

[Concluding Remarks 1]

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These fascinating few days have been filled with a variety of interventions about all manner of arts and crafts that can be described as ‘traditional’ and as ‘Japanese’. Or, to put it the other way around, we have talked about traditional Japanese activities that can be described as ‘arts’ or ‘crafts’. We have, in fact, constructed our debate with four words that are all problematic, and open to challenge, as fabricated, determined, and false. All four words delimit debate as well as permit it.

Much has been written about how the terms ‘arts’ and ‘crafts’ entered Japan in the early Meiji period, and separated a field of creativity that was, it is claimed, previously largely whole. This rift, I supposed can be regarded healed by an even newer portmanteau word, ‘craft-art’, or ‘art-craft’—*bijutsu kōgei*.

The notion of ‘tradition’ has recently come under precise critique. The more such ‘traditions’ are investigated, the more they often—though of course not always—turn out to be modern inventions, and certainly modern in their current form. The celebrated example is the Scottish kilt. ‘Traditions’ are often less genuinely old practices than recent graftings of several practices of varying date. At best, ‘traditions’ may be what in English is referred to as ‘grandfather’s axe’: this is my grandfather’s axe; my father replaced the handle and I replaced the head. That being so, exactly how is it grandfather’s? In the Roman Catholic church, this type of transmission is referred to as the Apostolic Succession. It is not Illegitimate; indeed, it is a recognized legitimating strategy. Likewise, those who practice these ‘traditions’ may well feel they are participating in something antique. But are they?

It is also important to note that the word ‘tradition’ and the word *dentō* have rather different nuances. If a ‘tradition’ cannot be proven to have long-standing pedigree, it is inauthentic. An ‘inauthentic tradition’ is an oxymoron. But a ‘*dentō*’ can be quite recent and still be genuine. In the case of the Scottish kilt, those who point out it emerged in the nineteenth century, state this to mock the petty pride of those who

wear them. But in Japan, something established in Meiji, or certainly in Bakumatsu, and which continues to this day, is a proper *dentō*, and cannot be refuted.

Then there is our fourth word: Japan. This is highly charged, of course. We need to consider how the modern nation state of Japan has worked, and spent vast sums, to propagate an image of itself, and to construct a ‘Japan’. This image is contestable, and might not be remotely that held at other periods of time, and in other parts of the wide spaces of this archipelago.

I would like to add to these generalizing comments one specific example. Much of what has been said in these few days has related to ceramics. I will take something from the world of performance, and specifically Nihon buyō. In 2005, Nihon buyō was brought to London for the first time, and I had some interesting talks with performers and their agents. Posters displayed around the city translated the event as ‘traditional Japanese dance’. Those who attended saw a range of activities, from almost slap-stick, kabuki-type routines, to slow and majestic noh-like movements. What they surely did not see was a ‘traditional Japanese dance’. The performance was simply not possible to see before very recent times, and as an event, this was not old at all. The program notes and press briefings stressed, on every possible occasion, that Nihon buyō “went back to the *Kojiki*,” that is, to the early eighth century. This seemed to me a curious claim, actually an impossible one. It is not unlikely that the term ‘*buyō*’ appears in the *Kojiki*, and we know that the term ‘Nihon’ does. One can imagine that the compound ‘Nihon buyō’ appears too. But this is disingenuous. It cannot be that anything appearing on stage today bears the remotest resemblance to eighth-century action, if only because, as we can clearly see, the costumes, hairstyles, musical instruments and everything else, are very much more modern. So why make a palpably false claim? I do not propose this is a deliberate lie. I propose that we see here a gap between what is understood by ‘tradition’ and what is understood by ‘*dentō*’.

I asked one of the ministers from the embassy about the origins of Nihon buyō. He replied it “went back to the *Kojiki*.” I told him that I didn’t believe it. He told me it went back to about 1960. That I do believe, and surely a small amount of investigation could pinpoint the origins clearly. But the important thing is to note that in Japan it is possible to claim *both* that a tradition “goes back to the *Kojiki*” and that it began only in 1960. Enlisted is a kind of Apostolic Succession: if one

accepts the idea that there is a Japan, and if one accepts that the people living there have always danced, then one can accept there is a Nihon buyō that goes back to the *Kojiki*— indeed, why stop there? It surely goes back to the very beginnings of life on these islands. But this can only work in English in magical contexts—the family myth about their grandfather, or the ecclesiastical myth about its priesthood. The breaks that necessarily occur over time cut through and separate past and present, such that almost nothing in our world, logically, lasts so long, though mythically it might.

After long talks with the minister, he told me that already there had been a decision in the embassy that if the troupe were to return, it would be marketed not as ‘traditional Japanese dance’ but untranslated, as Nihon buyō.