On 31 October 1613, Captain Richard Cocks, head of the English factory in Japan and one of the country’s early European visitors, attended a theatre performance in Hirado, which to his great astonishment was given ‘by the Kings themselves, with the greatest Noblemen and Princes. […] The matter was of the valiant deeds of their Ancestors, from the beginning of their Kingdome or Common-wealth, until this present, with much mirth mixed among, to give the common people content’. And he concluded appreciatively: ‘I never saw Play wherein I noted so much, for I see their policie is great in doing thereof, and quite contrary to our Comoedies in Christendome, ours being but dumbe shewes, and this the truth it selfe, acted by the Kings themselves, to keep in perpetuall remembrance their affaires.’

A contemporary of Shakespeare and thus accustomed to royal performances, Cocks discerned the meaning of such theatricalities of power, though he was unaware of the dramatic genre, which was ô—that is, lyric masked drama interspersed with song and dance, and accompanied by instrumental music and a chorus—alternating with kyôgen—comic sketches. To be more accurate, what the captain saw was amateur ô played by warriors. More than two centuries had passed since actor-authors like Kan’ami Kiyotsugu (1334–1384) and his son, Zeami Motokiyo (1363–1444?), brought sarugaku ô (later called ô) to a first bloom. Meanwhile, the genre had turned from a ‘beggars’ occupation’ (as one fourteenth-century courtier described it) of troupes affiliated with Buddhist temples and Shintô shrines, into a refined stage art. Patronised by the military elite, ô not only absorbed the iconography and rhetoric of aristocratic literature, but also adopted courtly deportment on stage. During the

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1 The account by Cocks is in John Saris’s journal, The Voyage of Captain John Saris to Japan, 1613, ed. by Ernest Satow, pp. 169, 170.
2 The theatre metaphor pervades not only dramatic works but also royal discourse from the period, as in famed sayings by English monarchs both on stage and off: ‘We royals are always on stage’ (Queen Elizabeth I); or, ‘A King is as one set on a stage’ (King James I, Basilicon Doron).
two centuries between the first famed actor-authors and Cocks, these elegiac dramas, fed by old myths and legends evoking the deeds of literary and historical heroes, had become so popular with mighty patrons that they themselves started practicing nô chant and dance. Thus, in Cocks’s time, nô (and kyôgen), transmitted over generations in the families of professional actors, had become an elegant pastime of the military class. Dancing and chanting nô became a discipline included in the curriculum of young samurai as well as an indicator of prestige and cultivation. Soon, what had begun as patronage became a sort of monopoly, as professional nô was absorbed by court ceremony: regimented, controlled, and jealously confined to the warriors’ world. Nevertheless, the old theatre form continued to attract aficionados from all social strata, and was practiced and enjoyed in various contexts beyond the samurai circles.

This essay deals with the visibility, the value, and the uses of nô during Japan’s early modern period—the Edo or Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868)—and argues that, in spite of its relative seclusion, the art asserted its role as a leading cultural medium and as a good that was traded across social divides. A contribution to work on nô’s shifting sociopolitical contexts, which have been highlighted by recent studies, this paper traces the resonance of nô in the public sphere, which emerged in Japan in response to absolutist rule and rapid urbanisation. During the early modern period, nô’s status and its uses varied considerably: it was a state ceremony but also a refined stage art; a body-mind discipline and lifestyle trend-setter; a repertoire of classical literary and visual topoi—all in all a multimedia repository of collective memory. My contention here is that, precisely because of its multiple functions, early modern nô shaped patterns of cultural identity that became conspicuous during Japan’s nation-building phase and have resonances down to the present day.

3 For the role of warriors as patrons and amateur practitioners, I am especially indebted to Fumio Amano and Akira Omote, Nôgaku no rekishi (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1987); Akira Omote, Kitaryû no seiritsu to tenkai (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1994); further Fumio Amano, Nô ni tsukareta kenyokusha: Hideyoshi nôgaku aikôki (Tokyo: Kôdansha, 1997).

4 The agency of nô actors is discussed in Eric Rath, The Ethos of Nôk: Actors and their Art (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); on the commoners’ relation to nô, see Kano Shigeru, Edo to nôgaku (Tokyo: Wan’ya Shoten, 1989); Gerald Groemer, ‘Nô at the Crossroads: Commoner Performance During the Edo Period’, Asian Theatre Journal, 15.1 (1998), pp. 117–41, also provides rich material.

5 For the concept of the theatrical public sphere as an abstract and encompassing space of multilevel interaction, extending beyond the categories of (actual) spectators and (potential) onlookers, I refer to Christopher Balme, The Theatrical Public Sphere (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 12–14.
A Fulminant Prelude: Nô and Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s Dramaturgy of Power

The use of Nô as a political weapon reached its first peak with Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598; r. 1585–1598), the second unifier of Japan after long and devastating intestine wars. This hegemon was not only the most versatile performer of royal power in Japan’s history, but also a fervent amateur actor and far-sighted patron of Nô, who laid the foundations for an enduring recontextualisation of the art. Hideyoshi’s dramatic reign, which was roughly contemporary with the Elizabethan Age, illustrates what Christopher Pye called ‘the irreducible relation between theatricality and absolutism’, disclosing in multiple ways ‘sovereignty’s true, and profound theatrical sources’. The need to defend his status, which had been acquired by prowess in arms and strategic genius, led the hegemon to a conspicuous self-fashioning via sedulous training in the elegant arts and disciplines, and to a sophisticated dramaturgy of pageants and other state acts—including destructive gestures such as irrational and lurid punishments as well as ordered suicides of close relatives, friends, and vassals—all staged as huge shows for the masses. In these performances, Hideyoshi distinguished himself not only by his love for ceremony but also by his impulsive, whimsical behaviour, which often disrupted normative protocol.

The hegemon’s histrionic temperament found congenial expression in Nô, an art that he practiced assiduously during the last six years of his life, when chanting and dancing became an obsessive occupation. Fully aware of its symbolic potential, Hideyoshi used Nô on a grand scale as a rhetorical weapon. He not only learned by heart and publicly performed sixteen classical dramas, but...
also compelled his vassals to emulate him on the stage; moreover, he ordered ten new nô to be composed in praise of his own military deeds. Among the five extant texts, two deity plays distinguish themselves by complex dramaturgies meant to create a charismatic relationship between the hegemon and his subjects. Unlike the warrior dramas dedicated to him, the deity plays do not recall past events, but instead offer anticipatory scenarios of actual royal pageants, thus appearing both prescriptive and descriptive. Their performance in situ implied multiple acts of dislocation and substitution of the royal persona in a network of reflective discourses.

The first of these texts, Yoshino môde (The Royal Procession to Yoshino), prefigures Hideyoshi’s famous pilgrimage to an important religious site on Mount Yoshino, the centre of a famous sect of mountain ascetics (shugendô), where a pageant took place in the spring of 1594. After minute preparations, the hegemon left Osaka with a huge retinue on the twenty-sixth day of the second month, spending one night at Taimadera and two more at Yoshino in a pavilion provided with a nô stage, Yoshimizu-in, close to the temple, where he held a poetry party on the twenty-ninth. The festivities culminated in the official cherry blossom viewing (hanami) in front of the great temple hall (Zaôdô) on the first day of the third month, followed by a nô program containing nine plays: three performed by Hideyoshi himself, two by his designated heir, Hidetsugi, three by high dignitaries, and one by a famous nô actor.

The first nô on the program was Yoshino môde, which displayed a mise-en-abîme of the royal pageant itself. The drama opens with a high dignitary (waki, the deuteragonist) announcing the procession of the hegemon, who rules the land at his heart’s will; conquered, allegedly, the three Korean lands and showed his benevolence to the Ming envoys; put an end to the wars; and built a splendid castle at Fushimi in Yamashiro. A character called ‘Hideyoshi’, accompanied by his retinue (cast in side roles as waki / wakizure), then arrives at Yoshino, where he encounters a mysterious old couple (shite, the protagonist, and tsure, his companion) and engages in formal conversation about the holy life that Nobunaga allowed me to do tea.’ Cf. Herbert Plutschow, Rediscovering Rikyu and the Beginnings of the Japanese Tea Ceremony (Kent: Global Oriental, 2003), p. 83.

10 Only five of the plays (with libretti by Hideyoshi’s historian and sycophant, Ômura Yûko, and musical arrangement by Konparu Yasuteru) have been preserved: three are warrior dramas; the other two are deity plays. One warrior play is translated in Steven T. Brown, Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh (2001).

11 The program included Yoshino môde, Genji kuyô, and Sekidera Komachi (Hideyoshi); Aoi no ue and Taema (Hidetsugi); Ōgao, Ominameshi, and Miwa (vassals of Hideyoshi); and Shiga (Konparu Anshô). Cf. Amano, p. 162.

12 My paraphrase is of the libretto in Yôkyoku sanbyakugojûbanshû, ed. by Nonomura Kaizô (Tokyo: Kôbunsha, 1928), p. 685.
ness of the site. The old couple depart, only to reappear in the second scene in their real form as two local deities—the formidable Zaô Gongen, patron deity of the temple, and a Heavenly Maid, who performs ceremonial dances. Both extend their grace to the hegemon character and promise to protect his reign.

Following the common pattern of deity plays, Hideyoshi’s pilgrimage is here cast as a via sacra crowned by divine epiphany. Indeed, the great hall of the temple complex (Zaôdô), completed two years earlier in 1592, contained a carved wooden trinity of Zaô Gongen, the fierce patron deity of shugendô, a formidable native god who is mentioned in texts as early as the ninth century. Iconographic similarities between Zaô Gongen and Hideyoshi’s royal persona were not entirely incidental: the despot often appeared in front of his subjects wearing fierce looking makeup with false eyows, a false moustache, and blackened teeth, looking very much like that fierce deity.

In contrast to the warrior dramas written for Hideyoshi, the location of Yoshino môde is not connected to the hegemon’s past deeds. Indeed, it is not a battlefield at all; rather, it is a place infused with a mysterium tremendum et fascinosum as well as a landscape of paradisiac harmony and peace, famous for its cherry blossoms—a locus amoenus. This double connotation offers an ideal mirror for Hideyoshi’s state procession, as the landscape comes to resonate in the libretto with abundant and carefully chosen felicitous words (shûgen) that are reinforced by wordplay (weaving the hegemon’s name into the text, for instance) and that point to the cosmic and religious dimensions of embodied royal power.

The performance relied on the sovereign’s multiple roles: Hideyoshi was simultaneously the leader of the flower viewing party (hanamû); an actor on the stage (impersonating not himself, but the local protective deity); dramaturge and spectator of the event; and, in addition, a character in his drama (the character Hideyoshi was played by a child, which was usual for royal characters in nô). Embedded within the multilayered state ceremony, the nô conflated a via sacra crowned by divine epiphany with the actual apotheosis of the sovereign-as-deity, thereby blurring, disturbingly, the realms of religion, poetry, theatre, and politics. On the nô stage, Hideyoshi (cast as Zaô Gongen) presented himself (the character Hideyoshi) with a symbolic gift—a blossoming cherry twig—and promised divine protection for his own reign. This intricate dramaturgy of sight and signs kept the spectators’ attention fluctuating between mirrored images that not only implied but also enacted godly sponsorship, literally displacing the hegemon’s royal person into a divine space.13

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13 The present essay is indebted to recent research on the performance of power: Karl-Georg Soeffner, Figurative Politik (Opladen: Leske und Budrich 2002); Ron Eyerman, Myth, Meaning and Performance: Towards a New Cultural Sociology of the Arts (New Haven:
Intermedial resonance replicated the event in perdurable images: the procession *cum* performance was related in official annals and visualised in art, for instance on a gorgeous folding screen probably painted by Kanô Mitsunobu, which clearly echoes representations of Buddhist paradise. On one of the screen’s panels, Hideyoshi appears dressed in white, like a bodhisattva among courtiers clad in bright colours, sitting in a pristine spring landscape and enjoying the view of blossoming cherry trees, a reflection of his own peaceful reign. In the lower left corner, inconspicuously, a *nō* stage is visible, annexed to his travel abode (Yoshimizu-in) and alluding to the performance that was actually held in front of Zaô Hall. The stage depicted on the screen was probably never used, yet it survives as an iconic sign—a symbolic tool of royal power.\textsuperscript{14}

Such an overt conflation of royal with divine authority carried a seed of blasphemy that would have been perceivable even to subjects living in a ‘charismatic social order’ (Max Weber’s term). When the hegemon turned to Mount Kôya immediately after his visit to Yoshino, to perform the second deity *nō*, *Kôya sankei* (*Royal Pilgrimage to Mount Kôya*)—in which Hideyoshi was to impersonate his own (deified) mother, voicing her gratitude to the character Hideyoshi (cast, again, as a child)—an earthquake and a violent storm prevented the show. According to an eyewitness, the despot’s presumption had infuriated the gods and Kôbô Daishi himself, founder of the Shingon sect of Buddhism, showed his discontent. Frightened by this divine omen, the despot hurried back to his Osaka residence, leaving behind the *nō* manuscript, where it still remains. These incidents did not, however, hinder Hideyoshi’s subsequent deification, which had been symbolically prefigured in the two deity plays.\textsuperscript{15} In his dramaturgy, *nō* came to be embedded in grand acts of state that display in striking ways the interpenetration of poetry, religion, and politics symptomatic of charismatic royalty.

\textsuperscript{14} Yoshino hanamizu byôbu, preserved in the Hosomi collection. http://bunka.nii.ac.jp/heritages/detail/43081.

\textsuperscript{15} Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s deification as Shin-Hachiman, the New Deity of War, was short-lived: his temple-shrine, erected after the hegemon’s death, was demolished in 1619.
Patronage as Symbiosis: Nô as Court Ceremony and Samurai Body-Mind Discipline

Toyotomi Hideyoshi’s addiction to nô was not an isolated case. Before and after him, warlords dedicated much time to the practice of the art, some of them mastering impressive numbers of dramas: the despot’s temporarily designated heir, Hidetsugi (who was later ordered to commit ritual suicide) mastered forty plays, to say nothing of the warrior and aesthete Hosokawa Yûsai, who boasted a repertoire of eighty-three. After Hideyoshi, all Tokugawa shoguns practiced nô in some form (either chanting and dancing or playing an instrument, preferably the drums), some of them even to excess. The fifth shogun, Tsunayoshi (nicknamed the ‘dog shogun’ due to his edicts on animal protection), for instance, danced nô on all official and private occasions, even at the bedside of his dying mother; and he was posthumously accused of having favoured actors such that he ‘inflicted harm on his samurai vassals’.16

Following Hideyoshi’s theatre legislation, the shogunate bestowed privileges on five nô schools that were designated to safekeep the art’s memory and authority.17 In the end, for these protected troupes, the distinction proved both an opportunity and a burden: it guaranteed their financial security and a certain social position (of quasi-samurai), but it also placed them under strict control by powerful patrons, which affected the profession’s most intimate aspects.19 Nô stages were integrated into the architecture of noble residences, both in Edo and in the provinces, acquiring the standard form still employed today. Professional customs were classified, regulated, and reified: lists of libretti and other requisites (masks and costumes, theoretical treatises, and other treasured family objects) were presented at intervals to the shogunate (kakiage), whereas the actors’ and musicians’ schools adopted the hierarchical ‘head-of-school system’ (‘iemoto’). Genealogies of professional groups of

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16 Among other favours extended to actors, Tsunayoshi bestowed the status of samurai on nearly one hundred of them. Cf. Amano and Omote, pp. 114–15.
17 The four Yamato schools (Kanze, Konparu, Hôshô and Kongô), joined by a fifth (Kita) in the mid-seventeenth century, are still active today.
18 The position of official actors fluctuated during the Edo period at the whim of those in power: for some time, certain actors were allowed to carry two swords in public (a distinction otherwise reserved for samurai), though they remained under the jurisdiction of the city police (who were recruited from among outcasts) and could be even beaten in public by them, as occurred in the mid-seventeenth century.
19 In the mid-seventeenth century, for instance, shogun Iemitsu ordered the heads of the four established schools to take lessons from the head of the new Kita school.
actors and musicians were also compiled, their authors grasping at the chance to upgrade their ancestry and to confirm the authority of their school.

Official actors during the Edo period had access to courtly life, where they also served as teachers of chant and dance to lords and their offspring, some actors even advancing to high positions in the shogunal administration. All in all, nô became a compulsory part of courtly life, as well as an instrument of control and coercion that was exercised by shoguns over their vassals. Provincial lords (daimyô) were expected to spend lavish sums of money and considerable time on the art; to build nô stages as standard elements of their residences (important daimyô had two or even three stages in their villas, while lesser samurai would spread mats in their study rooms upon which to hold performances); to maintain their own nô troupe (which could comprise up to ten persons); or to organise elaborate nô programs for banquets as expensive status symbols. Practicing nô thus became an important aspect of samurai accomplishment and excellence therein could enhance one's chance for promotion; manner books warned that it was shameful to be unfamiliar either with nô or with the tea ceremony.

Throughout the Edo period, nô remained deeply entwined with the lives of the elites. It was integrated into the official festival calendar and was required on a variety of occasions, from the elaborate New Year's ceremony, called first chanting (utaizome), to the end-of-year banquets; from private rites of passage (coming-of-age, marriage, and childbirth) to official acts, such as a shogun's investiture and the emperor's enthronement, to say nothing of the art's diplomatic functions (nô adorned the reception ceremonies of all Korean delegations) and the numerous public and private banquets given throughout the year.

The omnipresence of nô in courtly life could be a heavy cost for the spectators, especially at events lasting for days during which a single day's program might include as many as thirteen plays. Consumed (and practiced) in such quantity, nô was prone to provoke resentment among warriors, or lead at times to maniacal behaviour. It was not unusual for samurai to take part in nô marathons that triggered a state of trance. One private diary mentions a samurai who, exhausted by the daylong program, was taking a nap during the performance: he was woken in the middle of the night to put on his nô costume and to dance one scene, after which he drew his pillow close and fell asleep again.20 These prolonged nô performances could even produce states of intoxication—fully-fledged flow experiences.

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20 Quoted in Kano, p. 44.
In its courtly surroundings, nō underwent deep changes: practiced together with the martial arts (especially swordmanship), the stage idiom (gestures and dances, recitation and music) became immersed in the solemn decorum of court ceremony and the tempo of the shows slowed by approximately a quarter. The repertoire was restricted to about 200 plays—the number varies according to the school—in comparison to the over 3,000 plays that were written during the early modern period—while body language and gestures were standardised: the Edo period witnessed the emergence of the basic posture (kamae), the typical walking style with sliding steps (hakobi, suriachi), the system of gesture units (kata), and the rigid staging patterns that allowed only a few variations (kogaki).

These changes were prefigured as early as the beginning of the sixteenth century, when Konparu Zenpō, a grandson of Zenchiku (Zeami’s son-in-law), stressed the proximity of his art to martial arts, advising his pupils to hold the dancing fan exactly as warriors grip the sword when preparing for a fight, and prescribing a basic body posture similar to that of a fighting warrior. By the mid-eighteenth century, nō had completely absorbed the samurai demeanour, as a contemporary commentator suggests with bitter irony: ‘the voice in nō is their [the samurai’s] angry voice; the drummers’ voices also sound angry: probably similar to the shouts of attacking the northern barbarians (as Confucius writes).’

3 A Difficult Relationship: Commoners as Spectators of Nō

The transformation of nō into a court ceremony inevitably estranged the art from the broad masses of commoners who had formed the greater part of its audiences in preceding centuries. During the Edo period, spectators from the lower classes—deprived of regular opportunities to participate in what Fischer-Lichte terms the ‘autopoietic loop’ of a full aesthetic experience of the theatre form, to say nothing of practicing the art on a broader scale—gradually lost their competence as knowledgeable and responsive spectators. Though commoner access to nō performances was not formally prohibited, it did become subject to manifold restrictions.

21 On the standardisation of nō stage practice in relation to warrior discipline, see Stanca Scholz-Cionca, ‘Halte den Fächer wie ein Schwert’, in Körper-Inszenierungen: Präsenz und kultureller Wandel, ed. by E. Fischer-Lichte and Anne Fleig (Tübingen: attempto, 2000), pp. 131–47.

22 Edo hanshōki, quoted in Kano, p. 37.
The admission of commoners to courtly performances was limited to rare occasions; the so-called machiiri nō, or nō for the townspeople, were usually scheduled on the last (sometimes first) day of elaborate, multi-day theatre programs held in the shogun’s Edo castle or in residences of his vassals in Edo or in the provinces. On such special days, the castle doors would open to let commoners throng in and sit uncomfortably on the white pebbles surrounding the stage, which opened onto an inner garden on three sides. From there the crowds would watch the performance under the critical eyes of palace guards, while the lord and his entourage sat on the open veranda of the residence’s rooms that faced the stage. The admission of townspeople followed a strict order and timing: groups of commoners (each usually corresponding to a single city district) were admitted in turns to program slots that lasted about two hours; at the end of their allotted time they were moved out in order to make room for the next throng of spectators.

This practice contrasted with the normal theatre habits that involved daylong relaxed participation in the performances. Unable to enjoy a full nō program—which included several dramas in well-balanced succession, accelerating the tempo and dramatic tension towards the end of the day—common spectators, awed by the rigid rhetoric of power, were struck by the splendor of the set, costumes, and masks, and enjoyed the free meal and sake distributed by the lord. Paper umbrellas, distributed on rainy days, could scarcely compensate for the uncomfortable pebbles on which spectators sat exposed to rain and snow; they were more often the cause of disputes, preventing spectators in the rear from seeing the show. Even so, watching nō was a rare occasion for commoners: theatre historians approximate that just ten percent of the city population joined a nō audience in the three great urban centres of Kyoto, Edo, and Osaka.

Apart from formal shows in noble residences, opportunities to watch nō in public spaces varied according to location and were more frequent in the old imperial capital of Kyoto than in the more regimented political centre of Edo. Benefit performances (kanjin nō)—which were, before Hideyoshi’s theatre laws, the way the art form was most frequently practiced and had provided actors with the bulk of their income—were drastically restricted and closely controlled by the authorities. From time to time, the head actors of the official schools were allowed to organise benefit performances in public city spaces or on temple precincts. Among the five schools, it was only the head of the Kanze who enjoyed the privilege of holding so-called ‘once in a lifetime kanjin nō’: an elaborate program that could last up to several weeks or even longer, depending on weather conditions, and that brought substantial income to the school head from ticket sales.
A 1657 text written by a leading kyôgen actor, Ôkura Toraakira, gives us direct insight into the logistical complexity of such actors’ enterprises, which were planned far in advance and were submitted to the city magistrate for approval. Toraakira describes an all-kyôgen benefit program held on a gun training area on the seashore of Sakai (part of present day Osaka). He covers all aspects of the enterprise: he provides architectural details, such as the size of the stage with its adjacent bridge to the green rooms; he prescribes the material, form, and size of the diases erected for upper class spectators; he describes the expensive boxes with their special latticed woodwork designed to hide the faces of spectators seated in them; he offers advice on catering, fire prevention, billing, the wooden entrance tickets, the rental of cushions to sit on and of umbrellas for the lower class spectators watching from the lawn, and so on and so forth.

Financially, these huge performances were always profitable. Notwithstanding the high prices for the boxes, which could amount to several gold or silver coins, the best seats were usually sold out for the entire duration of the event (which could last up to fifteen days), a fact that points to the high prestige nô enjoyed among townspeople, especially wealthy merchants. Extravagant spectators would even decorate their boxes with furniture and luxury objects, an implicitly subversive gesture of protest against the strict class discrimination and the luxury prohibition laws imposed by the shogunate.

In contrast to warriors’ ceremony nô, which were staged in the subdued pitch of what we would call a chamber theatre, kanjin nô were noisy and entertaining shows, with bustling crowds of onlookers from all social strata; people eating, drinking, and smoking their long pipes; onlookers emitting encouraging shouts for the actors; women breastfeeding their babies; tired audience members taking a nap; or viewers watching the distant stage through their fashionable telescopes imported from Holland.

The popularity of kanjin nô should not, however, hide the fact that both rural and urban commoners had become increasingly unfamiliar with the themes, conventions, and acting style of the art, which had by this time been adapted to samurai decorum. Humorous lowbrow literature from the period suggests that comprehension of the dramas was often superficial. As an exception, one event from the late Edo period is better documented: the huge kanjin performance held by the Hôshô school in Edo in 1848, for which commoners’ reactions were recorded. Quoted in Miyamoto Keizô, ‘Edo jidai nôgaku hanjôki’ (‘Notes on

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23 Ôkura Toraakira, Meireki Sakai Shichidô kyôgen shibai, in Nihon shomin shiryô bunka shûsei, vol. xii, pp. 281–92.
24 As an exception, one event from the late Edo period is better documented: the huge kanjin performance held by the Hôshô school in Edo in 1848, for which commoners’ reactions were recorded. Quoted in Miyamoto Keizô, ‘Edo jidai nôgaku hanjôki’ (‘Notes on
period, refer in oblique ways to the difficult relationship of commoners to nô: the hero of one anecdote, for instance, mistook a comical kyôgen sketch (Suminuri; The Ink-Smeared Lady) for a famous nô drama (Sumidagawa; The River Sumida), a misapprehension caused by phonetic proximity (‘Sumidagawa’ / ‘sumi-ga-kao’; ‘ink-smeared face’). Many stories, too, refer to the bustling atmosphere and poor viewing conditions. Another anecdotal hero dreams of meeting a deity, who would bestow upon him an eye on his middle finger (to have a better view of the stage over the heads of people sitting in front of him).

Apart from the huge public performances discussed above, commoners could occasionally watch coarser styles of nô called tsuji-nô (crossroads theatre), shikata-nô (imitation nô), and kadozuke-nô/kado-utai (nô chanted in front of one’s gate). These less formal nô performances usually comprised single plays or fragments of drama and were performed in the streets, on shrine and temple precincts, in market places, and, occasionally, on wooden stages erected for the purpose by entertainers, most of them unauthorised. The alternative label for this sort of entertainment, kojiki nô (beggars’ nô), points to the performers’ status as outcasts. However, status barriers did occasionally crumble in the face of straitened financial circumstances, as when impoverished samurai offered their musical expertise to paying commoners. An illustration in a book on Edo lifestyles and customs shows a lordless samurai, his straw hat lowered to conceal his face, sitting on a mat in the street in front of a wall with his nô drum at hand. The picture bears the ironic caption: ‘Nô singing is a lofty pastime enjoyed by samurai of high standing; but some of them may also sink into misfortune and become rônin (lordless samurai) and come to sit in the dust on the roadside to beat the drum begging for alms.’

Alongside these informal entertainments, some itinerant troupes offered elaborate shows that were closer to orthodox nô. These were performed on wooden stages furnished with a hashigakari bridge and decorated with the customary auspicious pine tree painted on the backdrop; the troupes also provided standard instrumental accompaniment (a nô flute and three drums).

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25 These anecdotes appear in a collection from the first half of the seventeenth century: Kinô ha kyô no monogatari: Kenkyû oyobi sakuin, ed. by Kitahara Yasuo (Tokyo, Kasama sakui sôkan, 1973).

26 A detailed account of ‘crossroad performances’ in Edo and in the Kansai region is provided by Groemer, pp. 122–29.

27 Cf. an illustrated book of customs and lifestyles, Ehon Edo ôrai (1854), quoted in Kano, p. 15.
these stages, gifted actors could acquire popularity and fame among the city populace, some of them boasting followers and successors or even grounding schools similar to the official ones. Amateur nô could also be mixed with public entertainments of all sorts, sometimes in unexpected surroundings. A book print, for instance, shows a boat party (funa-asobi) with a nô stage built across two large boats docked at the pier, while crowds of people group together to watch the performance in smaller vessels floating around the temporary stage.

4 Emulating the Samurai: Commoners as Amateur Practitioners of Nô

As suggested by the variety of unofficial nô performances discussed above, hampered access to orthodox nô did not stifle the commoners’ desire to experience this exclusive art. In spite of class barriers, many townspeople did not only seek out opportunities to become audience members, but also found ways to participate in amateur training. While practicing with authorised nô teachers remained out of reach for most commoners, access to nô texts was facilitated by the quick dissemination of printed libretti, some as comprehensive anthologies and others containing just one play or arias selected for chanting lessons. Such booklets sold at moderate prices and their production and sales enjoyed an impressive boom during the whole period; their wide circulation in thousands of editions illustrates the huge popularity of nô among all social strata in cities, towns, and in the countryside.

The easiest means of accessing nô was su-utai (literally ‘bare chanting’, meaning chant without instrumental accompaniment or dance), a practice that had started among amateurs centuries before, but that acquired mass popularity during the Edo period. In fact, nô chanting became a rewarding leisure activity for commoners, as it could be practiced in a variety of contexts: individually or in small groups, at home or in the company of friends—but also within larger circles, thus encouraging communal participation. Regular chanting sessions held in private or public rooms rented for the purpose were fashionable among townspeople. Such gatherings, which might include tea parties, attracted people of all ages and occupations from all parts of the city.

28 Such is the case with the Horii Sensuke troupe, a name used by several generations of tsujinô actors who were popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. On their activities and their uncertain connections to the official Kanze school, see Omote Akira, “Sensuke-za Ikken-dome’ ni tsuite”, in Nôgakushi shinkô (Tokyo: Wanya shoten, 1986), vol. 2: 595–606.
and its outskirts, casual performers coming together to sing lyrical ‘arias’ from famous dramas as a chorus. Comical haiku (senryû) mention nô afficionados from all sorts of occupations and ages (one verse makes fun of the mixture of ‘long haired’ teenagers and ‘grey haired’ heads in one chorus, while another verse mentions a cook addicted to chanting).29

Despite the varying levels of proficiency at these gatherings, chanting sessions contributed in significant ways to the formation of a public sphere, both in urban surroundings and in the countryside. Group chanting spurred on agonistic ambitions and encouraged the diligent study of complex texts; it trained sensitivity to and aesthetic taste in literary and musical matters, all the more so as commoners of all professions spent plenty of their leisure time on practice. Contemporary sources mention cases of extravagant behaviour and addiction among commoners: visitors would practice chanting throughout the night and would sing with their host until dawn; wealthy merchants would spend huge sums of money bringing professional actors to their homes. Thus bare chanting (su-utai) became a common accomplishment among ordinary citizens, and was even introduced into ordinary school curricula.30

In contrast to chanting, which was a common pastime, nô dancing and the performance of entire dramas became increasingly rare beyond samurai circles. While amateur performances by commoners were still frequent during the seventeenth century—especially those held in city pleasure quarters either by courtesans themselves or by their clients—in later times, practicing nô seems to have been a clandestine activity among commoners: it is mentioned in instances of conflict with the authorities, when townspeople practicing nô were punished for contravening the luxury bans. Performing nô—that is, building an expensive stage, engaging musicians, and providing costly costumes and masks—was a medium for bold self-fashioning and the display of wealth, and would have been affordable primarily for prosperous merchants, brothel owners, rice brokers, and loan sharks, some of whom became genuine nô afficionados.31

Nô masters responded to the high demand by aggressively marketing their expertise, as teaching nô to amateurs of all classes became an important source of income, which called for structured programs and refined methods of knowledge transfer. To counteract the amateurs’ easy access to libretti and

29 Kano quotes senryû verse and prose stories referring to the nô chanting craze among townspeople in Edo and in urban centres in Kansai.
30 Cf. Rath, p. 196.
31 Prominent cases of commoners active as nô amateurs in the late Tokugawa period are described in Groemer, pp. 120–26.
to nô treatises that was provided by the printing industry, actors would stress the value of personal transmission, which they advertised as the ultimate key to their art. Heads of nô schools veiled their professional expertise in an aura of secrecy and exclusivity in order to control the access of amateurs to nô practice. At the same time, teaching nô to growing numbers of amateurs, as noted above, contributed to the standardisation of the repertoire and to the development of a structured curriculum, which stipulated long time spans for each level of proficiency. Nô masters thus controlled the access of amateurs to the arcana of their art, permitting the release of teaching licences only to a very limited number of students.\textsuperscript{32}

The dissemination of nô, even reduced to its most basic form, initiated a significant transfer of knowledge and aesthetic standards from the elite to the commoners, encouraging the latter to become familiar with classical genres and poetic techniques that had previously been reserved for the ruling classes. Despite all the restrictions, nô came to inhabit the bodies and to spark the imagination of commoners, shaping their sensibility and expanding their cultural horizons. Thus, in the interstices and folds of a strictly controlled system, bits and pieces of the elite art spread among the lower strata of society, becoming part of the commoners’ shared history of leisure and entertainment culture. Last but not least, practicing su-utaï contributed to the shaping of communities by intensifying social cohesion, an important factor during the subsequent nation-building phase.

5 \textbf{The Commodification of Nô in Everyday Urban Culture}

Beyond chanting and occasionally watching shows, commoner contact with nô also extended to objects of everyday use that were connected with the art. The lofty theatre genre, jealously confined to and controlled by the shogunate, was regarded as a luxury good that belonged to the splendid samurai culture and that constituted a repository of aesthetic refinement and good taste, all of which was reflected in its material aspects. For the lower classes, costly masks and gorgeous costumes were unattainable but at least, as we have seen, printed libretti could be bought, collected, cherished, even fetishised. Collections of nô texts, released by the heads of actors’ schools and reprinted by the mushrooming publishing houses during the whole Edo period became bestsellers in the long term, their popularity easily matched by that of nô treatises both old and

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. Rath, p. 196 ff.
new (some freshly compiled by heads of the official schools to reinforce their
authority), which allowed glimpses into the secret traditions of the art.

Among these books, lavish editions—such as the illustrated one hundred
drama series printed in the early seventeenth century by the famous artist
Hon'ami Kôetsu33—were traded as art objects and treasured as status symbols,
not only by mighty warriors, but also by rich commoners in big cities. Wealthy
merchants, who held the lowest status in the stratified society, eagerly col-
lected precious books printed on fine handmade rice paper delicately adorned
with floral motifs, animals, birds, or landscapes decorated with glittering sil-
ver or gold powder. The commercial success of printed libretti also spurred
the production and dissemination of new dramas, while broad interest in nô
encouraged philological studies that resulted in annotated and commented nô
editions explaining the rhetorical texture of the dramas. Via these many and
diverse activities, nô was made available to a broad public and gradually came
to be integrated into the canon of vernacular literature. Along with venerated
prose works from the classical period and imperial poem anthologies, nô texts
came to be viewed as a fund of classical topoi and poetic techniques, becom-
ing part of a collective cultural memory that transgressed class distinctions,
preparing the ground for the emergence of national literature during the Meiji
period (1868–1912) and after.

Knowledge of nô also spread through related but distinct genres, especially
the kabuki and puppet theatre, which integrated famous nô scenes into popular
plots or produced remakes of whole nô dramas. Towards the end of the Edo
period, nô dramas transposed onto the stage using the language of popular
urban theatre formed a distinct kabuki subgenre, matsubamemono. As might
be expected, matsubamemono favoured plots dealing with filial piety or feu-
dal loyalty as well as universal stories of love and jealousy. Kabuki and puppet
dramas like Kanjinchô (The Conscription List, after the nô Ataka), Funa Benkei
(Benkei in the Boat), and Musume Dôjôji (after the famous jealousy nô Dôjôji),
which transposed core plots from the nô repertoire to popular stage forms,
remain theatre hits down to the present day. As Tokugawa rule came to an
end, hybrid genres performed by nô professionals for common audiences also
emerged: teriha kyôgen, a mixture of nô with kabuki that originated in Osaka,
and Azuma nô, a hybrid genre popular in Edo (Azuma) that witnessed a short-
lived popularity during the second half of the nineteenth century.34

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33 Hon'ami Kôetsu (1558–1637), a famous multimedia artist—painter, potter, lacquerer, cal-
ligrapher, swordpolisher—and the founder of an artisan community in the vicinity of
Kyoto, issued, in collaboration with other artists, lavish editions of nô libretti.
34 A succinct summary of these two hybrid genres is in Groemer, pp. 130–33.
Besides, nō iconography, reified and reproduced on material objects, permeated the cultural horizons of commoners, becoming part of their domestic surroundings: emblematic motifs were disseminated as surrogates or metonymic substitutes for full-fledged dramas. Visual nō quotes appear on color prints (ukiyoé), folding screens, fashionable kimonos, sword handle sheets (tsuba), and on the tiny carved weights (netsuke) that were hung from one's belt to hold in place tobacco-pouches or pillboxes. Nō motifs also adorned decorative combs, teapots, lacquerware, and other objects of daily use. In larger cities, even a lowly servant would have been able to decipher the symbolism of such pictures. He might identify, for instance in the background of a courtesan's portrait, a scene from the nō Kantan (The Pillow Dream, a drama on the topos of life as a dream that has a European parallel in Calderon's La vida es sueno) as a memento mori pointing to the transience of worldly pleasures. Similarly, a netsuke carved in the form of hannya—the horned demonic mask famously worn by the serpent-woman in the nō Dôjôji—might caution him against the sin of jealousy. Such playful visual quotations were ubiquitous in Edo culture across class divides and contributed to the integration of nō into the collective imaginary.

6 Conclusion

During Japan's early modern period, nō theatre was primarily located within samurai residences, functioning as a subsidised ‘official art’ integrated into court ceremony and jealously controlled by its patrons, who put it to many uses. Besides being a theatrical genre to be watched and enjoyed for its aesthetic and entertainment value, nō was a medium of power discourse meant to impress and awe the commoners; it was used as a political weapon by the shogunate to maintain control over provincial lords; and it was an instrument of self-fashioning for the elites. However, in that period of rigid distinctions, nō remained an object of desire for commoners, who reclaimed it for their own needs: as entertainment and participative practice, but also as a commodity to be traded across social divides in a period of emerging consumerism.

35 A selection of nō motifs represented on everyday objects is in the Suntory Museum of Art Tokyo catalogue Nō no aikonoroji (Tokyo, 1992).
36 The hannya mask famously reminded Brecht of ‘how strenuous it is to be evil’ (‘wie anstrengend es ist, böse zu sein’). Die Maske des Bösen (The Mask of Evil), in Werke (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1993), vol. xv (Gedichte, 1941–1947).
Thus, on the one hand, nô thrived as a refined, lofty, and increasingly rigid ceremonial art, driven by financial security and tight control, which required actors to take on the role of strict preservers of authorised forms. On the other hand, commoners also claimed their right to watch and practice nô techniques (especially chanting); wealthy merchants used it (in more or less clandestine ways) as an instrument of self-fashioning and wealth display; and artisans integrated its iconography into the urban everyday. Even in abbreviated, fragmentary forms, the heritage of nô pervaded commoners’ lives and shaped their sensibilities in manifold ways. Thus, during the early modern period, nô came to be—for all social classes—more than just a theatre genre. With the expansion of amateur practice, nô transported not only classical literature and the ethos of the ruling class into the cultural horizon of commoners, but also norms of bodily discipline, etiquette, and aesthetics that would become prerequisites of the national culture of modern Japan.

The tensions and pressures that surrounded this contested artistic genre during Japan’s early modern period are engraved in its institutional structure, stage practice, and transmission techniques down to the present day. Contemporary nô has not only inherited—and even consolidated—the hierarchical ‘head-of-school system’ (iemoto), but also a strong dependence of the theatre genre on amateur practitioners, who form the most reliable and competent audience and also provide the main source of income for professional actors even now. Nô masters still maintain their authority by a quantified transmission of professional knowledge—a practice developed during the Edo period. In their teaching, they cultivate and transfer, to new generations of pupils, standards of value and mental habits inherited from early modern times. Even nowadays, shared physical experience of the art is a *sine qua non* prerequisite for spectatorial, critical, and even scholarly competence, just as chanting a song from the nô *Takasago* is still part of a Japanese wedding ceremony—both habits being the legacy of the long period which historians call Edo Japan.