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Okinawan Absence: *Ma* in Kumiodori

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This article considers the Okinawan aesthetic of Kumiodori and the role of absence in making a performance. There are two case studies of Kumiodori performances selected for this article, both written by the maker of this theatre style – Tamagusuku Chōkun. I watched both performances of Kōkō no Maki *and* Nidō Tekiuchi *in the National Theatre in Okinawa. I discuss the concept of absence, described as* ma *(間), through the theory and the interpretation of those performances. The article begins with a brief outline of Kumiodori and the cultural context of the Ryukyu Kingdom, followed by description of the concept of* ma *in literature, live performance and the culture in general. Finally, two case studies are introduced. The article aims to present an example of the Okinawan version of* ma *in theatre.*

The role of stillness, empty space and absence has an impact on Japanese theatre, in particular Nō performances. Absence is also noticeable in another genre of theatre that currently is perceived as Japanese, but historically belonged to another country. The article considers the Okinawan aesthetic of Kumiodori and the role of absence in making a performance. Kumiodori (Okinawan *Kumi wudui*) comes from the Ryukyu Kingdom, which geographically corresponds to present-day Okinawa Prefecture in southern Japan. There are two case studies of Kumiodori performances selected for this article, both written by the maker of this theatre style – Tamagusuku Chōkun. I watched both performances of *Kōkō no Maki* and *Nidō Tekiuchi* in the National Theatre in Okinawa (*Kōkō no Maki* on 13 May 2023 and *Nidō Tekiuchi* on 22 July 2023). I discuss the concept of absence, described as *ma* (間), through the theory and the interpretation of those performances. The article begins with a brief outline of Kumiodori and the cultural context of the Ryukyu Kingdom, followed by description of the concept of *ma* in literature, in live performance and in the culture in general. Finally, two case studies are introduced. The article aims to present an example of the Okinawan version of *ma* in theatre.

The Ryukyu Kingdom and Kumiodori

Japanese theatre is known for its diversity of genres in theatre and performance, such as Nō, Kabuki, Gagaku, Kagura, Bunraku and traditional dances, to name a few. There is also Kumiodori, a theatre genre that traditionally belongs to Okinawa. The theatre style was first presented in 1719 but only recently, in 1972, was Kumiodori recognized by the Japanese government as a nationally important intangible cultural property, and in 2010 UNESCO added Kumiodori to the Representative List of the Intangible

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Cultural Heritage of Humanity.[1] Kumiodori is not performed in Japanese. The language we hear onstage is one of the Okinawan languages. Although Okinawa is currently one of the prefectures of Japan, historically it was a completely different country with diverse languages and government. The Ryukyu Kingdom (currently Okinawa Prefecture) was a kingdom made of many islands, surrounded by the ocean, and therefore trade was crucial for the economy of the country. However, the geopolitical location of the kingdom was challenging. In the article 'Ryukyu/Okinawa: From Disposal to Resistance 琉球/沖縄、処分から抵抗へ', Norimatsu Satoko Oka and Gavan McCormack presented the colonial perspective of Okinawa in a brief description:

> Okinawa today looks back upon a history as an independent kingdom, enjoying close affiliation with Ming and then Qing dynasty China (1372–1874); a semi-independent kingdom affiliated with both China and Japan but effectively ruled from Satsuma in southern Japan (1609–1874); a modern Japanese prefecture (1872–1945); a US military colony, first as conquered territory and from 1952 subject to determination of the San Francisco treaty (1945–1972); and then, from 1972 to today, once again as a Japanese prefecture but still occupied by US forces.[2]

Since the seventeenth century, the Ryukyu Kingdom was dually dependent on China and Japan. While the Ryukyu Kingdom chose to preserve the tributary system with China, Japanese dependency was forcefully demanded by invasion of the island and the kidnapping of King Shō Nei (1609), who was held hostage for two years until he agreed to sign feudal dependency to the Satsuma clan. Shuri Castle and the Ryukyus became a stage for an intricate political relationship. The independence of the kingdom was continuously performed to keep the trade between China and the Ryukyus unharmed, so that Japan could access Chinese goods and reap the profit.[3] In consequence, the Ryukyuan representatives, who were sent to Edo (modern-day Tokyo) in procession called *Edo-nobori*, were required to wear clothes that did not resemble Japanese,[4] while Japanese officials used to hide whenever Chinese envoys arrived in Shuri. Satsuma also prohibited the Ryukyuans from adopting Japanese customs; among them were Buddhist practices. Although Buddhism had been introduced to Okinawa earlier and,[5] under the patronage of the king, influenced art,[6] after the Satsuma invasion it no longer flourished in the Ryukyus. Confucian scholars and administrators were in opposition to Buddhism and to forms of the indigenous belief system,[7] where women were priestesses (*noro*) and shamans (*yuta*). Hence the Confucian teaching of the importance of moral values and relations between people was dominant in the arts and later in theatre. To present itself as equally sophisticated and developed as its suzerain neighbours, the Ryukyu Kingdom needed strategic communication that built or sustained this difficult relationship. In the situation of dual dependency, there was a need to present something independent and unique.

The kingdom needed a form of theatre that would entertain the foreign envoys and present the country as an equal partner in trade. The investiture (*ukwanshin*) of a new King Shō Kei in 1719 was an opportunity to present a new form of art. The Chinese emperor was the person to appoint a new king in the Ryukyu Kingdom in a tributary relation (*sappō*). He sent Chinese envoys (*sappōshi*) with a crown and the imperial

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edict for the occasion.[8] Due to environmental conditions, such as the seasonal sustained winds from the north or the south and the typhoon season in Okinawa, the Chinese envoys stayed on the island for half a year and were given a cordial reception. According to the leading Okinawan performing arts researcher Yano Teruo, the tributary system also developed the performing arts, introducing new instruments from China and theatre elements from Japan.[9]

In this unique situation, the theatre could provide a public image by showing what values are important for the country. They had to be similar enough to the viewer's values, so they would be understood and appreciated, and different at the same time, to present cultural independence. Here the first performances were to entertain the king of the Ryukyus, the aristocracy and the Chinese envoys. The theatre mirrored the audience – represented them and their values. Before the creation of Kumiodori theatre, there were rituals and dances, poetry in the form of songs (*ryūka*) accompanied by music on *sanshin* – a three-stringed instrument adapted from China. Rituals that used the elements of performance were strongly implemented in the culture. However, they were performed for a limited and select audience. The society was strictly divided and organized hierarchically. While Kumiodori was an image of the court and the aristocracy, rituals and folk festivals took place in villages. Okinawans paid respect to and worshipped their ancestors, and they would sing and dance in moments significant to the community. The worship of ancestors, which also resonates in Chinese cultures, lasted into contemporary times, despite the persistent colonization and changes in the administration of the country. In the book *Origins of Traditional Okinawan Dance*, Ito Sachiyo writes,

> In Okinawa, the religious view is both vertical and horizontal. This means that the gods of Okinawa reside both above the earth and beyond the sea. The dual-directional view corresponds to the indigenous beliefs about where the gods or spirits reside. These are Nirai Kanai, Amamiya Shineriya and Obotsu Kagura.[10]

The new theatre style (Kumiodori) built on all the previous elements of rituals and added more inspiration from overseas. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, an aristocrat – Tamagusuku Chōkun[11] – was elected magistrate of dance and was placed in charge of inventing this new form of theatre. Tamagusuku travelled to many places, and saw and closely studied Kabuki, Nō and theatre from South East Asian countries.[12] With this experience, he added what he learned about Japanese theatre to traditional Okinawan poetry and dance. Perhaps, at that time, Tamagusuku Chōkun noticed the importance of *ma*, which was clearly influential in Nō theatre. According to Yano Teruo, some aristocrats even practised Nō chanting at the time in the Ryukyus.[13] This unique blend of foreign and native elements created Kumiodori (組踊) – in literal translation, a 'combination dance', combining movement, poetry and song. A new genre of theatre that Tamagusuku Chōkun presented to the world in 1719 began with *Nidō Tekiuchi*, the play described in the later part of the article, which was the first performance of Kumiodori presented to the Chinese envoys. Dramas are often based on local folk stories. Komine Naganori, in his book *Nufani:*

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English Translation of Kumiodori and Okinawan Poetry, explains why those themes were selected for Kumiodori performances:

> Because most *Kumiodori* were made for the entertainment of Chinese envoys, the main theme of *Kumiodori* is to emphasize feudal loyalty to the king and praise filial piety. The community accepted *Kumiodori* not because of its theme, but because of its function in entertaining people during that period. They performed *Kumiodori* at the harvest festival as an offering to the gods and as a means of entertainment.[14]

After the abolition of the Ryukyu Kingdom in the nineteenth century, the aristocracy, who trained in the art of Kumiodori, had to perform for commoners across Okinawa, but with time the new audience wanted to see their representation on the stage, not the court culture. The Meiji government sent orders to take over Shuri Castle and bring King Shō Tai to Tokyo. That was the time of the forced assimilation into Japan, 'King Sho Tai in 1879 surrendered Shuri Castle to the superior force of the Meiji government, he uttered the words "Life is precious" (*Nuchi du takara*).'[15] The words are important in the Okinawan culture and values to this day. The twentieth century brought a gradual rooting out of Ryukyuan language and culture, forced first by Japanese occupiers. In schools, children who were speaking any of the Ryukyuan languages were forced to wear a dialect tag called *hōgen fuda*.[16] The use of the local languages was eventually moved from education to the family. Okinawan traditions were forcibly replaced by Japanese myths and ideals of imperialism, which paved the way for many sacrifices on the battlefield. During the Second World War, many people lost their lives in the Battle of Okinawa, 'more than 120,000 Okinawans, between one-quarter and one-third of the population, died'.[17] It is worth mentioning that the Japanese soldiers also treated Okinawans as a worse category of Japanese nationals and often used citizens as human shields.[18] There was Okinawan resentment against the Japanese and American colonization forces. The aristocracy, who were trained in the Ryukyuan arts of dance and Kumiodori, were incorporated into the Japanese forces and perished. The people who survived the war, and those from the immediate families of the performers who remembered Kumiodori, passed the tradition on to the next generation. However, immediately after the war, the US government colonized the Ryukyus until 1972. Okinawa, destroyed after the war, suffered poverty and limited development possibilities. Kumiodori and the arts were not the colonizer's priority. After 1972, when Okinawa Prefecture became a part of Japan, the arts were recognized by the government. However, US military bases remain on Okinawa until today. The US presence is noticeable with the space they take, the privilege they have (they use land off-limits to Okinawans and they earn more than Okinawans), and the noise (airports) and danger they create (falling aircraft or incidents of rape). The language suffered a rapid decrease in the number of users, due to lack of jobs and education opportunities in Okinawa. The language of theatre from Okinawa was even further removed from Okinawans.

Later, in the second part of the twentieth century, Kumiodori meant much more than entertainment. The theatre in the local language can be a form of resistance to colonizers. In a country occupied by US forces, Kumiodori provided a tangible

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tradition that sustained the sense of unique identity. Currently, UNESCO's *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger* lists the Ryukyuan languages as endangered or severely endangered.[19] Theatre that uses the language that is endangered is precious. The language of the performances is stylistically presented in the form of a poem, recited in verse with a certain pattern (8-8-8-6 moras). The rhythm depends on the type of character performed; a young woman would recite differently than an older one, and men would also have a dissimilar rhythm of speech. At times of danger or anxiety, the characters go out of the pattern. In the most emotionally intense moments, the narration is taken over by *jiutai* (musicians). The musicians present a song that comes from old Ryukyuan poems (*ryūka*). Vowels in the songs are extended to the point where the composition becomes less a narrative and more a soundscape of emotions. Kumiodori play is performed in the Naha-Shuri dialect of the Okinawan language, hence the text displayed in modern Japanese at the sides of the stage. However, it is not only drama that the audience is looking forward to experiencing. The skills of actors and musicians play a major role. The way they recite, sing and move is essential to convey the emotions and narrative. Hence the space between narration, language, dance and sound produces the lived experience of Kumiodori. The theatre is not only to be seen but also to be heard. There is no primacy of sight over aural composition; they both make the theatre. The poetry (*ryūka*) that is used for the songs in Kumiodori can be recontextualized if the audience knows the specific geographical location of the place described, the characteristics of the season described, and the cultural importance of the metaphors used. This thought is explored further in the case studies discussed later in the article. The elements can be placed together in imaginative ways. The songs and music are woven together with the narrative and movement.

Wang Yaohua, who is a leading Chinese musicologist, wrote in his description of Ryukyuan music,

> In the practice of music, emotions born of reality are expressed from the artistic standpoint of 'emptiness'. This principle of 'separation from reality and receiving emptiness' (「離実得虚」) grounds the formal aspect of musical composition – which is manifest in the phrase 'one melody, many changing uses' (「一曲多変運用」) – and enables the restructuring of melodies and rhythms as generic types through a principle of aesthetic formalism.[20]

Here, we arrive at *ma* – the emptiness that is affective. This describes the ability of art and music to speak differently to everyone. This pattern was noticed in Ryukyuan poetry and music. What I have noticed in both outlined performances is that there are key moments of stillness that last a long time. Those moments are hauntingly moving, yet no active action happens onstage, but sung poetry fills the space with sound. Those gaps in the action, with the quality of 'separation from reality and receiving emptiness' through sound, could be described as *ma* – the planned space for thinking, the affective empty space that has a function.

Although it seems counterintuitive, the moments of still action are powerful through the extended time given for the involvement of the audience's personal

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experience. The relation of space and time with stillness is extensively discussed in the philosophy deriving from the Kyoto school. This is how the philosophy of Nishida Kitarō presents the role of thought in space. Nishida was one of the prominent Japanese philosophers, known for the philosophy of Nothingness (*mu* 無):

> Even if space is thought to be something still, stillness cannot be separated from time, as something still is stilled in terms of time. Time, moreover, cannot be considered something devoid of activity. Though activities are thought to be acted out in time, without the acting out, actual time cannot be thought, and time as a void becomes nothing but mere thought.[21]

This space and time given for the connection to form between the performance and the audience is an example of how *ma* works in theatre. Even if Kumiodori were not historically Japanese, the influence of Nō theatre would also be noticeable in its construction. The context of culture is also important in thinking about the empty space. Not only in Japan is the concept of *ma* important. In Chinese aesthetics, empty space was significant in visual arts such as painting, in poetry and onstage in the form of imaginary props.[22] In the article *Leaving Blank Space: The Highest Realm of Chinese Painting*, Donghua Yu writes,

> We often see an actor running around on stage, looking like riding a horse, and with various expressions. Although there is no horse or reins, the audience still feel like a horse is there. This horse is a kind of blank space in the opera, which makes the audience imagine. Blank space is like the extreme void, extreme quietness and extreme emptiness.[23]

Japanese Nō theatre was developed with Buddhist Zen philosophy, which came there from China. In both cultures the empty space is significant. Buddhism was also influential on Okinawa, until the Satsuma dependency. Other influences include Confucianism and, of course, the indigenous culture. Could Okinawan *ma* be shaped by the conversation between the systems of thought? The next part brings more light to the aesthetics of *ma* in general, followed by the Okinawan focus on the concept.

The aesthetics of *ma*

The aesthetics of *ma* can be evasive in translation into English,[24] as it refers to a non-physical concept, a multifaceted idea of space that includes place and time:

> Ma is the physical/mental distance that prepares the advent of the future. It is a phenomenon which cannot be grasped by a dualistic conceptualization of object and subject; it is a phenomenon of temporalization which brings a future event and makes the present in the process of having been. Ma is an intersubjective occasion that provides us with an empty and silent place to encounter the other. Ma is the empty time–space that produces an event and rhythms. But rhythm is never a repetition of the same, but a return of the similar in a renewed form. Nature never produces the same thing, but renews things from times past.[25]

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To begin with, *ma* is a term that refers to the concept of space or interval in Japanese culture. It can be translated into English as 'gap', 'pause', 'interval' or 'space', and it is a fundamental element in many aspects of Japanese life, including art, design, architecture, music and even interpersonal communication. *Ma* refers to the concept of negative space or the space between objects or events. This can refer to physical space, such as the space between buildings or the intervals between notes in music, or to temporal space, such as the pauses between words in a conversation or the moments of silence between movements in a dance.

Ma also carries with it a sense of significance or meaning. It is not simply an empty space, but a space that has been intentionally created or shaped in order to enhance the overall effect of artistic or aesthetic work. For example, in traditional Japanese architecture, the concept of *ma* is used to create a sense of balance and harmony between the building and its surroundings, with the placement of windows and doors carefully chosen to frame specific views of the natural world. The view of outside nature is a part of the inside of a house. In addition to its use in the arts, *ma* is also an important concept in Japanese philosophy, where it is often associated with the idea of mindfulness or presence. The idea is that by paying attention to the spaces between things, we can gain a deeper understanding of the world around us and our place within it.

Ma is known as a Japanese concept, coming from the philosophy of Zen Buddhism, where absence is a part of the composition. This aesthetics is clear in Japanese Nō theatre. In Nō performances the audience need to link the scenes together; the audience make sense of the layers of music, chanting and movement provided onstage. There is a perceivable gap between multiple layers of Nō performance:

> The audience has to weave scenes into a story, and there is no real dramatic development in the plot. The dance, Noh chanting and musical accompaniment all move forward simultaneously in small increments and at times are independently stacked upon each other. The Noh chorus sings in unison of the background of the story, and the actor often expresses his thoughts and actions and calls out to the audience to complete the picture. However, the acting is not always in line with the Noh chanting. The scheme is that the actor himself is also the commentator and master of ceremony at the same time. These multiple roles and layers also create a sense of Ma.[26]

The sense of space between layers of performance is described as *ma* by Motosugi Shozo in 'Ma in Traditional Japanese Theater: The Ma of Space and Ma of Time'. Silence and lack of movement are common in Nō performances; by not doing an action the actor gives space to the audience's consideration and imagination.

Okinawa and *ma*

Okinawan *ma* is not silent, but it gives space for the audience to think, compose mental imagery and poetically connect with the performance. The empty space is abundant with sound, where every note is carried by the space and resonates in the audience. Just like in the ocean surrounding Okinawa, waves are in constant movement. The waves of sound,

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usually filled with voice or *sanshin*, are carried throughout the poetry that is Kumiodori theatre.

The introduced concept of absence called *ma* evolved in Japan and is well recognized in the aesthetics of art and performance. However, even if Japanese influences were visible in numerous aspects of politics, economy or everyday life, especially among the aristocracy, Okinawa did not yet fully belong to Japan at the time when Kumiodori theatre was established. The Ryukyu Kingdom was diverse, as it included in its territory many islands with their own languages and cultures. Respect for ancestors and nature was dominant in Okinawan rituals and performing arts, which were originally shaped by their own shamanistic and nature-centred belief system, as well as by limited exposure to Confucianism and Buddhism, mainly through the influence of the Shuri court. The dominant intercultural dialogue present in the main Ryukyuan island, Okinawa, was between Chinese and Japanese cultures. The Ryukyu Kingdom, with its own plurality of languages and beliefs, translated the philosophy of its powerful neighbours through the lenses of their own culture and values. In this context, Confucianism was setting the value system of interdependence, but also the geopolitical situation of people depending on each other due to limited land and resources.

Nature was also inspirational for the performing arts, not only the vivid colours of subtropical Okinawa but also the omnipresent ocean, which surrounds every island and is the source of food. Okinawan dance is like the waves in the ocean – the movements are continuous. However, the idyllic landscape was also home to suffering and disasters, which forced people to leave their families. To begin with, natural disasters, such as constant typhoons, recurring droughts, earthquakes, occasional tsunamis and plagues, and heavy governmental taxes played an important role in shaping the population, as did the most recent disaster of the Second World War, the Battle of Okinawa, and the impact of Japanese and American colonialism.

Okinawan *ma* would be the kind of absence that, despite being a space of separation, is abundant with hope for a happy ending. In both of the performances introduced in this article, *Kōkō no Maki* and *Nidō Tekiuchi*, there is the key moment of separation, which takes a long time onstage. In both performances, the moment when the family is separating is presented as a ritual, where no one is moving, yet the lyrics we hear from the musicians tell us how difficult this moment really is. This reflects the Confucian system of family relations that define the structure of society. For example, in this moment, in the *Nidō Tekiuchi* performance we hear a poem in the song 'Nufa Bushi' about two people dear to each other who are walking in one direction, and one wishes this road would never end, as they do not want to separate.[27] In *Nufani: English Translation of Kumiodori and Okinawan Poetry* Komine Naganori presents the following explanation of the song:

> A man and his beloved wife climb up a pebble path for the last time. They must part, for the man suffers from leprosy and they can no longer live together. This song expresses the man's emotions, saying that if the path would last longer, they would not have to part at all.[28]

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Relations between people are important in the culture influenced by Confucianism and the cult of ancestors. Those who have passed away are still a part of the family, like present and future generations. However, the moment of separation is painful in any culture. In both performances, the motif of separation and the lack of action onstage happen before the main characters go on a journey from which they might not return. What is surprising, perhaps, is that during those moments I could not see grief or sorrow; the actors' mask-like faces and their gestures gave expressions leaning towards kindness and love for one another and possible hope for a future reunion.

The creator of Kumiodori, Tamagusuku Chōkun, was clearly inspired by Japanese forms of theatre. The aesthetics of absence, which is noticeable in Nō theatre and Japanese philosophy, can also be seen in Kumiodori theatre. However, Kumiodori is not Nō. In Kumiodori we do not see the ghosts of events that passed a long time ago; we see present choices and present problems. There is much more to the genre than inspiration from Japan. Chinese philosophy and values also had an important role in the development of the genre. Kumiodori's initial audience was the aristocracy; it mirrored the ideals of that state. The influence of Confucianism was clear in the educational function of the theatre.

In Kumiodori, except for the original poetry, rituals and stories, there is an attitude towards life from this subtropical island – 'Life is precious' (*Nuchi du takara*). Although the people went through the horrors of occupation, war, famine and starvation, there is the persistence of a happy ending, just as after every typhoon the sun comes out. The importance of space and time, discussed as *ma* in Japanese aesthetics, is also noticeable in Kumiodori. However, Ryukyuans perhaps had another perspective in the discussion of the importance of the empty time–space. This still space is noticeable because it is emotionally moving. That is the moment when drama happens in the minds of the audience, where the sound and poetry of *ryūka* is composed into images in the mind. There, the waves of sound and imagery are more significant than action. The next part of the article will unfold examples of two Kumiodori performances so that the aesthetics of *ma* can be discussed with reference to tangible experience. They were both written by Tamagusuku Chōkun, and they belong to the first Kumiodori performances. They both have the theme of obligation to parents. However, there are many more performances where *ma* is at play.

Kōkō no Maki

Kōkō no Maki (Daughter's Devotion) is a Kumiodori performance that I saw live on 13 May 2023 in the National Theatre in Okinawa. The performance begins in the middle of the day on Saturday, and from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. the audience is invited to follow the journey of sounds and images.[29] This play is rather still, but that is the beauty of the stillness that moves the audience on a personal level. For all the Kumiodori performances it is better to come prepared, to read the story in advance, to know the legends behind the stories, as all text spoken, or rather sung, onstage is in Okinawan and an English translation or synopsis is not always available.

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To provide a short outline of the main performance, *Kōkō no Maki* is a story about love and loyalty to one's family. There is a dragon (a giant serpent), a king and an impoverished family. The only way to get rid of the dragon that destroys the food of the entire community is to sacrifice someone. The village headman presents a notice board informing the village about the situation. As cruel as it sounds, for the death there is a reward – the family of the sacrificed person will receive the king's support and patronage. Having seen this note, a brother and sister from an impoverished samurai family, struggling to support their mother after their father passed prematurely, decide to volunteer. The sister decides to die for her family. She meets with her mother. Of course, she does not say anything about her plans. This is the longest moment in the entire play, the moment when she bids farewell to her mother without telling her about the plans or the fact that she might never see her again. This moment is particularly interesting for this article and is discussed in detail in the section about *ma*. Then, after the physically still and emotionally moving goodbye, the daughter goes to the king and later faces the dragon. She is the heroine and victim simultaneously. The ferocious dragon is about to eat the girl when a golden lotus appears. Suddenly it opens and reveals a representation of Bodhisattva Kannon, the goddess of mercy, so the dragon disappears instantaneously. It is a kind of miracle, a happy ending, which is doubled by the king's promise to marry the sister to his son and the brother to his daughter. In Japan and China, the goddess Kannon is easily recognized. That fragment of the story also refers to the early medieval Chinese Buddhist tradition of miracle tales, where the main protagonist, as a reward for good deeds, is saved from danger.[30]

This Kumiodori performance offers stylized movement, metaphorical poetry in the form of songs, and gaps in translation, not only linguistic gaps but also cultural gaps. What we expect to happen next might come from our cultural perception, formed by the stories and values we know. Drama without tragedy, sacrifice without death or blood, where the sadness comes from the lived experience of separation and life liminality between presence and absence of being. What is presented onstage is a set of images, movements and sounds that need to be poetically woven together by the audience to make the fabric of meaning, to be moving on a personal level. There are gaps between those layers of performance, but they are important for interpretation, as Kumiodori gives time for the audience to meditate on the feeling presented onstage. Because there was a moment of stillness, with the song in the background, there was time to think and to link the emotions from the stage and from personal life. The next performance provides another example, which is less about sacrifice and more about revenge. However, it also has a part where meditation upon separation is vividly presented.

Nidō Tekiuchi

The performance took place in the National Theatre Okinawa on 22 July 2023.[31] *Nidō Tekiuchi* (Revenge of the Two Boys) was based on the local historical legend of the Gosamaru–Amawari Revolt in 1458.[32] This is a revenge drama, where the main

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characters are two young boys (teenagers). They wish to avenge the death of their father – Gosamaru, an aristocrat, who was a supporter of the existing Ryukyu Kingdom administration. The person responsible for the death of their father is Amawari, the Lord of Katsuren. He was known to be ambitious and was even plotting to become the king of the Ryukyu Kingdom. In his opinion, Gosamaru was his rival to the throne. Due to Amawari's lies and set intrigues, the Gosamaru family was killed, except for the wife and two young sons, Tsurumatsu and Kamechiyo. Years later, they plan to revenge their father's death. They carry Gosamaru's swords and set out on a journey to kill Amawari.

The play begins with Amawari entering the stage with two swords under his belt and a large, ornamented fan – a symbol of power in the Ryukyu Kingdom. The Lord of Katsuren talks about his battles so the movement is strong, direct and well planned, and includes freeze-frames (*mie*),[33] a form known from Kabuki performances. The first speech of Amawari is known for the seven-*mie* pose, where the character strikes a pose facing seven different directions. Strong dance movements are supported by clear poses that freeze the body for a second but give the audience enough time to note the significance of the movement.

Another example of a meaningful empty space, a purposeful gap (*ma*), is the moment of separation between the mother and two sons. This scene is a long one, the mother and children do not say anything, and they do not move much. We can see them sitting onstage, facing each other. The sounds we hear are vowels extended for a long time from songs called 'Nakankari Bushi', 'Sanyama Bushi' and 'Nufa Bushi', played one after another. The words of the songs are extended and joined together, as the sound seems to flow without focus on poetic words. The moment brings to mind a state of meditation with the waves of sound in the background. This is the moment when the audience would have time to contemplate and personalize (or internalize) the moment of parting. At that time in performance, we do not know whether they will ever see each other again. The difficult emotions that are accumulated in the scene are mainly provided by the personal experience of the audience. This is the moment when the image onstage is there for so long that it becomes a representation of one's own thoughts and experiences, when we had to say farewell to people we love without knowing whether we will see them again. Even if the scene is still and the actors are mostly silent, the sound of the poem is present, and the perceivable space for thinking is powerful. *Ma* is the relationship between people, the mental and physical space between one person and another, between the character onstage and the audience.

Further on in the play, the two brothers dress up as dancers and in this disguise appear near Amawari and his servants, who are drinking sake and appear relaxed. Amawari does not suspect anything and enjoys their dance and offers them gifts. Finally, there is the opportunity for revenge and the killing takes place offstage. There is no begging for life, no blood, no second thoughts. After a brief time, the brothers come back onstage and we learn that their revenge is complete. The play ends quickly when the brothers express their happiness after their success. The structure of the play follows the *jo-ha-kyū* (序破急) format, where there is a longer beginning, a

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climax and a fast end. We do not see any cruelty onstage, but after the long and painful separation of the loved ones, through the dynamic dances, the play quickly nears the abrupt happy ending (for the protagonists). These two plays were selected as an example, as they are representative of the genre and were accessible live in the moment of contemplation on the Okinawan version of *ma* in theatre.

Conclusion

The article has discussed the concept of a purposeful empty space – *ma* (間) in the selected examples of Okinawan theatre – Kumiodori, written and choreographed by Tamagusuku Chōkun. The plays belong to the first Kumiodori plays ever to be performed: *Chōkun no Goban* (The Chōkun Five Plays), which are *Shushin Kaneiri* (Passion and the Bell), *Nidō Tekiuchi* (Revenge of the Two Boys), *Mekarushi* (Master Mekarushi), *Kōkō no Maki* (Daughter's Devotion) and *Onna Monogurui* (Woman's Madness). There, the stillness onstage in the moments of separation is one of the key moments of the play, and although there is no movement onstage, the audience can hear the live musicians (*jiutai*). However, throughout the centuries there have been many writers and composers of Kumiodori. The name 'Kumiodori' can be translated into English as 'combination dance' – a dance theatre that combines poetry, live music, movement and the unique visual aesthetic of the Ryukyu Kingdom. There, one of the layers of performance is the open, empty space, filled with sound. *Ma* is not a boundary between other layers, there is no line between entities, but there is the affective and active open space. How can a space be active? This is the time open for the audience to embrace their personal connection between the image onstage and their personal experiences. In this way, the play becomes meaningful on a scale that cannot be planned by the director or playwright. That is why a play that was written in a country from the past, written in a language that only some can fully embrace aurally, is so powerful that it moves a contemporary international audience. That happens not only because of the narrative, but also because of the gaps that the narrative involves.

In Kumiodori, the aural soundscape is significant. During the performance, we can hear the traditional instruments and the Ryukyuan language. In sung poetry, the vowels are extended to the point of words seemingly lacking an ending or a beginning. Simultaneously, the translation into modern Japanese is available at the sides of the stage. There, we can read the meaning of the sounds we hear. What is seen and heard onstage comes from a particular culture. The poetry refers to the rituals from the past and the beauty of the geographical location of Okinawa. The characteristic instrument (*sanshin*) produces that sound that is omnipresent on the island. However, the dramas in Kumiodori often refer to universal feelings of love, revenge and separation. The stillness of the image in the selected performances gives space to mediate upon the universal condition that in turn brings the audience to the personal memories of separation, known from the past or imagined. That is why stillness, open space and absence are impactful in Kumiodori performances.

Kumiodori theatre was initially created in times of dual dependency between China and Japan. It was not only a poetic and artistic invention but also a political one. The

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theatre displayed Okinawan culture with elements of Chinese and Japanese art and values. That was a political tool to balance difficult power relations. After the abolition of the Ryukyu Kingdom, the rapid and forceful Japanization meant that Ryukyuan language and art were not supported. Kumiodori was then a form of resistance. During the war, many performers lost their lives, but their relatives passed the tradition on to the next generations. The US occupation did not support the development of the theatre, so only after 1972 was Kumiodori acknowledged by Japan as important, and only in 2004 was the National Theatre Okinawa built. Okinawa Prefecture is presented – branded – as the 'Hawaii of Japan', an exotic place that is Japanese but at the same time different to mainland Japan. Many Okinawans suffered (and still suffer) discrimination in Japan. In Okinawa, the tourism industry is rapidly developing and Kumiodori is often presented as a tourist attraction. Okinawan culture is also a target of a form of colonialism that uses the indigenous culture and brands it as exotic to sell products. However, Kumiodori is more than entertainment; it is more than a cultural product sold by colonizers. This theatre is also a form of resistance that keeps the link with the past alive.

NOTES

1 National Theatre Okinawa, *Kumiodori*, at www.nt-okinawa.or.jp/traditional-okinawan-performing-arts/english/Kumiodori_en.html (accessed 25 February 2024).

2 Satoko Oka Norimatsu and Gavan McCormack, 'Ryukyu/Okinawa: From Disposal to Resistance 琉球/沖縄、処 分から抵抗へ', *Asia–Pacific Journal*, 10, 38 (2012), pp. 1–13, here p. 1.

3 Ibid., p. 3.

4 Gregory Smits, *Visions of Ryukyu: Identity and Ideology in Early-Modern Thought and Politics* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1999), p. 18.

5 'To the late 13th century and to Eiso's reign tradition ascribes the introduction of Buddhism into Okinawa. A Japanese priest named Zenkan is said to have been shipwrecked and washed ashore sometime between 1265 and 1274. He was given permission to construct a small place of worship, and under the king's patronage a temple was built at Urasoe, named the Gokuraku-ji.' George Henry Kerr, *Okinawa: The History of an Island People* (Rutland, VT and Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle, 1958), p. 48.

6 Ibid., p. 70.

7 Ibid., p. 167.

8 National Theatre Okinawa, *Kumiodori*.

9 Teruo Yano, *Kumiodori wo kiku* (Tokyo: Mizuki Shobō, 2003), pp. 11, 33.

10 Sachiyo Ito, 'Origins of Traditional Okinawan Dance', PhD thesis, New York University, 1988, p. 46. To briefly explain the terms, *Nirai Kanai* is the name of a land beyond the sea (to the east), *Amamiya Shineriya* is where the ancestors' spirits live (to the north) and *Obotsu Kagura* is where the gods reside (above the visible sky).

11 Japanese names in text are presented with surname and first name format. Here, Tamagusuku is the surname.

12 Naganori Komine, ed. and trans., *Nufani: English Translation of Kumiodori and Okinawan Poetry* (Urasoe: Okinawa Bukku Sābisu, 2008), p. 173.

13 Yano, *Kumiodori wo kiku*, p. 33.

14 Komine, *Nufani*, p. 1.

15 Norimatsu and McCormack, 'Ryukyu/Okinawa', p. 4.

16 The Asahi Shimbun, 'Rich Okinawan Language Is in Danger of Soon Becoming Extinct', at www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14622095 (accessed 25 February 2024).

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17 Norimatsu and McCormack, 'Ryukyu/Okinawa', p. 5.

18 'In some caves, Japanese soldiers slaughtered civilians, or forced them to commit mass suicide. Some residents died of starvation. Outside, hell broke out as artillery fire, mortar shells and flame throwers killed Japanese troops and residents en mass' (Okinawa Prefectural Peace Memorial Museum).

19 Alexandre Nicolas, 'Kunigami, Miyako, Okinawa, Yaeyama, and Yonaguni', in Christopher Moseley, ed., *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger*, 3rd edn (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 2010), pp. 1–154, here pp. 145, 147, 148.

20 Yaohua Wang, *Chūgoku to Ryūkyū no sanshin ongaku*, trans. Kaneshiro Atsumi (Tokyo: Daiichi Shobō, 1998), p. 299.

21 Dean Anthony Brink, *Philosophy of Science and the Kyoto School: An Introduction to Nishida Kitaro, Tanabe Hajime and Tosaka Jun* (London, New York and Dublin: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p. 26.

22 Donghua Yu, 'Leaving Blank Space: The Highest Realm of Chinese Painting', *Arts Studies and Criticism*, 1, 1 (2020), pp. 1–3, here p. 1.

23 Ibid., pp. 2–3.

24 Michael Lucken and Miriam Rosen, 'The Limits of Ma: Retracing the Emergence of a "Japanese" Concept', *Journal of World Philosophies*, 6, 1 (2021), pp. 38–57, here p. 55, outline the various meanings and contexts of the empty space–time defined as *ma* (間): '*Maai:* [literally] meeting of *mas*; finding the distance (esp. in the martial arts). *Ma ga au:* [literally] having *ma* that connects; having the right timing. *Ma ga nukeru:* [literally] having *ma* that misses out; not keeping to the beat. *Ma ni hamaru:* [literally] falling into *ma*; adapting perfectly. *Ma ga nobiru:* [literally] extending *ma*; putting off (in time). *Ma ga chijimu:* [literally] shortening *ma*; moving forward (in time).'

25 Tetsuya Kono, 'Phenomenology of Ma and Maai: An Interpretation of Zeami's Body Cosmology from a Phenomenological Point of View', *New Generation Computing*, 37 (2019), pp. 247–61, here p. 247.

26 Shozo Motosugi, 'Ma in Traditional Japanese Theater: The Ma of Space and Ma of Time', in M. Kodama, ed., *Ma Theory and the Creative Management of Innovation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 195–214, here p. 195.

27 'Nufa Bushi', a song that was played in the moment of separation in *Nidō Tekiuchi*:

> There is a meandering stone road
> In the Nufa village.
> While climbing up the road
> With my lover,
> I wish the road would last longer.
> It doesn't seem quite long enough.

Komine, *Nufani*, p. 112.

28 Ibid., p. 112.

29 Before the main performance, on that day, there were a couple of much shorter dance performances. All of them were loosely connected to the theme of the main performance, which is loyalty to the family and love finding its expression in self-sacrifice. What struck me at the beginning of those dances was the intensity of colours and the simplicity of scenography. Onstage we can see vivid colours of costumes highlighted by the background light – the same bright colours that are on Okinawa on a sunny day. The red is a hibiscus red; blue is often presented with turquoise – the colours of the clear and warm tropical ocean. The subtropical location of the island of Okinawa is clearly visible in the performances. Even before the main Kumiodori performance, there are songs and dances in the Okinawan language. The poetic text is sung with extended vowels, so the sound seems almost continuous. The translation into Japanese is always available at the side of the stage. While we listen to the sounds of the language from the past, we can read the meaning at the side. The first performances are dances telling stories about crops, sailing, the pine tree (symbolizing timelessness), longing and loneliness, love and hope. In all the dances, performed either solo or in pairs, there is only a single prop – for example, a single handmade narrow

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cloth called *minsā*. This is a piece of fabric that symbolizes love. The tradition comes from the Yaeyama Islands, and the name describes an item – a narrow piece of cotton cloth. It was made with the thought of a loved one, usually by a woman, as a sign of an accepted marriage proposal or of love. The pattern of four squares and five squares alternately is symbolic. The reading of numbers four and five make a message of everlasting love. Everything else happens in the imagination of the audience, through the medium of sung poetry. The songs not only present images that explain what we might see through the eyes of the dancer, but also pose questions which everyone in the audience will have to answer individually. As an example, there is a scene where a woman holding a *minsā* sings a story that she is standing on the shore and had to bid farewell to the loved one. Maybe this will be the last time she sees him. One of the questions posed by the song is, 'How can you say goodbye to a loved one'. What is characteristic of this type of performance is that there is no extreme facial expression or rapid dance movement. The dancer's face is, rather, still; the movement is stylized and organized into a collection of defined forms. What is particular to this type of performance is the near disconnection of the emotional layer and the body of the dancer. The emotion presented by the body is so nuanced that without some knowledge of the cultural context, one might not notice the tilt of the head or the subtle eye expression. The layer of emotion is narrated by the chorus (*jiutai*), singing in the background and supported by the instruments: the *sanshin*, *koto*, drum, flute and *kokyu* (National Theatre Okinawa). After the dances there is the main performance of Kumiodori. The movement of Kumiodori is based on the movement from Okinawan dances.

30 *Mingxiang ji* 冥祥記, or *Records of Signs from the Unseen Realm*, was written by Wang Yan 王琰 (around 500 CE). Translation and study on the book are accessible in Robert Ford Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012).

31 The performance was a part of the Kumiodori appreciation event, with a lecture about the theatre before the performance. As a part of the event, one week later, a theatre sightseeing tour was organized by the theatre. This included a one-hour workshop with the Kumiodori actors. The National Theatre, where Kumiodori takes place, was built in 2004. The first time I visited the theatre was in 2013. Back then, I recall, there was not much support for English-speakers. Ten years later, there are audio guides available with translations into Japanese and English. Leaflets were available in English. What is most encouraging, for the live events, is that there were English interpreters available for every group, giving international tourists a better understanding of the genre and the Okinawan tradition.

32 National Theatre Okinawa, *Kumiodori*.

33 The freeze-frame pose is called *mie* in Kabuki, but in Kumiodori it is known as *nana mijichi*. Ito, 'Origins of Traditional Okinawan Dance', p. 106.

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