

Bunraku: Japan's Traditional Puppet Theater

by Torigoe Bunzo

(Translated by Ayako Kano)

Lecture given April 1, 2003 as the Donald Keene Center's Soshitsu Sen XV Distinguished Lecture on Japanese Culture.

If one were to look up the term "*jôruri*" in the dictionary (the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* published by *Shogakkan*), one would find definitions such as: 1) a Buddhist term; a clear and transparent lapis lazuli stone; a metaphor for purity; 2) one of the musical story-telling genres originating with *heikyoku* (*Tale of Heike* recitation) and *yôkyoku* (*noh* play recitation). Except for those with an interest in Buddhism, most of us are familiar only with the second of these definitions for "*jôruri*." I remember hearing this word when I was an elementary school student. I heard sounds of someone practicing a recitation in one of the neighbor's houses. I asked my mother what the sounds were, and she answered, "*Jôruri*." This was in a regional city in Kyushu. I do not think that I first heard of *jôruri* in an especially unusual environment. For Japanese people before World War II, *jôruri* was not something distant from our lives.

We find the first example of the use of the word "*jôruri*" in written records in July of 1475, in the *Sanetaka Kôki Haishi*. Until this reference was found, it was said that the references in the *Sôchô Nikki* were the oldest. *Sôchô*, master of linked-poetry, wrote in his diary of August 1531 about hearing a blind performer recite *jôruri* while traveling in Odawara. It is possible that even older references will be found in the future, but for the time being, we can say that the genre of *jôruri* existed in Japan from about 500 years ago.

How did a Buddhist term come to be used as the name of a performing arts genre? It is said that the master of the station of Yahagi offered prayers to Hôrai-ji temple in Mikawa, an area that is now Aichi prefecture, for the birth of a child and was finally granted a daughter. He named the daughter "Princess Jôruri," after Yakushinyorai (Bhaishajyaguru) who is said to reign in the Eastern realm of Jôruri Sekai according to Buddhist belief. Stories were written about this "Princess Jôruri," and these stories appear in the above-mentioned references. These "Jôruri Hime Monogatari" or "Tales of Princess Jôruri" were spread by *biwa hôshi*, musician-story tellers who played the lute and recited tales, which were until then mostly from the *Tales of Heike*. The *biwa hôshi* expanded their repertoire and started telling various other tales as well, but the genre itself came to be known as "*jôruri*" even when the tales had nothing to do with Princess Jôruri.

Puppets have a long history as figurines representing human beings (*hitokata*), and had a strongly religious significance as part of practices of worship or incantation. When artistry was added to the puppets, "puppetry" or "puppet manipulation" (*ningyô ayatsuri*) developed, and when this was combined with "*jôruri*," the "*ayatsuri jôruri*," i.e. *jôruri* with puppet manipulation, was born. This was theater in which the stories told as *jôruri* are made visual through the use of puppets and shown to the audience. It is said that this happened in the early Tokugawa era, i.e. the early 1600s. As the accompanying instrument, the "*biwa*" was replaced by

"*shamisen*," a three-stringed instrument that was introduced from the islands now known as Okinawa and altered to match the sensibilities of the Japanese people.

What is now known as "*bunraku*" had its origins here. The *ayatsuri jôruri* (the literal translation would be puppetry *jôruri* or manipulation *jôruri*) consists of three components: the "*tayû*" who recites the *jôruri*, the "*shamisen hiki*" who plays the accompanying *shamisen* instrument, and the "*ningyô tsukai*" who manipulates the puppet. It has a history of 400 years.

It first originated in Kyoto, the center of culture at the time, and then became popular in the urban centers like Osaka and Edo, but since Osaka eventually became the center of *ayatsuri jôruri*, I will focus on the history of the genre in Osaka.

When we consult old texts on *jôruri*, we see words like "*tôryû*" (fashionable, up to date) or "*shin jôruri*" (new *jôruri*). Since what is not "new" is defined as "old," the history of *jôruri* can be divided largely into "old *jôruri*" and "new or fashionable *jôruri*." The work that is situated at the dividing point between the new and the old is *Shusse Kagekiyo*, written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653-1724), and first performed by Takemoto Gidayû, the *jôruri* chanter (1651-1714). *Shusse Kagekiyo* premiered at the Takemotoza, a theater in the Dôtonbori area of Osaka, in 1685; Chikamatsu was 33 years old, and Takemoto Gidayû was 35 years old. These two could be called geniuses, but in the realm of the arts, even geniuses cannot create something out of nothing. It would thus be more appropriate to say that they broke new ground by taking advantage of the fruits of eighty years worth of the old *jôruri* created by their superb forerunners.

Jôruri chanters before Takemoto Gidayû expressed their individuality by taking their names and adding it to "*bushi*" which means "tune" or "performance style." Yamamoto Kakutayû had his *kakutayûbushi*, Miyako Ittchû had his *ittchûbushi*, Okamoto Bunya his *bunyabushi*, Uji Kadayû his *kadayûbushi*. Takemoto Gidayû followed these examples, and called his own style *gidayûbushi*. Toyotake Wakatayû, a talented disciple of his, left his master, opened up the Toyotakeza theater in the same Dôtonbori district, and competed with his master's theater, the Takemotoza theater. But the *jôruri* that was used in the Toyotakeza was called *gidayûbushi* [after the master], not *wakatayûbushi* [after the disciple]. This was the same as the way in which "*jôruri*" became the name of a genre even after the performance repertoire expanded beyond "Princess Jôruri Tales."

So the *jôruri* that I had first heard mentioned by my mother was indeed this *gidayûbushi*.

Wakatayû did not create his own *wakatayûbushi*, but after Gidayû, there were many who created their own *bushi* or style. In the *kabuki* world, we still hear about *tokiwazubushi* or *kiyomotobushi*, which are also performance styles of *jôruri*. But they are referred to as "*tokiwazu*" or "*kiyomoto*," rather than as "*jôruri*." This is because "*jôruri*" has become synonymous with "*gidayûbushi*."

Chikamatsu Monzaemon is one of Japan's most well-known authors. During his writing career spanning about 50 years, Chikamatsu produced about 100 *jôruri* scripts, and about 50 *kabuki* scripts. Although we only have the outlines of his *kabuki* works, his *jôruri* have been published as "*shôhon*" (full texts), so these works can be viewed in their entirety. Although one cannot say

this about all 100 of the plays, many can be called masterworks. Since *jôruri* are originally from the epic tradition, many of them are "*jidaimono*" (historical pieces), which portray historical characters. However, they are also contemporary in that they use historical characters to portray the events and problems of Chikamatsu's own time. In addition, he also wrote *jôruri* that portrayed events involving common people in the urban areas. These are called "*sewamono*" or domestic pieces, as opposed to "*jidaimono*." The first work that featured a townsman as the hero of a tragedy was *Sonezaki Shinjû* (Double Suicide at Sonezaki) which premiered in 1603. This work is said to have enjoyed great popularity. It is also highly regarded by Professor Donald Keene, one of the very few scholars who can evaluate these works from a global perspective. This means that this work can be recognized as a classic.

However, regrettably, there are only a limited number of works by Chikamatsu that have survived until today with the original music. The reason for this, simply put, is that Japan did not see the development of a system of music notation as in European music. All of the traditional arts in Japan have been passed down from master to disciple through the body, from mouth to ear. *Jôruri* is no exception. When performances are interrupted for a while, the music is forgotten. The aforementioned *Sonezaki Shinjû*, which is among the most famous of Chikamatsu's works, was also such a forgotten work. It was after WWII that it was performed in a reconstructed version, with the text also somewhat altered, and within 50 years it was performed over 1,000 times, making it one of Chikamatsu's most popular works.

To repeat, when we *read* Chikamatsu's works, we can call him a great author who wrote masterpieces, but when it comes to *seeing* and *hearing* these works on stage, in a form that has been unchanged from the first performance, we are reduced to less than one-tenth of Chikamatsu's works. This makes evaluation of Chikamatsu difficult.

This might be difficult for people from Europe and the United States to understand, so allow me to add a few more footnotes. Chikamatsu is often compared to Shakespeare. But when it comes to Shakespeare, directors of every age have focused their attention on how to *interpret* the original text and how to *express* it on stage. Hence we have performances where Hamlet is dressed in non-prince-like tights.

But those who are involved in Japanese traditional arts do not hold the same regard for new interpretations. They focus their attention on how to *reproduce* as faithfully as possible the ideas and modes of expression of the age in which Chikamatsu's works were written. The *interpretation* by an individual of a later age is not the same as the *reproduction* of the stage as intended by Chikamatsu and Gidayû. Such interpretation is considered negligence of tradition. So here we have a different understanding of the notion of "tradition."

However, in the case of Chikamatsu, because he left such great literature, there is a new movement that is attempting to approach him through twenty-first-century modes of expression. This topic is worthy of further exploration.

A notable trend that began after Chikamatsu's death is the increase in works produced collaboratively by several writers, rather than works authored by a single playwright. The play

featured in this year's symposium, the 1748 *Kanadehon Chûshingura* (Treasury of Loyal Retainers) followed two other works, *Sugawara Denju Tenarai Kagami* (Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy) of 1746 and *Yoshitsune Senbonzakura* (Yoshitsune and the One Thousand Cherry Trees) of 1747, and together they comprise the three great works of *jôruri*. The authors were Takeda Izumo, Namiki Sôsuke, and Miyoshi Shôroku. Among these three, Namiki Sôsuke is considered a great writer, equaling Chikamatsu. But that the work that made his reputation was a part of a collaborative effort, rather than a single-authored work like in Chikamatsu's case, points to the trend of the times.

This trend of the times had to do with the great flourishing of *ayatsuri jôruri*. A text that describes the Dôtonbori area around 1745 records that "*ayatsuri* (i.e. puppet theater) is becoming more popular, and it is as if *kabuki* didn't exist." The Dôtonbori area of Osaka was a theater district, like New York's Broadway. There were two theaters specializing in *ayatsuri jôruri*, the Takemotoza and the Toyotakeza, as well as three theaters for *kabuki*. Osaka had this strange period in history in which theater performed by puppets was more popular than theater performed by people, i.e. *kabuki*. And this history lasted for about a quarter of century, which is amazing.

The fact that *ayatsuri jôruri* flourished also means that there must have been talented people to support the performances as reciters, *shamisen* players, and puppeteers. When there are many master performers, each act becomes more elaborate. Naturally each act also becomes longer, and it probably becomes difficult for one playwright to have control over the entire play. Thus multiple authors would divide up and collaborate on one play. Since there were many master playwrights, a system of collaboration was invented, and together with the performers, they brought *ayatsuri jôruri* as a whole to great heights. It is difficult to tell which came first, the chicken or the egg, or in this case, the performers or the playwrights.

In any case, this was a time that saw the rise of many playwrights and performers who could be called "master" playwrights, "master" reciters and so forth. There is another important point. Up to and including Chikamatsu's time, each puppet was manipulated by one puppeteer. From 1734, a technique was introduced in which each puppet was manipulated by three puppeteers. Hence, this was an era of expansion that saw an increase in the numbers of puppeteers, the extending of stage space, as well as the enlarging of the theater buildings.

However, this trend of expansion eventually came to an end. In August of 1765 the Toyotakeza and, two and a half years later at the end of 1767, the Takemotoza both found that it had become impossible to exclusively devote themselves to *ayatsuri jôruri*. This has been called "retreat" (*taiten*). These two theaters had until then never allowed performances other than *ayatsuri jôruri* since they had opened. But at this point it became impossible to maintain high attendance numbers, and the two theaters decided to manage by renting out the stage to *kabuki* and so on.

From one perspective, the fact that the *ayatsuri jôruri* performances in these two theaters decreased drastically means that the *ayatsuri jôruri* population of Osaka declined. This, however, had a positive side as well. Performers started putting on shows in small theaters in Osaka, or in theaters in places other than Osaka. And when chanters and *shamisen* players put effort into training amateurs, performances in small theaters supported by devoted amateur *jôruri*

aficionados became popular. Takemotoza and Toyotakeza were large theaters that could hold up to 1,000 people at maximum capacity. But there were many small theaters that would seat several hundred people, because the population that practiced *jôruri* as a hobby increased. Aficionados also increased in other regions, so in Japan as a whole, the *ayatsuri jôruri* population increased. As I said earlier, it was through *jôruri* works that the culture (*kyôyô*) of the common people of the Edo period was formed.

Let us now compare *jôruri* with *kabuki*, the other theater supported by the common people in the Edo period. *Ayatsuri jôruri* works from the time of Chikamatsu to the "retreat" of the Takemotoza and Toyotakeza theaters were adapted for *kabuki* soon after their premieres. *Kabuki* was mostly on the *importing* side. There are only a few examples in which *kabuki* *exported* plays to the *ayatsuri jôruri*. When we look at the repertoire of *kabuki* today, we see that over half are works that premiered as *ayatsuri jôruri* and then were adapted for *kabuki*. From this we can understand how important a position *ayatsuri jôruri* held in the theater beloved by the common people of Japan since the 18th century.

After the retreat of the two theaters, *ayatsuri jôruri* in Osaka took the form of sporadic performances in small theaters here and there. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a messiah appeared: the promoter Uemura Bunrakuken. He devoted himself to the promotion of *ayatsuri jôruri* productions. This is why the performances he promoted came to be called "*bunraku no shibai*" or "Bunraku's theater." Since *bunraku* theater consisted exclusively of *ayatsuri jôruri*, "*bunraku*" came to be used as a synonym for *ayatsuri jôruri*. After the Meiji Restoration of 1868, the word "*ayatsuri*" was shunned and the term "*ningyô jôruri*" or puppet *jôruri* came into use. This term is still used today as if it were the official academic term, but "*bunraku*" was accepted as a general term and has also become internationally known.

Following the time when Bunrakuken started promoting productions in Osaka, i.e. about the end of the 18th century, few new works were written. Old works were performed repeatedly. As a result, the modes of expression became more elaborate and artistically refined. Takemoto Koshijitayû who died in 2002 at the age of 89 is said to have been the last chanter who truly trained in *gidayû* from childhood, but he always used to say, "The training of *jôruri* takes more than a lifetime. I'd like to have one more lifetime." This shows how difficult it is to master this art.

Let me show in terms of numbers how many *bunraku* works (and *gidayûbushi* musical pieces) exist. To estimate very crudely, there are about 500 from the old *jôruri* period, 700 from the new *jôruri* period, for a total of about 1,200. Of these 1,200, there are some which only exist in single copies, whereas others exist in multiple copies. Our research thus far has focused on public libraries and museums, and private collections have yet to be researched thoroughly, but there exist about 30,000 texts. Some time ago, we edited the *Gidayû Timeline: The Early Modern Period* (8 vols, 4,758 pages). This timeline lists all the works that were performed with *gidayûbushi* music, starting with Takemoto Gidayû's performance in Kyoto in December of 1677 to the Meiji Restoration in 1868, about two hundred years later. Each entry tries to clarify which piece was performed by whom, when, and where. Since "*banzuke*," which correspond to posters or pamphlets today, are the most reliable source of information, we focused on researching *jôruri*

banzuke. We looked for them all over the world and photographed them, including multiple copies of the same *banzuke*, and ended up with about 10,000.

The number of performance runs totaled 3,835. When divided by 200 years, we came up with an average of a little under 20 performance runs per year.

The aforementioned *Kanadehon Chûshingura* was called the "*Dokujintô*," which is a kind of "tonic" or "restorative" drug, because whenever a theater was suffering from low attendance, if it stopped whatever it was showing and started staging this work, the attendance would go up. For this reason, this play was performed the most often. Let us use this play as an example to look more closely at performance frequency.

In the 120 years from the premiere in 1748 to the Meiji Restoration there were 263 performance runs, in the 77 years of the modern era, that is from 1865 to the end of WWII there were 116, and in the 57 years since the end of WWII there were 163 performance runs. In terms of annual average, there were on average two performance runs per year during the Edo period, 1.5 per year during the modern period, and 3 per year in the postwar period. In the Edo period, new works were still being produced, but even so, twice a year is not a high number. The reason the number declines further in the modern era is because *bunraku* itself saw a decline. And the reason the average became the highest in the postwar period is because the repertoire became impoverished. There were almost no new works produced, and the repetition of well-known works became all too common.

Since 1868, the productions of *bunraku* and *kabuki* have not followed a system of long-term runs. These days, each piece in the *bunraku* repertoire is repeated at least every five years, and as often as every other year. I mentioned earlier that the *Sonezaki Shinjû* has been performed over 1,000 times in the 50 years since the end of WWII. Since each performance run lasts about 20 days, this means that there was on average one performance run of this play somewhere in Japan every single year. This is surely a sign of the impoverishment and decline of the *bunraku* repertoire.

Bunraku has been recommended this year to receive the designation of "Intangible Cultural Treasure" by UNESCO. I must confess that my feelings about this are mixed in that I feel both sad and guilty that *bunraku* might fit the criteria for designation, that is, "art forms that are endangered." Objectively speaking, we must admit the fact that *bunraku* has been on the decline since the modern period and especially after WWII. On the other hand, *kabuki*, which also originated in the Edo period as a performance art form of the common people, is still flourishing today. While people pointed to the danger of *kabuki* declining several times, it ultimately has been revitalized. I can only hope that *bunraku*, too, will be revitalized.