In his note, Osamu Wada gives an excellent analysis of Yamaji’s thesis through an overview of kagura, a major genre of Japanese folk performing arts. At the risk of painting the lily, I add the present guide for fear that not all English readers would have sufficient knowledge about the relationship between Japanese folk performing arts, called minzoku geinō, and Japanese theater studies. To this effect, I will provide readers with additional information to understand the relevance of Yamaji’s paper (Yamaji 2019).

First of all, I must mention what constitutes minzoku geinō; this compound term is composed of the terms for folklore [minzoku] and (popular) performing arts [geinō]. The word comprises a wide spectrum of performance, such as agricultural and fishery ceremonies, communion with ancestral spirits, exorcism of demons and plagues, and joyous urban festivals. They are represented in Shintoist, Buddhist or their syncretic milieus, their characters varying from those having ritualistic aspects to more theatrical entertainment. The connection between minzoku [folklore] and geinō [popular performing arts] was first recognized by Shinobu Orikuchi (1887–1953), one of the pioneers of Japanese folkloric studies [minzoku-gaku]. It was after WWII, however, that this kind of performance carried out in communities nationwide was designated as minzoku geinō. The first generation of scholars studying folk performing arts tackled the task of categorizing its performances. One great authority on this typology is Yasuji Honda (1906–2001) who made the most comprehensive list of folk performing arts in Japan.1

The notion of minzoku geinō is, as explained above, suspended between two spheres because minzoku signifies tradition or the past while geinō implies the present. The latter is “living” as long as it is performed, hence it is inevitably exposed to changes due to historical and/or social conditions. Indeed, since the late 20th century, minzoku geinō has faced the problem of how to “preserve” its living entity. For that purpose, the national as well as local governments began to designate many types of minzoku geinō as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties in the 1970s. The trend was further accelerated in the 1990s by an act for promoting folk performing arts as regional cultural resources, although some folklorists pejoratively called the legislation “the festival law.” Notwithstanding, their view remains essentialist, because they believe culture is based on things unchangeable. In reality, even noh, bunraku and kabuki, the three representative forms of Japanese traditional theater, do not preserve the past in the strict sense; they are not what they used to be 100 years before. The performing arts cannot but modify themselves to remain financially sustainable. If the old and new coexist in Japan, this equilibrium is made possible through their delicate balance, which I will explain hereunder.

As the current problem of minzoku geinō indicates, while a formalistic and synchronic comparison is possible, diachronic studies (situating a particular performance in a specific time) is often difficult; records of its origin, whether oral or written, lack evidence in many cases and the more a performance
pretends to be old, the more it is hard to ascertain its reliability. However, there exists a way to connect historical surveys with synchronic studies.

In fact, a blind spot of Japanese theater and performance researchers overseas is that they miss the contribution that *minzoku geinō* has made to the development of Japanese theater studies. Noh, bunraku, and kabuki do not exist in their own rights, and are, in fact, closely related to folk performing arts. Metaphorically speaking, these three are the most remarkable islands surrounded by the sea of *minzoku geinō*; the former are not only thought to have been brought about by the latter, but the appearance of a wide variety of folk performing arts can also be attributed to their contact with the refined urban stages.

For example, bunraku (*ningyō jōruri*) as we know today is a highly refined art developed in the late 18th century in cities like Osaka; more primitive puppet theaters are found nationwide, suggesting older forms of *ningyō jōruri* before its modernization in the late 17th century by Chikamatsu Monzaemon and Takemoto Gidayū. In addition, there are also cases in which rural puppet theaters developed through the influence of urban *ningyō jōruri*. Such communication is illustrated by Awaji puppet theater, which has been maintained on Awaji Island located on the other side of Osaka Bay. Awaji puppet theater preceded Bunraku in history and several professional troops toured across the country between the 17th and 19th centuries. In fact, the name bunraku was derived from Uemura Bunrakuken I (1751–1810), a puppet theater manager from Awaji Island who settled in Osaka in the early 19th century. Awaji puppet theater adopted bunraku plays popular in Osaka at the time. Some of these plays have disappeared from the present Bunraku repertoire along with their performing styles. Thus a knowledge of Awaji puppet theater is indispensable for surveying the history of bunraku.

The geography of Japanese folk performing arts could be visualized through an imaginary – and somewhat exaggerated – picture of European theater; in this other world, you will find a Medieval liturgical play being continuously performed in a rural village (meaning that its mise-en-scène is not completely modernized like the Oberammergau Passion Play) and Shakespearean plays with Elizabethan stage directions become a traditional community entertainment in another village after an itinerant troop stays there once, while in another, people play *commedia dell’arte* in an archaic form. Such vision becomes a reality in Japan because the country has been relatively safe compared to the old continent (remember Japan has the oldest wooden building in the world: the Hōryūji Temple from the 7th century). In addition, Japanese people have undeniably had a particular preference for the performing arts. Japan is a rare country where various performing arts – including those that are age old – have been preserved, though we must use the word “preserve” with discretion.

If *minzoku geinō* has more or less the tendency to transmit the theater and performance of the past, it provides Japanese theater researchers with a great opportunity for studying it on a practical – rather than a textual – basis. This is what they did because some folk performing arts can provide keys for reconstructing repertoires and performing styles that present-day noh, bunraku, and kabuki do not share. Moreover, by considering canonized theaters and *minzoku geinō* as continuity, it is possible to extract concepts and patterns that are common in Japanese performing arts, while such aspects are blurred in sophisticated urban theaters.

It was Masakatsu Gunji (1913–1998) who made epoch-making achievements in kabuki studies by introducing such methodology. Gunji, based on his extensive knowledge of *minzoku geinō* obtained 2

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2 These names, as well as Uemura Bunrakuen, are given in the Japanese order; family names followed by first names like Chikamatsu (family name) Monzaemon (first name).

3 For the relationship of Awaji puppet theater to Bunraku, see for example, Uchiyama, 2002.
through fieldwork, was able to create pioneering original research on subjects like the development of the clown [saruwaka] in early kabuki or the presence of furyū, a genre of minzoku geinō, in kabuki dance. His method consists of combining close observations of both urban kabuki stages and rural performing arts with historical sources.4

His concerns lie not only in surveying kabuki in archaic forms, but in establishing common denominators of performing styles and conceptions of Japanese traditional theaters. His method foresaw present theater studies in the sense that the performance analysis weighs as much as the study of dramatic texts. Besides, it is possible to extend this method to a comparative study of performance and theater in East Asia in terms of their performative structures. This kind of study has already been attempted in Japan on a limited scale,5 but it is not known – as far as I know – to researchers overseas because Gunji’s method is intrinsically related to the rich tradition of minzoku geinō.

English studies of minzoku geinō do exist, although they are limited in number. The most comprehensive introduction so far is Terence A. Lancashire’s An Introduction to Japanese Folk Performing Arts (Lancashire 2016). The author categorizes minzoku geinō into four groups: (1) kagura, (2) furyū, (3) Spoken Word (katarimono) and Entertainments of Celebration (shukufuku gei), and (4) Entertainments of Foreign Derivation and Stage Entertainments. While his typology follows mainly that of Honda, the author paints vivid pictures of the performances, derived from his extensive fieldwork. Besides, he not only summarizes the history of minzoku geinō studies, including Hiroyuki Hashimoto’s radical reflection on its methodologies, but also provides a directory of major folk performing arts. This book certainly provides the best overview for English readers on minzoku geinō.

Irit Averbuch, on the other hand, makes an in-depth study of a folk performing art in The Gods Come Dancing. A Study of the Japanese Ritual Dance of Yamabushi Kagura (Averbuch 1995). It is a study of a particular type of kagura performed around Mt. Hayachine in Iwate Prefecture in northern Japan. Yamabushi kagura in the region, including those called Hayachine kagura, was first spotlighted in 1931 when Honda conducted his fieldwork. This region, Tōno, spreads around Mt. Hayachine and is a symbolic place for Japanese folkloric studies, as it furnished the material for Kunio Yanagita (1875–1962) to write Tōno monogatari [Folk Legends from Tōno]6, a cornerstone of Japanese native folklore studies, in 1910. Averbuch, having visited Tōno more than 20 times, makes a thorough study of the history of its art, religious backgrounds, dance compositions, masks, costumes, and audience.

Eike Grossmann makes another comprehensive research on a regional noh tradition in Kurokawa Nō. Shaping the Image and Perception of Japan’s Folk Traditions, Performing Arts and Rural Tourism (Grossmann 2013). This particular type of noh is famous, as it has been performed in a village called Kurokawa in the north of Japan and has variants that are not seen in canonized noh. The author studies the theater’s history, relationship to the community, and present-day problems concerning its tradition.

Jane Marie Law focuses on Awaji puppet theater in Puppets of Nostalgia. The Life, Death, and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyō Tradition (Law 1997). She not only treats the grass-root rehabilitation of puppet theater in Awaji Island in the late 20th century, but also studies its prehistory going back to the Medieval age, analyzing the symbolism of puppet performance in Japan as well as the social discrimination that arose therefrom.

4 For the works of Gunji, see Gunji, 1990-1992.
5 As an example of such survey, see Miyao, 2006.
6 For an English translation of the text, see Yanagita, 2015.
The problem of conserving minzoku geinō in modern contexts is discussed by Barbara Thornbury: *The Folk performing Arts: Traditional Culture in Contemporary Japan* (Thornbury 1997). The author introduces various approaches made by local communities and administrations to maintain traditions, indicating that minzoku geinō gradually transforms itself into stage art as a result of modernization and commercialization.

As for Iwami kagura, the subject of the present Yamaji paper, an English guide is available by David Petersen: *An Invitation of Kagura: Hidden Gem of the Traditional Japanese Performing Arts* (Petersen 2007). The western end of Honshū (the main island of Japan) including the north of Hiroshima Prefecture (Geihoku region), Shimane Prefecture (Iwami and Izumo regions) and the west of Okayama Prefecture (Bicchū region) is known for various kagura performances. The author compares regional variations of kagura with regard to their performing styles, costumes, masks and music.

I have also found two academic papers in English about Iwami kagura. They are written by Lancashire: “Music for the Gods: Musical Transmission and Change in Iwami Kagura” (Lancashire 1997) and “Izumo Kagura, Iwami Kagura, and National Intersections. Ritual, Propaganda, Tourist Attraction.” (Lancashire 2017) The former is a musicological approach to kagura accompaniments found in different performing groups called shachū. The latter treats the history and political implications found in a set of kagura called shin-noh (divine noh), indicating the chauvinistic aspect hidden therein. It is a challenging paper, however, and is by no means easy for English readers, as the author relies heavily on Japanese expressions in the Japanese writing system.

With the aid of these works mentioned thus far – though they are not exhaustive – English readers will be able to amass a certain amount of knowledge about minzoku geinō as a whole as well as their particular aspects. It seems, however, that overseas researchers have a general tendency to be interested in performing arts with more archaic appearances. As a matter of fact, not all minzoku geinō derives from old traditions of Shintoist rituals or syncretic ancient ceremonies. We can find minzoku geinō with less traditional elements in rural kabuki. There remain about 200 rural kabuki stages in Japan, which means kabuki was not an urban entertainment in the early modern period. One likely case for a rural community to take up kabuki was through kabuki stages by itinerant troops that impressed villagers, who then learnt how to play this theater and continued the performance as communal entertainment. A local kabuki in a fishing village called Fukuura in the northern end of Honshū Island originated in such fashion in the late 19th century, while the tradition is now designated as an intangible cultural asset by Aomori Prefecture.

Seen from another angle, the process by which a tradition of minzoku geinō is brought about, transmitted, and transformed tells us that it is “living.” Minzoku geinō is neither a fossil conserving the past in its entirety nor a contemporary event entirely cut off from tradition. Researchers must distinguish archaic ingredients from modern aspects in the art just as evolutionary biologists discern old and new elements in genetic information – and this is also true for noh, bunraku, and kabuki; they are not “living fossils” of Japanese tradition, nor have they been changed completely by modern elements. Understanding Japanese traditional theaters therefore requires such double vision, and fieldwork on

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7 For a pioneering work in this field, see Hoff, 1978.
8 Hattori, 2007, p. 332.
minzoku geinō provides a good occasion for this practice, shedding light on the reason why learning minzoku geinō was once a part of the apprenticeship for Gunji’s disciples.

Another problem concerning overseas research works on minzoku geinō is that most of them are carried out with little connection to canonized noh, bunraku, and kabuki. Among the authors cited above, Lancashire comes from a musicological background, Averbuch works in anthropology, Law, in comparative religion (she does not treat the interaction between Awaji puppet theater and Osaka bunraku in her monograph), and Thornbury studies Japanese culture in general. Only Grossmann can be found within the field of theater and performance.

 Needless to say, minzoku geinō should be studied per se, independent of Japanese traditional theaters (there exists, for this purpose, the Society of Folk Performing Arts [minzoku geinō gakkai]). We cannot ignore, nonetheless, that the frontiers that separated folk performing arts from urban stages were not so distinct in the past; at the risk of simplification, we could say their differences should be understood in terms of urban and rural entertainments, which were dependent on each other up to a certain time in history.

While we can no longer accept without reservation the age-old thesis that minzoku geinō is the precursor of the traditional theaters, we can no less deny the dense communication that existed between them – they were both corelated and constituted a single continuity. Such viewpoint has not yet been introduced in English studies of Japanese traditional theaters. The situation also suggests that the significance of Gunji’s methodology may not be sufficiently understood by overseas researchers.

Lastly, let me mention the career of the author of the present paper: Kōzō Yamaji (1939–). After his studies at Waseda University under the mentorship of Honda and Gunji, Yamaji conducted his research based in Kyoto. He was the Representative Director of the Society of Folk Performing Arts [minzoku geinō gakkai] between 1997 and 2015. He has been one of the central figures in the study of folk performing arts since Honda and Gunji.

Yamaji further developed Gunji’s method by introducing the approach of Tatsusaburō Hayashiya (1914–1998), a Kyoto-based scholar known for his study of Medieval culture, who stressed a socio-historical approach for analyzing geinō of the past (Hayashiya’s method is called the “environmental approach” [kankyō-ron] while that of Gunji is qualified as the “performance style approach” [geitai-ron]). Thus Yamaji has studied performers and theater people in the premodern age whose activities were not reflected in the canonized history of traditional theaters, by referring to his knowledge of minzoku geinō as well as by following Hayashiya’s methodology.

His writings include: Okina no za ([The Place of Okina] Yamaji 1990), which focuses on itinerant Medieval performers found outside canonized noh, and Kinsei geinō no taidō ([The Quickening of Early Modern Performing Arts] Yamaji 2010), a research work on puppet plays and kabuki in their early stages. He has also been committed to the problem of social discrimination, as theater people were considered outcasts.

He also contributed to the publication of video books: Taikei nihon rekishi to geinō ([The Collection of Popular Performing Arts in Japanese History] Amino et. al. 1992). This collection of 14 volumes, the compilation of which Yamaji played a major role, covers a variety of folk performing arts through video

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10 As for the difference between the approaches of Gunji and Hayashiya, see Motiya, 1971, p. 336.
11 “Okina” means old man appearing in Japanese traditional theaters and performances, including noh.
and books. They now remain as valuable records of the folk performing arts as seen in the late 20th century. It was awarded the 46th Mainichi Prize for Cultural Publication [Mainichi shuppan bunkashō].

The relevance of Yamaji’s paper will be elucidated in the following note by Wada, however, it must be stressed that his research on Iwami kagura is an excellent case study of the aliveness of minzoku geinō; the paper treats the changes that occurred in kagura in the mid 19th century, and it is this dynamism that leads to the present Iwami kagura moving toward the form of stage shows. Yamaji clarifies how a folk performing art transformed itself due to historical backgrounds, while its archaic aspects were maintained in some exceptional cases.

The event that brought about such changes, the Meiji Restoration in 1868, was not only a trigger for modernizing Japan, but also an ideological cultural revolution led by the government. The new rulers, for the purpose of purifying Shintoism as a national religion, denied the syncretism of Shintoism and Buddhism from the previous age (in the Edo period). Hence the performance of Iwami kagura, which had assumed a syncretic atmosphere, was made impossible. At this moment, farmers, who had been excluded from the rituals, took over the performance, as they were interested in the kagura stage. It was their participation that paved the way to the exuberant present-day kagura shows. Such is the general outline of Yamaji’s paper.

We could recognize in this shift of performers another invented tradition, not in the sense of Eric Hobsbawm, but rather as a case of a practical popular solution for evading the authorities’ forced modification of tradition. Starting with this paper, we can even begin to reconsider the Japanese sense of tradition, in which conservatism and renovation have been compromised in order to survive through history. To end, I must tell English readers that the present paper is an abridged version; a more detailed analysis is given in another of Yamaji’s studies (Yamaji 2014).

References


