accompanied by the biwa. It is divided into numerous episodes, with blind *biwa* players playing a crucial role in popularizing the instrument and becoming closely associated with the epic.

By the early Muromachi period, the popularity of chanting the *Heike Monogatari* began to wane. In response, the *biwa-hōshi* adopted various strategies to sustain their livelihood, including performing alternative narrative genres such as the *Gikeiki* (The Chronicle of Minamoto no Yoshitsune) and popular *koto* compositions.[64] A significant resurgence in interest occurred with the introduction of the *shamisen* in the late 16th century. Despite this decline in the popularity of the *Heike Monogatari*, it continued to support the status of the *biwa-hōshi* guilds until the end of the Edo period.

The Legacy of the *Tōdō-za*

The mid-Kamakura period saw the formation of mutual interest associations among performers, including *sarugaku* and *dengaku* groups. Groemer documents how beginning in medieval times, visually impaired individuals organized into guilds, with the *Tōdō-za* emerging as a prominent association that facilitated their economic and political activities. The *Tōdō-za* not only consolidated the blind community's position in Japanese society but also sought to legitimize its authority through historical and legendary associations. The guild claimed descent from Semimaru, the mythical blind musician and prince mentioned previously, as well as ties to imperial and aristocratic lineages.[65] These claims reinforced the guild's status and influence despite internal disputes over rank systems and external conflicts with rival groups. The *Tōdō-za* faced challenges, such as lawsuits over their exclusive rights to perform certain songs or lend

[64] Groemer, "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan," p. 350.
[65] Matisoff, p. 4.

money, but they successfully navigated these disputes to maintain their prominence. Notable members, such as Kengyō Sugiyama (1610-1694), advanced professions such as massage and music, further solidifying the guild's legacy in Edo society.[66]

Groemer highlights the *Tōdō-za*'s evolution during the Tokugawa period, particularly its significant influence in Edo, where it became the main source of institutional support for the blind. The Edo period was a time when the blind, particularly those associated with the *Tōdō-za*, received significant benefits, including the right to operate as a distinct social group with their own governance and financial support systems. In addition, Nakamura Tarō notes that the blind were often exempt from certain taxes and duties, allowing them a degree of economic relief.[67] The guilt's financial activities, notably money lending, flourished during this time. This shift was driven by the economic conditions of Tokugawa Japan, where urban centers became hubs of consumption following the relocation of the warrior nobility to cities in the early 17th century. The resulting high demand for loans, combined with a currency shortage, positioned the *Tōdō-za* to lend funds at high interest rates to both warriors and merchants. While this transition proved lucrative for high-ranking guild members, it also tarnished the *Tōdō-za*'s reputation, associating it with usury and exploitation. This negative perception is reflected in *kyōgen* plays such as *Saru Zatō*, where a *zatō* character's jealous and possessive nature results in his downfall.

Groemer also discusses internal tensions within the guild and the blind community, which are mirrored in plays where higher- and lower-ranking *Tōdō-za* members engage in conflict. He examines how the guild sought to protect its members' interests by maintaining monopolies on certain performance traditions, such as *Heike* recitation. However, not all blind

[66] Groemer, "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan," p. 359.
[67] Nakayama, *Nihon Mōjinshi*. pp. 431-432.

individuals adhered to the guild's regulations. Many operated outside the *Tōdō-za*'s control, creating a distinction between guild-affiliated performers and those on the margins, often leading to struggles for recognition and legitimacy within the performing arts. Groemer concludes that the decline of the *Tōdō-za* marked a significant turning point for blind individuals in Japan, as they faced new economic and social realities without the support of a structured guild.

The historical trajectory of Japan's disabled community, from revered custodians of tradition to marginalized groups and, finally, to organized guilds like the *Tōdō-za*, reflects the dynamic interplay of cultural, religious, and social factors. The rise of the blind community as a distinct and influential group highlights the resilience and adaptability of disabled individuals in navigating societal structures, leaving a lasting legacy in Japanese history and culture. However, Nakamura also touches on the complexities of this support, noting that while the blind were granted certain privileges, they were still often treated as second-class citizens and faced societal stigma.[68] This duality reflects a tension in how disabled individuals were both protected and marginalized within the social structure of the time.

Divergence of Blind and Non-Blind Disabled Communities in Early Japan

[68] Nakayama, p. 432.

While the blind community found robust political and economic support through organizations like the *Tōdō-za, Goze-za* (瞽女座)[69], and *Mōsōza* (盲僧座)[70] guilds, comparable mutual aid systems did not develop for the broader disabled community. The *Tōdō-za*, with the support of figures such as shogun Ashikaga Takauji[71] (足利 尊氏, 1305-1358), played a significant role in elevating the status of the blind across Japan. Takauji supported the *Tōdō-za* to help consolidate his power and gain the support of the common people. By aligning himself with the *Tōdō-za*, he could leverage their social influence and the goodwill they garnered from their performances, particularly of the *Heike Monogatari*, which resonated with the populace. Supporting these groups also allowed him to portray himself as a ruler who cared for the welfare of the disadvantaged, thus strengthening his legitimacy and authority during a time of political instability in Japan.[72]

Additionally, the *Tōdō-za* had historically been a source of cultural expression and community for blind individuals, and by endorsing them, Takauji could ensure their loyalty

[69] The local associations of the *goz*e (blind women) who often worked as musicians, teaching the *shamisen* and *koto* to townspeople, or serving in the entertainment industry. While some *goze* achieved higher status by catering to the elite and were noted for their skills, many led less exalted lives, struggling for economic security. Groemer indicates that in Edo, while the shogunate assumed that blind women were connected to the *Tōdō-z*a the actual relationship varied. In 1832, it was clarified that blind women were not controlled by the guild and could practice their arts freely, although many chose to apprentice with male guild members to gain proficiency and benefits from the guild. Groemer, “The Guild of the Blind,” pp. 370-372.

[70] The *Mōsōza* guild was composed of blind men who recited sutras and performed music. Groemer notes that the *Mōsō*, or "blind priests," formed their own associations in regions like Kyushu and western Japan. However, in 1674, they lost a significant lawsuit against the *Todo-za*, which prohibited them from performing *shamisen* and *koto* music, chanting *joruri*, or singing popular songs professionally. This loss limited their professional power, indicating a struggle for autonomy and recognition within the broader context of blind performers in Tokugawa Japan. The *Todo-za*, on the other hand, became the primary representative of blind interests throughout Japan by the 18th century, and it was recognized by the shogunate as such. The *Mōsōza*'s attempts to gain equal status and recognition, particularly in light of the *Todo-za's* increasing authority, illustrate the complexities and challenges faced by blind performers in that era. Groemer, “The Guild of the Blind,” p. 351.

[71] Ashikaga Takauji was a prominent Japanese military leader and the founder of the Ashikaga shogunate, which ruled Japan during the Muromachi period.

[72] Groemer, “The Guild of the Blind”, pp. 254-257.

while simultaneously promoting cultural activities that would enhance his image as a benevolent leader. This relationship was reflected in the increased protection and privileges granted to the *Tōdō-za* during his regime, as they were seen as an integral part of the social fabric of the time. Through their association with the recitation of the *Heike Monogatari* and the economic and political privileges tied to this practice, the blind secured a level of societal integration that was unavailable to non-blind disabled individuals. Ōkuma Miyoshi suggests that while the blind had some institutional backing, the broader disabled community did not benefit from similar institutional frameworks or recognition.[73] Hanada Shunchō also argues that the broader disabled community, including those with physical disabilities, did not receive as much focused institutional support until later reforms.[74]

This divergence raises a critical question: why did mutual aid organizations for the non-blind disabled community fail to materialize despite some evidence of societal esteem for disabled individuals in ancient times? From early myths such as the *Kojiki*, which includes depictions of disabled members of the imperial family, to the veneration of deities such as the "Leech Child" Hiru-ko, physical disabilities (excluding blindness) were often viewed with reverence. Even the Seven Lucky Gods feature various disabilities, though none are visually impaired. Why, then, did the two groups follow such markedly different trajectories by the Edo period?

One suggestion is that government policy played a significant role in shaping the divergence between the blind and non-blind disabled communities. During the Nara period, the central government, influenced by the Taika Reforms (大化の改新), sought to emulate the

[73] Ōkuma, pp. 224-226.
[74] Ōkuma, pp. 223-226.

centralized bureaucracy of Tang China. Policies such as tax exemptions for disabled citizens, based on the severity of their disabilities, were indiscriminate in their application and benefited both blind and non-blind individuals.[75] In some cases, individuals with severe disabilities received greater government support than those who were blind. However, societal attitudes and practical considerations began to shift this balance. Aristocratic families, for example, often directed disabled children into roles where their impairments would not hinder performance, such as scholarly or religious vocations. At the same time, intellectual or physical disabilities often led to social demotion, with aristocratic children sometimes adopted by farming families. Blindness, which would have limited one's ability to farm, likely shielded blind individuals from such demotions, contributing to their ability to secure specialized roles as performers or religious figures.

During the medieval period, karmic retribution framed disability as both a personal failing and a source of shame, compounding societal stigma. Hanada notes that families in this era often regarded "non-normal" individuals as sources of embarrassment.[76] For example, the existence of *sashikirō* (座敷牢), or confinement for those with disabilities suggests that families sought to hide away their relatives who did not conform to societal expectations.[77] Ōkuma notes instances of derogatory terms used for individuals with disabilities.[78] He mentions *domekura* as a derogatory term used to refer to blind people, particularly those who did not belong to the organized groups of blind individuals, such as the *Tōdō-za.*[79] It implies a lower social status compared to those who were part of such organizations. Nakamura mentions that their social

[75] Hanada, p.14.
[76] Hanada, pp. 36-37.
[77] Hanada, pp. 245-246.
[78] Ōkuma, pp. 17-20.
[79] Ōkuma, pp. 67-68.

status was low, and they were treated as *senmin* 賤民 (lowly people) or *yakkaimono* 厄介者 (nuisances).[80] The lack of prominent non-blind disabled figures from the period, combined with mockery in cultural forms like early *kyōgen* theater, reinforces the idea that the broader disabled community was marginalized. Blind individuals, by contrast, gained prestige as *biwa-hōshi* and religious specialists. The *Tōdō-za* provided blind individuals with exclusive privileges, including the right to recite the *Heike Monogatari*, which was instrumental in maintaining their societal standing.

The late Muromachi period (1467–1568) marked a temporary shift in the visibility and roles of disabled individuals. The era's emphasis on practicality and military utility led to the employment of deaf and mute individuals as guides for attacking armies, valued for their inability to disclose secrets if captured.[81] Similarly, the 9th and 13th Tokugawa shoguns exhibited symptoms consistent with cerebral palsy, suggesting that physical disability was not an absolute barrier to political authority. However, systemic support for non-blind disabled individuals remained limited, with the majority of policies favoring the blind through the *Tōdō-za*.

By the Edo period, the *Tōdō-za* had solidified its influence through exclusive privileges, including money-lending licenses and the administration of ranks within their organization. These privileges allowed blind individuals, especially those in higher ranks like *kengyō* (検校), to amass wealth and contribute significantly to Edo society. However, the *Tōdō-za*'s exclusionary practices, which prohibited contact with outcast groups and beggars, likely exacerbated the marginalization of other disabled individuals.[82] The *Tōdō-za* explicitly barred

[80] Nakamura, pp. 252.
[81] Hanada, p. 77.
[82] Groemer, "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan," p. 355.

outcastes from becoming guild members. They had stringent regulations that dictated that members were not to have contact with individuals engaged in certain “polluted” professions, such as monkey trainers, puppeteers, and others listed in the Edo period hereditary leader of *eta-hinin* Danzaemon’s catalog of controlled occupations.[83]

In contrast, there were *gonin-gumi* (五人組, neighborhood mutual aid associations) formed out of practical need. The *gonin-gumi* was a system in Edo-period Japan that involved five households forming a unit with shared responsibility. This system aimed primarily at maintaining public order and managing tax collection in rural and urban areas. Each household would monitor the others, and in the event of any issues arising, all members would bear collective responsibility. Another example of mutual aid came out of the housing arrangements. During the Edo period, the dwellings of commoners in Edo were often narrow single-story housing complexes called *nagaya* (長屋, longhouse). In this arrangement, people could not help but come into close contact with each other, and this inevitably led to helping each other out. There were also specific policies from the Edo government meant to strengthen mutual aid associations. Although this may not have been done in the community's best interests since these policies were largely enacted to suppress Christianity,[84] the associations still benefited.

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[83] Danzaemon’s catalog of controlled occupations was a list that asserted his authority over various groups, including the blind, and it included a range of occupations associated with outcasts. The catalog, which claimed origins dating back to 1180 but was likely first submitted to the *bakufu* in 1725, listed some twenty-eight occupations under his control. In this list, the term "*zatō*" (or "*Heike zatō*," synonymous with "members of the *Tōdō-za*") was placed in a prominent position, indicating that he sought to establish jurisdiction over the blind. Danzaemon's assertions implied that since some blind individuals worked as street performers, all blind individuals should fall under his jurisdiction. This claim was met with resistance from the *Tōdō-za*, as they sought to maintain their independence and authority. The *Tōdō-za* members, particularly high-ranking ones, recognized the potential threat to their status and economic activities posed by Danzaemon’s attempts to control the blind. Groemer, “The Guild of the Blind,” pp. 352-353.

[84] Neighborhood associations were responsible for identifying and exposing *Kakure Kirishitan* (hidden Christians). This included monitoring for Christian practices, such as secret gatherings, possession of religious artifacts, or refusal to participate in Buddhist rituals.

Neighborhood associations allowed beggars and poorer members of Edo society to survive in an increasingly competitive merchant culture.

While neighborhood associations provided some mutual aid for disabled individuals, these systems lacked the economic and social benefits enjoyed by members of the *Tōdō-za*. The neighborhood system imposed a collective responsibility for disabled residents, often framing them as a communal burden. In contrast, the blind, through the *Tōdō-za*, were perceived as contributors to society through their artistic and economic endeavors.

The *Tōdō-za* were organized primarily for the purpose of trade and commerce, serving as guilds or associations that brought together merchants or craftsmen within a specific trade. They were focused on economic activities and mutual support among members in their respective trades. In contrast, neighborhood associations typically focused on community cooperation, social support, and local issues within a residential area without a specific trade focus. The *Tōdō-za* often had a more formal structure, with specific roles and responsibilities assigned to members, often including leadership positions and regulations governing conduct and operations. This structure was designed to enhance their bargaining power in the marketplace.

Neighborhood associations, on the other hand, were usually less formal and more community-oriented, focusing on fostering relationships among residents rather than economic activities. The *Tōdō-za* had significant influence over local economies and could negotiate prices, regulate supply, and protect members' interests against competitors. Neighborhood associations had a more localized impact, primarily concerned with issues affecting the quality of life in their area, such as safety, cleanliness, and neighborhood events.

One area of progress for disabled individuals in the Edo period was the *terakoya* (寺子屋) system, small private schools associated with merchant culture. The rise of merchant

families, driven by Edo's burgeoning capitalist economy, led to an increased emphasis on education, and the *terakoya* system represented significant progress in the education and cultural development of the Edo period in Japan. Merchant-class parents often prioritized practical skills such as literacy and arithmetic for their children. Notably, records indicate that a significant number of disabled children, such as those with mild physical disabilities, were included in these educational settings.[85]

This inclusion suggests a degree of societal acceptance and a recognition of the importance of education for all, regardless of physical ability. The system was significant in fostering a sense of community and providing educational opportunities that were otherwise limited for disabled individuals. Success in the marketplace provided a pathway to social mobility, reducing the stigma for disabled individuals who could contribute economically.

As *terakoya* proliferated, they contributed to the cultural and intellectual growth of the populace. They played a crucial role in spreading literacy and knowledge, which in turn fostered a more informed society. This was particularly important as more people began to engage with literature, arts, and other cultural practices. While the *terakoya* system offered some educational opportunities, it was not fully inclusive or specialized for disabled individuals. The establishment of dedicated institutions for the blind and other disabled persons later in the Meiji period marked a significant step forward in providing more appropriate education and support for these communities.

Conclusion

[85] Ōkuma, pp. 224-226.

This chapter has explored the multifaceted representations and organizational structures of the disabled community in Japan, tracing their evolution from the pre-Nara period to the Edo period. The interplay between religious, cultural, and societal factors reveals a dynamic narrative of reverence, marginalization, and systemic inequality. While the blind community benefited from institutional support and mutual aid systems like the *Tōdō-za* guild, which secured economic privileges and societal influence, the broader disabled community often faced systemic exclusion and stigma. This divergence highlights how social attitudes, government policies, and cultural narratives shaped the experiences of disabled individuals in distinct ways.

From the ancient myths of Hiru-ko and Ebisu, which symbolized both the marginalization and potential transcendence of disability, to the Edo-period neighborhood associations and *terakoya* schools, Japan's evolving treatment of disabled individuals reflects broader societal transformations. The blind community's ascent as cultural and economic contributors through their roles as *biwa-hōshi* and guild members contrasts sharply with the challenges faced by non-blind disabled individuals, whose societal roles were often constrained by entrenched stigmas and limited institutional support. This analysis emphasizes the critical role of cultural, religious, and historical contexts in shaping societal perceptions and treatment of disabled communities. By examining these distinctions and contradictions, the chapter highlights the nuanced and evolving attitudes toward disability in Japan, paving the way for further exploration of how these historical changes were reflected in the representation of disability in *kyōgen* plays. Furthermore, this study underscores the enduring impact of systemic inequalities while acknowledging the resilience of marginalized communities in forging pathways toward inclusion and recognition.

Chapter 2

The Evolution of Disability Representation in *Kyōgen*: An Analysis of the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* and Its Legacy

Introduction

The representation of disability in *kyōgen* has undergone a profound transformation from its earliest recorded performances to its later Edo-period iterations. Initially, *kyōgen* humor often relied on crude mockery and slapstick, with *zatō* and other marginalized figures frequently serving as the butt of jokes. However, as *kyōgen* scripts became more formalized during the Edo period, the genre increasingly moved beyond indiscriminate ridicule, incorporating irony, satire, and social critique. This shift is particularly evident when tracing the evolution of *zatō* plays, which transitioned from reinforcing blindness as a source of incompetence to using disability as a lens through which to explore social hierarchy, morality, and personal agency. At the heart of this transformation is the *Tenshō Kyōgen bon* (天正狂言本, also known as the *Tenshō-bon*, 1578), the earliest surviving collection of *kyōgen* plays. This collection represents a transitional moment in *kyōgen* history, preserving elements of earlier oral and improvisatory traditions while also foreshadowing the genre's later engagement with power dynamics and ethical dilemmas. By examining the *Tenshō Kyōgen bon* and its legacy in subsequent *kyōgen* collections, this chapter traces the shifting portrayal of disability, illustrating how *kyōgen* evolved from a vehicle for crude humor into a more nuanced form of social and cultural commentary.

For the sake of clarity and convenience, I have compiled a chronological list of the primary *kyōgen* collections referenced in this chapter, along with their respective dates of

compilation or publication. These texts represent key stages in the evolution of kyōgen, from its earliest known written records to its later Edo-period codifications.

1. ***Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*** (天正狂言本, aka *Tenshō-bon*) – 1578
2. ***Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū*** (大蔵虎明本能狂言集, aka *Toraaki-bon*) – 1642
3. ***Torakiyo-bon*** (虎清本) – 1646
4. ***Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi*** (天理本狂言六義, aka *Tenri-bon*) – 1644
5. ***Kyōgenki*** (狂言記) and ***Zoku Kyōgenki*** (続狂言記) – 1660
6. ***Kyōgenki hoka gojūban*** (狂言記外五十番) – 1661
7. ***Kyōgenki-shūi*** (狂言記拾遺) – 1730
8. ***Enpō Tadamasa-bon*** (延宝忠政本, aka *Tadamasa-bon*) – 1678
9. ***Yasunori-bon*** (保教本) – 1716~1724
10. ***Namekawa Rokuemon Shuki*** (名女川六右衛門手記) – ca. 1761
11. ***Ōkura Torahiro-bon*** (大蔵虎寛本) – 1792
12. ***Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū*** (狂言三百番集) – 1824–1885

The Origins of the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*

Although it is possible that earlier written sources of *kyōgen* existed but were lost, the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, published in 1578, remains the earliest known collection of *kyōgen* plays.[86] Prior to this collection, *kyōgen* plays were transmitted orally, making it difficult to confirm the exact nature of the performances. However, historical evidence suggests that many pre-*Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* plays contained crude and vulgar humor. While there are no surviving written texts from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, it is believed that by the time of Zeami, *kyōgen* had evolved into a more structured form. These early plays likely focused on amusing song and

[86] The collection's name is derived from its publication in the 6th year of the Tenshō era (1578).

dance as the climax, with dialogue leading up to the finale.[87] However, the details of these performances were not formally documented until the late sixteenth century.

Zeami, writing in his *Shūdōsho* (1430), cautioned *kyōgen* actors against vulgarity, stating that they "should be careful in their] words and behavior not to do anything vulgar (*shoku*), but to use jokes (*riko*) and patter with which the genteel and people of quality will feel comfortable."[88] His warning suggests that *kyōgen* at the time often relied on lowbrow humor, likely targeting marginalized groups. Historical records further support this assertion. The diary of Ise Sadayori (伊勢貞頼, d.1529), a steward of the Ashikaga shogunate, describes a major benefit (*kanjin*) performance in 1464 performed over three days at Tadasugawara, organized by the *nō* actor Kanze On'ami (1398–1467) for members of the Kyoto nobility and shogunate.[89] The *kyōgen* performed at this event prominently featured the mocking of disadvantaged groups. Three plays, *Saruhiki* (The Monkey Trainer) and *Hikekeitate* (likely an earlier version of *Higeyagura* (The Bearded Fortress), *Hayakaki Zatō (*Ripe Persimmon and the Zatō*)* specifically targeted blind and economically disadvantaged men, reinforcing the theme of using marginalized figures as the butt of humor. The play *Saruhiki* follows a narrative in which a monkey trainer deceives a blind man by stealing his wife while he sleeps. The play *Higeyagura* (*The Bearded Fortress*) revolves around a financially struggling man who is chosen to perform a prestigious role at the Daijō-sai Festival at the imperial court. However, his wife, frustrated by the financial burden of paying for the official costume and expressing a strong aversion to beards, demands

[87] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 775-780.
[88] Wells, *Japanese Humour*, p. 33
[89] *Gunsho Ruijū,* p. 361-363. Other kyogen plays performed include *San no Maru Chōja* (modern title*: San'nin Chōja), Saruhiki, Kakuremino, Kaichū* (modern title*: Kaichū Muko), Hachiman no Mae* (modern title*: Hachiman Mae),Hikekaitate (*modern title*: Higeyagura), Ōka Koka, Oni no Mame, Imonoshi, Chishaku, Sanbonbashira, Koyomi, Asahina, Sanemori, Chagaki Zatō, Harazutsumi, Wakame, Iruma-gawa, Miru Muko, Shūku-gasa, Kuwaichiu, and Ro?kui (*the exact title of the last play is unclear due to a missing kanji). *Chakagi Zatō* is clearly a *zatō* play, but does not appear in any *kyogen* collection.

that he shave. This dispute escalates into a physical altercation, during which the bearded man resorts to violence against his wife. Their conflict unfolds through a series of comedic exchanges, culminating in the man's exaggerated attempt to construct a symbolic "fortress" to protect his beard. Ultimately, with the assistance of other neighborhood women, the wife forcibly plucks out his beard. While *Higeyagura* does not specifically target individuals with physical disabilities, as seen in *zatō* plays, its humor is still largely derived from the protagonist's distinctive physical features and the underlying socioeconomic tensions within the household. *Hayakaki Zatō* is notable due to its absence from later *kyōgen* collections. However, it may represent an earlier variant of *Kaki Yamabushi* (柿山伏, *The Persimmon Thief*), with a *zatō* serving as the protagonist instead of a *yamabushi.* In *Kaki Yamabushi,* the mountain priest is caught stealing persimmons, and is ultimately exposed and humiliated, thrown to the ground by the owner of the tree. Given the thematic similarities, a version featuring a *zatō* as the central figure would align with the comedic patterns found in plays such as *Saruhiki* and *Higeyagura*, which similarly target figures of lower social status for ridicule.

The *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*: Structure, Content, and Authorship

Many of the crude themes seen in pre-*Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* performances appear to persist within the collection. The exact authorship of the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* remains unknown, and its accuracy as a historical document has been questioned. Various typographical errors suggest that the text may have been copied from an earlier version by a less-educated individual, who signed the text only as 正久.[90] This has led scholars such as Kanai Kiyomitsu to speculate that there may have been older written sources that were lost over time.[91]

[90] Kanai does not give a reading of this name, but it is possibly Shōkyū or Seikyū.
[91] Kanai, *Tenshō Kyōgenbon Zenshaku*, p. 8.

The *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* is the first known attempt to document *kyōgen* performances in written form.[92] The collection consists of 103 plot summaries, varying considerably in length and detail, with some including songs and dialogue. Kanai argues that these outlines were likely intended for theater-goers rather than performers, as *kyōgen* actors were still expected to improvise within the confines of a loose storyline.[93] The flexibility of these plots, along with the fluidity of play titles—since *kyōgen* plays with similar plots in other records appear under different names—suggests that performance practice remained dynamic during this period.

The Character of Early *Kyōgen*

The *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* is particularly significant because it contains approximately 20 plays that are no longer performed. It also captures *kyōgen* at a point before it was formalized under Tokugawa rule. The collection suggests that before *kyōgen* became codified, it was notable for its reliance on vulgarity and crudeness. As previously mentioned, Zeami's warnings against coarse humor highlight the widespread nature of this comedic style. In addition to Zeami's observations, scholars such as William LaFleur have argued that *kyōgen* of this period was not simply comedic but also satirical. LaFleur notes that rather than being pure farce, *kyōgen* had an "object of attack."[94] This perspective suggests that, beyond its crude humor, early *kyōgen* was often directed at specific groups or individuals, making it a form of social and political commentary. Although the manuscript is thought to date from 1578, Kanai Kiyomitsu suggests that the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* content represents a form of *kyōgen* performed from the late Muromachi period onward.[95]

[92] Kanai, p. 7.
[93] Kanai, p. 14.
[94] LaFleur, *The Karma of Words*, p. 140.
[95] Kanai, p. 9.

Zatō Plays in the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*

The *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* contains seven plays that prominently feature blind characters, many of which rely on humor derived from their disability. These plays depict *zatō* engaging in various conflicts, misunderstandings, and physical altercations, frequently to the amusement of the sighted characters. The following section examines the *zatō* plays in this collection, highlighting their thematic content and the ways in which blindness is used as a comedic device.

Tachin Zatō (たちんさとう, Pack-horse Fare Zatō)

The narrative of *Tachin Zatō* follows a blind father and son who, exhausted from traveling, decide to rent a horse. However, a deceitful priest appears with an ox and convinces the *zatō* family to mount it instead. As they ride, the priest, in front of a gathered crowd, mocks them by remarking how strange it is that blind people in this region prefer riding cows instead of horses. As the father becomes suspicious, he reaches around to confirm the animal's identity and, upon feeling the ox's horns, becomes enraged. The priest, maintaining his deception, solemnly chants that "at the beginning of an auspicious dynasty, even horses grow horns," reinforcing the absurdity of the *zatō*'s predicament. Further humiliating the father, the priest points to the son and proclaims that "even little *zatō* grow horns."[96] In his anger, the father attempts to attack the priest, but the priest preemptively strikes him on the head, resulting in a physical altercation. The confrontation escalates until the priest, using the ox, tramples the *zatō*'s son before making his exit. The play's humor is rooted in the gullibility of the blind characters and their public humiliation, reinforcing their status as figures of ridicule.

[96]「座頭にも角が生えましたよ」Kanai, *Tenshō Kyōgenbon Zenshaku*. p. 473

***Kemari Zatō* (蹴鞠座頭, Kickball Zatō)**

Kemari Zatō follows a high-ranking blind guild member (*kengyō*, 検校) ,[97] who enthusiastically announces his intention to play *kemari* with other blind individuals.[98] Although it might seem obvious to the audience that blind people would have difficulty playing kickball, the *kengyō* seems oblivious to his physical limitations and organizes a game with other blind players. However, their physical limitations quickly become apparent as they struggle to keep up with the game. Recognizing his disadvantage, the *kengyō* instructs his servant to tie bells to the ball, allowing him to track it through sound rather than sight. Despite this modification, the game ends in chaos as the *kengyō* is trampled by the other *zatō*. The scene concludes with the injured *kengyō* standing up in frustration, dragging his injured leg, and the play abruptly ending. The comedic effect of *Kemari Zatō* relies on the audience's expectation of the *kengyō*'s inevitable failure, with the humor emerging from his misplaced confidence in his abilities.

***Nunokahi Zatō* (ぬのかひざとう, Cloth Lender Zatō)**

Nunokahi Zatō exemplifies how blindness is used as a narrative device for exploitation. In this play, a merchant deceives two blind men by selling them the same piece of cloth and fleeing with their money. Unaware of the deception, the two *zatō* begin fighting over ownership of the cloth. Their dispute escalates to the point that a guard intervenes to break up the altercation. Unable to determine which of the blind men is the rightful owner, the guard calls

[97] The highest of the four ranks in the *Tōdō-za* guild.
[98] *Kemari* is a game similar to hacky sack in which players kick a deerskin and horse leather ball to try to reach the highest number of consecutive kicks possible. It became popular in the Heian period and was especially popular in the Kamakura and early Muromachi period.

upon a nearby *kōtō* (勾当)[99] to arbitrate the matter. However, the *kōtō* is equally unable to resolve the dispute, leading to an unexpected turn of events: the two *zatō*, frustrated with the lack of resolution, grab the *kōtō*, drag him to the ground, and trample him before departing. The humor of the play stems from the exaggerated violence and the notion that the blind characters, initially victims of deception, ultimately turn against one another in their confusion.

***Umakari Zatō* (馬かりさとう, Rental Horse Zatō)**

Umakari Zatō introduces another blind protagonist, Hakuyō, who decides to attend the Myonko festival with his servant.[100] To ease their journey, Hakuyō suggests renting a horse. At the same time, a *kengyō*-ranked blind man also sends a servant to secure a horse. The horse master, either out of negligence or mischief, agrees to rent the same horse to both individuals, leading to a dispute over ownership. To resolve the matter, the horse master proposes a singing contest in which each *zatō* must compose a verse to assert their claim to the horse. The *kengyō* sings first, recounting how he once tripped due to his worn-out wooden clogs (*geta*), concluding that since he cannot wear them (*hakuyō*), he should simply throw them into the valley.[101] The implicit insult is that Hakuyō, like the broken clogs, is worthless. In response, Hakuyō composes a retort, asserting that since he has no plans for drinking parties, the *kengyō* is equally useless—implying that the primary function of a *kengyō* is indulgence in alcohol rather than leadership.

[99] The official rank below *bettō* (別当) and above *zatō* (座頭)in the *Tōdō-za* blind man guild. See introduction for a complete list of ranks.
[100] The *Myonko* festival was a gathering of musicians who worshiped Myoenten, the Buddhist goddess of music, also known as Bishamonten or Benzaiten. There, they made offerings and played instruments such as the *biwa*.
[101] He uses the Japanese はくゆふ (modern: 履く用 (hakuyō), meaning “to wear,” which, as a homophone for the name Hakuyō, is a subtle insult. 「道中にはかけほこりをころはして、はくゆふなくは谷へほうらん。」Kanai, p. 481.

Enraged by the insult, the *kengyō* physically attacks Hakuyō, leading to a brawl. The horse master intervenes, striking Hakuyō in an attempt to restore order, but the situation quickly deteriorates. In the ensuing chaos, the horse master and the *kengyō* are both trampled by Hakuyō, flipping the power dynamic established at the beginning of the play. This shift in the balance of power, albeit temporary, provides an element of unexpected reversal to the humor.

Tarashii Zatō **(たらしざう, Trick Zatō)**

Tarashii Zatō centers on an act of trickery, wherein a woman deceives a blind man and steals his clothing. The play begins with the *zatō* expressing his intention to rent a room at an inn. A woman appears and proposes that they share a room, leading him to believe she is acting out of generosity or romantic interest. Under this pretense, she guides him to a river without informing him of a nearby bridge. As they prepare to cross, the *zatō* removes his clothes, assuming he must wade through the water. Unaware of the deception, he joyfully begins chanting passages from the *Heike Monogatari*.[102] Meanwhile, the woman seizes the opportunity to steal his garments. When the *zatō* hears the rustling and realizes what has happened, he gives chase, cursing the woman as they exit the stage. The humor in *Tarashii Zatō* derives from the blind man's ignorance of the situation and his misplaced trust in the woman. Unlike later *zatō* plays that involve hierarchical or social critiques, the *zatō* does not appear to do anything wrong other than his attraction to the woman. The audience is invited to laugh at the *zatō*'s misfortune without any indication that he has earned such treatment.

[102] The *zatō* are known for chanting the *Heike Monogatari*, so this appears to be a direct reference to the *Todōza*.

***Inubiki Zatō* (犬引き, Dog-Pulling Zatō)**

Inubiki Zatō follows a similar structure of deception but introduces a romantic element in which a *zatō* is betrayed by his lover. The blind protagonist, in an attempt to control his wife, ties her to himself to prevent her from leaving. However, the woman conspires with a hawker, who helps her escape by replacing her with his dog. Unaware of the switch, the *zatō* continues holding onto the leash, believing he is still tethered to his lover. When he finally pulls on the rope, expecting resistance from a human partner, the dog attacks him. The physical comedy of the scene relies on the audience's anticipation of the inevitable confrontation between the *zatō* and the dog. This narrative bears a strong resemblance to *Saruhiki* (The Monkey Trainer), performed in 1430, and serves as a precursor to the later *Saru Zatō* (Monkey *Zatō*). The fundamental comedic device in these plays remains the same: the *zatō* is tricked into thinking that he has prevented his wife from leaving him when, in reality, he is engaging with an animal. The audience's amusement derives from the moment of realization when the blind character suffers the consequences of his mistaken assumptions.

***Goze Zatō* (ごぜざとう, The Blind Woman and the Zatō)**

Unlike the other *zatō* plays in the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, *Goze Zatō* presents a rare early instance of a sympathetic depiction of blind individuals. This play, set at Kiyomizu Temple, follows a blind couple—one *zatō* and one *goze* (a blind female entertainer)—as they seek divine intervention in their search for a spouse.[103] Once there, they each conduct a musical ritual for the

[103] During the medieval period, female blind performers traveled from place to place, engaging in musical and narrative performances. They played instruments such as the drum and *shamisen* while also singing songs and recounting stories.

temple deity and pray. The *zatō* remarks that, as a guild-less blind man,[104] he is sad that he does not have a wife. He laments that without sight, his world is dark and lonely. Simultaneously, the *goze* prays for the same purpose, explaining that she is a good person with no resentment yet remains alone. As they exit the temple, the *zatō* hears the *goze* speaking and wonders if she is the answer to his prayer. When she recounts a dream oracle she received, he realizes that he too received a similar oracle, leading them both to conclude that they were destined to meet. The play ends on an uplifting note, with the *zatō* exclaiming his joy and taking the *goze* by the hand as they walk off stage together. This play stands in stark contrast to the crude and exploitative humor seen in *Tarashii Zatō* and *Inubiki Zatō*. Rather than reinforcing blindness as a source of incompetence or mockery, *Goze Zatō* focuses on themes of companionship, destiny, and emotional fulfillment. The *zatō* and *goze* are not presented as objects of ridicule but as individuals navigating the challenges of their disability in search of love and belonging. *Goze Zatō* stands as an exception among the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* plays; however, it exemplifies the trajectory of *kyōgen*'s evolution.

Several recurring themes can be observed in the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*. One prominent motif is the portrayal of blind individuals as highly gullible and susceptible to deception. In plays such as *Tachin Zatō, Nunokahi Zatō*, and *Umakari Zatō*, blind characters are easily deceived, reinforcing the stereotype of blindness as a condition of inherent vulnerability. Another recurring theme is the depiction of blind individuals engaging in seemingly pointless competition. Works such as *Kemari Zatō* and *Umakari Zatō* emphasize internal conflicts among blind characters, often underscoring their perceived arrogance or lack of self-awareness. Lastly, many of these plays legitimize public humiliation and physical comedy at the expense of blind characters.

[104] He claims that he is a *tsuchimekura* (土盲, a blind person who is not a member of the *Tōdō-za*).

Numerous scenes depict blind individuals being physically struck, trampled, or otherwise subjected to slapstick violence, reinforcing their roles as objects of ridicule.

The *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū* and other Seventeenth-Century *Kyōgen* Compilations

The *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū* (大蔵虎明本能狂言集, hereafter referred to as the *Toraaki-bon*), compiled in the seventeenth century, is the second oldest extant collection of *kyōgen* plays. The collection is notable for being the first to present complete *kyōgen* scripts rather than plot summaries or outlines. The text derives its name from the Ōkura family of *kyōgen* performers, who passed down texts like these in secret. Ōkura Yaemon Toraaki (or Toraakira, 1566-1646) transcribed the collection in the 19th year of the Kan'ei era (1642) in the early Edo period.[105] Toraaki was the thirteenth *iemoto* (headmaster) of the Ōkura school, following his father Ōkura Yaemon Torakiyo (1566-1646), who also wrote down scripts for eight plays in a collection known as *Torakiyo-bon* (1646).[106] Toraaki is known not only for the *Toraaki-bon*, but also the *Waranbegusa* (わらんべ草, For My Young Successors, 1660), which served as an instructional text for aspiring *kyōgen* performers, and is one of the most comprehensive guides to the art of *kyōgen* from the Edo period.

The *Toraaki-bon* is divided into two volumes, with plays broken into categorizes such as *Waki Kyōgen no Rui* (脇狂言之類, Subordinate Role *Kyōgen* Plays) and *Daimyō Kyōgen no Rui* (大名狂言之類, Lordly *Kyōgen* Plays). The second volume contains additional classifications,

[105] Ōtsuka, *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū*, p. 8.
[106] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 789.

including *Onna Kyōgen no Rui* (女狂言之類, Women's *Kyōgen* Plays) and *Shukke Zatō Rui* (出家座頭類, Monk and Blind Man Plays).

Preserved and Modified *Zatō* Plays

Several *zatō* plays from the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* appear in the *Toraaki-bon*, some of which remain largely unchanged. *Goze Zatō* is included in the collection and retains its original structure. Similarly, *Kemari Zatō* is also present, though it is listed under the alternative title *Mari Zatō* (鞠座頭).[107] This version of the play was performed by both the Ōkura and Izumi *kyōgen* troupes, indicating its continued popularity.

***Kikazu Zatō* (**不聞座頭, **The Deaf Man and the Blind Man)**

The *Toraaki-bon* also marks the first known documentation of a play featuring both a deaf and a blind character: *Kikazu Zatō* revolves around two servants, Tarō Kaja (who is deaf) and Kikuichi (who is blind), who are entrusted with guarding their master's holdings during his absence. As they begin their task, the two men commiserate about their respective disabilities, each arguing that his own condition is the more burdensome. The humor of the play stems from their escalating competition to prove who is more disadvantaged. Their complaints become more exaggerated as the dialogue progresses, leading to a comical exchange of grievances. Unlike earlier *zatō* plays that derive humor purely from the protagonist's disability, *Kikazu Zatō* employs a more humanistic approach, using mutual jest and rivalry between two marginalized characters as the basis for its comedic tension.

[107] *Kemari Zatō* was temporarily discontinued around the time of publication but was later brought back. See Õtsuka, p. 278.

Hakuyō (伯養)

Another noteworthy *zatō* play in the collection is *Hakuyō*, which portrays the rivalry between two blind guild members, a *zatō* and a *kōtō*. The protagonist, Hakuyō, shares his name with the *zatō* from *Tachin Zatō*, suggesting continuity in character archetypes. His counterpart in this play is Kotarō, a *kōtō*-ranked blind musician. The play's narrative unfolds as Hakuyō prepares for a summer gathering, only to discover that his master's *biwa* (Japanese lute) is damaged. Seeking a replacement, he visits a lender to borrow another instrument. Coincidentally, Kotarō arrives at the same time with the same request. Kotarō criticizes Hakuyō for attempting to borrow a *biwa* on behalf of his master, accusing him of being a "double-borrower."[108] This accusation escalates into a dispute, prompting the lender to intervene by proposing a series of contests to determine who deserves the *biwa*. Hakuyō first suggests a game of *Hashiri gogura*,[109] but Kotarō refuses. Next, Hakuyō proposes reciting a poem. In the first poem, Hakuyō calls Kotarō a "dog," and Kotarō calls him a "damn dog."[110] In the second poem, Kotarō compares Hakuyō to useless chipped wooden geta clogs,[111] and the two fight again. The lender then proposes sumo wrestling. The two men agree, and both take their positions and begin to grapple. Kotarō complains that Hakuyō is a "cowardly fellow" and that he "ran away," and Hakuyō says that Kotarō is a "cowardly fellow" and that "you made me run away," and the bickering continues.[112] The lender says "neither of you can even run, much less run away, since you can't see anything." At the height of the contest, the lender, who was holding the contestants apart,

[108] [又借りでござる」Ōtsuka, *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū,* p. 283.
[109] [走りこぐら] Ōtsuka, p. 284.
[110] 「犬勾当」としたことに勾当は「畜生」呼ばわりしたといい] Ōtsuka, p. 284.
[111] The same pun (履く用（「はくよう」） that is used in *Tenshō-bon*'s *Umakari Zatō.* Ōtsuka, p. 284.
[112] [伯養は勾当が「卑怯なお方」で「どれへやら逃げさせられた」と言い合う] Ōtsuka, p. 284.

releases their hands. Mistaking him for their opponent, both Hakuyō and Kotarō seize the lender's legs and wrestle him to the ground. After being overpowered by the two blind men, the lender refuses to grant either of them the *biwa*, exclaiming, "I won't lend you my *biwa*, you bums, after you beat me like this."[113] The humor in *Hakuyō* is derived not only from the physical comedy of the wrestling match but also from the irony of two blind musicians, whose primary skill was thought to lie in their extraordinary sense of auditory artistry, engaging in a purely physical contest.

Replacement of *Inubiki Zatō* with *Saru Zatō*

The *Toraaki-bon* includes *Saru Zatō* (猿座頭, Monkey *Zatō*), a play similar to *Inubiki Zatō* (Dog Pulling Zatō), which is absent. *Saru Zatō* maintains the fundamental comedic premise of *Inubiki Zatō* while introducing key modifications. In this version, the protagonist is a blind man with the title of *kengyō*. Accompanied by his wife, he embarks on a journey to Mt. Nishi to join other villagers in viewing the cherry blossoms at Kiyomizu Temple. Upon their arrival, the couple engages in festivities, only to be interrupted by a monkey trainer, who begins to tease the *kengyō* and his wife. Over the course of the play, the monkey trainer gradually persuades the wife to leave her husband, ultimately replacing her with his monkey. Unaware of the switch, the *kengyō* becomes irritated at his wife's silence and tugs on the rope that he believes is attached to her, only to be attacked by the monkey. The play concludes with the *kengyō* fleeing from the monkey while the monkey trainer absconds with his wife.

[113] 「某をこのように打ちたおいて、どちへも琵琶は貸さぬぞ」「横着者」と罵る] Ōtsuka, p. 285.

Key Differences from *Inubiki Zatō*

While the fundamental comedic structure remains consistent, *Saru Zatō* introduces several important changes that distinguish it from *Inubiki Zatō*. One of the most notable alterations is the characterization of the protagonist. In *Inubiki Zatō*, the blind character is an unnamed, lower-ranking *zatō*, whereas in *Saru Zatō*, the protagonist is elevated to the status of a *kengyō* in the Ōkura version and a *kōtō* in the Izumi version. This shift in social status influences the humor and implications of the play, as the humiliation of the protagonist is now directed at a figure of authority within the *zatō* guild rather than a generic blind man. Additionally, the antagonist's role undergoes a significant transformation. In the earlier *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* version, the wife abandons her blind husband for a hawker who is described as a *daimyō* (feudal lord). Given the wife's disadvantaged position as the spouse of a blind man, her decision to leave him for a *daimyō* carries a clear economic rationale. In contrast, later versions replace the hawker with a monkey trainer, a *burakumin* (social outcast) figure who holds little social standing. This shift in the wife's choice of suitor introduces a more complex and potentially cruel dynamic. The later versions of *Saru Zatō* imply that the wife is not merely seeking economic security but is willing to abandon her relatively high-ranking husband for an individual of lower social status. In doing so, the play amplifies the perceived inadequacy of blindness, suggesting that the protagonist's disability alone justifies his wife's betrayal.

Furthermore, while the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* version presents the wife's departure as relatively straightforward, the later iterations emphasize the monkey trainer's deception. In the *Saru Zatō* versions, the monkey trainer must actively persuade the wife to leave her husband, repeatedly pleading with her before she ultimately relents. Moreover, he explicitly announces his scheme to the audience, reinforcing the calculated nature of his trickery. This narrative choice

distinguishes *Saru Zatō* from earlier versions, where the wife's decision required little justification beyond economic self-interest. In essence, whereas *Inubiki Zatō* depicts the wife's departure as an almost inevitable consequence of her social standing, *Saru Zatō* reframes the event as a deliberate act of deception, intensifying both the comedic and tragic dimensions of the protagonist's plight.

The *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* and the Development of the Izumi School Repertory

The *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* (天理本狂言六義) (hereafter referred to as the *Tenri-bon)*, dating from 1644, represents the oldest extant compilation associated with the Izumi school (和泉流). This manuscript is contemporaneous with the *Toraaki-bon* (1642) and serves as a crucial source for understanding the evolution of *kyōgen* performance. Kitagawa Tadahiko compares the *Toraaki-bon's* contents to the *Tenri-bon* and suggests that the material included in the *Tenri-bon* manuscript predates the *Toraaki-bon*.[114] Monica Bethe also posits that because the Izumi school never joined one of the official *nō* schools, as the Ōkura and Sagi schools did when *kyōgen* became institutionalized, the plays included may represent an older style.[115] The collection contains 222 plays, a number that closely aligns with the 254 plays currently included in the Izumi School repertory, with the plays divided into seven categories. The *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* highlights the early development of the Izumi School, known for performances that blend entertainment with social commentary. It also provides valuable insight into the strict master-student training system within the Izumi lineage. Instruction books like this one were passed down generationally, serving as fundamental training materials for aspiring performers.[116]

[114] Kitagawa, *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi,* p. 4.
[115] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 791.
[116] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 10.

Kitagawa remarks that if a student failed to demonstrate full commitment to memorizing the text, they were expected to abandon their training.[117]

Codification and Fluidity in the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi*

The *Tenri-bon*, along with the *Toraaki-bon*, marks a period in which *kyōgen* scripts became more formalized and less improvisatory. Unlike the earlier *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, which primarily contained plot outlines, these Edo-period compilations preserve complete scripts, reflecting the increasing standardization of *kyōgen* performance. Despite this growing formalization, the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* also highlights the fluid nature of *kyōgen*'s transmission as variations between different schools became more pronounced. While some differences were relatively minor—such as the Izumi version of *Saru Zatō* featuring a *kōtō* (a mid-ranking *zatō*) instead of the Ōkura version's *kengyō* (a high-ranking blind guild member)—other discrepancies were more substantial. For instance, the Ōkura version of *Goze Zatō* evolved into *Kiyomizu Zatō* in the Izumi collection. Even more significantly, major structural differences emerged in plays such as *Tobukatsuchiri* (井礑, Pebble Plop), which underwent significant modification between the two schools.[118]

Disappearance of *Zatō* Plays and the Shift in Representation

A key distinction between the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* and earlier collections is the significant decline in the number of *zatō*-themed plays. Several works from the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, including *Nunokahi Zatō*, *Umakari Zatō*, *Tachin Zatō*, and *Tarashii Zatō*, are notably absent

[117] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 12.
[118] These differences are covered in the pages ahead.

from the *Tenri-bon* repertory. Unlike *Saruhiki* and *Saru Zatō*, which were adapted into later variations, there is no evidence to suggest that these omitted plays survived in any form. One possible explanation for their disappearance is their focus on ordinary *zatō* rather than high-ranking members of the *Tōdō-za*, the guild that oversaw blind performers and professionals. The remaining *zatō* plays in the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* largely target figures of authority within the *Tōdō-za* rather than individual characters defined solely by their disability. In many cases, these works appear to critique the *Tōdō-za* as an institution rather than focusing on blindness itself. As Gerald Groemer argues in "Guild of the Blind," the *Tōdō-za* was often the subject of public resentment due to its monopolization of economic and performance opportunities, as well as its imposition of excessive fees. Given that *kyōgen* performers were in direct competition with the blind performers' guild, this frustration may have been reflected in *kyōgen* plays. Thus, rather than functioning as an indiscriminate mockery of disability, these later plays appear to satirize the exploitative nature of the *Tōdō-za*'s senior leadership. Many of these narratives shift their focus toward critiquing moral failings and pretensions, exemplified in portrayals such as that of a *zatō* who places his wife on a leash, symbolizing both his perceived arrogance and his misguided assertion of authority.

Representative *Zatō* Plays in the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi*

Among the *zatō* plays that persist in the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* are *Sanninkatawa* (三人片輪, *Three People, One Wheel*), *Kemari Zatō*, *Kiyomizu Zatō*, *Mizu Kikazu* (不目不聞, *Can't See, Can't Hear*), *Kawakami Zatō*, *Hakuyō*, and *Tobukatsuchiri* (井礑, Pebble Plop).

***Tobukatsuchiri* (井礑，Pebble Plop)**

In *Tobukatsuchiri*, two blind men, a *kōtō* and a lower-ranking blind servant named Kikuichi (a role similar to Tarō Kaja), are traveling toward Kyoto while reciting *The Tale of the Heike*. As they approach a river, they throw pebbles into the water to determine a shallow crossing point. When the first pebble makes a "donburi" (deep splash) sound and the second makes a "katachiri" (shallower plop), the *kōtō* believes he has identified a safe place to cross. However, when he tries to cross by riding on Kikuichi's back, an opportunistic passerby climbs onto Kikuichi instead. The *kōtō* calls out for help, and Kikuichi, confused, believes he is still carrying the *kōtō*. When Kikuichi attempts a second crossing with the *kōtō* on his back, they both fall into deep water and get soaked. Freezing from the cold, the *kōtō* asks Kikuichi to pour them some sake, but another passerby steals the drink.

A key difference between the Ōkura and Izumi versions of *Tobukatsuchiri* lies in the nature of the mistake. In the Ōkura version, Kikuichi simply drops the *kōtō* into the river, whereas in the Izumi version, the confusion arises because Kikuichi mistakes the passerby for the *kōtō*. The Izumi version also ends with Kikuichi finally retaliating by chasing the passerby away with his cane, shifting the comedic focus from the *zatō* characters' incompetence to the trickery of sighted bystanders. The Ōkura version, by having the relatively low-ranking Kikuichi drop the *kōtō*, emphasizes the class tensions among the blind.

Implications for the Evolution of *Zatō* Plays

The *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* reflects an ongoing transformation in the treatment of blind characters in *kyōgen*. While earlier plays often derived humor purely from physical mockery, later works increasingly emphasized social dynamics, deception, and power struggles within the

blind guild. The shift away from lower-ranking *zatō* characters toward figures like the *kōtō* and *kengyō* suggests a growing awareness of hierarchical tensions within the *Tōdō-za*.[119] Additionally, the retention of plays like *Tobukatsuchiri* in the *Izumi* repertory—albeit with structural modifications—demonstrates how *kyōgen* adapted over time, moving away from simple ridicule toward more layered comedic narratives.

Sannin Katawa **(Three People, One Wheel) and Feigned Disability**

A notable addition to the *Izumi* collection is *Sannin Katawa* (三人片輪, *Three People, One Wheel*), which can be translated less literally as *The Three Handicapped Men*, as it features a blind man, a deaf man, and a crippled man. The play revolves around three individuals who feign disabilities to secure employment under a benevolent and powerful master. While their deception initially allows them to maintain their positions, their scheme unravels when, in their master's absence, they host a drinking party. During the festivities, they begin dancing and, in the process, inadvertently remove their disguises. The unexpected early return of their master forces them into a frantic attempt to re-assume their feigned disabilities. However, in their panic, they misidentify their assigned impairments, leading to comedic confusion over who is supposed to be blind, deaf, or crippled. This blunder ultimately exposes their fraud, prompting their master to chase them off the stage.

The inclusion of *Sannin Katawa* in the *Izumi* repertory reflects significant social and economic shifts in the Edo period, particularly the increasing organization and influence of disabled communities such as the *Tōdō-za*. While much of the humor derives from the foolishness and disorder of the three impostors, the play also subtly critiques the societal

[119] For more information on the guild, see Chapter 1.

structures that granted employment advantages to disabled individuals. By the Edo period, rather than indiscriminately mocking disability itself, *kyōgen* plays began to focus more on the moral shortcomings of their characters. This shift aligns with a broader cultural trend in which disability was no longer merely a subject of ridicule but also an indicator of status, influence, and economic agency—particularly within the *Tōdō-za,* which controlled blind performers and professionals.

***Mizu Kikazu* (**不見不聞, **Can't See, Can't Hear)**

Another play reflecting the evolution of disability representation in *kyōgen* is *Mizu Kikazu,* which humorously explores the rivalry between a blind servant, Kikuichi, and a deaf servant, Tarō Kaja. The play begins with their master instructing them to guard the house in his absence and to remain vigilant for any burglars. To compensate for their respective disabilities, Kikuichi devises a plan: if he hears anything suspicious, he will grab Tarō Kaja's sleeve as a signal for them to investigate together. Initially, Tarō Kaja agrees to this strategy, but Kikuichi soon begins to exploit the situation by pulling Tarō Kaja's sleeve repeatedly as a joke, taking amusement in his startled reactions. Angered by the trick, Tarō Kaja retaliates by mocking Kikuichi's blindness, pointing out that, unlike Kikuichi, he can at least perform a *komai* dance.[120] He taunts Kikuichi further by announcing that once he finishes his *komai*, he will touch Kikuichi's face, knowing that Kikuichi will have no way of anticipating it. Kikuichi, however, remains blissfully unaware of Tarō Kaja's intentions and appears to enjoy the dance despite being unable to see it, prompting Tarō Kaja to laugh even louder. In response, Kikuichi counters

[120] In addition to the *kyōgen* plays themselves, performances include short dances called *komai* (小舞, small dance). These are traditional dramatic dances (not necessarily comic), performed to a chanted accompaniment, and with varied themes. The movements are broadly similar to *nō* dances.

by complaining that deaf people have an easier life compared to the blind, escalating the comedic tension between them. The play concludes with Kikuichi grabbing Tarō Kaja by the leg as he dances, only to trip himself in the process, bringing the performance to an abrupt and ironic end.

***Akutagawa* (芥川, Akuta River)**

Akutagawa presents a narrative centered around two physically disabled individuals—a man with a deformed hand and a lame man—who journey to Ikuta Hachiman Shrine during its opening ceremony.[121] The lame man remarks that he was not born crippled but fell from a high place, and so he is going to pray about healing his leg. The man with the deformed hand soon appears and explains to the audience that he was not born with a deformed hand, but he had an injury as a child, so he too is going to pray about his hand. The meet up, and not knowing about each other's handicaps, agree to travel together to Hachiman Shrine. The man with the deformed hand remarks that the lame man is a well-matched traveling companion. They soon come upon the Akutagawa (literally, "Rubble" River), which must be crossed to reach Hachiman Shrine. As they cross, the lame man is lagging behind, and the man with the deformed hand realizes that it is because of his leg. He composes a poem teasing the lame man, and the lame man is irked his handicap has been discovered. Shortly afterwards, they are washing their hands in the river when the lame man sneaks up on the man with the deformed hand and notices his hand. The man with the deformed hand tries to hide his deformity by cleverly only poking his non-deformed hand through his sleeve when asked to show his hand, but he is soon found out. The man with the deformed hand, upon recognizing that his impairment has been exposed, is visibly irritated, and the lame man composes a his own teasing poem, highlighting their mutual recognition. The play

[121] The "ginger hands" (右のうでがしやうがじゃ) (Modern Japanese: 生薑) refer to the hands that are gnarled like nobs of ginger.

concludes with a humorous exchange: the lame man exclaims, “I told you your hand was twisted!” to which his companion indignantly replies, “This hand is not twisted; it is deformed!”[122]

The humor in *Akutagawa* arises from the characters’ attempts to mask their disabilities, only for their impairments to be inevitably revealed. While they each try to downplay their physical differences, the irony of the situation is that they are both ultimately identified as disabled. This ending not only underscores their shared humanity but also challenges fixed perceptions of disability. Given that the handicaps were caused by accident rather than from birth and that they both attempt to hide their disabilities, the play highlights the contingent and socially constructed nature of disability.

The *zatō* plays of the *Tenri-bon,* and to a lesser extent, the *Toraaki-bon,* are a far remove from the types of plays we saw in the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon.* The humor itself is more developed, sometimes with subtly ironic undertones. For example, in *Hakuyō*, the blind characters are so busy competing with each other that they fail to take notice of the lender’s manipulation in making them compete in a game to borrow the *biwa*. This point is emphasized with the lender’s final remark about how neither of them can run away as blind men. The blind men are unaware of their own inadequacies, as well as the ableism of the lender. A similar sense of irony is found in the Ōkura version of *Tobukatsuchiri,* where instead of searching for the passerby who is bullying the blind men, Kikuichi drops the *kōtō* in the river. Compared to the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, the *zatō* plays found in these later collections, particularly the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* and, to a lesser extent, the *Toraaki-bon*, demonstrate a significant evolution in comedic style. The

[122] [アト「しやうがてなふてなんぞ」と伝　シテ「是ははじかみと伝物じゃ」] Kitagawa, p. 301.

humor in these later works is often more sophisticated, incorporating irony and social critique rather than relying solely on crude mockery of physical impairment.

Shifting Representations of Disability in Edo-period *Kyōgen*

Another significant aspect of the later *kyōgen* plays is their inclusion of multiple disabled characters within a single narrative, leading to comedic exchanges rooted in competitive one-upmanship rather than external ridicule. This is particularly evident in *Mizu Kikazu.* The deaf Tarō Kaja and blind Kikuichi are so busy one-upping each other that they fail to notice their own handicaps. This is emphasized when Kikuchi trips himself as he attempts to trip Tarō Kaja. Much like *Akutagawa*, *Mizu Kikazu* highlights the evolving sophistication of *kyōgen* humor in the Edo period, which parallels the development of economic power and organizational support for the blind in the Edo period. The comedic tension is no longer derived purely from the physical disabilities of the characters but from their own self-perceptions, misunderstandings, and competition with one another. Rather than merely serving as objects of ridicule, disabled characters in these later plays become active participants in the humor, engaging in exchanges that both reinforce and subvert traditional assumptions about their impairments. Both *Sannin Katawa* and *Mizu Kikazu* highlight a fundamental transformation in *kyōgen*'s treatment of disability during the Edo period. While earlier plays often targeted blind individuals purely for their physical condition, these later plays introduce more complex dynamics, such as deception (*Sannin Katawa*) and competitive one-upmanship (*Mizu Kikazu*). The humor no longer derives solely from physical impairment but rather from characters' personalities, social interactions, and ethical shortcomings.

The *Kyõgenki* and Its Associated Texts

A series of *kyōgen* texts published between 1660 and 1730 further illustrates the evolution of *kyōgen* during the Edo period. The original *Kyōgenki* (狂言記) was published in 1660. Its sequels, *Zoku Kyōgenki* (続狂言記) and the *Kyōgenki hoka gojūban* (狂言記外五十番) were published in 1699. The final text in this series, *Kyōgenki-shūi* (狂言記拾遺), was published in 1730.[123] Each of the five books, known collectively as *Kyōgenki,* contains approximately 50 plays, resulting in a total of around 250 plays. The collection was intended for a broad readership and includes woodblock illustrations accompanying each play. These illustrations offer valuable insight into contemporary performance practices, including aspects such as costuming and staging.

Unlike the *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū* and the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi,* the sources of the scripts in the *Kyōgenki* series are not clearly documented. It is generally believed that these texts were compiled by a diverse group of *kyōgen* performers, including *tesarugaku*[124] (amateur performers), many of whom played a role in the development of *kabuki*.[125] As a result, they differ from the Ōkura school, whose plays were composed largely for ceremonial performance. This discrepancy suggests that *kyōgen* was still a fluid and evolving art form with significant regional and school-based variations. Given the lengthy period over which the texts were written—spanning seventy years—scholars are often hesitant to treat them as a unified

[123] Hashimoto, *Kyōgenki*, p. 621.
[124] After the civil unrest and destruction in Kyoto during the Ōnin Disturbances (1467), local *daimyō* rose in power, and entertainers sought new patrons. This led to the emergence of amateur troupes known as *tesarugaku,* which included townsmen and performers from diverse social strata. These amateur groups performed *kyōgen* and other traditional arts at various venues, including the imperial palace and local festivals. In the Edo period, the number of *tesarugaku* players increased, and they began to perform independently, often alongside other performing arts, which contributed to the popularity of *kyōgen*.
[125] Hashimoto, *Kyōgenki*, pp. 611–613.

corpus. However, when analyzed collectively, they offer a valuable perspective on the fluctuations in the *kyōgen* repertory during the early Edo period.

The *Kyōgenki* as a Historical and Cultural Document

The *Kyōgenki* is also significant because it sheds light on the further formalization of *kyōgen* scripts. During the 1640s, the heads of the Ōkura and Izumi schools began transcribing *kyōgen* scripts that encompassed nearly all branches of their respective traditions. This process marked a shift in *kyōgen* from a largely adaptive and improvisational performance art to a codified tradition meant to be preserved and passed down to future generations. However, these scripts were typically restricted to a select group, accessible only to the *iemoto* (headmasters) and their direct disciples. While the Ōkura-*ryū* (大蔵流) and Izumi-*ryū* (和泉流) schools are explicitly referenced in the *Kyōgenki,* the text also acknowledges a wider range of influences. Notably, it cites various historical figures and sources, indicating that the plays were transmitted orally before being recorded in writing.[126] The text also refers to *gunshō yakusha-tachi* (群小役者たち, "small group actors") who were active in Kyoto and Nara. These independent performers, unaffiliated with any specific *kyōgen* school, played a role in shaping the *kyōgen* tradition by contributing original material to the *Kyōgenki* collection.[127] Despite its lack of direct association with the major *kyōgen* families, and its function as a reading collection of plays, the *Kyōgenki* texts would have played a role in *kyōgen* performances and, in turn, influenced other collections. By offering a diverse and less restricted view of *kyōgen* as it was practiced across

[126] Hashimoto, *Kyōgenki*, p. 597.
[127] Hashimoto, p. 595.

different regions and schools, the *Kyōgenki* provides a valuable resource for understanding the broader context of *kyōgen*'s evolution in the Edo period.

Recurring Themes and Variations in the *Kyōgenki* Collection

Despite the lack of direct association with any specific *kyōgen* school, the *Kyōgenki* collection includes many plays that bear similarities to earlier works. Among the plays featured in this collection are *Tobukatsuchiri*, a version of *Hakuyō* titled *Biwakari Zatō* (琵琶借座頭, Biwa Borrowing Blind Man), and a variation of *Kawakami* called *Kawakami Jizō* (川上地蔵). Additionally, *Marike Zatō* (鞠跋座頭, Kickball *Zatō*) appears as a variant of *Kemari Zatō*, while *Tsunbō Zatō* (つんぼ座頭, Deaf Man and Blind Man) explores themes of disability in a manner reminiscent of earlier *zatō* plays. Finally, *Sarukae Kōtō* (猿替勾当, Monkey and *Kōtō* Swap) is a revised version of *Saru Zatō*. These adaptations demonstrate the continuity of certain comedic tropes while also illustrating how the themes and characters evolved across different time periods and *kyōgen* schools.

The Evolution of Disability-Based Humor in *Tsunbō Zatō* (Deaf Man and Blind Man)

Tsunbō Zatō, which appears in the 1699 *Kyōgenki hoku gojūban* (狂言記外五十番), explores the comedic potential of miscommunication between a blind man and a deaf man (*tsunbō*), a theme that recurs in other *zatō* plays of the Edo period. The narrative begins with a master leaving his house to run an errand. However, he lacks confidence (*kokoro motonai*, 心元ない) in his deaf servant's ability to manage the household alone. To compensate, he assigns a blind man to assist the deaf servant in guarding the house. Predictably, miscommunication

ensues between the two characters, primarily due to the deaf man's inability to hear instructions correctly. For instance, the *zatō* devises a system to signal the presence of an intruder: if he hears a suspicious noise, he will poke the *tsunbō* in the knee, alerting him to the potential danger. The *tsunbō* is impressed by the *zatō*'s ingenuity, but the *zatō* quickly retorts, "If you talk to a *tsunbō*, your spirit and mind will be completely exhausted." This insult escalates into an exchange of verbal jabs between the two characters. Ultimately, the *tsunbō* retaliates by stating, "I hate the fact that you're blind," and physically attacks the *zatō* by twisting his leg. The *zatō*, indignant, responds, "You have done this to a man who can't even see." The *tsunbō* then counters with the ironic remark, "You have no right to do this to a man you can't even see."[128] Rather than presenting the blind and deaf characters as passive victims or noble sufferers, it portrays them as active participants in a comedic power struggle. The humor arises from their mutual inability to communicate effectively, but rather than fostering sympathy or cooperation, their frustrations escalate into insults and physical altercations. One of the striking aspects of the play is that the blind and deaf characters insult and attack each other, rather than form a sense of solidarity. The *zatō* expresses frustration at communicating with a deaf person, stating that it is "exhausting" to speak to him. The *tsunbō* responds by expressing outright hatred toward the *zatō* for being blind. This mutual hostility challenges the assumption that disabled individuals would automatically support one another due to shared experiences. Instead, it suggests that prejudice and misunderstanding exist even among marginalized groups—a theme that resonates with broader human interactions beyond disability. The *tsunbō's* final remark—"You have no right to do this to a man you can't even see"—adds an ironic twist. In this moment, the power dynamic is reversed: the blind man, who may be assumed to be more vulnerable, becomes the aggressor.

[128] 「目も見へぬ者を此様にしをっ て、生来がよふあるまいぞ」Hashimoto, p. 404.

This destabilizes conventional assumptions about who is weak or strong. It also highlights how humor in *kyōgen* often emerges from the collapse of rigid social hierarchies, allowing even marginalized figures to assert themselves in unexpected ways.

The Sagi School's Repertory

Sagi Niemon Sogen (1560-1650) was a prominent kyogen actor and a key figure in the development of the Sagi school. He was recognized for his innovative and dynamic style, often characterized as flamboyant or "kabuki-like," which drew criticism from conservative scholars who viewed his approach as excessively unorthodox.[129] Niemon's performances were characterized by their creativity, and he often incorporated humor in a way that distinguished his work from more traditional forms. He became popular during the late sixteenth century and was recognized by influential patrons, including the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu.[130]

The *Enpō Tadamasa-bon* (延宝忠政本) (hereafter referred to as the *Tadamasa-bon)* and *Yasunori-bon* (保教本) were published in 1678 and around 1724, respectively, and represent the earliest set of scripts of the Sagi (鷺流) school of *kyōgen*. Thirty or so years after Niemon's death, the Sagi school began to consolidate its performance art by writing down texts. The *Yasunori-bon* is composed of four volumes, containing a total of 150 *kyōgen* plays, making it one of the most extensive collections of Sagi *kyōgen* scripts. In contrast, the *Tadamasa-bon* (忠政本) is significantly smaller, containing only twenty-five plays. Despite the large number of plays in the *Yasunori-bon*, it includes only one *zatō* play: *Futari Zatō* (二人座頭, Two Blind

[129] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 789.
[130] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 788.

Men), which is categorized under the "foreigner/Chinese" (*tōjin*, 唐人) and Noh *komai* (小舞) dance classifications.

Futari Zatō (二人座頭, Two Blind Men**)**

Futari Zatō is based on the legend of *Zatōbuchi* (座頭淵), a tale concerning a blind man who accidentally slipped and fell into the Yoshino River, where he drowned. The story is thought to have a historical basis, as the Yoshino River contains several dangerous areas. In particular, between Shimobuchi in Oyodo-chō and Sanade, there is a location known as *Zatōbuchi*, which may have inspired the play's setting.

The play opens with a *kōtō* announcing his intention to travel to a *Heike* recital gathering in Higashiyama. He expresses a desire to compose a verse at the gathering, but since his *biwa* is broken, he must find a fellow performer from whom he can borrow one. Along the way, he encounters a *kentō*, another blind performer traveling to the same *Heike* gathering. The *kentō* informs the *kōtō* that his friend Kikuchi, who lives by a lake in Higashiyama, has a *biwa* he may be able to borrow. As they travel toward the lake, the *kōtō* remarks that, despite his blindness, he enjoys the scent of the flowers around him. He notes that the fragrance reminds him of a melancholic song called *Tamaboko* (玉鉾), which poetically describes the aroma of flowers.[131] The *kentō*, however, dismisses the sadness of the song, prompting the *kōtō* to rebuke him, stating that such an attitude is unbecoming of a *kentō*. Upon arriving at the gathering, the two men hear a *Heike* performance in progress and express their disapproval of the quality of the recital. The *kōtō* critiques the performance, asserting that no school teaches *Heike* in such a manner. The

[131] Scholz-Ciona provides a translation of the poem in "What Happened to the *Zatō Kyōgen*?", p. 13. "This spring/ acquainted or strangers/ like beads on the string/ they cross their sleeves/ o, their blossom fragrance!"

kentō, in response, challenges him to perform something himself if he is so confident. The *kōtō* initially declines, claiming he must be in the right mood to sing. The *kentō* then offers to sing *Ichinotani* (一の谷)[132] but initially hesitates, noting that the song is difficult to perform. Eventually, the *kentō* begins singing a song about a blind man who cuts his heel on a valley slope and falls into the Yoshino River. At this point, the *kōtō* abruptly stops him, exclaiming, "You cannot sing a song like that while we are on a cliffside like this!" The *kentō* replies, "If you don't listen to the good stuff, you won't know the bad stuff."[133] Angered by this remark, the *kōtō* denounces *kentō* as all talk. The *kentō* then suggests that he wishes the *kōtō* could see their current surroundings, implying that if he could, he would realize how precarious their location is. In retaliation, the *kōtō* physically attacks the *kentō*, and a struggle ensues. Ultimately, the *kentō* is overpowered and left stranded on the cliffside.

Reexamining Disability through the Play's Climax

[132] *Ichinotani* was one of the songs based on the *Heike Monogatari* that *zatō* were expected to perform. While the *kyogen* version of the song is humorous (see below), this name alludes to a famous battle (1184) in the Genpei War (1180–1185) between the Minamoto and Taira clans. The surprise attack orchestrated by Minamoto no Yoshitsune (1159-1189) is considered one of the most daring military maneuvers in samurai history. The Taira clan, after losing Kyoto, retreated to their stronghold at Ichinotani, located near modern-day Kobe, Hyōgo Prefecture. The fortress was protected by the sea in the front, where the Taira had their warships for potential escape. The rear of the fortress faced Mount Rokko, a steep and rugged mountain that the Taira believed was impregnable from attack. While a large Minamoto force attacked head-on, engaging the Taira in direct combat, Yoshitsune led a small elite force of 70–100 horsemen up Mount Rokko. They descended the steep, almost vertical cliffs behind Ichinotani, a route thought to be impassable. The Taira were completely unprepared for an attack from this direction. The implication is that because the *kōtō* and *kentō* are themselves on a steep cliff in this play, the *kentō* is hesitant to sing this song. Scholz-Ciona provides a translation of *kyōgen*'s comic version of the battle: "And when the battle of Ichinotani was over, the Minamoto and the Taira fled away in disorder. Among the fleeing warriors were some whose heels had been cut off, and others whose chins had been cut off; but as they were in a great hurry, they took the cut-off heels and stuck them to their chins; and they took the cut-off chins and stuck them to their heels... and as the cut-off parts grew [in their new places], they got beards growing thick on their heels and as winter came, they got deep cracks into their chins. Scholz-Ciona, "What Happened to the *Zatō Kyōgen*?", p. 19.

[133] 「上手を聞かねば下手がしらまい」Sagi, *Sagi-ryū Kyōgen Densho: Yasunori-bon*. Vol. 63, p. 374.

The *kentō*'s remark about wishing the *kōtō* could see is particularly significant, as it prompts a reconsideration of the meaning of blindness within the play. While *kyōgen* traditionally used *zatō* characters as stock figures of ridicule, *Futari Zatō* challenges this convention by allowing the blind characters to engage in witty verbal exchanges, physical confrontations, and artistic critique. The play's conclusion—where the *kentō* is left stranded on the cliff—compels the audience to reflect on the precariousness of the blind characters' situation. The scene does not simply reinforce blindness as an object of humor; rather, it highlights the vulnerability of the characters while simultaneously presenting them as dynamic individuals capable of wit and conflict. *Futari Zatō* shares several thematic and structural similarities with later *zatō* plays, particularly those from the *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* and other Edo-period collections. Like plays such as *Hakuyō* and *Mizu Kikazu*, *Futari Zatō* portrays blind characters engaged in competitive one-upmanship rather than simply serving as passive objects of ridicule. The *kōtō* and the *kentō* challenge each other's musical expertise, mirroring the competitive dynamics among *zatō* performers in other later plays. In *Futari Zatō*, the *kōtō* ultimately overpowers the *kentō* in a physical confrontation, a motif seen in later *zatō* plays such as *Hakuyō*, where blind performers engage in disputes that escalate into fights. These conflicts often serve as exaggerated representations of real tensions within the blind guild hierarchy, reinforcing the satirical underpinnings of Edo-period *zatō kyōgen*. Unlike earlier *zatō* plays from the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon*, where blind characters were primarily depicted as helpless or easily deceived, *Futari Zatō* presents its protagonists as active agents in their own narratives. The characters assert themselves in musical critique, verbal exchanges, and physical altercations, demonstrating the increased complexity in later *zatō kyōgen*, which moved away from mere slapstick toward social commentary. The statement from the *kentō* where he wishes the *kōtō* could see their

surroundings so he could see how dangerous it is, prompts a reconsideration of disability from an alternative perspective—one that emphasizes difference rather than inferiority. In this case, the *kōtō*'s inability to see the fearful drop inadvertently suggests an advantage. This shift in viewpoint reframes the depiction of disability, moving away from traditional notions of deficiency and instead recognizing it as a distinct but equally valid human experience, one which may even have its advantages such as not being burdened with seeing dreadful things like the cliffside abyss. Moreover, the poignant recitation transforms what might otherwise be perceived as a comical or foolish scenario—namely, a blind man falling into a river—into a reflective commentary on disability as a fundamental and shared aspect of the human condition.

The *Namekawa Rokuemon Shuki*

The *Namekawa Rokuemon Shuki* (名女川六右衛門手記, ca.1761, aka *Hōreki Namekawa-bon*) is a *kyōgen* collection of approximately twenty volumes, transcribed around 1761 by Namekawa Rokuemon Tatsusaburō (?-1777), a senior disciple within the Den'emon line of Sagi performers. Rokuemon, the seventh head of the Namekawa family, compiled these records, documenting the history and artistic lineage of the seventh, eighth, and ninth heads of the Den'emon family.

This manuscript is part of a broader collection known as the *Sagi-ryū Kyōgen Densho* (鷺流狂言伝書), a compilation of nine volumes that preserve the traditions and teachings of the Sagi school of *kyōgen*. The text outlines a chronological record of key events within the Sagi Den'emon family, including Rokuemon's illness, the appointment of his son, Ayano Shin, as his successor, and the disputes that arose regarding leadership within the family.[134] The document

[134] Takahashi, "Sagiryū Kyōgen 'Meijukawa Rokuemon Shuki' Honkaku / Kaidai," pp. 143-197.

also describes performance differences between the Niemon and Den'emon factions of the Sagi school, providing rare insight into the stylistic variations that emerged within this lineage. As a manuscript with a significant number of *kyōgen* plays, the *Namekawa Rokuemon Shuki* serves as an intermediary text between the earlier *Yasunori-bon* of the Sagi Den'emon school and the later *Tokiwamatsu Bunko* version compiled at the end of the Edo period.[135] This text is particularly valuable because it preserves plays that are missing from both of these collections, thereby filling in critical gaps in the historical *kyōgen* repertory.

Out of the original twenty volumes, only seven books appear to be extant. These surviving texts, collectively referred to as *Hinomoto*, include five volumes of core *kyõgen* plays (*honkyōgen* 本狂言), one volume of *maikyōgen* (舞狂言) featuring dance-based *kyōgen* performances, and one volume of *densho* (伝書), a transmission book detailing performance techniques and interpretations. In terms of *zatō* plays, the text includes *Goze Zatō*, *Kawakami Zatō*, *Hanami Zatō* (花見座頭, Flower-viewing Zatō), *Kikazu Zatō,* and *Hakuyō*.

The *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* and Its Role in the Standardization of Modern *Kyōgen* Scripts

The *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* (大蔵虎寛本), published in 1792, represents the most recent major collection of scripts from the Ōkura school of *kyōgen*. It was based on a manuscript by Ōkura Yaemon Torahiro, who reworked and refined the repertory of the 1642 *Toraaki-bon.*[136] The collection continued to expand, with later editions of this text including plays that were incorporated beyond the Meiji period. The text was compiled under the direction of the

[135] Takahashi, pp. 195-197.
[136] Bethe, "Kyōgen," p. 54

nineteenth head of the Ōkura school and originally contained 165 *kyōgen* plays.[137] Over time, this number expanded to 180, reflecting later additions to the repertory.

Standardization of *Kyōgen* Texts

A significant aspect of the *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* is that it was published during a period in which *kyōgen* scripts became largely fixed, marking a transition away from earlier improvisational variations. By the late Edo period, the performances documented in this collection had become codified and resemble the versions that remain in the modern *kyōgen* repertory. Unlike earlier collections, which allowed for regional and school-specific variations, the *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* played a crucial role in the stabilization of *kyōgen* scripts, ensuring their transmission in a more standardized form. The *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* retains several significant *zatō* plays, many of which had been carried forward from earlier collections. Among the plays that remain in this collection are *Hakuyō, Dobukatsuchiri*, *Saru Zatō*, *Kikazu Zatō*, *Sannin Katawa*.

The *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū* (狂言三百番集)

The *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū*, as its name suggests, is a comprehensive collection containing over 300 *kyōgen* plays. While the majority of the plays originate from the Izumi school, the collection also includes works from other major *kyōgen* traditions, such as the Ōkura.[138] This breadth of representation allows researchers to examine variations in performance styles across different *kyōgen* traditions and track the evolution of specific plays. Published

[137] Sasano, *Nō Kyōgen: Ōkura Torahiro-bon*, pp. 78-79.
[138] Nonomura, *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū* (Jō), pp. 12-14.

between 1824 and 1885, the compilation was initially derived from the training manuals of the Miyake Tōkurō family (三宅藤九郎家), one of the most prominent lineages within the Izumi school.[139]

Representative *Zatō* Plays in the *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū*

Several plays within the *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū* exemplify the later *zatō* repertoire, particularly in their treatment of hierarchical relationships within the *Tōdō-za*, the blind guild. Notable plays from this collection include *Kawakami*, *Akutagawa* (芥川), *Kikazu Zatō, Hakuyō*, *Dobukatsuchiri*, *Mari Zatō* (鞠跋座頭), *Chiyakagi Zatō* (千夜鉦座頭), *Saru Zatō*, *Kiyomizu Zatō*, *Tsukimi Zatō* (月見座頭), and *Sannin Katawa* (三人片輪).

***Tsukimi Zatō* (The Moon-Viewing *Zatō*)**

A blind man residing in Lower Kyoto sets out on the night of the full August moon to appreciate the sounds of insects, as he is unable to partake in the visual enjoyment of moon gazing like others. As he walks, he reflects on how those deprived of sight find great pleasure in auditory experiences. Upon reaching the fields, he sits and listens attentively, praising the cries of various insects that seem to raise their voices toward the moon. Among the sounds, he identifies a variety of crickets, grasshoppers, and locusts. Meanwhile, a man from Upper Kyoto, on his way to admire the moon, happens upon the blind man and decides to join him. The two spend time composing poetry, drinking, singing, and dancing, enjoying each other's company. However, as the evening comes to an end, they realize they must part ways, as they reside in opposite ends of Kyoto. They bid each other farewell and set off in separate directions.

[139] Nonomura, *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū* (Jō), pp. 62–64.

Unexpectedly, the man from Upper Kyoto, seemingly amused by the encounter, decides to play a cruel trick on the blind man. Disguising his voice, he deliberately picks a quarrel with him. As the blind man walks along, still expressing admiration for the kind individual he has met, the man from Upper Kyoto suddenly collides with him. Feigning indignation, he berates the blind man for obstructing the road and forcefully throws him to the ground twice. After enjoying his deception, the man from Upper Kyoto runs off, gloating over the amusement he has derived at the blind man's expense. Left alone, the blind man painfully gets to his feet and searches for his cane, which he had dropped in the struggle. Slowly making his way home, he reflects on the stark contrast between the two individuals he encountered that night. As he continues on his journey, he sings a melancholy song, contemplating the unpredictability of human nature.

Chakagi Zatō **(The Tea-Sniffing Zatō)**

Chakagi Zatō, or *The Tea-Sniffing Blind Men* provides a humorous yet critical exploration of the interactions and social hierarchy among blind priests, specifically the *biwa hoshi*. The play is set during an annual gathering of worshippers of Benzaiten (弁才天), hosted at the residence of the *kengyō*, the central character. Various individuals, including three elders and three brothers, arrive at the Patriarch's house to participate in the festivities. The comedy unfolds when a *kentō* (検討), a blind assistant to the *kengyō*, suggests a "tea-sniffing" contest, a game in which participants attempt to distinguish different types of tea by scent alone. However, a sighted spectator secretly interferes by adding pepper to the tea, resulting in the blind priests sneezing uncontrollably. This prank creates disorder and comedic chaos while also highlighting the absurdity of the hierarchical relationships within the group. The play satirizes the internal

power struggles among the blind priests, many of whom hold formal titles, such as *kentō*, and compete to maintain their social standing.

Social Status and Marginalization

Beyond its humor, *Chakagi Zatō* and *Tsukimi Zatō* reflect broader themes of social status, identity, and the everyday experiences of marginalized groups. *Chakagi Zatō* targets the internal structures of the *Tōdō-za*, and both plays implicitly critique the broader societal treatment of blind performers. The humor emerges not from their disability itself but from the rigid conventions and social pretensions that govern their interactions. In this way, these plays align with the later evolution of *zatō kyōgen*, which increasingly used satire and irony to comment on power dynamics rather than simply mocking physical impairments.

Overview of *Zatō-mono* Repertory Changes from *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* to the 18th century

A comprehensive analysis of the *kyōgen* repertory reveals significant thematic and structural shifts over time. One of the most notable transformations is the decline of crudeness and vulgarity in *kyōgen* by the late 16th century. Earlier plays frequently relied on physical mockery, often ridiculing blind characters solely for their disability. For instance, in *Tachin Zatō*, a blind father and son are deceived into riding an ox rather than a horse, serving as the target of public humiliation. Similarly, in *Nunokahi Zatō*, the cloth lender appears to exploit the blind characters's vulnerability for his own economic gain. Both of these plays were dropped from the repertory by the mid-Edo period.

The plays that continued to be performed exhibited more sympathetic portrayals of blindness. *Goze Zatō*, for example, continued to be included in subsequent compilations,

potentially because it refrained from reducing blindness to mere ridicule. Other plays, such as *Kemari Zatō* (also known as *Mari Zatō*), endured until the *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū*, albeit with a shift in comedic focus. While the play may initially appear to derive humor from the physical ineptitude of the blind, later versions seem to reframe the humor as a critique of the *Tōdō-za*. The play's comedic tension arises from the *kengyō*'s attempt to organize a game of kickball—a fundamentally unsuitable activity for the visually impaired—thus highlighting the hierarchical structure and absurdities within the guild rather than merely mocking disability. Similarly, *Inubiki Zatō* initially appears to ridicule its blind protagonist, who ties his lover to himself in an attempt to prevent her from leaving. However, later versions of the play replace the generic blind man with a high-ranking member of the *Tōdō-za*, shifting the humor toward a critique of the economic power of the guild rather than focusing on blindness itself. Without these contextual nuances, these plays might superficially resemble earlier works such as *Tachin Zatō* that relied solely on physical mockery, leading to their misinterpretation as crude ridicule rather than layered social satire. As Caroline Morley observes, the comedic appeal of *zatō* plays is deeply tied to the historical and social contexts in which they were performed. She notes that "without the context for the humor, the intricate social interactions of the *biwa hoshi* among themselves, as well as their place among the many artisans of the road, the pepper prank quickly loses its appeal."[140] She further asserts that, to contemporary audiences, the humor in *zatō* plays can verge uncomfortably close to outright mockery of disability, which has contributed to their infrequent performance in the modern *kyōgen* repertory. This observation underscores the importance of situating *zatō* plays within their historical and cultural frameworks to fully appreciate their comedic intent and evolution.

[140] Morley, "*Chakagi Zatō* (The Tea Sniffing Blind Men)," p. 53.

Another key change is the shift toward more refined humor and satire. As *kyōgen* evolved into a more structured and socially aware art form, later collections such as the *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū* and *Tenri-bon Kyōgen Rikugi* began to phase out overtly crude physical humor in favor of satire and irony. *Sannin Katawa* introduces characters faking disabilities to gain employment, reflecting social skepticism toward disability-based privileges. *Tsukimi Zatō, Kawakami,* and *Kiyomizu Zatō* contain sympathetic characters whose plight as blind individuals in a cruel world is foregrounded for the audience.

Later *zatō* plays also increasingly engage with questions of morality, fate, and personal agency. In the debate between karma vs free-will, *Kawakami Zatō* presents blindness as a condition influenced by personal choices, rather than as an immutable karmic punishment. *Kiyomizu Zatō* reinforces this idea—blind characters actively seek divine intervention and change their own fates. This transition reflects broader shifts in Edo-period moral and religious thought, moving from karma-based fatalism toward an emphasis on personal responsibility and ethical behavior.[141]

The later plays also show an increased complexity in terms of the representation of disability and the growth of irony and layered humor. In *Hakuyō,* two blind guild members are so preoccupied with competing over a *biwa* that they fail to notice their own exploitation by a sighted lender. In *Mizu Kikazu*, a blind man and a deaf man argue over whose disability is worse, failing to recognize their shared struggles. These plays indicate a growing self-awareness in *kyōgen*, moving beyond simple slapstick to social commentary. As such, by the late Edo period *kyōgen* begins to explore the social lives of disabled people more holistically.

[141] See Chapter 3 for more detail.

Although the primary focus of this study is not the representation of non-blind disabled characters, their portrayal in *kyōgen* remained largely static in comparison to that of *zatō* characters. While blind individuals were frequently the subject of humor, their depiction evolved over time into more complex, sometimes tragic, and occasionally sympathetic figures. In contrast to plays such as *Kiyomizu Zatō*, *Kawakami Zatō*, and *Tsukimi Zatō*, which offer more empathetic portrayals of blind protagonists, characters with other physical disabilities do not receive the same degree of sympathy. For example, in *Akutagawa*, two physically disabled men attempt to conceal their impairments, yet much of the play's humor derives from their efforts to cruelly expose each other's disabilities through pranks and poetic taunts. A similar dynamic is present in *Mizu Kikazu*. This discrepancy in representation may have stemmed from the institutional power of the blind guild, which played a crucial role in influencing how blindness was perceived, whereas other disabilities lacked comparable organizational advocacy.

Over time, *kyōgen* evolved from a form of crude and often vulgar humor, reliant on physical mockery and indiscriminate ridicule, into a sophisticated and socially aware performance tradition. The transition from the *Tenshō Kyōgen-bon* to later Edo-period collections illustrates this shift clearly. While early *zatō* plays primarily mocked blindness as an inherent weakness, later versions integrated irony, social critique, and ethical dilemmas. By the Edo period, *kyōgen* performances had begun to reflect the complexities of hierarchical relationships, power dynamics within the Tōdō-za, and broader moral questions about fate and free will, which will be explored in more detail in later chapters.

Chapter 3

Between Karma and Comedy:
Kyōgen, Buddhist Ethics, and the Representation of Disability

Introduction: Disability, Ethics, and Performance in Medieval Japan

Up to this point, we have examined changes in the *kyōgen* repertoire and their correspondence to ethical shifts regarding the treatment of disabled individuals. Buddhist doctrine, as a primary framework for ethical thought in medieval Japan, was inherently tied to these changes. Given the argument that *kyōgen* plays that thematize disability might serve as evidence of ethical transformations in contemporaneous culture, it is essential to consider to what extent they might also reflect evolving Buddhist sensibilities towards disability. While Buddhist doctrine provides explicit teachings on disability, some of the most compelling evidence lies in unspoken beliefs regarding blindness, which surface in the public imagination through literature and art. In premodern Japan, although doctrine and art often reflected one another, at times they were notably at odds. Buddhist teachings frequently coexisted with popular Buddhist and Shinto beliefs that diverged from official doctrine. In the context of performance, certain symbolic representations differed between popular and doctrinal perspectives. For instance, disability in Buddhist doctrine often symbolized general human *dukkha* (suffering), while in *kyōgen* plays, disability assumed a more salvific role reflective of popular medieval Japanese thought. Although *kyōgen* humor often engages with disability as a target of ridicule, the plays also diverge from Buddhist teachings by emphasizing the provisional nature of disability and the potential for transformation through personal agency and moral action. This chapter argues that this duality—combining laughter with reflective inquiry—highlights the tension between doctrinal views of karma and *anātman* (non-self) and the popular imagination, which often

imbued disability with salvific potential and ethical resonance. Through their evolving engagement with disability, *kyōgen* plays provide insight into the interplay between performance, religion, and societal attitudes toward marginalized groups in premodern Japan.

Buddhist Doctrine and Disability: Karma, *Anātman*, and Ethical Frameworks

Two key concepts related to blindness highlight the disconnect between doctrine and popular practice: karma (the ethical consequences of actions) and *ātman* (soul or self). These ideas, as manifested in *kyōgen* plays and Buddhist doctrine, are central to representations of disability. Karma is closely tied to *ātman* because it presupposes continuity of identity across past and future lives. Although Japan inherited the Mahayana Buddhist tradition that rejected the concept of a continuous soul (*ātman*), elite Buddhist doctrines coexisted with popular Buddhist and native beliefs that incorporated *ātman*-like concepts.

The term *ātman* (soul or innermost self) generally refers to the essential essence of an individual. In the early Vedic texts, *ātman* is associated with breath and vital energy. Within the framework of reincarnation, *ātman* was understood to be the entity that persisted across lifetimes, maintaining identity over time. The earliest references to *ātman* are found in the ancient Indian scriptures known as the *Vedas*, composed between 1500 and 500 BCE. It is described as eternal, unchanging, and beyond the physical realm. Moreover, it was believed to exist as a separate entity from the body and could even detach during sleep.[142] By the time of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama (ca. 5th or 6th century BCE) *ātman* had already undergone significant philosophical elaboration. However, the Buddha rejected the existence of *ātman*, introducing instead the doctrine of *anatman*. This doctrine denies the notion of a fixed, eternal

[142] Buswell, "ANATMAN/ATMAN (NO-SELF/SELF)." *Encyclopedia of Buddhism. Volume One: A-L*, pg. 18.

self, asserting that human existence is composed of transient *skandhas* (aggregates), including *rūpa* (physical matter), *vedanā* (physical sensation), *saṃjñā* (perception), *saṃskāra* (various mental states such as emotions and intentions), and *vijñāna* consciousness.[143] In Buddhism, where all phenomena are subject to *anitya* (impermanence), *ātman* as a continuous entity was understood to be a conditioned concept, applicable only to apparent reality – that is, as *skandhas*. The Buddha argued that these aggregates collectively create the illusion of self, and when they dissipate, the concept of "personhood" ceases to exist. The term *anātman*, combining the prefix *an-* ("not") with *ātman* (self), encapsulates this rejection of a permanent self.[144]

When Mahayana Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the 6th century CE through Chinese and Korean transmissions, the principle of *anātman* became a foundational doctrinal element. However, as Buddhism adapted to Japan's cultural and religious contexts, interpretations of *anātman* varied, and in some cases, the doctrine was overlooked altogether.

Examples of this tension can be seen in Tendai Buddhism's principles of *san-tai* (三諦, Three Truths) and *hongaku shisō* (本覺思想, Original Enlightenment). Tendai Buddhism, founded by Saichō (767–822) in the 9th century, integrated various Buddhist teachings and practices. One of its fundamental doctrines, *hongaku shisō*, asserts that all things—including human beings, animals, insects, and even plants—are part of the same Buddha nature. This perspective is characteristic of Mahayana nondualism, which emphasizes that individuals are not distinct from the world around them. This view's rejection of individuality also appears to deny the existence of a continuing essence.

[143] Buswell, p. 18
[144] Buswell, p. 18.

San-tai (“Three Truths”) comprises three interrelated principles: the truth of non-substantiality (*śūnyatā*), which posits that phenomena lack inherent existence; the truth of temporary existence, which asserts that all phenomena have provisional reality; and the truth of the Middle Way, which synthesizes the first two, maintaining that all phenomena are simultaneously inherently empty and provisionally real. Although the first two principles may seem contradictory, the Middle Way reconciles these opposing perspectives. Notably, the Middle Way’s acknowledgment of provisional reality suggests the existence of a continuous identity, albeit in a temporary sense.

Shingon, another form of esoteric Buddhism, was introduced to Japan by Kūkai (aka Kōbō Daishi, 774–835) in the 9th century. Shingon developed its interpretation of *anātman* through the three bodies of the Buddha: *Dharmakaya* (法身, Truth Body), *Sambhogakaya (*報身, Reward Body), and *Nirmanakaya* (応身, Manifested Body). Regarding *anātman*, the *Nirmanakaya* exemplifies the transient and illusory nature of individual existence, underscoring the impermanence and interconnectedness of all phenomena.

Karma, Rebirth, and the Perceived Moral Dimensions of Disability in Buddhism

Karma (業, *gō*) is another concept related to *ātman* in which doctrinal and popular beliefs varied. Karma is the Buddhist principle of cause and effect, where good actions produce positive outcomes, and bad actions yield negative results. Since karma accrues from past actions, an individual’s current circumstances are understood as consequences of their actions in previous lives. In this sense, *ātman* appears to be implied by karma. However, in the context of the doctrine of *anātman*, a seeming contradiction arises: karma involves the effects of actions from a previous life, suggesting a continuity of identity, while *anātman* posits the absence of a

permanent, unchanging self. Despite this tension, Buddhist scholars, and even the Buddha himself, have tried to reconcile these concepts. As mentioned earlier, the Buddha taught that although there is no eternal self or soul, individuals exist as an ever-changing collection of *skandhas*. Karma operates within this framework, influencing individuals without necessitating the existence of a permanent self.

Karma in Buddhism functions as a causal principle governing the ethical and moral consequences of intentional actions. Early Buddhism, part of the broader *Śramana* (mendicant) religious movements alongside Jainism and Ājīvikism, shared the belief that actions inevitably lead to reciprocal results.[145] While these traditions varied in their interpretations, early Buddhists viewed karma as contributing to endless lifetimes and rebirths. Hindu religious literature and the Vedic Upanishads offered solutions to the problem of karma, including physical or mental inaction or the realization of one's true nature. However, the Buddha rejected these strategies, proposing instead a psychological solution focused on eradicating *tṛṣṇā* (desire). For the Buddha, karma arose not from specific actions but from desire, positioning the cessation of desire as central to liberation. Thus, the concept of *anātman* does not negate karma's workings; rather, karma functions within the framework of *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination), where actions arise from conditions and causes, leading to subsequent effects. These effects manifest within interconnected existence without requiring a fixed, enduring self.

The consequences of karma are understood to manifest not only in rebirth across various realms and social positions but also in the physical condition or appearance of the body. In Buddhist canonical texts, physical impairments and disfigurements are often linked to non-virtuous behavior. Bee Scherer's study of the intersection between Buddhism and critical

[145] Buswell, p. 415.

disability theory highlights how the non-virtuous actions of the fool (*bāla* in Sanskrit) manifest as impairments, including being "ugly, unsightly, deformed, diseased, or blind or crooked or lame or paralyzed."[146] According to Theravāda tradition, blindness is among eighteen *abhabbatthāna* ("unfavorable rebirths" or "impossible states"), alongside *jaccabadhira* (deafness), *ummataka* (insanity), *elāmūga* (muteness), *pīṭhasappi* (crippledom), *liṅgam parivattati* (changeable sex), *kuṭṭhī* (leprosy), and others.[147] Notably, this list also includes being born female or with *ubhatobyañjanā* or *paṇḍaka* (non-normative sexual characteristics).

Similarly, the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya*, a 4th or 5th-century Indian scholastic text influential in Mahayana thought, posits that the opposite qualities—such as being born male, into privileged families, without physical or mental disabilities, and with the ability to recall past lives—place an individual in the best position to achieve enlightenment. These canonical texts reflect the deeply embedded association between physical conditions and karmic merit, shaping historical attitudes toward disability within Buddhist contexts.[148]

Karmic Determinism and the Representation of Disability

Buddhism's explanation of disability, whether as punishment for past sins or as an impediment to enlightenment, tends to position disability within a predominantly negative framework. Scholars such as Stephen E. Harris argue that Buddhism's approach to disability aligns most closely with the medical model and only tangentially addresses aspects of the impairment and social models.[149] The medical model is one of three primary frameworks in

[146] Scherer, "Buddhism and Disability," p. 27.
[147] Mrozik, *Virtuous Bodies*, p. 71.
[148] Mrozik, p. 71.
[149] Harris, p. 68.

Disability Studies: the *impairment*, *medical*, and *social* models.[150] Texts such as the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* describe disability as an impediment to enlightenment, framing it in terms of functional limitation. Furthermore, Buddhist texts generally lack acknowledgment of social discrimination as a contributing factor to the challenges faced by disabled individuals. In some cases, Buddhist practices even appear to condone social discrimination. For example, Buddhist priests historically excluded *Burakumin* from temple registers, reinforcing societal marginalization.[151] These practices highlight Buddhism's sometimes limited engagement with the social and environmental factors that shaped the lived experiences of disabled individuals.[152]

Karma and Liberation in Medieval Japanese Buddhism: Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren Perspectives

The Muromachi period witnessed the rise of new Buddhist schools and movements, as well as the continued development and adaptation of existing traditions. With regard to karma, several significant new perspectives emerged. Zen Buddhism, particularly the Rinzai and Sōtō schools, flourished during this period. Zen teachings emphasized direct experiential insight into the nature of reality, primarily through *zazen* (meditation) and contemplation. While Zen teachings did not reject the concept of karma, they placed greater emphasis on the immediacy of present experience and the direct realization of one's true nature, which transcends conventional

[150] See the introduction for more information about the three frameworks.
[151] Williams, *The Other Side of Zen*, p. 30.
[152] *Burakumin* (部落民, hamlet/village people) is a Meiji era term for ethnic Japanese people who are believed to be descended from members of the pre-Meiji feudal class of *eta* and *hinin*, who were associated with *kegare* (穢れ, defilement), such as beggars, executioners, undertakers, slaughterhouse workers, butchers, and tanners. See Chapter 1 footnotes for more information.

notions of past and future. In the *Sanji-No-Gō* chapter of the *Shōbōgenzō*,[153] the patriarch of the Sōtō school, Dōgen (1200–1253), delineates three types of karmic retribution:

> What we call the three temporal periods are the three time periods in which we receive the retribution from our good and evil acts. These are, first, the retribution experienced in one's present life; second, the retribution experienced in one's next life; and third, the retribution experienced in some later future life.[154]

Dōgen's explanation of karma appears to have been an attempt to address concerns about the existence of karmic repercussions. Such concerns were understandable, given that Dōgen's interpretation of karma was, on the whole, subordinate to Zen praxis. He emphasized the importance of being fully present and engaged in each moment, as this is where karma is enacted and its effects are experienced. For Dōgen, *shūgyō* (practice) and *kenshō* (realization) were inseparable.

Dōgen often stressed the centrality of *zazen*, or sitting meditation, as the core practice of Buddhism. He considered *zazen* to be synonymous with the study of Zen, as indicated in the first sentence of his 1243 instruction manual, *Fukan Zazen-gi* (普勧坐禅儀): "The practice of Zen is *zazen."*[155] In his teachings, karma is not a fixed or static concept but rather a dynamic process continuously unfolding in each moment. Students were encouraged to transcend karma through ethical conduct and by cultivating wisdom through meditation and mindfulness. Despite the prominence of karma in Dōgen's other work, *Shōbōgenzō*, the text fell into obscurity within a few generations after Dōgen's death. By the late medieval period, it was known only to a small group of individuals associated with the Eihei-ji temple. This decline underscores the shifting

[153] The *Shōbōgenzō* is the most famous work of Dōgen. It is a collection of essays and sermons on Zen practice, philosophy, and enlightenment, written in Japanese rather than classical Chinese, making it accessible to a wider audience in Japan.
[154] Nearman, *Shōbōgenzō,* p. 1029.
[155] 「修行とは坐禅である」 Dōgen, *Zazen-gi*. Dōgen. *Fukan zazengi,* p. 2.

priorities within Japanese Buddhism during the Muromachi period, as new movements and interpretations emerged.[156]

Pure Land Buddhism, centered on devotion to Amitabha Buddha and the aspiration to be reborn in the Pure Land, gained significant popularity during the Muromachi period. Amidist teachings emphasized faith and reliance on Amitabha Buddha's vow to save all beings who sincerely call upon his name. While Amidism did not dismiss the concept of karma, it offered a path to liberation that prioritized faith and devotion, assuring practitioners that sincere belief would secure their rebirth in the Pure Land, irrespective of their karmic conditions. Zen Buddhism's focus on the immediacy of the present moment and Pure Land's emphasis on faith stands in contrast to the themes of punishment and karmic power prevalent in early *nō* and *kyōgen* plays.

Although good karma could facilitate rebirth in the Pure Land, Shinran's perspective framed karma as better understood in ethical terms. In his late 13th-century work, *Tannishō* (歎異抄), Shinran described karma as an obstacle to establishing faith in Amida Buddha rather than as a barrier to rebirth. Shinran understood karma, which he interpreted as the consequences of past actions, to be the root cause of all poor decisions. He stated:

> Good thoughts arise through the prompting of past good; evil comes to be thought and performed through the working of evil acts (karma). These words were among those spoken by the late master: "You must realize that there is never [any act]—even so slight as a particle on the tip of a rabbit's hair or sheep's fleece—that is not evil that we commit and [the working out of] past karma (*shukugō*)." [157]

In Shinran's analysis, all karma is inherently negative, as it reflects the lingering effects of past lives on present choices. This passage suggests that all human actions—whether in thought,

[156] Kawamura, *Dōgen Zenji Zensho*. pp. 699-711.
[157] Trans. Ueda, "Freedom and Necessity in Shinran's Concept of Karma," pp. 76–100.

emotion, speech, or behavior—are not determined by personal judgment or volition but are instead governed entirely by the consequences of past actions. Shinran attributes absolute authority over human conduct to karmic causation, effectively negating the notion of moral responsibility and free will in the present. Such an interpretation of karma may be characterized as fatalistic, as it implies that every action, whether virtuous or immoral, is determined by necessity, rendering the present self entirely powerless. Shinran ultimately subordinated karma to the praxis of faith in Amida.

Nichiren Buddhism (日蓮仏教), another significant development in Kamakura Buddhism, also emphasized the potential to overcome karma. Nichiren Buddhism, based on the teachings of the 13th-century Buddhist priest Nichiren (日蓮, 1222–1282), derives its doctrine primarily from the *Lotus Sutra*. Nichiren asserted that all sentient beings possess an inherent Buddha nature, enabling them to attain Buddhahood in their current life. Similar to other medieval Buddhist traditions, Nichiren emphasized the transformative potential of karma. This understanding is closely tied to the principle of *ichinen sanzen* (一念三千, "three thousand realms in a single moment of life"). This principle conceptualizes the individual as a microcosm of the universe, positing that an individual's condition at any given moment is reflected across all aspects of their life and surroundings.

Nichiren Buddhism teaches that individuals can transform their karma and achieve enlightenment through practices such as chanting the mantra *Namu-myoho-renge-kyo* ("All praise to the Marvelous Lotus Sutra") and engaging in compassionate actions. Chanting is believed to purify negative karma, harmonizing one's life with the rhythm of the universe and fostering greater fulfillment and enlightenment.

Scholars have noted that Kamakura Buddhism placed primary emphasis on religious experience, often formulating theological explanations afterward, a reversal of the traditional approach in earlier sects.[158] Given this emphasis, popular plays and entertainment from the period can serve as evidence of prevailing religious attitudes. However, a clear disconnect exists between the immediacy and non-attachment espoused in contemporaneous Buddhist discussions and the karmic entanglements depicted in medieval literature.

The Edo Period: Institutionalization of Buddhism and Ethical Shifts

This tendency toward an emphasis on moral visibility and practical ethics continued into the Edo period, which marked another significant transformation in the history of Japanese Buddhism. During the Edo period, Buddhism was nationalized through institutional mechanisms such as the *danka* system, which required family membership in a temple for the purposes of census and taxes. Once monks became government officials, they could rely on the *danka* system to maintain their ministries, only making minimal efforts to increase their followers. Consequently, monks became predominantly "masters of the funeral ceremony," focusing on funeral and memorial services for the deceased.[159]

While the shogunate promoted Buddhist study, it simultaneously prohibited inter-sect debates about new doctrines or any expressions of dissent, fearing that such discussions might cause confusion within the Buddhist community. Additionally, the shogunate's prohibition of such debates limited the freedom of speech and critical discussion within Buddhist studies, which hindered significant scholarly development. The contents of sutras and the teachings of

[158] Ōsumi, "Buddhism in the Kamakura period" in *The Cambridge History of Japan,* vol. 3, pp. 544–580.
[159] Matsuo, *A History of Japanese Buddhism*, p. 232.

sect founders were regarded as immutable truths, leaving little room for critical inquiry.[160] This limitation on open discussion and the expression of opposing viewpoints led to a situation where monks and scholars had to find alternative ways to engage with ethical issues and convey moral teachings to the general public. As a result, some monks, like Suzuki Shōsan and Hakuin Ekaku, sought to establish secular morality with a Buddhist orientation.[161] They focused on communicating Buddhist teachings in a manner that was accessible to the common people, advocating for ethical behavior and moral responsibility in daily life.

Suzuki Shōsan (鈴木正三, 1579–1655) sought to disseminate Buddhism among the common people, establishing a secular morality rooted in Buddhist principles. While traditional Buddhism encouraged the transcendence of the material world, these developments transformed it into a framework for ethical living and social behavior.[162] Hakuin Ekaku (白隠 慧鶴,1685–1768) played a significant role in promoting secular morality through his teachings and practices within the Rinzai Zen sect. He emphasized that every person has the capability of becoming a Buddha, which became a widely accepted concept in Japanese Buddhism after the Kamakura period. Hakuin sought to make Zen teachings accessible to the general public by using simple language and metaphors to explain complex ideas. He advocated that good conduct, such as making donations, observing precepts, reciting prayers, and undergoing training, should be an integral part of Zen practice.[163] This effort to promote ethical discourse arose from the need to connect Buddhist principles to the lived experiences of individuals, especially since formal debate and critique were restricted. In the end, the shogunate's restrictions paradoxically

[160] Matsuo, p. 217
[161] Matsuo, pp. 218-219.
[162] Matsuo, pp. 218-219.
[163] Matsuo, pp. 220-221.

contributed to a revival of ethical discourse within the Buddhist community, emphasizing moral behavior.

Another significant development during the Edo period was the rise of Neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism is a philosophical and ethical movement that emerged as a response to the challenges posed by Buddhism and Daoism during the Song Dynasty (960–1279 CE) in China. It sought to reinterpret and revitalize Confucian thought by integrating metaphysical and cosmological ideas, creating a more comprehensive philosophical system. Introduced to Japan during the Kamakura period through contact with Chinese texts and scholars, Neo-Confucianism gained prominence during the Muromachi period through the efforts of Japanese scholars who had studied in China.

By the Edo period, Neo-Confucianism had become the dominant intellectual and ethical framework, actively promoted by the Tokugawa shogunate to consolidate social order and reinforce hierarchical structures.[164] Its influence extended to education, governance, and social ethics, aligning with and complementing Buddhist teachings. Both Neo-Confucianism and Buddhism emphasized compassion, filial piety, and virtue cultivation. While Neo-Confucianism underscored social and moral responsibility, Buddhism focused on personal enlightenment and universal compassion. The interaction between these two traditions contributed to a rich ethical landscape in Edo period Japan. Together, they shaped a moral framework that blended religious and secular principles, influencing governance, community life, and individual behavior. This synthesis highlights the adaptability of Buddhist teachings to the changing cultural and intellectual currents of the period.

[164] Earhart, *Religion in Japan,* pp. 83-85.

With these developments, karmic emphasis shifted from what you did in your past life to what you do in the present. Buddhist ethics and Confucian moral principles were deeply intertwined with the concept of karma, shaping social conduct and reinforcing moral responsibility. The prevailing belief was that ethical behavior—expressed through filial piety, social harmony, and personal virtue—led to positive karmic consequences, both in this life and in future rebirths. In other words, moral living was depicted as the path to karmic purification. However, as we can see from the following examples, popular literature and drama interpreted conceptions of *ātman* and karma in a variety of ways.

Ghosts, Spirits, and the Supernatural: Challenging Doctrinal *Anātman*

Despite the formal rejection of *ātman*, *ātman*-like concepts continued to appear in Japanese literature and theater, suggesting a persistent tension between doctrinal orthodoxy and popular belief. This tension underscores how karma and *ātman* were reimagined within the *kyōgen* repertoire, offering insights into the cultural and ethical dimensions of disability in medieval Japan. At the same time that Shingon and Tendai Buddhism were promoting *anātman*-derived principles, practices seemingly at odds with *anātman* persisted in Japanese thought, particularly within the popular and creative spheres. In the Heian period, *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*), Lady Rokujō, a mistress of the novel's protagonist, Hikaru Genji, becomes jealous of Genji's other romantic interests, particularly his principal wife, Lady Aoi. Consequently, Lady Aoi is attacked by Rokujō's *tama* (魂, or *tamashii*, her life force or spirit), which appears to leave her body while sleeping.[165] The belief that the *tama* could temporarily leave the body as an *ikiryō* (生霊, living spirit) was widespread during the lifetime of the author,

[165] Murasaki, *The Tale of Genji*. Trans. Tyler, pp. 176–190.

Murasaki Shikibu (973–1014 or 1025). After Lady Rokujō's death, her *shiryō* (死霊, dead spirit) is humiliated when Genji criticizes her difficult personality to his secondary wife, Lady Murasaki.[166] In revenge, Rokujō's *shiryō* possesses Lady Murasaki, causing her to fall ill and temporarily stop breathing.[167] Through a medium, Rokujō later explains that her attack on Murasaki stemmed from her lingering jealousy and attachment to Genji: "For months you have cruelly chastised me and caused me such pain that I thought I might teach you a proper lesson."[168] Lady Murasaki eventually recovers, but Rokujō's spirit later possesses another of Genji's wives, the Third Princess, further illustrating her enduring influence. In this way, Rokujō's lingering spirit shares intriguing parallels with the concept of *ātman*, as it reflects a profound and unresolved attachment that contradicts the principle of no-self central to Buddhist thought.

The concept of *tama*, derived from *kami* worship practices and folk religion not yet fully integrated into Buddhist contexts, aligns more closely with the idea of *ātman* than *anātman*, particularly in the case of *shiryō* (dead spirits). However, the notable presence of Buddhist monks and rituals during exorcism scenes depicted in literature and historical chronicles links this *ātman*-like belief to Buddhist traditions. This coexistence indicates that a popular belief in the soul persisted in the early 11th century, even as Buddhist doctrine emphasized the principle of *anātman*. Written for a popular audience, *The Tale of Genji* reflects a widespread concern with *mononoke* (spirit possession), which was believed to especially afflict women during childbirth, the leading cause of death for women in the Heian period.

[166] Murasaki, p. 613.
[167] Murasaki, pp. 613–615.
[168] Murasaki, p. 654.

The symbolic use of *tama* highlights a divergence between Buddhist doctrine and popular art. In *The Tale of Genji*, aristocratic women of the Heian period, confined largely to their homes and reliant on indirect communication, found power and agency through supernatural means. Lady Rokujō's wandering and vengeful spirit, both alive (*ikiryō*) and dead (*shiryō*), enables her to infiltrate the lives of her rivals Lady Aoi and Lady Murasaki, exerting influence otherwise unavailable to women in her societal position. Her revenge on Genji, driven by his emotional neglect, critiques the male patriarchy of the period. In this way, the *tama* becomes a symbol of resistance against systemic inequities. The narrative's focus on *tama* also adds an element of mystery and intrigue, as only Genji is initially aware of Rokujō's role in Lady Aoi's death, while Rokujō herself remains unaware of her spirit's actions. Buddhist interpretations often view Lady Rokujō's spirit possession as a manifestation of unwholesome mental states, such as jealousy and mattachment, which can lead to suffering for oneself and others.[169] Her transformation into an *ikiryō* exemplifies how unchecked emotions can have tangible, harmful effects, aligning with Buddhist teachings on the importance of mental discipline and the dangers of negative emotions. So although Buddhism may interpret the lingering spirit of Rokujō as a metaphor for attachment, its literary use reflects the values and concerns of the Heian audience.

Similar themes appear in Sei Shōnagon's *The Pillow Book* (*Makura no Sōshi*), which includes accounts of angry ghosts often described in the context of Buddhist exorcism rituals. Specifically, she recounts a scene in which a handsome priest chants mantras on behalf of a lady suffering from spirit possession. After remarking how a medium's writhing is a pitiable sight, Shōnagon notes how the spirit begs for forgiveness and is dismissed. Likewise, the *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (*Tales of Times Now Past*), a late Heian-period collection of stories, features

[169] See Barnes, "Lady Rokujō's Ghost: Spirit Possession, Buddhism, and Healing in Japanese Literature."

numerous supernatural tales involving ghosts. In "A Human Skull Repays the Kindness of Dōtō, a Priest from Korea[170]" a Korean priest at Gangoji Temple seeks to perform meritorious deeds, including building a bridge over the Uji River. While traveling over Mt. Narasaka, he encounters a human skull trampled on the road and, moved by compassion, instructs his assistant to place it on a tree. Sometime later, on New Year's Eve, an unknown man arrives at the temple, expressing gratitude for Dōtō's kindness and inviting the assistant to a meal. The man reveals he was murdered by his elder brother for money and left to decay, suffering until Dōtō's act freed him. As dawn approaches, he vanishes, warning of his brother's arrival. Shortly after, the ghost's mother and brother arrive to perform rituals, and the mother, learning the truth, grieves and condemns her elder son. The story concludes with a reflection on gratitude, asserting that if even the dead repay kindness, the living should do so as well.[171] It also connects the Uji River bridge to Dōtō, with some versions claiming divine beings assisted in its construction.

The story "Taira no Suetake, a Retainer of Yorimitsu, Comes Across a Woman with a Baby"[172] is a supernatural tale that highlights bravery, skepticism, and the eerie encounters between humans and spirits. While serving Minamoto no Yorimitsu in Mino Province, a group of samurai discuss a mysterious woman who appears at the Watari river crossing, pleading with travelers to hold her baby. Doubting the tale, Suetake confidently wagers his belongings and sets out to cross the river, despite his comrades' skepticism. Three men secretly follow him and, hidden in the grass, witness Suetake successfully reaching the far shore and planting his arrow as proof. As he returns, a woman's voice calls out, asking him to hold her baby, and an eerie fishy

[170] Vol. 19, Tale 31, 髑髏報高麗僧道登恩語.
[171] 「然れば、死たる人の骸そら、恩を報ずる事、此の如し。況や、生たらむ人の恩を報ずるをば、仏菩薩も喜び給ふ事也。」
[172] Vol. 27, Tale 43 「源頼光と平季武が産女に出会った話」

smell fills the air. To their shock, Suetake accepts the child but refuses to return it when the woman demands it back, carrying the baby to the governor's residence. However, when he reveals his sleeve, the baby has vanished, leaving only a handful of tree leaves. The men who had secretly followed him recount what they saw, terrifying those who had doubted the tale. Though Suetake wins the wager, he refuses any reward, insisting that the task was simple. The story ends with speculation about the woman's true nature, some believing her to be a fox spirit and others thinking she was the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth, emphasizing the supernatural presence that lingers in the world of the living.[173] These ghostly figures consistently embody unresolved attachments anchoring their spirits to the human realm.

Karma as Skillful Means: *Hōben* and Adaptive Buddhist Teachings

During the Muromachi period, some Buddhist thinkers interpreted karma as a skillful means (Skt. *upaya*, Jp. *hōben*), a tool understood to have been employed by Buddhas and bodhisattvas to guide sentient beings toward awakening. From this perspective, karma was not viewed as a rigid and deterministic law but as a flexible principle that could be skillfully applied to aid in liberation. Although Buddhist texts did not directly address discrimination against the blind and disabled, *hōben* was indirectly used to include such individuals in Buddhist teachings, tailoring the doctrine to accommodate the mental and physical capacities of diverse audiences. E. B. Cowell highlights this aspect of *hōben* as evidence of Buddhism's inclusive nature.[174] He examines how the Buddha exemplifies skillful adaptability in instruction by tailoring his

[173] 「この産婦と言うのは、「狐が人を騙そうとして化けているのだ」と言う人もいれば、「妊婦が死んで霊になったのだ」と言う人もいると、語り伝えています。」
[174] Cowell, *The Jātaka: Or Stories of the Buddha's Former Births. Vol. 1*. pp. 15-21

teaching methods to the specific needs of his disciples. In one instance, rather than providing a doctrinal exposition, which would have been ineffective, the Buddha guides a monk with limited intellectual capacity through a straightforward yet impactful practice: handling a cloth while repeatedly reciting the phrase "removal of impurity." This tactile and meditative exercise enables the monk to recognize the defilements within his own mind, ultimately leading to profound insight and eventual liberation. Notably, the concept of *hōben* was not only employed to assist individuals with physical disabilities but also served as a means of addressing the diverse psychological and intellectual capacities of practitioners.

The *Lotus Sutra* provides one of the most famous illustrations of *hōben* through the parable of the Burning Mansion. In this parable, a father saves his three children from a burning house—representing the suffering of existence—by telling them that various vehicles likely to appeal to each child await them outside. Upon escaping, the children find only one "Great Vehicle" (Mahayana), which they joyfully accept, having escaped the danger of the fire. The *Lotus Sutra* emphasizes that different strategies must be employed to convey the teachings of Buddhism (*dharma*) because the physical and psychological abilities of individuals vary significantly.[175]

Setsuwa **and the Narrative Transmission of Karma**

One application of *hōben* is evident in the *setsuwa* genre, a form of Japanese literature consisting of anecdotal stories, parables, and moral tales rooted in Buddhist teachings. The term *setsuwa* translates to "narrative" or "storytelling," and these stories served as a means of disseminating Buddhist principles, ethical values, and teachings to a broad audience. Emerging

[175] Watson, *The Lotus Sutra*, pp. 56–62.

during the medieval period (1185–1603), *setsuwa* tales were shared by monks and storytellers who traveled to various locations, delivering these narratives orally or through written texts. *Setsuwa* often explored themes such as karma, compassion, impermanence, the nature of existence, and the consequences of actions. They illustrated Buddhist concepts such as the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, and the karmic law of cause and effect. Designed to be accessible to individuals from all backgrounds and levels of education, these tales served as powerful tools for imparting Buddhist teachings in a relatable and engaging manner. Moreover, *setsuwa* frequently integrated elements of folklore, mythology, and everyday life, enhancing their relevance and resonance with the audience's lived experiences.

A *setsuwa* from the Muromachi period that illustrates the concept of karma is the tale of "The Man Who Tried to Steal a Bell" (*Kane Dorobō no Monogatari*, 鐘泥棒の物語). In this story, a man becomes obsessed with stealing a large temple bell renowned for its exquisite sound. Despite warnings from others about the consequences of his actions, he disregards them and proceeds with his plan. Although he successfully steals the bell and escapes, the bell becomes increasingly heavy as he flees. Eventually, he collapses under its weight and is unable to carry it further. Upon awakening, he finds himself back at the temple, with the bell returned to its original place. Realizing the error of his ways, the man repents and seeks forgiveness from the monks. Moved by his sincerity, the monks forgive him, and he dedicates the rest of his life to serving the temple and its community. This tale underscores the workings of karma, as the man's selfish act leads to immediate suffering (an instantaneous form of karma) and eventual moral transformation. It serves as a cautionary narrative about the consequences of selfish actions and the importance of repentance and responsibility.

A tale from the *Hokke Genki* (1040-1044) recounts the story of the priest Gyohan, a devout practitioner of the *Lotus Sutra* who is able to recite the entire text from memory with one significant exception—the "Former Affairs of the Bodhisattva Medicine King" chapter (*Yakuō Bosatsu Honji-hon*).[176] Despite years of dedicated practice, Gyohan consistently fails to recall this section, prompting him to investigate the cause. Initially, he reaffirms his mastery of meditative concentration, but when this proves ineffective, he adopts a repentant heart and prays for insight. In response, he receives a revelatory dream in which an old man, appearing as a Shinto deity, informs him that karmic consequences from a past life are responsible for his inability to recite the chapter. In his previous incarnation, Gyohan was a black horse owned by a *Lotus Sutra* devotee and, through repeated exposure to the sutra, had internalized all but the "Medicine King" chapter. Although he lacked conscious understanding as an animal, the mere act of hearing the scripture left an imprint on his karmic continuum, leading to his rebirth as a *Lotus* practitioner. The old man assures Gyohan that if he diligently recites the sutra in his current life, he will achieve clarity and great enlightenment in his next incarnation. With this knowledge, Gyohan fully embraces his faith, deepening his commitment to the *Lotus Sutra* and reading it ceaselessly, embodying the power of karmic influence and the transformative potential of devotional practice.

Memory, Attachment, and the Challenge to *Anātman* in *Mugen Nō*

These depictions of ghosts and the immediate effects of karma thus challenge the doctrinal concept of *anātman*. This contradiction continues into the medieval period with the ghosts depicted in *nō* and *kyōgen* plays. In *mugen nō* (dream vision *nō*), the *shite* (lead actor) appears

[176] Dykstra, "Miraculous Tales of the Lotus Sutra: The *Dainihonkoku Hokkegenki",* pp. 189-210.

first as an ordinary person recounting past events before revealing their true identity as a ghost and reenacting those events in the second act. While Mahayana Buddhism acknowledges the existence of supernatural beings, such as *gaki* (hungry ghosts) and *Ashura* warriors, these beings belong to distinct realms within the *rokudō* (sixfold path of existence or reincarnation). The ghosts depicted in *mugen nō* exist within the same realm as living human beings, thereby challenging the clear demarcation of distinct realms outlined in the doctrine of the *rokudō*. *Mugen nō* does not merely collapse these boundaries; rather, its spectral figures retain memories of their past lives and recount their stories, a notion more closely aligned with the concept of *ātman* than with *anātman*. This continuity of self, which contrasts with the Buddhist principle of the absence of a fixed, enduring self, is integral to the dramatic structure of *nō* theater. The narrative effectiveness of *mugen nō* relies on the premise that ghosts retain and articulate their past experiences, reinforcing the genre's thematic emphasis on memory, attachment, and unresolved emotions. Nevertheless, the ghosts of *mugen nō* serve as representations of suffering caused by attachment, promoting the salvific power of Buddhism. From a secular perspective, however, these ghosts function as dramatic devices to entertain audiences and advance the plot.

This divergence can be partly attributed to the demands of the dramatic genre. Just as Lady Rokujō's spirit in *The Tale of Genji* voiced Murasaki Shikibu's critique of patriarchy, the ghosts in *mugen nō* (dream vision noh) served as visible representations of attachment. Dramatic coherence required their presence, as did the pedagogical aim of illustrating attachment. For instance, in the *nō* play *Yorimasa*, an itinerant monk is guided to historical sites by a mysterious old man. The old man recounts the story of Minamoto no Yorimasa, a general in the Genpei War (1180–1185) who, after losing a battle, committed suicide by stabbing himself with his sword. The old man vanishes, and in the second act, Yorimasa's ghost returns to lament the transient

nature of life while recounting his battle at Uji River and his death. As in other warrior category plays, Yorimasa's ghost expresses attachment to violence and battle, themes that underscore the karmic entrapment of such figures. In this way, the ghosts of *nō* plays not only fulfilled narrative and dramatic functions but also visually embodied the Buddhist teachings on the dangers of attachment and the cyclical nature of suffering. These differences between theatrical representations and theological discussions highlight the multifaceted nature of medieval Japanese Buddhism. At the same time that late Muromachi artistic works emphasized karmic repercussions, other developments in Muromachi Buddhism appeared to shift focus away from karma.

Another *nō* play that diverges from contemporaneous Buddhist doctrine of *anātma* and karma is *Seimimaru.* Written by Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥元清, 1363–1443), the play draws its plot from the 12th-century collection *Konjaku Monogatarishū* (今昔物語集). Among the saddest of *nō* plays, the story focuses on Semimaru, the purported son of Emperor Uda (r. 888–897), who is banished to live in a hut near the Ausaka Barrier (Ausaka no seki) due to his congenital blindness. Semimaru spends his days playing the *biwa* lute, gradually coming to terms with his fate as both a blind man and an outcast, attributing these hardships to the workings of karma. Although Emperor Uda's actions might seem cruel, they are justified within the context of karmic theory. In this framework, blindness was understood as karmic punishment for transgressions committed in past lives. Allowing an individual with such bad karma to ascend to the throne was seen as potentially disastrous, as their karma might bring misfortune to the entire country. Consequently, Semimaru's exile was deemed a necessary act of governance.

Semimaru himself accepts his suffering as redemptive, believing that his blindness in this world will lessen his suffering in the next:

Heartless this would seem, but it's his plan
To purge in this world my burden from the past,
And spare me suffering in the world to come.[177]

The thematic core of the play lies in Prince Semimaru's fate and the inevitability of karma. Reduced from the status of prince to that of a beggar due to his karmic sins, Semimaru also witnesses his sister, Princess Sakagami, wandering from Kyoto in madness caused by her own karmic burden. The play concludes with Semimaru resigning himself to his solitary existence. Scholars such as Susan Matisoff interpret *Semimaru* as a medieval morality play that underscores the inescapable and awe-inspiring power of karma.[178] In this context, blindness functions as a somber reminder of one's predetermined fate. Rather than overcoming one's karma, as *anatman* would suggest, *Semimaru* is tied to his past life in a conception analogue to *ātman.*

***Sekkyō*: The Intersection of Buddhist Didacticism and Popular Entertainment**

Other Buddhist genres also explored themes of karmic retribution, including *sekkyō* tales (説教) —narrative performances that gained popularity between the Kamakura and Muromachi periods. *Sekkyō* has a rich tradition within various schools of Japanese Buddhism, including Zen, Pure Land, and Nichiren Buddhism. These tales were often based on Buddhist sutras and doctrines, functioning as a form of public entertainment and religious instruction. *Sekkyō* tales were a medium for preaching or delivering sermons in which speakers employed metaphorical and allegorical language to convey Buddhist teachings. The stories frequently utilized parables, analogies, and vivid imagery to present complex philosophical ideas in an accessible and

[177]「だから、父の帝が山野に捨て置かれるのは、情けのないように見えるけれども、この世で過去の罪障をすすぎ、後世を助けようという深いお考えがあるからなのだ」Koyama, *Yōkyokushū,* vol. 2. *Nihon Koten Bungaku Zenshū 59*, Trans. Matisoff, *The Legend of Semimaru*, p. 104.
[178] Matisoff, *The Legend of Semimaru*, p. 96.

relatable manner. Although *sekkyō* tales were associated with religious institutions, the boundaries between clergy and laypeople were often indistinct in medieval Japan. During the Heian to Muromachi periods, *sekkyō* performers (*sekkyō-shi*) likely had no formal religious affiliation. These storytellers played a crucial pedagogical role in disseminating Buddhist principles such as karma to diverse audiences, blending spiritual instruction with engaging narratives to inspire and enlighten both clergy and lay practitioners.[179]

Over time, *sekkyo* evolved from a purely religious practice into a form of entertainment, giving rise by the 17-18th centuries to *sekkyo-bushi* (説教節), which combines spoken narration with melodious singing (*bushi* refers to the musical component). As Keller Kimbrough discusses in *Wondrous Brutal Fictions*, Edo period *sekkyō-bushi* tales often shared characteristics with horror narratives, frequently involving the gratuitous suffering and torture of children and other vulnerable characters. However, as Kimbrough notes, these stories could also be interpreted optimistically, as the suffering was portrayed as a means of burning off negative karma and hastening one's ascent to the Pure Land, where immediate salvation awaited. This perspective aligns with earlier examples, such as *Semimaru*, in which punishments are similarly understood as a way of purging bad karma for the sake of the future. In fact, Semimaru was seen as a significant figure in the origins of sekkyō-bushi, where he is seen as the deified ancestor from whom the sekkyō chanters are descended.[180]

One *sekkyō-bushi* story, *Shintoku-maru* uses blindness as a trial. The plot revolves around a noble boy who faces tragic circumstances. Shintoku-maru, a *moshigo* (申し子)[181] from

[179] Morrison, "*Sekkyō* and the Tale of Terute in *Oguri Hangan*: Authorizing the Role of Women (Part 1)." pp. 9-10.
[180] Ishii, "Sekkyō-Bushi." p. 292.
[181] A *moshigo* is a child granted in response to prayers. Ishii, p. 288.

Kiyomizu-dera, lives happily until his mother dies when he is thirteen.[182] After her death, his stepmother schemes to establish her own son as the heir and curses Shintoku-maru, leading to his blindness and leprosy. He is taken to Tennoji and ultimately abandoned. In a dream, Kannon appears to him and advises him to visit Kumano Shrine. During his journey, he is aided by Princess Oto, to whom he had once been betrothed. Despite his disfiguring illness, she helps him on his journey. Upon reaching Kiyomizu-dera, he is restored to health by the Shimizu Kannon. In retribution for having cast out his son, Shintoku-maru's father is himself blinded and forced to roam the countryside as a beggar. Eventually, Shintoku-maru seeks him out, restores his sight, but avenges himself by beheading the evil stepmother and her son. Here blindness is framed as a transformative trial that the protagonist must endure, akin to the challenges encountered in the archetypal hero's journey. As we shall seen in *kyōgen* plays from the same period in the following pages, blindness is depicted not as an insurmountable condition but as an obstacle to be transcended through moral agency and personal resilience.

The *sekkyō-bushi Oguri no hangan* employs blindness in a similar way. In the tale, the central character, Oguri, is also a *moshigo*, who is blessed with skills in writing, music, and painting, as well as being an accomplished horseman.[183] However, he faces turmoil when he becomes romantically involved with a beautiful princess, who is actually a serpent in disguise. As a result, he is cast out by his father. Later, Oguri marries Princess Terute, but her family opposes the union and ultimately succeeds in poisoning him and his retainers. The princess is spared but is enslaved in a brothel. Moved by the pleas of Oguri's retainers, the King of Hades allows Oguri to return to the world, albeit in a blind and ghostly form. To regain his human form, Oguri must reach the Kumano Shrine and bathe in its hot spring. During his journey, he

[182] Ishii, pp. 290-291.
[183] Ishii, pp. 291-292.

encounters the brothel where his wife works, but she does not recognize him. Eventually, he bathes in the shrine's spring, regains his former self, and is reunited with his family. Oguri then takes revenge on those who wronged him, and the tale concludes with him being enshrined as the deity Hachiman at Mino after his death.

Initially, Oguri is depicted as a skilled and accomplished individual, but his romantic involvement with a princess—a serpent in disguise—leads to his downfall and subsequent banishment by his father. After being poisoned and rendered blind, Oguri's condition is reminiscent of concepts of *ātman* and the type of karmic entrapment seen in *Semimaru*. His blindness not only represents his physical limitations but also reflects the emotional and spiritual turmoil he experiences due to betrayal and loss. As Oguri embarks on his journey to regain his human form, the blindness he suffers becomes a test of his perseverance and determination. He must navigate a world where he is unrecognized by his wife, Princess Terute, adding to the emotional weight of his journey. The challenge of overcoming blindness culminates at the Kumano Shrine, where he must bathe in the hot spring to restore his sight and humanity. Ultimately, Oguri's successful overcoming of blindness signifies his triumph over adversity, allowing him to reclaim his identity and reunite with his family. The narrative arc underscores that blindness, although a formidable obstacle, can be transcended through determination, faith, and the pursuit of redemption. This theme resonates with the broader motifs of struggle and recovery found throughout *sekkyō-bushi* stories, where characters often face significant trials before achieving resolution and fulfillment.

Evolving Ethical Frameworks in *Kyōgen*: From Karmic Retribution to Moral Agency

In contrast to *mugen nō,* the blind man plays of *kyōgen* eschew supernatural elements such as ghosts and transformations, instead focusing on living characters. These plays, particularly the early ones, emphasize blindness as karmic punishment for misdeeds in a past life. As with *anātman*, the concept of karma in *kyōgen* is loosely based on Buddhist doctrine but frequently diverges to address the real-life concerns and dramatic expectations of the popular audience. This blending of doctrinal elements with everyday themes underscores the adaptive nature of performance art in medieval Japan.

In early *zatō kyogen* this theme of karmic judgment and inescapability serves as a rationale for the physical abuse and ridicule of the central blind character. The earliest known collection of *kyōgen* plays, the *Tenshō Kyōgen Bon* (天正狂言本), was published in 1578, shortly after the fall of the Muromachi shogunate. As detailed in Chapter 2, one play from this collection, *Nunokahi Zatō,* portrays a merchant who deceives two blind men by selling the same piece of cloth to both and absconding with their money.[184] In another play, *Tarashii Zatō,* a woman steals the clothes of the blind man, either for mere amusement or possibly financial gain from selling the garb.[185] And in *Kemari Zatō*, the humor derives from the prospect of a group of blind men kicking each other while playing *kemari.*[186] In *Nunokahi Zatō*, the merchant himself is not punished for his transgression, instead the *zatō* end up attacking each other and trampling the *kōtō* attempting to mediate. In *Tarashii Zatō*, the *zatō* chases and curses the woman at the end of the play. In *Kemari Zatō,* the *kengyō* left behind simply limps off stage sadly. What unifies these plays is their crude humor directed at blind individuals, where the audience believes that the

[184] Kanai, *Tenshō Kyōgenbon Zenshaku*, p. 481.
[185] Kanai, p. 531.
[186] Kanai, p. 479.

laughter is better directed at the *zatō* rather than the perpetrators. Although the mockery in these *kyōgen* plays is harsher than in *Semimaru,* the blind characters share a similar acceptance of their blindness as karmic punishment for sins committed in past lives. Their being targets of ridicule is seemingly rationalized as part of the blind individual's karmic fate, reinforcing the notion of karmic justice in the form of laughter.

Whereas in *Tarashii zatō* and *Nunokahi zatō* the blind men at the end of the play are furious about how they have been tricked, at the end of *Kemari* zatō, the *kengyō* seems sadly resigned to his fate. This melancholic fatalism, similar to what we see in *Semimaru,* allows us to identify with the blind character, and becomes more pronounced in Edo period *zatō kyōgen*. For example, in *Tsukimi Zatō,* two men—one from lower Kyoto and one from upper Kyoto, one seeing and one blind—meet on the bank of a river during a full moon on a mid-autumn evening. Initially, they share the beauty of the autumn foliage, compose a *waka* poem together, and drink sake. However, after the two separate amicably, the man from lower Kyoto decides to bully the blind man, accusing him of obstructing the pathway and physically assaulting him. Despite apologizing, the blind man is beaten. The blind man's mistaken belief that the kind man who composed *waka* with him is different from the man who beat him highlights the cruelty of the world and the inescapability of karmic fate. But because we have watched him enjoy the autumn evening, drinking sake and composing poetry, we are encouraged to identify with him, so the cruelty of the other man seems much more surprising, and although we might laugh, our feelings of compassion are aroused.

Zatō plays function similarly to *mugen nō* plays in that the effects of karma must be visible to be ethically comprehensible. While the visibility of blind characters in the *zatō* plays as living individuals is less central than in *mugen nō*, the afflictions and ongoing punishment of

individuals burdened with bad karma must be apparent to depict the workings of karma. These effects occasionally manifest as instances of immediate karmic retribution, analogous to those found in *setsuwa* literature. For example, in *Kawakami*, the blind man experiences an immediate return to his state of blindness upon disobeying Jizō's commands. In one sense, this visibility allows the audience to understand the connection between one's current suffering and past misdeeds. Despite the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (non-self) and the *skandhas* (aggregates), which deny continuous identity, the dramatic portrayal of blind individuals in *zatō* plays suggests that audiences still associate their targets with the sins of their past lives.

The effects of karma are more readily understood and ethically resonant when the afflicted individual is aware of their past misdeeds, as in the case of *Semimaru*:

> I was born blind because I was lax in my religious duties in a former life.
> That is why the emperor, my father,
> Ordered you to leave me in the wilderness.[187]

This dramatization likely reflects the practical and earnest nature of the medieval audience, who sought dramatic clarity in their entertainment in the same way they sought simple explanations of karmic principles in *setsuwa*. A similar sense of wistful acknowledgment of fate is evident in *Tsukimi Zatō* when the blind man sings his mournful song:

> Further thoughts gain nothing but deepening regret.
> In the depths of autumn,
> Came I to listen to the singing of bugs,
> And lost myself in the deep maze of foolishness.
> Twilight deepens into night
> On this lonely plain.
> I find myself all alone
> Weeping bitter tears,
> I find myself all alone
> Weeping bitter tears.[188]

[187] Trans. Matisoff, p. 179.
[188] Trans. Kenny, *The Kyogen Book: An Anthology of Japanese Classical Comedies*. p. 211

These examples illustrate a popular ethical framework that relies on a belief in a continuous identity affected by karma. This approach to identity and morality coexisted with the doctrinal de-emphasis on continuous identity in religious teachings, highlighting the complexity and adaptability of Muromachi Buddhism.

Evolving Ethical Frameworks: From Karmic Retribution to Moral Agency

Reflecting the religious and social trends of the period, the plays of this era exhibit an ethical shift, moving away from narratives centered on karmic retribution toward a focus on ethical and moral decision-making. As discussed in Chapter 2, earlier plays such as *Tachin Satō* and *Nunokahi Zatō* —which derive their humor primarily from the confusion caused by the blind man's inability to see—were dropped from the repertoire after the *Tenshō Kyōgen Bon*. In contrast, plays like *Kemari Zatō* and *Inubiki Zatō* persisted until the *Kyōgen Sanbyakuban* of 1824–1825. Why would that be the case? As I argued in the previous chapter, later versions seem to reframe the humor as a critique of the leadership of the *Tōdō-za* rather than disability itself.

One reason might be that these plays, rather than focusing solely on the character's disability, target the *Tōdō-za* guild as an institution.[189] For instance, *Kemari Zatō* critiques specific members of the guild, such as the *kengyō*, who is trampled by members of his own guild. As Gerald Groemer notes in *"*Guild of the Blind," the *Tōdō-za* was a legitimate target of public criticism due to its monopolistic control over economic and performance opportunities and its excessive fees. This public resentment likely influenced *kyōgen* plays, especially since *kyōgen* performers competed directly with the blind performers' guild.[190] Similarly, *Inubuki Zatō* critiques the *zatō* for behavior beyond his blindness. The transition from the lower-ranked *zatō* to

[189] See Chapter 1 for more information on the predatory behaviour of the *Tōdō-za*.
[190] Groemer, "The Guild of the Blind in Tokugawa Japan," pp. 3-4.

the higher-ranked *kengyō* not only reflects a shift in satirical focus toward the *Tōdō-za* guild but also suggests a broader commentary on power dynamics within the blind community. Rather than solely targeting blindness as a physical condition, the critique appears to center on the blind man's excessive control over his lover, symbolized by his act of restraining her with a leash. This shift in emphasis highlights concerns regarding authority and dominance within hierarchical structures, rather than merely reinforcing stereotypes associated with visual impairment.[191]

The plays align with broader trends in Edo period, which increasingly emphasized ethical behavior over the passive acceptance of karmic retribution. A cursory reading of the 1642 *Kyōgenshū* version of *Kawakami* might suggest a motif of powerlessness in the face of fate, similar to the *nō* play *Semimaru*. Under this interpretation, the blind man ends the story in the same position as he began, implying that mastery over karma is unattainable. However, such a reading oversimplifies the narrative. The play makes it clear that the blind man could have permanently overcome his blindness if he had heeded Bodhisattva Jizō's command. This emphasis on personal choice marks a departure from traditional karma-based morality plays like *Semimaru*. Here, morality is no longer about resigning oneself to fate but about the consequences of one's choices in shaping destiny.

Other contemporaneous *zatō* plays, such as *Kiyomizu Zatō*, similarly highlight themes of personal choice and morality. In *Kiyomizu Zatō*, a later Edo adaptation of the *Tenshō kyōgen Bon*'s *Goze Zatō*, a blind man and woman independently visit Kiyomizu Temple to pray to the Bodhisattva Kannon for relief from their loneliness. At the temple, they receive a divine revelation instructing them to meet at the west gate, where they will find a suitable partner. This

[191] For more information, see Chapter 2.

time, both choose to follow the deity's guidance, and they meet each other at the gate, fulfilling Kannon*'s* promise.

Although the *Tenshō Kyōgen Bon* provides only a skeletal guide for performers, in the original version of *Kiyomizu, Goze Zatō,* the play simply ends with the blind man happily taking his new wife's hand and leaving. However, in the *Ōkura Torahiro-bon* version, the blind man reflects on their miraculous encounter, stating, "Like the tall standing brocade tree, if we hadn't met, we would have wilted alone."[192] This statement suggests that had the couple not prayed to Kannon, they would have been destined to live out their lives in isolation, a fate ostensibly befitting someone burdened by the karma of blindness. By taking action, they alter their destiny, demonstrating a shift from passive acceptance of fate to proactive moral agency.

Different versions of the play *Kawakami* also offer significant insight into the types of karma they emphasize. The *Toraaki-bon* (1642), *Tenribon* (1644), *Kyōgenki* (1660-1730) and *Kyōgen Sanbyakubanshū* (1824-1885) versions of the play are not classified as *zatō* plays because the protagonist's blindness is not congenital. Instead Toraaki classifies them in the category of women plays. The reason for this classification lies in the couple's relationship. At the beginning of these later versions, the man explains that he became blind because his wife failed to take care of his sore eyes. He goes to Jizō's shrine to pray and the deity restores his sight, but when he returns his wife claims that he must have been cheating on her since he was looking so well-fed after seven days of fasting.[193] In other words, like other Edo-period works, the emphasis shifts from sins of a past life to the alleged sins (of the wife) in the present life.

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[192]「千枝万枝の立錦木、逢はでやあらん萎れ木に。」 Sasano, p. 321.
[193] 「女房「おのれ、知らぬと思ふか。わ男め、内々聞き及うだ。誰(た)そ、酒や肴、色々の物を持つて(い)行て馳走してがあらう。」 Nomura, *Kyōgenki* (*ge*). p. 278.
[193] Scholz-Cionca. "What Happened to the Zatō Kyōgen?", pp. 67–82.

Ōkura Toraaki classifies this play as one of the "woman" plays (*onna kyōgen* 女狂言), interpreting the wife's suspicious and jealous nature as a personification of bad karma. Like later versions of *Kawakami,* the man is miraculously healed after spending seven days praying at Jizō's shrine. However, instead of celebrating her husband's restored sight, the wife accuses him of running away with a concubine.[194] The play concludes with the enraged wife dragging and tossing her husband across the stage until he loses his sight again. This conclusion reinforces the idea that his fate is tied to his past karma, even as it underscores the miraculous possibility of temporarily overcoming blindness and karma. These early versions echo themes of the inescapability of fate seen in early *kyōgen* collections and the instantaneous karmic retribution characteristic of *setsuwa*. Simultaneously, the miraculous transformations of sight—whether the healing or the reversal back to blindness—suggest the provisional nature of blindness and the possibility of overcoming bad karma through the intervention of Buddhist deities, a theme echoed in other surviving blind man plays.

Another important aspect of the play involves the couple's in-fated compatibility. In the Edo versions of the play mentioned here, the protagonist's blindness is attributed to his wife's jealousy, reinforcing Jizō's assertion that their negative marital relationship—framed as an unfavorable karmic bond—is the cause of his affliction. This narrative suggests that the wife bears responsibility for his condition. However, contemporary performances of the play have removed the wife as the cause of his blindness, instead portraying their marriage as harmonious. As a result, Jizō's command for the protagonist to divorce his wife appears more inexplicable. This alteration intensifies the play's tragic dimension, as the blind man emerges as a more universal symbol of resilience in the face of karmic suffering that lacks a discernible cause.

[194] Scholz-Cionca, p. 3.

Furthermore, the Edo-period depiction of the wife's jealousy-induced blindness aligns with the *bunraku* version of the Semimaru story., which is discussed in the following section. In both cases blindness becomes the embodiment of both the consequences of past actions and the emotional turmoil stemming from love and jealousy in the present.

The Evolution of Blindness as an Ethical and Dramatic Motif in Edo-Period Theater

Later adaptations of *Semimaru* in the Edo period reflect this evolving ethical focus. In Chikamatsu Monzaemon's *bunraku/jōruri* version (first performed sometime between 1688-1691), the focus is more on themes of love and jealousy rather than just karmic fate. The story begins with Emperor Daigo, who is on a tour of his lands and discovers an abandoned baby, leading to the introduction of Naohime, a young woman who pleads for her child back, revealing her difficult circumstances. The emperor, moved by her plight, decides to care for her and her mother, reflecting his compassionate governance. As the narrative unfolds, we learn about Prince Semimaru, the emperor's son, who is torn between his duty and his feelings for Naohime. Semimaru is bound by a vow of celibacy but is also deeply in love with Naohime, creating a conflict between his desires and societal expectations. His wife, who feels neglected, experiences jealousy, which sets the stage for further tragedy. Reflecting the complexities of the *bunraku* genre, the plot thickens with the introduction of Hayahiro, the elder brother of Semimaru's wife, who becomes an antagonist. After a series of misunderstandings, conflicts arise, leading to violence and tragic consequences. Semimaru's wife becomes jealous because she feels neglected and resentful due to Semimaru's affections for another woman. In a fit of rage and jealousy, she punishes herself and transforms into a snake, showcasing the destructive power of unbridled emotions. As the acts progress, Semimaru's blindness becomes a symbol of his emotional turmoil

and detachment from the world around him. The characters navigate their fates, with significant moments involving Kiyotsura, Semimaru's loyal retainer, who attempts to assist him while grappling with his own moral dilemmas. At the end of *Semimaru*, the characters find redemption through a combination of spiritual awakening and fulfillment of their duties. Semimaru's wife, who had died due to jealousy, is able to attain Buddhahood, dispelling her resentment and transforming into *Nyoi Kannon* (如意輪観音), a figure of compassion and wisdom. This act of redemption leads to Semimaru's eyes being opened, allowing him to see once again. His newfound vision symbolizes clarity and enlightenment, aligning with the Buddhist theme of overcoming suffering and ignorance.

Semimaru's blindness in the play symbolizes the consequences of past actions and the emotional turmoil stemming from love and jealousy. Specifically, it represents the profound impact of his wife's jealousy, which leads to his suffering and the inability to see the truth or the beauty of life around him. His blindness can also be interpreted as a metaphor for a spiritual or emotional blindness, where he is unable to perceive his own desires or the reality of his situation due to his overwhelming feelings of love and despair. The play emphasizes themes of karma and the consequences of one's actions, suggesting that Semimaru's blindness is a result of his past deeds and the turmoil in his relationships. In other words, Semimaru's blindness is attributed not to sins in a past life but to his transgressions in his current life.

This theme of this-wordly trangressions is reinforced in later *kabuki* versions of the play. In 1689's *Semimaru nido no shusse* (*Semimaru's Return to Greatness*), which is based on Chikamatsu's original *jōruri*, the character roles have shifted.[195] In this version, Semimaru is portrayed as more passive than the complex and tragic figure found in the *nō* play. His passivity

[195] Matisoff, pp. 150-151.

is highlighted in contrast to the more aggressive and dynamic character of Sakagami, who is reimagined as Semimaru's elder brother. The *kabuki* adaptation introduces a clear moral dichotomy, with Semimaru representing good and Sakagami embodying evil; they both seek the love of Naohime and are struggling for her affection. This struggle is less pronounced in the *nō* play, where the themes are centered on the tragedy of Semimaru's fate and his connection to karma and less on clear ethical choices. In the *bunraku* version, Semimaru's blindness is attributed not to sins in a past life but to his transgressions in his current life: he has had an affair and his wife becomes so jealous she performs a black magic ritual to attack the mistress, a ritual that accidentally ends up cursing Semimaru. This adjustment shifts the narrative from an exploration of karmic inevitability to a reflection on personal accountability and ethical behavior framed as a struggle between good and evil. These developments reflect a broader ethical evolution in Japanese theater, moving from themes of karmic retribution toward an emphasis on individual morality and choice. Such shifts mirror changes in religious and social thought during the Muromachi and Edo periods, showcasing the interplay between performance, religion, and ethics in medieval and early modern Japan.

Given the concurrent developments in Buddhism that deemphasized karma, the prominence of disability and karmic themes in these plays suggests an alternative religious discourse more reflective of popular beliefs. The layered portrayals of blindness as both a karmic burden and a condition that can be transcended highlight an evolving interplay between doctrine, performance, and popular ethics in medieval and early modern Japan. Hanada discusses how these characters aligned with Edo-period archetypes of blind individuals as skilled, resourceful, and multidimensional figures.[196] *Kabuki* plays such as *Izari Katsugorō* (いざり勝五郎) and

[196] Hanada, p. 266.

Hakone Reigen (箱根霊験記) are seen as the protype for modern characters such as Zatōichi, the blind swordsman.[197] Zatōichi is one of Japan's most iconic fictional characters, embodying the paradox of vulnerability and mastery. First introduced in Shimozawa Kan's 1948 novel series and later popularized by the 1962 film *Zatōichi Monogatari* starring Katsu Shintarō, Zatōichi is a blind masseur who conceals extraordinary sword-fighting skills beneath his humble exterior. Set in the Edo period, the character navigates a world of political corruption, yakuza conflicts, and social injustices, often using his heightened senses to outmatch sighted opponents.

Disability, Humor, and Metaphor in Edo-Period *Kyōgen*

The portrayal of the blind as multidimensional figures continues in more sophisticated *kyōgen* plays such as *Tsunbo Zatō*, *Hakuyō*, and *Kikazu Zatō*. In *Tsunbo Zatō*, first appearing in 1699's *Kyōgenki hoku jūban*, the humor is derived from the commotion and misunderstandings between a blind man and a deaf man. The teasing between individuals with disabilities is portrayed as a natural part of their interactions.[198] The play's humor relies on exaggerated misunderstandings and mutual insults, presenting an exchange that simultaneously mocks and highlights the complexities of communication between individuals with differing impairments. The narrative reflects the natural teasing within a social context that often conflated disability with moral or intellectual failings, underscoring the ambivalent attitudes toward disability in the period. For example, in the philosophical context of Shimon Shingaku, a religious and ethical movement founded by Ishida Baigan (1685–1744), blindness could symbolize a lack of moral insight or the inability to perceive the truth, aligning with the teachings about the importance of

[197] Hanada, pp. 178-179.
[198] See Chapter 2 for more plot details on this and other plays in this chapter.

the "heart" and moral integrity. The metaphor of blindness is used to illustrate how one's desires or moral failings can cloud judgment, akin to being unable to see clearly.

The comedy in *Tsunbo Zatō* appears to derive, in part, from the shared disabilities of the characters. Similar to plays like *Tsukimi Zatō*, *Tsunbo Zatō* is steeped in irony, as the conflict arises from the prejudice harbored by individuals with disabilities against one another. From a Buddhist perspective, the characters' lack of self-awareness and mutual ignorance transform disability into a symbol of the broader human condition, reflecting the delusion and ignorance that perpetuate *saṃsāra* (the cycle of suffering and rebirth).[199]

Similarly, *Hakuyō*, the play in which an otherwise healthy vendor is incapacitated by the blind men, suggests that disability is presented as a provisional state. Rather than targeting blindness itself, the humor derives from the inconveniences imposed by a disabled body. Here, the comedy centers on the blind men's inability to run away and the vendor's inability to pursue them once incapacitated. This marks a departure from earlier *kyōgen* plays, where blindness was often the direct target of mockery. Moreover, it diverges from a Buddhist interpretation, as blindness here is not associated with sin or suffering but is treated in a more pragmatic and situational manner.

Another play that highlights the provisional nature of disability is *Sannin Katakawa*, which features a blind man, a deaf man, and a physically disabled man. In the narrative, three individuals feign disabilities to gain employment from a powerful and charitable figure. Their ability to deceive their employer and inadvertently confuse each other's supposed impairments suggests that disability is not an inherent or fixed characteristic of an individual but rather a

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[199] This blindness as a form of *hōben* is echoed by other Japanese scholars. See Kim, "Zatō Kyōgen no Warai to Bukkyō."

condition shaped by social interactions and environmental contexts. This perspective aligns with the social model of disability, which posits that disability arises from societal barriers—whether physical, attitudinal, or systemic—rather than solely from individual impairments.

In *Kikazu Zatō*, the servants Tarō-kaja, who is deaf, and Kikuichi, who is blind, are left to guard the house while their master is away. As they begin to discuss the hardships of life as a deaf man and a blind man, their conversation turns competitive, escalating into a humorous contest of one-upmanship. The comedy arises from the characters teasing each other about their respective disabilities, seemingly in a good-natured manner. However, the jokes also highlight the characters' inability to empathize with or fully understand each other's experiences. From a Buddhist perspective, *Kikazu Zatō* and similar plays have been interpreted by scholars such as Kogarimai Ken as symbolic explorations of the mutual ignorance inherent in the human condition.[200] Disability, in this context, is transformed into a metaphor for the broader human struggle to comprehend one another's suffering, reflecting the samsaric cycle of misunderstanding and self-centeredness.

Conclusion: Bridging Doctrine and Performance in Premodern Japan

Unlike Buddhist doctrine, which tends to subsume disability within the universal context of human suffering, *zatō kyogen* plays directly engage with disability, whether through ridicule or by exploring its inherent pain. Simultaneously, the plays underscore the provisional nature of the disability and propose its potential for transcendence, often through the salvific power of Buddhism and its compassionate deities. Furthermore, the blind men in plays such as *Tsukimi Zatō* and *Kawakami* are portrayed with moral complexity, reflecting Edo-period representations

[200] Kogarimai, "Kyokugen no Warai: Zatō Kyōgen Kō Zeppitsu"

of blind individuals as skilled, resourceful, and multidimensional. This characterization aligns with broader archetypes from the era which inspired later figures such as as Zatōichi, the blind swordsman, who embodies both martial prowess and moral depth. These characters evoke both laughter and reflective engagement with the complexities of human nature. While Buddhist doctrine and *kyōgen* plays alike employ blindness as a metaphor for the human condition, *kyōgen* approaches this theme with a pragmatic sensibility and a compassionate perspective, reflecting the grounded and humanistic values of its creators.

Chapter 4

Laughter and Liminality:
Kyōgen Humor, Buddhist Thought, and the Aesthetics of *Zatō-Mono*

Introduction: The Paradox of *Kyōgen*

In the previous chapters, I examined how *kyōgen* functioned as a contested site in debates surrounding karma and disability. The extent to which *kyōgen* can be interpreted as an alternative avenue of Buddhist thought or as evidence of reformed ethical attitudes toward the disabled is further complicated by the historical stigma associated with certain types of humor in Japan. Zeami cautioned against the potential crassness of *kyōgen* humor in his *Shūdōsho* (習道書, Learning the Way), highlighting its tendency to devolve into vulgarity. However, Zeami's concerns were not unique; they reflected a long tradition of ambivalence toward comedy in Japan, extending back to its earliest written records. Even setting these concerns aside, there remains the question of whose values the humor in *kyōgen* reflects, as Japanese comedic ideals found in written sources often derived from aristocratic traditions of wit and refinement. Nevertheless, from Zeami's comments one might assume that *kyōgen* was initially performed for audiences more associated with bawdy and coarse humor. By the early Edo period, however, *kyōgen* actors attached to the shogunate by bonds of patronage needed to cater to a diverse audience. On the one hand, to maintain *kyōgen*'s reputation alongside *nō* as the *shikigaku* (official ceremonial performances of the shogunate) Ōkura Toraaki, like Zeami, urged *kyōgen* performers to cater their act to aristocratic aesthetics.[201] On the other hand, the Sagi school was enjoying great acclaim from the general populace by remaining rooted in a more earthy sense of

[201] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 817-818.

humor. *Kyōgen*'s humor operates as a site of tension and convergence between societal norms, religious philosophies, and aesthetic ideals, reflecting Japan's complex historical attitudes toward humor. By navigating the dichotomy of *ga* (雅, refined) and *zoku* (俗, vulgar), as well as incorporating Zen principles of non-duality and detachment, *kyōgen* transcends its categorization as simple comic theater to become a profound medium that engages with themes of morality, spirituality, and the human condition. This duality, evident in its capacity to entertain through crude slapstick humor while simultaneously provoking philosophical reflection, highlights *kyōgen*'s enduring relevance and its role as both a challenge to and reinforcement of cultural values.

Humor and the *Ga/Zoku* Dichotomy

The earliest indications of Japanese comedic ideals come from Chinese sources. According to Konishi Jin'ichi, the Yamato rulers of the 3rd through 8th centuries were influenced by *ga*, a concept from Chinese literature rooted in Confucian ideals of tradition and order.[202] *Ga* represented the ancient sense of beauty celebrated in classical Chinese works such as *The Book of Songs* (詩経) and *The Book of Rites* (礼経). Viewing the Chinese as cultural paragons, the ruling Yamato clan adopted these aesthetic values as they sought to exert control over rival *uji* clans.[203] While *ga* embodied tradition, elegance, and refinement, it was often defined in contrast to *zoku*, or crassness. Although Konishi does not explicitly discuss humor in the context of *zoku*, Liu Xie, a 5th century Chinese scholar of literary aesthetics, implies a connection. In *Wén Xīn Diāo Lóng* (文心雕龍, J. *Bunshin Chōryū, The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*), Liu Xie asserts that humor—particularly the crude and slapstick variety characteristic of *kyōgen*—

[202] Konishi, *Nihon Bungei-Shi*, p. 248
[203] Konishi, p. 248

falls outside the domain of *ga* (雅), or refined literary elegance.[204] While humor (幽默, *yōu mò*) is not a primary focus, Liu Xie acknowledges that wit, wordplay, and cleverness can be effective literary tools if used appropriately. In other words, humor should not detract from the moral and aesthetic standards of refined writing.

As suggested by Liu Xie, despite its association with *zoku*, certain forms of humor were still valued. Marguerite Wells traces the earliest definitions of *okashi* in Japanese literature, noting that the term encompassed both laughter-provoking humor and a type of elegant wit. While *zoku* was perceived as vulgar and linked to the lower classes, wit—particularly in the tradition of *chikōsei* (機知性) derived from Chinese aesthetics—was considered part of *ga*. As Konishi explains, "Until the eleventh century, *ga* in *waka* was perceived as an expressive realm ruled by *chikōsei* in the Six Dynasties style."[205] This distinction between *zoku* and *chikōsei* underscores the role of class in shaping social attitudes toward humor, associating *chikōsei* with the elite and *zoku* with the vulgar tastes of commoners and beggars.

Humor in the *Kojiki* and Ritual Laughter

Outside of the early association of humor with poetic wit, the *Kojiki* offers a different perspective by attributing laughter to the deities themselves. The *Kojiki*, Japan's earliest extant historical chronicle, was compiled at the request of Empress Genmei (元明天皇, 660-721) between 711 and 712. This collection of myths, legends, hymns, genealogies, and semi-historical accounts narrates the origins of the gods, lands, and rulers of Japan. In section X, "The Door of the Heavenly Rock Dwelling" (天の石屋戸, Ama no Iwato) Amaterasu (天照), the heavenly

[204] Shih, *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, p. 79.
[205] Konishi, p. 248.

sun deity, retreats into a cave, offended by her younger brother Susanoo's (スサノヲ) unruly behavior. Her withdrawal plunges the world into darkness, causing disastrous portents. Concerned, the deities devise a plan to coax Amaterasu out of the cave. Ame-no-Uzume (天宇受売命), the goddess of merrymaking, humor, and dance, performs a provocative dance before the cave entrance. As described in the text, "overturning a bucket before the entrance to Heaven's Boulder Cavern, she stamped loudly on it and became possessed, showing her breasts and pushing the girdle of her skirt down past her privates."[206] The uproarious laughter of eight hundred deities shakes the Plain of High Heaven, perplexing Amaterasu, who peeks out to investigate the commotion. At this moment, the deities seize the opportunity to pull her out of the cave, restoring light to the world.

Ame-no-Uzume's legendary dance appears to be a fusion of ritual performance and comical striptease. Simultaneously, it can be understood as one of the earliest examples of ritual laughter, a motif frequently found in Japanese tradition.[207] Social psychologist Mahadev Apte defines ritual humor as humor that is deliberately structured, orchestrated, or embedded within specific cultural or social rituals, ceremonies, or practices. It is distinct from spontaneous laughter in that it is performed or expected within a particular framework, such as religious rites, initiation ceremonies, or traditional performances. Apte discusses how ritual laughter can be found in various societies and traditions where it reinforces social cohesion, signals transitions (e.g., from one social status to another), and may even serve as a means of communication with the divine. In some cases, ritual laughter is prescribed—it may be invoked to drive away evil spirits, mock authority in a controlled setting, or emphasize the inversion of norms during

[206] 「また桶を伏せ、其の桶踏み轟かし、神懸りして胸乳を掛き出で、裳緒をほとに忍し垂りき。」 Furutake, pp. 76–77.
[207] See Goh, "A Ritual Performance of Laughter in Southern Japan" in *Understanding Humor in Japan.*

festivals or carnivalesque events. Ame-no-Uzume's dance exemplifies a form of ritual humor performed in the context of religious ceremonies, rites of passage, or traditional rituals. Ame-no-Uzume herself functions as a ritual clown—a figure who, according to Apte, possesses "special powers, enabling them to play a vital role in practicing and directing the religious behavior of members of a culture and to act as links between them and the supernatural forces in the universe."[208] Such figures are granted societal license for deviance, with "considerable freedom to depart from conventional behavior and to parody activities that are strongly disapproved in normal everyday social interaction or are even taboo."[209] At the same time, ceremonial clowns reinforce societal norms, as they embody deviant behavior within the boundaries of ritual. "On the one hand, the clowns are humorists and breakers of social and ritual taboos, and on the other hand, serve as healers and guardians of traditions and ritual sanctity."[210]

In addition to invoking divine favor, Ame-no-Uzume's ceremonial laughter bears a striking resemblance to festivals such as the Yama-no-kami Matsuri (山神祭り, Mountain Goddess Festival) in Wakayama. This festival originated from a tale about a mountain goddess who was displeased with her appearance. In the story, villagers help alleviate her unhappiness by presenting her with an *okoze*[211] (虎魚, stonefish), which leads the goddess to realize that something uglier than herself exists in the world.[212] This tale was later transformed into a ritual in which villagers carried *okoze* in their pockets while cracking jokes about the fish. The persistence of such laughter-based rituals, particularly in mountain and rural villages, suggests that aspects of ritual laughter have longstanding roots in folk traditions.

[208] Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach*, p. 152.
[209] Apte, p. 155.
[210] Apte, p. 173.
[211] A venomous fish irregularly surfaced with spines, giving it a knobby appearance.
[212] Abe, pp. 40-41.

Although the *Kojiki* purportedly aimed to document Japan's ancient myths, legends, and historical narratives, and Ō no Yasumaro (太安万侶, d. 723), who compiled the *Kojiki*, likely drew upon diverse sources, including oral accounts preserved among peasants, nobility, and priests, [213] its primary purpose was to legitimize the imperial lineage and provide a coherent narrative of Japan's divine origins, deities, and ruling families.[214] Alongside the tale of Ame-no-Uzume, the *Kojiki* includes genealogies, ritual descriptions, and accounts of the imperial family's divine ancestry. While some humor in these myths may have peasant origins, it is difficult to attribute specific attitudes toward humor in the *Kojiki* to a particular audience.

Theoretical Frameworks of Kyōgen Humor

Although humor associated with *zoku* appears in chronicles like *Kojiki*, it was not until the medieval period and the works of Kanze Zeami that we see a theoretical framework linking *zoku* to the performance of *kyōgen*. Zeami, alongside his father Kanze Kan'ami (觀世觀阿弥, 1333–1384), is regarded as one of the founders of modern *nō*. They introduced innovations such as focusing on a single actor and incorporating *kusemai* and *dengaku* dances. In his 1430 treatise *Shūdōsho* (習道書, Learning the Way), Zeami distinguished between forms of comedy: one that incites boisterous laughter and another that elicits a gentle smile embodying *yūgen*—the elegance and mysterious depth central to *nō* aesthetics. *Kyōgen*, Zeami argued, would be merely vulgar if its sole aim were to provoke loud laughter. He asserted that true gaiety lies in evoking delicate smiles, which create lasting impressions and move the audience profoundly. According to Zeami:

> It is said that true gaiety lies within a delicate smile, and such impressions are always effective and moving for an audience. If a *kyōgen* actor can create such an atmosphere for

[213] Philippi, trans, *Kojiki*, pp. 15–18.
[214] Philippi, pp. 6–14.

> his spectators and cause their gentle smiles while still maintaining their interest, then he will have achieved the highest level of humor that shows in itself the quality of *yūgen*. One who achieves this is truly a master of comedy."[215]

The ultimate aim of *kyōgen*, Zeami maintained, was not to provoke mere laughter but to elevate *kyōgen* to the same lofty realm of *yūgen* aspired to in *nō*. Zeami further emphasized avoiding *zoku* in *kyōgen* performances to ensure they did not offend aristocratic patrons:

> Whether in terms of words or gestures, a *kyōgen* actor must, avoiding all vulgarity, allow his well-born audience to experience humor that is both clever and endearing. To repeat again, just because a performer's function requires him to be amusing, there should certainly be no reason for him to use vulgar words or gestures. This matter should be considered carefully.[216]

Zeami's prescriptions for *kyōgen* humor resonate with Chinese *chikōsei*, underscoring his effort to align *kyōgen* with aristocratic tastes and aesthetics. Zeami wrote during a period in which he sought to elevate *nōgaku* (the combined traditions of *nō* and *kyōgen*) to a level of sophistication that would make it worthy of patronage by the Ashikaga shogunate. At the age of twelve, Zeami impressed the third Ashikaga shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (足利 義満,1358–1408), with his performance while accompanying his father, Kan'ami. Yoshimitsu subsequently became the patron of Kan'ami's Kanze troupe, granting them access to valuable resources, including a classical education for Zeami under Nijō Yoshimoto (二条 良基, 1320–1388), the most influential court poet of the time and a prominent theorist of *renga* (linked verse).[217]

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[215] Rimer, trans., *On the Art of the No Drama: The Major Treatises of Zeami*. p. 170.
[216] Rimer, p. 170.
[217] Pinnington, pp. 105–109. The Muromachi period saw a flourishing of *renga* composition. *Renga* gatherings, called *tsukeai* or "linked verse parties," became popular among the literati, where poets would gather to compose collaborative poetry. *Renga* influenced *nō* in many ways including its use of symbolism, classical allusion, Zen aesthetics, and nature and seasonal references. Aristocratic culture in the Heian and Kamakura periods valued *ga*, and renga adhered to these ideals by requiring poets to compose lines with graceful diction, subtle allusions, and delicate seasonal imagery.

At this time, *nōgaku* performers were considered to occupy a socioeconomic position comparable to that of beggars. Thus, Yoshimitsu's patronage provided Zeami with an unprecedented opportunity to elevate *nōgaku* from a popular magico-religious artform to the official theater of the shogunate court. This shift not only enhanced the cultural status of *nōgaku* but also established the Kanze troupe as the leading *nōgaku* ensemble, ensuring its patronage for generations.[218]

Since *kyōgen* and *nō* were part of the unified *nōgaku* tradition during this period, Zeami encouraged both *kyōgen* and *nō* performers to aspire to the same level of *yūgen*. Nevertheless, the association of certain types of *kyōgen* humor with the negative connotation of *zoku* persisted through the Edo period. In fact, the refinement of *kyōgen* in this period was influenced in part by the rise of *kabuki* burlesque in the 17th century. *Kabuki*, as an art form, was intertwined with deviant behavior from its inception. The term "kabuki" derives from *kabuki mono*, meaning "deviant ones," a label originating in the early Edo period to describe unemployed youths—primarily lower-ranking samurai—who paraded in avant-garde fashions and engaged in disruptive behaviors such as robbery, rape, and kidnapping. *Kabuki* theater, inspired by these rebellious youths, quickly acquired a reputation for pushing societal boundaries.

The Tokugawa shogunate, concerned with *kabuki's* disregard for morality, took action to regulate the art form. In 1629, women were banned from performing on the *kabuki* stage due to the association of female *kabuki* performers (女歌舞伎, *onna kabuki*) with prostitution. Similarly, in 1652, the government banned performances by young male actors (若衆歌舞伎, *wakashū kabuki*), citing their connections to disputes among samurai and suspected prostitution.

[218] Note that Pinnington pushes back against the narrative of Zeami as the main contributing factor in the elevation of *nō* in *A New History of Japanese Theater,* pp. 83-84.

Despite these bans, the government recognized *kabuki's* importance in entertaining and placating the rapidly growing urban populations of Japan's cities. Consequently, *kabuki* was allowed to continue under strict moral oversight, reflecting the shogunate's dual approach of suppressing its disruptive elements while accommodating its role as a popular form of entertainment.

Kyōgen performers were particularly concerned about their art form's association with *kabuki*. Elements of *kyōgen* were adopted into early *kabuki* plays, including lively drinking scenes and *komai* (小舞, short dances). The influence of *kyōgen komai* is evident in the 1640 *Komai Jūrokuban* (小舞十六番, Sixteen Short Dances), the earliest extant collection of kabuki dances with lyrics, which amplified erotic elements through *kabuki's* use of double entendres.

Given the government's response to *kabuki's* perceived immorality, there was concern that *kyōgen* might also be targeted. In the 17th century, Ōkura Toraaki echoed Zeami's call to refine *kyōgen* as a way to distance it from *kabuki* burlesque and maintain its status as *shikigaku* alongside *nō.*[219] Toraaki became the first person to document full *kyōgen* scripts in the *Ōkura Toraaki-bon Nō Kyōgenshū*. Continuing Zeami's tradition, Toraaki authored an extensive five-volume theatrical treatise, *Waranbegusa* (わらんべ草, For My Young Successors, 1660), intended as a practical guide for young *kyōgen* performers. While Zeami distinguished between raucous laughter and graceful smiles in a philosophical context, Toraaki's discussion of smiles is more grounded in specific performance techniques. He writes:

> People laugh in response to something amusing (*okashiki koto*), offer a polite smile in social exchanges, or smile spontaneously without a clear reason. Laughter may also arise from physical sensations, such as being tickled, or from observing others—whether in response to a shared smile, incoherent speech, or even an adversary's sharp words during a dispute. Additionally, a smile can reflect happiness, accompany gossip, mask one's true feelings, or soften the impact of a minor injury. It may also emerge in reaction to another's unconventional behavior or demeanor.[220]

[219] Bethe, "Kyōgen," pp. 817-818.
[220] Ōkura, *Waranbegusa*, pp. 259-60.

Like Zeami, Toraaki urges performers to aim for humor characterized by grace and refinement, classifying laughter into three grades: high, medium, and low.[221] He warns against plays that appeal to the lowest form of laughter, often associated with the vaudeville-like *kabuki* performers of his time, from whom Toraaki sought to distinguish *kyōgen*. Toraaki refers to this lowest form of laughter as *dokemono*, or clowning:

> The world of *kyōgen* is clumsy, disordered, and somewhat coarse. Actors engage in aimless conversation, exaggerated expressions, and exaggerated physicality, adopting improbable behaviors to elicit laughter. While such performances may entertain the general public, those with refined sensibilities might find them discomfiting. This style of humor aligns with the clowning (*dokemono*) characteristic of contemporary kabuki, which has gained popularity in recent times.[222]

Toraaki associates *dokemono* with ugliness in the following *waka*:

> Making an odd gesture to catch the spectator's eyes
> Is an ugly act indeed.
> It is like a normal man's
> Temporarily becoming a cripple.[223]

However, Toraaki also acknowledges the necessity of accepting imperfection, suggesting that true happiness comes from embracing the world's inherent flaws:

> You try and try
> To escape from this world—
> The result is worse.
> Your mind will be at ease, only
> When you accept things as they are.[224]

[221] Ōkura,, p. 258.
[222] Ōkura,, p. 255.
[223] Ōkura,, p. 257, trans. Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy." p. 22.
[224] Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy," p. 20.

Toraaki's philosophy appears contradictory. On one hand, he seeks to appeal to the refined tastes of the aristocracy by rejecting the vulgarity of *zoku*. On the other hand, he acknowledges humor's potential to reveal higher truths through an acceptance of *zoku* as a reflection of reality and its imperfections. According to Ueda Makoto, this duality may have stemmed from Toraaki's ethical convictions. Toraaki draws from various moral precepts, including those from Buddhism, Confucianism, and Shintoism, indicating that his teachings intertwine with ethical and religious considerations Ueda argues, "Toraaki is most insistent on the importance of the actor's moral integrity as the foundation for artistic accomplishment" and that Toraaki's passages often resemble an ethical or religious tract. Furthermore, Toraaki's discipline in his art is linked to his spiritual and moral development, as he highlights that "to lead a virtuous life" and "to pursue the nature of things" are essential for actors.[225]

The Persistence of Crude Humor in Japanese History

While Toraaki's entreaties might have been a response to the shogunate's crackdown on indecent behavior, the very fact that such issues arose highlights the recurring presence of crude humor in Japanese history. The preference for raucous and erotic humor seen in the *Kojiki* with Ame-no-Uzume's striptease persisted into the medieval period, where Buddhist priests entertained their audiences with humorous stories. By the Muromachi period, this tradition evolved into the *otogishū* (お伽衆), wandering quasi-professional storytellers and court entertainers—including Buddhist preachers, scholars, doctors, retired warriors, and other intellectuals—who combined humorous tales with religious sermons.

[225] Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy," p. 24.

The *otogishū* tradition influenced the art of *kobanashi* (小話), the exchange of short, humorous anecdotes, clever wordplay, or witty remarks in social settings such as teahouses or among friends. *Kobanashi* stories were collected and published in works such as the 18th-century *Edo Kobanashi* (江戸小咄, Humorous Tales from Edo). These tales often depicted the everyday lives of Edo-period commoners and were characterized by their use of puns, wordplay, double entendres, and satirical elements. Erotic tales became so prevalent within this genre that they warranted their own subgenre, *enshō kobanashi* (艶笑小話, humorous tales of an erotic nature).

Much of the comic literature of the Edo period falls under the category of *gesaku* (戯作, playful writing).[226] Interestingly, *gesaku* can also be read as a synonym for vulgarity, or *gehin* (下品). While the genre was often associated with amateur writing, *gesaku* texts have also been considered complex works of art.[227] Although the term *gesaku* is not limited to comic works, it encompasses a wide range of humorous popular literature, including *kokkeibon* (滑稽本, funny books), *kibyōshi* (黄表紙, yellow-covered picture books), comic poetry, *gōkan* (合巻, multivolume chapbooks, often about revenge), *hitoonnabon* (人情本, sentimental fiction), and *sharebon* (洒落本, books of wit and fashion).[228]

The *kokkeibon* genre emerged in the late Edo period during the 19th century as a type of early modern Japanese novel. These works depicted humorous behavior in the everyday lives of commoners, incorporating caricatures, witty dialogues, and colorful illustrations to appeal to a broad audience. One of the most famous examples of this genre is Jippensha Ikku's *Tōkaidōchū*

[226] Kern, *Manga from the Floating World*, p. 95.
[227] Kern, p. 95.
[228] Kern, p. 246.

Hizakurige (東海道中膝栗毛, *Shank's Mare*, 1802–1822). This text is considered a classic of Japanese literature and has inspired various adaptations, including *kabuki* plays, films, and television series. The novel follows the misadventures of two travelers, Yaji and Kita, as they journey along the Tōkaidō, a major road in Edo-period Japan. Written in a comedic style, the book served as both a travel guide and a source of entertainment, detailing famous landmarks at the 53 post stations along the road. Yaji and Kita, largely preoccupied with food, sake, and women, view the world through an Edo-centric lens, deeming themselves superior to the rural people they encounter.

Similar to *kokkeibon*, *kibyōshi* were small, pocket-sized books with woodblock-printed illustrations and text. These works were immensely popular among the urban population during the Edo period. *Kibyōshi* explored various themes, including social satire, romance, everyday life, and political commentary, often using humor to critique societal norms or mock contemporary customs and manners.

Likewise, *sharebon* focused on humor and wit but specifically highlighted the lifestyles, fashions, and trends of the urban merchant class. These books often depicted the behaviors, manners, and romantic pursuits of townspeople, blending entertainment with social commentary. An example of *sharebon* is Ihara Saikaku's *Kōshoku Ichidai Otoko* (好色一代男, *The Life of an Amorous Man*), published in 1682. This novel narrates the life and romantic escapades of Yonosuke, a merchant who indulges in the pleasures of the red-light districts and entertainment quarters. The narrative explores themes of love, desire, and the transient nature of life, providing a vivid portrayal of the urban culture of the time. Saikaku's work is celebrated for its candid depiction of sexual relationships and its commentary on Edo-period social and cultural dynamics. Both *kibyōshi* and *sharebon* played instrumental roles in the development of modern

Japanese literary forms, contributing to the dissemination of humorous content and reflecting the cultural and social landscape of the Edo period.

Like *kyōgen*, *gesaku* literature featured stock characters such as country bumpkins and incompetent monks. One notable anthology of Edo-period raucous humor is *Kinō wa Kyō no Monogatari* (きのふはけふのものがたり, Stories of Yesterday, Tales of Today), published in 1636 by an unknown author. The second volume of this two-volume work is particularly reflective of commoners' taste for crude humor, including tales involving bodily functions and bawdy scenarios. For example:

> 助兵衛
>
> すそつ張の娘を持て、おやぢ、ほふどこまり、 工夫して、とかく是ハめかけに出すがよいと相 談して、親子づれでふり売と出かけ、 むすめ ハ先に立て、めかけ。ヲヤヂいんらんのつび。[229]
>
> **Itinerant Sales**
>
> A father didn't know what to do with his promiscuous daughter. He devised a plan with his daughter and decided that the best thing for her was to become a mistress. So they went out to sell her as a mistress. Like a vendor selling their goods on the street, the daughter first called out, "Mistress for sale!" Then the father followed, "Dirty whore for sale!"

Even *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints depicted humorous scenes from daily life, theater, and satirical portrayals of societal norms. *Ukiyo-e* frequently depicted comedic scenes from *kabuki* plays, capturing actors in exaggerated, humorous poses or situations. These prints documented lively moments from comedic performances that were popular during the Edo period. Additionally, some *ukiyo-e* artists created satirical prints that subtly mocked societal norms,

[229] Asaka, *Kinō wa Kyō no Monogatari.* p. 301.

political figures, or customs of the time, using visual humor and clever compositions to convey their critiques. Kawanabe Kyōsai (河鍋 暁斎, 1831 – 1889), a prominent *ukiyo-e* artist known for his versatility and eccentricity, created several satirical and comical prints. Some of his works featured caricatures, playful scenes, and exaggerated figures, showcasing his humorous style. For example, *Hōhi Gassen* ("Fart Battle" , 放屁合戦), an early *gesaku*-style satirical print from the Edo period. This comical war of flatulence caricatures feudal disputes, showing people in traditional attire engaged in an absurd battle of farting, ridiculing the pomposity of the ruling class and bureaucrats.

Artists such as Hokusai and Hiroshige incorporated comedic elements into their works, reflecting the humor of the Edo period. Katsushika Hokusai (1760–1849), one of Japan's most renowned artists, painters, and printmakers, is widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in Japanese art. He is best known for his *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and paintings, particularly the series *Fugaku Sanjūrokkei* (富嶽三十六景, Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji), which includes the iconic work *Kanagawa-oki Nami Ura* (神奈川沖浪裏, The Great Wave off Kanagawa). Beyond his celebrated landscapes, Hokusai also produced a series of caricatures and humorous drawings. In one such piece, *Fūryū Odoke Hyakku Enten ni Suberu o Mireba Uri no Kawa* (風流おどけ百句 炎天にすべるを見れば瓜の皮，A Slip Under the Blazing Sun: Must Be a Melon Peel), Hokusai depicts a man falling in front of a melon vendor, with the caption humorously attributing the summer slip—despite the absence of icy conditions—to a discarded melon peel.

Utagawa Hiroshige (1797–1858), also known as Andō Hiroshige, was another highly esteemed *ukiyo-e* artist and printmaker of the Edo period. A contemporary of Hokusai, Hiroshige is particularly celebrated for his landscape prints. One of Utagawa Hiroshige's students, Utagawa

Hiroshige III (1842–1894), continued the tradition of landscape prints while incorporating more satirical and humorous elements in some of his works. He produced a series titled *Edo Meisho Dōgai Tsukushi* (江戸名所道外尽, Comical Views of Famous Places in Edo), which playfully portrays *Edokko* (Edo townspeople) engaging in humorous antics during the late Edo period. For instance, in No. 19, *Shin-Ōhashi Mitsumata* (Mitsumata at Shin-Ōhashi Bridge), men wearing only loincloths leap from a bridge and crash into a small boat filled with watermelons, creating a lively and absurd scene.

Popular narratives such as the *Hyakki Yagyō* (百鬼夜行, *Night Parade of One Hundred Demons*) also reflect elements of Edo-period humor. This subject depicts a procession of supernatural creatures, including *oni* (demons) and *yōkai* (monsters and ghosts). According to legend, every summer, *Nurarihyon*, a *yōkai* resembling an old man with a gourd-shaped head, would lead the procession through the streets of Japan. Folklore warned that anyone encountering the parade risked death or abduction. While the primary intent of the *Hyakki Yagyō* was not comedic, the fantastical and exaggerated portrayals of the creatures often carried a sense of playfulness and creativity. This humorous edge is particularly evident in depictions by Kawanabe Kyōsai that blend satire with the supernatural. Kyōsai's *Hyakki Yagyō* differs from earlier versions by artists such as Toriyama Sekien in its expressive, almost chaotic energy, reflecting his satirical and often subversive style. "The Demon of Painting" (画鬼, Gaki), a self-portrait in which Kyōsai imagines himself as a *yōkai*, emphasizes his unrestrained, rebellious artistic nature.

Shunga (春画, spring pictures), a genre of erotic art, also occasionally incorporated humor alongside its explicit content. Some *shunga* prints featured playful and lighthearted scenes, often using humor to depict intimate or romantic situations. Kawanabe also produced

numerous *shunga* works.[230] One example is his *Humorous Shunga Picture Calendar with Erotic Scenes*, which includes a February illustration of a woman lifting her leg to reveal a fox mask attached beneath, scaring away a lecherous old shrine attendant.

While such works may initially seem like mere distractions for the working classes, their crude and bawdy humor often masked subversive political commentary that was otherwise forbidden under Edo-period censorship laws. The Tokugawa shogunate imposed strict regulations prohibiting overt political or social critique, as well as criticism of specific government officials and prominent individuals. However, authors and artists could use humor to veil their critiques. For example, Adam Kern discusses a *kibyōshi* titled *The Thousand-Armed Goddess of Mercy*, in which the Goddess of Mercy (*Senju Kannon*) experiences the financial struggles plaguing Japan in 1785. To make ends meet, she has her extra arms chopped off and rented out. When renters accidentally damage the arms, their value drops from one gold coin to just one-eighth of the original price, forcing the Goddess to take a financial loss. The satirical ending targeted Senior Counselor Tanuma Okitsugu (1719–1788), a regent who had devalued currency to one-eighth its former value by introducing the *nanryō nishugin* silver coin, worth only one-eighth of a gold piece.[231]

These works, whether visual or literary, reveal the ingenuity of Edo-period artists and writers in embedding social and political critique within humor. By blending satire with playfulness, they not only entertained audiences but also offered commentary on the cultural and political realities of the time. Whether or not it was due to the satirical elements of *gesaku*, by the

[230] *Shunga* (春画), meaning "spring pictures," refers to Japanese erotic art, primarily created during the Edo period. These artworks, typically produced as *ukiyo-e* (woodblock prints), depicted a wide range of explicit sexual themes with humor, exaggeration, and aesthetic refinement. Despite their erotic nature, *shunga* prints were often appreciated as sophisticated and artistic, rather than purely pornographic.
[231] Kern, pp. 208-210.

later Edo period, *zoku* also came to signify lived reality. The *Nihon Koten Bungaku Daijiten* (日本古典文学大辞典, *Dictionary of Classical Japanese Literature*) explores the *ga/zoku* dichotomy, defining *zoku* as the opposite of *ga's* "beauty and grace." However, the dictionary also highlights alternative interpretations of *zoku*, noting that it can refer to reality and everyday life, particularly in the context of *haikai*, a type of short-form comic poetry that developed in the sixteenth century from *renga* (linked verse).[232] In this context, *haikai* can also mean "earthy" or "vulgar." In historical examples, critiques of poetry often mention how certain expressions or styles are too close to the mundane or everyday life, thus lacking poetic quality; *haikai* celebrated such expressions for humorous effect. As Japanese literary scholar Okazaki Yoshie notes, "Humor (*kokkei*), which was an important feature of early *haikai*, was, by convention, rich in the elements of real life, rather than being an elegant emotion."[233]

As *haikai* developed, its emphasis on real-life elements was downplayed. Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694), one of Japan's most celebrated poets, transformed *haikai* into a more sophisticated and contemplative form, ultimately leading to the development of what is now known as *haiku*. Originally characterized by lighthearted, playful verse often containing humor or satire, *haikai* was elevated by Bashō, who introduced a serious and reflective tone. This transformation elevated *haikai* from mere entertainment to a form of artistic expression capable of conveying deeper truths and insights about life. In other words, Bashō brought *haikai* into the realm of *ga*, thereby integrating the real-life elements of *haikai* into the aesthetic refinement associated with *ga*.

[232] Ōsone. *Nihon Koten Bungaku Daijiten*. vol. 4, p. 41.
[233] Okazaki, *Okashi no Honshitsu*, in *Bi no Dento*, p. 44.

By the late 18th century, the *haikai* poet Yosa Buson (1716-1784) writes that while the everyday world provided inspiration for *haikai*, the goal of the form was to transcend the mundane and elevate it into the realm of *ga*.[234] By the later Edo period, it became increasingly difficult to categorize an art form like *haikai* as *zoku* in the traditional sense of crassness because its aesthetic aspirations placed it firmly within the domain of *ga*. Yet this connection to the real world also defined other Edo-period art forms, particularly *kyōgen* comedy.

As discussed earlier, although some Japanese scholars today contend that humor has carried negative associations since the Heian period, these associations often align with class-based distinctions. *Zoku* was dismissed by the aristocracy or by those seeking to appeal to elite tastes, as seen in the cases of Zeami and Toraaki. Nevertheless, ribald humor persisted as a significant cultural undercurrent, evident from the earliest examples of Japanese literature and continuing into the Edo period with the various *gesaku* genres. While authors and critics frequently cautioned against crude humor, by the Edo period, a more nuanced understanding of *zoku* emerged, framing it as a reflection of lived reality. *Kyōgen*, as an art form straddling these dual currents, managed to appeal to both audiences: those seeking refinement and those drawn to the earthy humor of *zoku*. Furthermore, this convergence of seemingly contradictory strands finds resonance in religious contexts as well, further enriching its cultural significance.

The Problem of Humor in Religion

The exhortation by Toraaki to elevate comedy to the same transcendent realm as Zeami's concept of *yūgen* appears to be closely tied to the *kyōgen* performer's religious beliefs. Makoto Ueda observes that Toraaki "enlists the help of all kinds of moral precepts lying near at hand,

[234] Hisamatsu, "Rizoku to 'Yasashimi,'" in *Nihon Bungakushi*, pp. 1168-1182; See also *Nihon Koten Bungaku Daijiten*, vol. 4, pp. 41-42.

whether of Buddhist, Confucian, or Shinto origin, so that many of his passages look like part of an ethical or religious tract."[235] Ueda further notes that Toraaki studied under masters from four different Buddhist sects, who reportedly praised his level of spiritual attainment.[236] For Toraaki, acting was ultimately an exercise in moral improvement, with an actor's skill tied to their ability to attain eternal truth through performance. This sentiment is expressed in the following poem:

> To lead a virtuous
> Life, to keep the self upright,
> To dissolve the soul
> And to pursue the nature of things-
> These make up the basis of our art.[237]

Audience members, akin to Buddhist practitioners, were expected to detach themselves from their passions and observe the human condition with detached amusement. Laughter, when disconnected from this higher purpose, was considered not only pointless but counterproductive. Zeami was also deeply influenced by Buddhist teachings, particularly those of Zen Buddhism, and incorporated Buddhist themes into many of his later plays. While there is limited documentation on Zeami's personal religious practices, the principles underpinning *nō* theater reveal a strong alignment with aesthetics influenced by Zen Buddhist philosophy. Zeami's central concept of *yūgen* conveys an elusive and profound beauty, a mysterious depth that is not immediately apparent but sensed intuitively. This aligns with Zen aesthetics, which emphasize the subtle, enigmatic, and ineffable. Like Toraaki, Zeami encouraged actors to cultivate inner awareness and develop a deep understanding of the characters they portrayed, suggesting that

[235] Trans. Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy," p. 24.
[236] Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy, p. 24-25.
[237] Ōkura, p. 262.

acting, much like a monk's disciplined pursuit of enlightenment, is a path requiring perseverance and dedication.

This dichotomy between physical laughter and spiritual truth echoes debates among early Buddhist thinkers. Similar to Zeami's and Toraaki's notions of a spiritually elevated laughter, Indian Buddhist scholastics in the 4th century CE distinguished various types of laughter along a spiritual hierarchy. At the apex of this hierarchy was *sita*, a serene and refined smile, considered the most spiritually appropriate form of laughter.[238] These scholastics identified six ascending types of laughter: *sita* (a barely perceptible smile), *hasita* (a smile that slightly reveals the teeth), *vihasita* (a broad smile with mild laughter), *upahasita* (louder laughter with head and shoulder movements), *apahasita* (laughter that brings tears), and *atahasita* (uproarious laughter involving convulsions and a loss of bodily control[239]). Toraaki similarly categorized laughter into higher, middle, and lower forms, with the lowest associated with the crude humor of *kabuki* burlesque. For both the Buddhist scholastics and Toraaki, the highest forms of laughter were linked to spiritual insight and transcendence, while the lower forms were rooted in physicality and worldly attachments. It was believed that the Buddha himself only engaged in the most elevated form of laughter, *sita*. Thus, Zeami and Toraaki can be seen as extending this hierarchical framework to their artistic theories, prescribing only the highest forms of laughter.

The tension between humor and spiritual degradation is further embodied in contrasting Buddhist figures such as the Bodhidharma (known as Dámó in China and Daruma in Japan) and the Laughing Buddha. The Bodhidharma, a semi-legendary patriarch of Chan Buddhism in China, is credited with introducing a meditative practice involving extended periods of wall-gazing. In Japanese legend, his extreme commitment to enlightenment led him to cut off his

[238] Shwe, *The Compendium of Philosophy*, p. 26
[239] Shwe, pp. 22–25.

eyelids after falling asleep during meditation, and his legs were said to have rotted away after nine years of sitting. These vivid depictions of Bodhidharma—typically portrayed with piercing eyes that seem to challenge viewers' pretensions—symbolize the urgency of escaping *samsara*, the cycle of suffering, as emphasized in Buddhist texts such as the *Lotus Sutra's* "Parable of the Burning House."

In contrast the Bodhidharma, the Laughing Buddha, identified as the 10th-century monk Pu-Tai, represents a lighter, more joyful approach to Buddhist practice. Pu-Tai, often depicted with a jovial smile and a round belly, embodies humor as a vehicle for Buddhist teachings. Conrad Hyers, in *The Laughing Buddha: Zen and the Comic Spirit*, argues that laughter is central to Buddhism, symbolizing the debunking of pride, the overcoming of mental attachments, the cooling of desires, and the collapse of hierarchies and dualities. Referencing the classifications of the scholastics, Hyers notes how laughter can range from subtle, refined expressions to more exuberant and unrestrained forms, each reflecting different aspects of emotional and spiritual expression within the Buddhist tradition.[240] He also identifies a "higher order laugh," attributed to the Buddha, representing an enlightened perspective that reconciles self-awareness with the impermanence of existence.[241] In this sense, Buddhist laughter operates as a double-edged sword, simultaneously elevating and humbling the practitioner.

Humor and paradox are also central to Zen teachings, where they are used to challenge conventional modes of thought and dismantle dualistic concepts, encouraging practitioners to perceive reality beyond ordinary distinctions. Laughter, in this context, serves as a tool for cultivating non-attachment by emphasizing the illusory and transient nature of existence. This perspective closely aligns with Toraaki's approach to humor. As Ueda notes, "Laughter belongs,

[240] Hyers, p. 30.
[241] Hyers, p. 30.

in Toraaki's view, not to a moralist nor to a social reformer, but to a bystander, to an objective observer who brings to light the various weaknesses of man and society but who makes no positive effort to correct them."[242] Thus, the interplay of humor and spirituality in Japanese performance traditions reflects broader religious and philosophical debates about the role of laughter in transcending human frailties while simultaneously embracing them.

In his writings, Conrad Hyers highlights that laughter, playfulness, and a sense of lightheartedness are integral to certain Buddhist traditions, particularly those influenced by Zen. He emphasizes how Zen Buddhism, with its focus on direct experience, spontaneity, and non-dual awareness, often incorporates humor to provoke insight and transcend conventional patterns of thinking. Similarly, in his discussion on playfulness in Japanese visual culture, Hung Ky Nguyen explores how Buddhism occasionally depicted religious or historical figures in unexpected or incongruous ways as a critique of Buddhist institutions allied with the Edo shogunate.[243] Aesthetically, these depictions exemplified non-duality, underscoring the lack of distinction between the profane and the sacred. For example, figures such as Bodhidharma and the Bodhisattva Fugen were sometimes portrayed in contemporary garments or as courtesans and other socially disreputable figures of Edo society. Josef A. Kyburz, in "'Omocha': Things to Play (Or Not to Play) With," further examines the relationship between play and religion, noting how traditional Japanese toys like the Daruma figure (derived from Bodhidharma) served dual purposes: as objects of play and as religious artifacts believed to offer benefits such as protection

[242] Ueda, "Toraaki and His Theory of Comedy, p. 21.
[243] Nguyen, "Anything Goes with Wit and Ambiguity," pp. 72–86.

from bad harvests.[244] These examples suggest profound connections between religion, humor, and everyday life.

However, not all scholars are ready to associate Buddhism so readily with humor. In *Long Strange Journey*, Gregory Levine examines the popularity of "Bodhi-characters," 20th century figures he describes as "often quirky and humorous in a particular modality of detachment joined by 'an appetite for the zany."[245] Levine cites The Dude from *The Big Lebowski* as a prime example of these carefree, Zen master-like characters. Yet Levine, in direct response to Hyers and others, cautions against over-interpreting the humorous elements in Buddhist texts and traditions. He warns that humor is notoriously resistant to definition and interpretation, particularly across linguistic and cultural boundaries, and urges caution in assuming a humorous intent in Buddhist passages and stories. Significantly, Levine remarks, "many passages which we are inclined to read with a smile today, may have been a deadly serious matter to those who originally wrote them down."[246] He grounds this argument in the memorable story of the Dalai Lama failing to understand a Zen joke, emphasizing the potential dissonance between modern and historical interpretations of humor.[247]

Kyōgen, Zen Aesthetics, and the Paradox of Divine Madness

Kyōgen humor, in many ways, reflects qualities from both perspectives. On the one hand, *kyōgen* performers can be likened to Hyers' clowns, embodying a "divine madness" that allows

[244] The Daruma doll is named after Bodhidharma, and is typically red and round with a simple design. They are usually hollow and weighted at the bottom so that they return to an upright position when tilted or pushed over. They are seen as symbols of perseverance, luck, and achieving goals.
[245] Levine, *A. Long Strange Journey*, p. 63.
[246] Levine, p. 177.
[247] In the joke, a man walks into a Pizza parlor and asks to "Make me one with everything," a playful nod to non-duality.

them the freedom to subvert norms playfully. In the *kyōgen* play *Bōshibari* (*Tied to a Stick*), for example, two servants tied up by their master to prevent them from drinking his sake engage in song and dance as they devise a clever way to access the forbidden alcohol. Yet, as is typical in *kyōgen* plays, order is ultimately restored when the master returns home early and punishes the servants for their indulgence.

Metaphorically, *kyōgen* collapses categories and distinctions, embodying the relationship between humor and Buddhist non-dualism. Hyers observes that in Zen, laughter can function as a form of expedient means (Sk. *upaya* J. *hōben*). As an example, he discusses *kōan* (paradoxes) and *mondō* (dialogues) and their humorous commentaries and parodies.[248] These forms served both as pedagogical tools to facilitate enlightenment and as demonstrations of the insights of those who had already achieved it.

In *The Karma of Words*, William LaFleur highlights how *kyōgen* and *nō* plays represent two distinct strands of Buddhist thought. *Nō* plays, with their emphasis on characters from higher social strata such as samurai and Heian courtiers, reflect traditional hierarchies and cosmic notions of karmic guilt extending across eons. By contrast, *kyōgen* plays focus on ordinary characters—servants, tea-makers, and even insects—and feature a faster-paced narrative structure. In *kyōgen*, characters may transform instantaneously between humans and animals, subverting *nō*'s hierarchical conception of the Six Paths of Reincarnation (*rokudō*). These distinctions underscore the dynamic interplay between humor, performance, and religious philosophy in *kyōgen*. While *nō* presents a stable cosmological and hierarchical vision of

[248] *Kōans* are paradoxical or enigmatic statements, anecdotes, dialogues, or questions used in Zen Buddhism as a tool for meditation and contemplation. These are part of the Zen tradition's teaching methods, aiming to provoke deep insight and transcendence of dualistic thinking. *Mondō* refers to a form of dialogue or verbal exchange between a Zen master and a student, typically conducted during a Zen training session or as part of the Zen teaching method.

existence, *kyōgen*'s humor often collapses these distinctions, engaging with everyday life and the concept of non-duality through playful subversion.

Kyōgen also exhibits aspects of "divine madness," as, in the iconoclastic spirit of "Bodhi-characters," it brings lofty religious figures down to earth. Emma, the King of Hell, is reduced from his formidable role as the judge of the afterlife to serving as a horse for the warrior Asahina in the eponymous *kyōgen* play. Similarly, the mighty mountain priests of *nō* are transformed into comedic figures in *Fukuro Yamabushi* (Owls) and *Kusabira* (Mushrooms). In *Fukuro Yamabushi*, the priest boasts that he can exorcise the owl who is possessing two woodcutters who have disturbed the owl's nest. However, his spell backfires, resulting in his own possession. A similar scenario unfolds in *Kusabira*, where he claims the ability to banish demon mushrooms who have invaded a villager's garden, only to exacerbate the situation. By the play's conclusion, he is driven off the stage by the mushrooms, underscoring his failure and the comedic irony of his misplaced confidence. In the *kyōgen* play *Kaminari* (雷, Thunder God), a thunder deity falls from the sky and injures his back. Unable to return to the heavens, he seeks the help of a passing doctor. The doctor offers to treat his injury using traditional Chinese medicine techniques, such as acupuncture or moxibustion, but the thunder god, unfamiliar with human medicine, is skeptical and fearful. After some comical exchanges and misunderstandings, the doctor proceeds with the treatment, and the thunder god eventually recovers. Grateful, he returns to the sky, promising rain as a token of gratitude. This transformation aligns with Toraaki's observation that *kyōgen* "makes the real unreal and the unreal real."[249] The plays are rooted in the lives of real people in medieval Japan, but their actions are exaggerated to a comic and unrealistic degree. At

[249] Ōkura, p. 256.

the same time, powerful supernatural beings—such as the God of Thunder in *Kaminari* —are humorously rendered into quivering submission by ordinary humans.

The incorporation of Zen aesthetics into performance is not unique to *kyōgen*; Zen has been a significant influence on *nō* theater since at least the Muromachi period. Zen aesthetics profoundly shape *nō* theater's philosophy, performance style, and artistic elements. The Zen emphasis on simplicity and minimalism is reflected in *nō*'s elegant and restrained nature. Sparse stage settings, refined movements, and the minimalistic design of costumes and props embody Zen's principle of eliminating the non-essential to reveal the essence. Zen's focus on being fully present in the moment is central to *nō* performances, with actors practicing intense concentration and mindfulness to achieve a state of deep focus and presence—qualities resonant with Zen mindfulness practices.

The use of symbolism and subtlety in *nō* also reflects Zen aesthetics. Zen often conveys profound meanings through subtle gestures and symbols rather than overt expressions. Similarly, *nō* relies on symbolic gestures, masks, and poetic language to evoke deep emotions and explore complex themes in an understated manner. Both Zen philosophy and *nō* theater share a preoccupation with impermanence and the fleeting nature of existence. *Nō* plays frequently address themes of life, death, and the passage of time, encapsulating the transitory nature of reality—a concept central to Zen teachings.

The elusive and mysterious quality of *yūgen* further aligns *nō* with Zen aesthetics, emphasizing an appreciation of the ineffable and the beauty found in subtlety. When combined with *kyōgen*'s focus on humble, real-world characters, humor achieves new levels of profundity, particularly in surviving *Zatō Kyōgen* plays such as *Tsukimi zatō* and *Kawakami*. These plays, much like Zen *kōan*, are deceptively simple yet deeply thought-provoking. This blending of *zoku*

and *chikōsei* allows *kyōgen* to appeal to a diverse audience while simultaneously offering alternative avenues for Buddhist thought. It is this simultaneity of elements—the juxtaposition of the real and the unreal, the sacred and the profane—that gives *kyōgen* humor its enduring power and depth.

Zatō Kyōgen at the Crossroads of Humor, Aesthetics, and Buddhist Thought

Kyōgen occupies a unique space at the intersection of humor, religion, and cultural aesthetics, serving as both a reflection of and a challenge to societal and spiritual norms. Its ability to merge the sacred with the profane, the real with the unreal, and the vulgar with the refined, underscores its liminality. By blending elements of Zen philosophy, Buddhist non-dualism, and the earthy humor of *zoku*, *kyōgen* transcends its categorization as mere comic theater. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic medium capable of engaging diverse audiences while offering profound commentary on the human condition. Through its humor, *kyōgen* not only entertains but also provokes critical thought and spiritual reflection, demonstrating how laughter can function as both an artistic and philosophical tool.

We can see similar dichotomies in the *zatō kyōgen* plays, which often center on blind characters who embody both comedic and tragic elements. The humor in these plays operates within the framework of *zoku*—earthy, physical, and accessible humor—while also reflecting deeper concerns about karma, fate, and societal perceptions of disability. Zeami's aesthetic theories, particularly his distinction between boisterous laughter and refined smiles, resonates with the treatment of *zatō* characters, whose humor can be both slapstick and subtly ironic. Furthermore, the examination of Buddhist perspectives on humor, including the hierarchy of laughter in Buddhist thought, aligns with the way *zatō* figures are positioned within *kyōgen*

narratives—not merely as objects of ridicule but as complex figures whose struggles and social roles invite reflection on broader themes of suffering, karma, and resilience. Toraaki's efforts to refine the craft to distinguish it from *kabuki* burlesque can also help explain the changes in *zatō kyōgen*. While these plays often depict blind figures in humorous or exaggerated situations, they also maintain a level of complexity that prevents them from descending into mere farce. By engaging with both Buddhist non-dualism and the dynamics of social marginalization, *zatō kyōgen* exemplifies the convergence of humor, performance, and deeper philosophical inquiry.

Dissertation Summary and Conclusion

The evolution of *zatō kyōgen* from the Muromachi to Edo periods encapsulates a significant shift in both the representation of disability and the sociocultural attitudes towards blind individuals. Initially grounded in humor that capitalized on the vulnerabilities of the blind, these plays mirrored broader societal perceptions of blindness as a manifestation of karmic retribution. Over time, however, *zatō-mono* transcended this reductive framework to embrace a more complex and humanizing perspective. By the late Edo period, the blind man figure emerged not merely as an object of ridicule but as a poignant symbol of resilience and the human struggle against fate's unpredictability.

In examining the multi-faceted portrayal of blindness and disability in *kyōgen* plays, we uncover a complex interplay between religious doctrine, societal attitudes, and artistic expression. These plays reflect the evolving ethical landscape of medieval and early modern Japan, transitioning from deterministic views of karmic retribution to narratives emphasizing moral agency, personal transformation, and the provisional nature of disability. By engaging directly with disability as a lived experience and a metaphorical concept, *kyōgen* simultaneously critiques and complements Buddhist teachings, offering a grounded and humanized perspective on the challenges and resilience of marginalized groups. Through their unique blend of humor, reflection, and ethical exploration, these performances transcend mere entertainment, becoming vehicles for interrogating the interplay between fate, choice, and societal structures. This enduring relevance underscores the dynamic capacity of *kyōgen* to bridge religious ideals and human realities, providing a window into the ethical and cultural dimensions of premodern Japanese society.

Simultaneously, the role of the blind in society, particularly through their affiliations with guilds like the *Tōdō-za* and their contributions to performance arts, reflected a dynamic that oscillated between marginalization and empowerment. The plays thus became a medium through which societal tensions regarding disability, morality, and agency were explored. The study of *zatō-mono* within the *kyōgen* repertoire provides a compelling lens for understanding the interplay between performance, disability, and cultural identity in medieval and early modern Japan. It also underscores the importance of Disability Studies in reinterpreting historical narratives, offering insights into how artistic representations both reflect and shape societal values. Through its dual comedic and tragic dimensions, *zatō kyōgen* continues to resonate as a testament to the enduring complexity of human experience.

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