"The Origin and Historical Context of Ankoku Butô"

ANKOKU BUTÔ

The Premodern and Postmodern Influences on the Dance of Utter Darkness

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Chapter One

THE ORIGIN AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF ANKOKU BUTÔ

The Butō dance movement originated mainly through the creative interaction of two powerful and charismatic dancers: Ohno Kazuo and Hijikata Tatsumi (Ohno's son, Ohno Yoshito, who studied with Hijikata and played the part of the young man in Forbidden Colors is said to have had considerable influence as well¹). Both Ohno and Hijikata were born and grew up in Northern Japan (Tohoku): Ohno was born in the fishing village of Hakodate in 1906, Hijikata was born Yoneyama Kunio in a farming village in Akita prefecture in 1928. For Hijikata in particular the fact that he was born in the Northern "provincial" part of Japan came to have a great deal of significance, as he believed that the places in which we grow up, as well as those who surround us, impress themselves upon our bodies in an unconscious, but nevertheless powerful way.² Both knew great poverty: Ohno recalls that when he was in junior high school his youngest sibling died in his arms because they didn't have enough money to take the child to the doctor.³ Hijikata remembered vividly the day that his older sister was sold into prostitution (a common practice in the economically depressed farming

¹In reference to his son's influence on his work, Ohno has said, "if my son were not around, perhaps I wouldn't have been able to dance--there is always a conflict between the two of us when I create a piece, and only through that conflict can I finish the piece." Ohno Kazuo, "The Origins of Ankoku Butō," audiotape of lecture delivered at Cornell University, 25 November 1985. Hereafter cited as: Ohno, Cornell lecture.

²This idea of the body as a repository for memory had its fullest expression in Hijikata's 1972 work, Tôhoku Kabuki, in which Hijikata used the gestures and movements of Tôhoku people of the early Showa era (i.e., the period of Hijikata's childhood) as a basis for the dance.

³Ohno, Cornell lecture.
Christian on the beach at Kamakura. Ohno continued a full time career teaching physical education concomitant with his career in dance, until his retirement in 1980. He says he was first inspired to dance in 1929 when he sat with a friend in the top balcony of the Imperial Theater in Tokyo watching La Argentina (Antonia Mercé), the famous flamenco dancer: “From the first moment, I was moved almost beyond bearing. I was totally stunned. This was the encounter that changed my life.”

Seeing Harald Kreutzberg dance in 1934 influenced him to study for one year with Ishii Baku (who had toured Europe in the 1920’s and seen Mary Wigman dance), and then with Eguchi Takaya, who had brought back “neuer Tanz” from his study at Mary Wigman’s institute in Germany. In a personal interview Ohno remarked that Kreutzberg’s influence was different than La Argentina’s in that when he watched Kreutzberg dance he was struck by his sublime technique, but when he watched La Argentina dance, her effect on him was such that technique was no longer a consideration. This latter effect is what Ohno has said he especially wanted to recreate in one of his most famous works, Admiring La Argentina, but in fact, this stress on personal charisma over “mere” technical virtuosity underlies all his work.

Ohno’s career was interrupted, and his style virtually frozen in time, by World War II, so that his first public recital did not come until he was forty-three (1949) when he danced with Andô Mitsuko (another disciple of Eguchi Takaya) at Kanda Public Hall in Tokyo. It’s unclear when and where Ohno and Hijikata first met, but according to Lizzie Slater, a long time Butô aficionado and sometime manager of the Butô groups Sankai Juku and Muteki-sha, it was Ohno’s early performances with Andô that brought him into contact with Hijikata Tatsuji. Ohno Yoshito, who was still in highschool

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1Hijikata Tatsumi, Yameru Mai Hime (A Dancer’s Sickness), (Tokyo: Hakusuisha, 1983), pp. 89-90.

2Gōda Nario, “Ankoku Butō ni Tsuite” (On Ankoku Butô), Butô: Nikutai no Suriajisuotosai (Butô: Surrealists of the Flesh), ed. Hanaga Mitsutoshi (Tokyo: Gendai Shukan, 1933), unpagedinated. Page numbers cited hereafter refer to translation in appendix. For this citation, see p. 84.

3Dances of the last ten years with this theme include Okasan (Mother), Ozen: Dream of a Fetus, and The Dead Sea.


6Western style dance was introduced to Japan by Giovanni V. Rossi who was hired by the Imperial Theater in Tokyo in 1912 to teach European operatic theater and creative ballet. Ishii Baku, who was Rossi’s most talented dance pupil, was the first Japanese to perform a Western-style dance in public: in June of 1916 he performed a “dance poem” inspired by the work of W.B. Yeats.

7Ohno, interview with author, 1 July 1986.

8The pieces included: Ennui for the City with Andô Mitsuko and three solo pieces, Devil Cry, Tango, and First Flower of a Linden Tree.
at the time, remembers Hijiikata coming to their home in Yokohama around 1954.\textsuperscript{12} Hijiikata had studied dance for a short while with Masumura Katsuko, a student of Eguchi Takaya, in Akita City. He came to Tokyo for the first time in 1949; during this initial visit he happened to see Andō and Ohno dance at Kanda Public Hall and was struck quite by Ohno’s dance. Caught up in the Western-style dance “craze” that was sweeping Japan at the time, he moved permanently to Tokyo in 1952, and began studying with Eguchi Takaya and Andō Mitsuko.\textsuperscript{13} In 1953 Hijiikata performed a piece choreographed by Andō on television, and it was around this time that he finally met Ohno. Ohno offered Hijiikata his own unique interpretation of German dance methods; Hijiikata brought to the collaboration his interest in using the works of such “decadent” literary and artistic figures as Genet, Lautréamont, Marquis de Sade, and Aubrey Beardsley. At the time of his first stage appearance in 1954 he changed his name to Hijiikata Kunio, and became a member of Andō’s group, “Unique Ballet.” He continued to participate in Unique Ballet’s yearly performances until the late 1950’s when he changed his name to Hijiikata Tatsumi and founded his own group, “Hijiikata Tatsumi Dance Experience.” In November of 1961, he gave a name to the dance movement he had created, retroactively christening it “Ankoku Butō-ha.”\textsuperscript{14}

As mentioned previously, the first performance of Ankoku Butō came in 1959, and in Forbidden Colors many of the qualities that have since come
to epitomize the Butō movement were already in evidence. Hijiikata eliminated a number of the supports upon which mainstream dance leaned at that time: music (the dance was performed in complete silence), all interpretive program notes, and any dance techniques which went beyond what he felt were the realistic limits of the “natural” body.\textsuperscript{9} By returning the focus of dance to the simplicity of a body that was in tune with nature, those involved with Ankoku Butō hoped to tap into the expressive energy and sense of life that they felt had been lost in contemporary society. The act of killing a chicken, with its primitive sacrificial overtones, was mean: as an expression of the turbulent sexual passion which modern man suppresses but which still remains as a core of darkness at the heart of our existence. In the conclusion of Forbidden Colors this core of darkness expanded to cloak the entire stage: all that was left was the sound of the boy’s footsteps escaping and the man pursuing him. It was from this conclusion—the performers were literally “dancing in the dark”--that Ankoku Butō-ha took its name.

Evoking images that were often grotesquely beautiful, and reveling in the shady, shameful underside of human behavior, the movement which Ankoku Butō spawned was very much a product of the bleak postwar landscape of Japan in the 1950’s. It was a period of growing antagonism on the part of Japanese artists and intellectuals towards the superpowers (both the USA and the USSR), whom they held directly responsible for the threat of imminent destruction by nuclear war; America and Europe were also held responsible for the technology, closely bound up with Western modes of production, that was wreaking havoc on Japan’s much idealized natural environment, thereby disrupting the traditional “sacred” bond between the Japanese and nature as well as contributing to a widespread sense of alienation, dehumanization, and loss of self-identity. This amorphous sense of disenchantment was given a concrete focus in 1959-1960 when the U.S.-Japan Mutual Defense Treaty (Nihonbiki Arsen Hoshō Jayaku, or AMPO for short)\textsuperscript{4} came up for a ten year renewal. The widespread debate and demonstrations that the controversial treaty occasioned acted as a catalyst for change in a number of areas, and Ankoku Butō was one of the first of the new artistic forms that emerged to challenge Western culture’s hegemony.


\textsuperscript{13}When the postwar occupation lifted the wartime censorship on Western dance and drama, first Tokyo and then all of Japan was swept by what could only be called a “craze” for Western-style dance. Although in the beginning ballet eclipsed modern dance in popularity, the number of modern dance schools and studios increased steadily throughout the 1950’s, supported and periodically revitalized by visits from the major modern dance companies of the period. For a detailed discussion of the economic ramifications of postwar cultural developments in Japan, see Thomas R.H. Havens, Artist and Patron in Postwar Japan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982). According to Havens, the visit of Martha Graham’s dance company in 1955 had a particularly strong effect on the shape that mainstream dance took in the 50’s and 60’s in Japan, and it was often towards Graham-influenced work that Butō directed its anti-Western antagonism.

\textsuperscript{14}In the 1 July 1986 interview, Ohno identified three members of Ankoku Butō-ha: Ohno Yoshito, Ishii Mitsutaka and Kasai Akira.


However, in order to understand the particular form Ankoku Butō took, we will need to look more closely at the historical context out of which it arose. As a unique three-part fusion of elements from Western dance, Western theater, and traditional Japanese dance-theater, it was influenced by the 20th century history of all three forms in Japan.

The Historical Context of Western Theater and Dance in Japan

The avant garde’s reaction against Western cultural and political dominance has a number of interrelated components, not the least of which was that in both dance and theater of the 1950’s, Western-influenced work had become the “establishment” and thus was ripe for overthrow by the younger generation. In regard to Western-style Japanese theater (called Shingeki, which literally means “new theater”), this feeling has been succinctly summed up by the critic Tsuno Kaitarō:

Shingeki has become historical, it has become a tradition in its own right. The problem of the younger generation has been to come to terms with this tradition. For us modern European drama is no longer some Golden Ideal as yet out of reach. It is instead a pernicious, limiting influence...Shingeki no longer maintains the dialectical power to negate and transcend; rather, it has become an institution that itself demands to be transcended.\(^\text{17}\)

The Shingeki movement was born in the early 20th century mainly through the efforts of Osanai Kaoru and Hijikata Yoshi,\(^\text{18}\) as a radical attempt to establish a Japanese theater which would be patterned after the realistic theatrical style of Ibsen and Stanislavsky. It rejected both Kabuki and Shimpaa, the theatrical form that in the late 19th century had attempted to achieve a synthesis of Western and native Japanese theater. In the 20’s and 30’s the Shingeki movement became highly politicized through its association with the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), one result of which was Shingeki’s strong commitment to Soviet socialist realism. These leftist leanings caused it to be heavily censored and repressed by the military government during World War II. The movement came back strong under the occupation, however, crystallizing into an orthodoxy that by the end of the 1950’s had achieved a near monopoly on theater. Although Shingeki was dominated by directors and playwrights who had been trained in the socialist realism style of the 20’s and 30’s, many younger artists felt Shingeki’s socialist realism was quickly becoming little different from mainstream Western-style realistic theater, and was no longer appropriate to the concerns of postwar Japan. However, because Shingeki was at least nominally political, and because many of its members were highly respected for the pacifist position they had taken in opposition to the war, it wasn’t until the 1960 Security Treaty Crisis that the younger generation’s differences with the older generation came to a head. The tension between young and old was intensified by the fact that many of the younger artists were also members of Zengakuren (the Japanese student movement).\(^\text{19}\) Zengakuren had already broken with the JCP in 1958 when an anti-JCP faction, the Kyōsanhūgisha Dōmei (the Communist League, or Bund) managed to take control of the Zengakuren leadership. Thus the rift that already existed between the JCP and Zengakuren paralleled and encouraged the rift that was just beginning to appear between the older pro-JCP Shingeki leadership and the younger theater people.

The differences manifested themselves in a number of ways: for one thing, the young people were disappointed by the lack of aggressiveness that the Shingeki leadership, in conjunction with the JCP, displayed in their leadership of the political demonstrations. The JCP and Shingeki leadership, for their part, roundly condemned such violent incidents as the student-lead storming of the Diet on November 27, 1959 (which resulted in 12,000 people singing and snake dancing in the Diet Compound for three hours) and the sit-in at Haneda airport on January 15, 1960 intended to block the flight of Prime Minister Kishi to the United States to sign the Security Treaty. There were also more specific political differences: whereas the JCP was firmly tied to the party line given out by the Soviet Union and thus was prone to radical shifts


\(^{18}\)Osanai Kaoru and Hijikata Yoshi (no relation to Hijikata Tatsumi) founded the Tsukiji Little Theater (Tsuciji Shōgekijo) in 1924 and in the four years that it lasted (until the death of Osanai in 1928) it trained most of the major actors and directors of the next 20-30 years. For an succinct discussion of the history of Shingeki and its pertinence to contemporary theater, see David Goodman, “New Japanese Theater,” The Drama Review 15 (Spring 1971), pp. 154-168.

\(^{19}\)The information on the involvement of Zengakuren in the AMPO struggle was taken from Stuart J. Dowsey, ed. Zengakuren: Japan’s Revolutionary Students (Berkeley, CA: The Ishi Press, 1970). The two most useful chapters were Matsunami Michihiro, “Origins of Zengakuren” and Harada Hisato, “The Anti-AMPO Struggle.”
in policy because of changes in Soviet leadership, the Zengakuren leadership called for a more non-aligned status, whereby the JCP would try to adjust its policy to the particular circumstances prevalent in Japan. In a 1980 interview with David Goodman (scholar and often active participant in the theater avant garde of the 1970's), Suzuki Tadashi, one of the foremost directors in Japan today, described the position taken by young theater people at the time:

From the younger generation's point of view, the alternative proposed by the Old Left, principally the Japanese Communist Party (JCP), merely substituted an alliance with the Soviet Union for the existing relationship with the West. The young activists found the prospect of an alliance with the Soviet Block at least as repugnant as the alliance with the West, however.28

It was thus the feeling that Shingeki was unable to deal meaningfully with the concerns of contemporary postwar Japan, exacerbated during the 1960 anti-AMPO struggle by frustration with the subservience of the Shingeki establishment to Japanese Communist Party discipline that led to a radical break between the young and the old in theater.

Western dance in Japan, on the other hand, had never been as overtly political as Shingeki, and in fact, by the mid-50's was well on its way to becoming entrenched as just one more culturally art that young, upper-middle class women were expected to learn before they married. With few political ties and little interest in dealing with the contemporary political concerns of young Japanese, the Western dance establishment in Japan left itself open much earlier than Shingeki to attack by the more radical and innovative elements in its midst, dancers who were interested in freeing dance from the yoke of Western cultural dominance. Thus it was that the beginnings of the Butō movement were laid long before the Security Crisis of 1960, in the experiments that Ohno and Hijikata worked on, both together and separately in their studios. The culmination of these experiments came with Forbidden Colors, which is now seen as the seminal work in the development of the Butō aesthetic. In 1960, when younger theater people as well as dancers were becoming politically and culturally disaffected with the West, Ankoku Butō was already there to present them with a persuasive alternative philosophy of theatrical expression.

28Bishop Yamada, program notes for a performance in Hokkaido, June 1979. The style of Yamada's name here is an exception to the rule I gave in footnote #1 (family name, given name); perhaps because Yamada has taken an English word for his given name in the theater, he is usually referred to according to the Western convention for names (given name, family name).

29Tsuno, "The Tradition of Modern Theatre," p. 10-11. This article addresses the question of why, for most postmodern dramatists in Japan, "the very theatrical forms that have appeared as alternatives to Western dramatists are not available to us" (p. 13).

30The Edo period began with the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1603, and ended with the Meiji Restoration of 1868.
Finally, one can see it in the work of the Butō group Sankai Juku, founded by Amagatsu Ushio in the late 1970’s. Although Sankai Juku’s performances are not generally improvised, through their focus on primitive forms of life they attempt to reach the level of the collective unconscious and thus achieve cosmic significance for their art.

A second avenue of exploration was a revival of interest in the popular origins of Kabuki and Nō, along with a reassessment of early 20th century forms of popular theater, particularly the Asakusa “opera” (a kind of musical theater whose style incorporated both traditional and Western influences), Misemona (a form of theater that included acts comparable to a circus side show), and the Yose theater (similar in form to a vaudeville review centering on a comic monologue), all of which the critic Donald Richie has pointed out as formative influences on postwar avant-garde theater. Such entertainments moreover, were themselves rooted in performative traditions that had existed prior to the emergence of Nō and Kabuki. In a sense both Nō and Kabuki could be said to have a common origin in some forerunner of Yose theater’s loosely structured format of dance (usually erotically suggestive if not downright indecent), dramatic skits, and short comic monologues. Nō as we know it today began in the 14th century when Kanami borrowed the kusemai dance from the dancer/prostitutes who performed in the river beds of Nara and Kyoto; Kabuki traces its beginnings to a 15th century temple dancer/prostitute named Izumi no Okuni, who was famous for her scandalous takeoffs on well known figures of the day. However although Yose theater and forms like it had a long history, they only truly came into their own as the theater of the masses in the late 19th century, when the Kabuki theaters moved out of the slums of Asakusa, back towards the center of the city. This move signalled Kabuki’s new status as a purveyor of “civilization and enlightenment” to the upper classes, as well as the fact that they were leaving their lower class audience behind. In the void that was left with Kabuki’s elevation to high culture, the Misemona and Yose theater flowered as the major forms of entertainment for the masses. Here is a description of what it was like in and around the precincts of the Kannon Shrine in Asakusa,

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*About 25 years before the Restoration, the Kabuki theaters were forced to move to the Northeastern fringes of Tokyo, just beyond Asakusa, near the Yoshiwara pleasure quarters. This had the effect of making Asakusa, particularly the area around the popular Asakusa Kannon Temple, the gateway to the theater and Yoshiwara districts.

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according to Basil Hall Chamberlin and W.B. Mason’s 1891 edition of their
guide to Japan:

...nothing is more striking than the juxtaposition of piety and
pleasure, of gorgeous altars and grotesque ex-votos, of
pretty costumes and dingy idols...Here are raree shows,
penny gaffs, performing monkeys, cheap photographers,
street artists, jugglers, wrestlers, life-sized figures in clay,
vendors of toys and lollipops of every sort, and circulating
amidst all these cheap attractions, a seething crowd of busy
holiday makers."

Butō, and the theatrical avant garde influenced by Butō, saw these
popular entertainments as the only legitimate heir of Kabuki and strove to
incorporate their hurly-burly, riotous atmosphere. In the Yose theater's
ribald, Rabelaisian humor and fantasy, as well as in the lower-class, marginal
status of its actors, Hijikata hoped to find the energy and creative freedom
lacking in the staid respectability of Kabuki in its 20th century form. The Butō
groups Dai Rakuda-kan (Big Camel Battleship) and Dance Love Machine
are well known for this style of Butō: their stages are filled not only with the
detritus of early 20th century culture but with a hodgepodge of previous
century’s trash as well. The success of their attempt to recreate the energy of
that period can perhaps be measured by a comment by the dance/drama critic
Ichikawa Miyabi: “Dai Rakuda-kan has more of the essence of Kabuki than
what Kabuki is today.”

The 1960's

Influences are notoriously difficult to trace, but at the very least it is
safe to say that the unusual vision of Hijikata and Ohno contributed impor-
tantly to the “zeitgeist” of the early 1960's, the period of creative ferment that
produced most of today's major avant-garde figures. During the years from
1960 to 1966, while the group Ankoku Butō-ha was still in existence,
numerous dance performance collaborations between Ohno, Hijikata and
the members of Ankoku Butō-ha were held. To mention a few among many:*

*As quoted in Edward Seidensticker, Low City, High City (New York:

Times, Sunday, 4 July 1982, Arts and Leisure section.

*This performance chronology was taken from a biographical “vita”
given to me by Ohno Kazuo in November 1983.

there was the performance in 1960 in which Hijikata directed Ohno in the role
of the old male prostitute, Divine, in a dance based on Gion's Notre Dame
des Fleurs; in 1961 there was Hanin-hanyosha no Hirusugari no Higi (The
Secret Daytime Ritual of an Hermaphrodite); in 1963, Anma–Aiyoku o
Sasageru Gekijo no Hanashi (The Blind Masseur—A Theatrical Story in
Support of Love and Lust); in November of 1965 there was a joint memorial
performance of Bana Iro Dansu (A Rose-Colored Dance) and in 1966
Ankoku Butō-ha formally broke up with a performance at Kinokuniya Hall
of Tomato–Seial Onchōgaku Shinanzue (Tomato–Introductory Lessons in
the Blessed Teachings of Erotic Love). The incipient avant garde of the time
not only saw these performances, they were also often active participants in
them. For example, abstract painter Nakamura Shūzō and graphic
designer and illustrator Yokō Tadanori designed posters and sets for Ankoku
Butō-ha productions. Nakamura continued to influence Butō even after his
collaborative efforts ended. In 1976, one of his abstract paintings inspired
Ohno to create Admiring La Argentina and return to the stage again after ten
years of semi-retirement. Yokō Tadanori was probably even more influen-
tial; he is usually given credit along with Hijikata for the “look” of not only
Butō but also the avant-garde theater which was influenced by Butō. Like
Hijikata, Yokō was interested in the popular culture of the early 20th century;
drawing on the mass-produced popular art and advertising of the late-Meiji,
Taishō, and early Showa period (approx. 1910-1930), Yokō's work was a
“nostalgia” version of Pop Art. It may have lacked the cynicism of an Andy
Warhol, but it was nevertheless resolutely set against the Japanese high
culture's elitism and good taste. Donald Richie has described Yokō's and
Hijikata's stage designs as representing,

...not only the end of the world but, especially, the end
of Japan. The stage resembled a flea market and the effect
was, purposely pognant. Here is the post-war wasteland,
filled with spastic cripples holding aloft these pathetic
emblems of vanished civilizations."

Another important avant-garde figure influenced by Ankoku Butō
was Terayama Shūji, the poet, playwright, and director who died in 1983 at
the age of 47. Like Ohno and Hijikata, Terayama was born in the provincial
Northern part of Japan (Tōhoku). Before Terayama started Tenjō Sajiki,
arguably the most important avant-garde theater group of the 1960's, he
collaborated with Hijikata and Ohno on a number of scenarios for dances. In
1960 he participated in the second 650 Experience performance, which

included a work based on the life of the Marquis de Sade: Sei Kōshaku (The Sainted Marquis). Like Hijikata, Terayama was antagonistic towards the high culture of Nō-Kabuki-Tea Ceremony, and looked instead towards the more popular culture of folk festivals and entertainments such as Misemono and Yose theater.

Kara Juro's work with Jōkyō Gekijō (Situation Theater) was also heavily influenced by Hijikata's preoccupation with the marginal elements of society, as well as his interest in the darkness of existence (which Kara called "yami" or "gloom"). The strongest link between the two was Maro Akaji, who studied with Hijikata at the same time that he was a major box office attraction for Kara's Jōkyō Gekijō. In the early 60's there wasn't a strong distinction made between what was theater and what was dance, and Kara, Maro, and Hijikata were very close. Eventually Maro left Jōkyō Gekijō to form Dai Rakuda-kan, and Kara's work became more political, as well as more overtly theatrical.

Finally there is Suzuki Tadashi, who as director of the Suzuki Company of Toga (SCOT) is probably the most familiar to the Western theatrical avant-garde. Suzuki was influenced by the search for a truly "Japanese" identity that was such an important element of the zeitgeist of the early to mid-60's. This influence came to fruition in the 70's with Trojan Women, in which Suzuki has been said to run through the entire history of Japanese theatrical styles, from Sarugaku (an early form of No) up through Shimpotō, within the loose framework of the play by Euripides. This play marks the beginning of Suzuki's interest in reexamining the similarities between Japanese Nō theater and Classical Greek theater, the focus of most of his work in the last fifteen years. Hijikata's strong emphasis on the material nature of the body as the fundamental element in all performance was also taken up by Suzuki. He began to develop, at about the same time as Butō groups of the 1970's such as Sankai Juku, a vocabulary of movements that were based on kata (movement patterns) from Nō, Kabuki, and the martial arts.

In the dance world, the energy and charisma of Ohno and Hijikata, as well as their avant-garde stance, attracted a number of talented young people such as Kasai Akira, Maro Akaji (the founder of the Butō group Dai Rakuda-kan), Bishop Yamada (who formed the Grand Camellia School), Nakajima Natsu (founder of Muteki-sha), and Tanaka Min (mainly known as a solo dancer, but who recently formed a group called Majikku), all of whom were restless and discontented with the state of dance in Japan at that time. Not all of these dancers actually studied under Hijikata or Ohno, but all of them have admitted to being strongly influenced in their own work by the Butō aesthetic. Both Ohno and Hijikata encouraged these dancers to go out and start their own companies, and by the mid-70's they had in turn spawned a third generation of smaller, more regional troupes, including Hoppō Butō-ha and Suzuran-tō (from Bishop Yamada's Grand Camellia School), Dance Love Machine and Amagatsu Ushio's Sankai Juku (from Maro Akaji's Dai Rakuda-kan).

Sankai Juku, although not the first Butō group to visit the United States (Ohno performed at La Mama in New York City in 1980, Dai Rakuda-kan at the American Dance Festival in Durham, North Carolina in 1982; Sankai Juku's first U.S. performance was at the Olympics Dance Festival in Los Angeles, 1984), has certainly provoked the most overwhelming critical response, and so can legitimately be said to have brought Butō to the attention of the mainstream dance world. Sankai Juku is a good example of the Japanese phenomenon of gyaku-yunyū ("go out and come back"): Japanese artists often only achieve recognition at home in Japan after they have achieved recognition abroad. A determining factor in Sankai Juku's commercial success is undoubtedly the fact that the group is based in Paris rather than Tokyo, and gave their first major performances in Europe. However, critics who have watched Butō from the very beginning have strong reservations about Sankai Juku's work: they claim that in Sankai Juku much of the original innovative excitement and energy of Butō has been schooled and domesticated. It is often the case with avant-garde movements that when they become popular, they also become institutionalized, and in fact, for young dancers today Butō seems to have become merely one more method that it is necessary to learn, along with ballet and Western modern dance. The peak of the Butō movement's expansion was probably in the mid-70's (at that time there were 20 to 25 groups practicing it across Japan). Today there are almost no new groups being formed, although at the time of his death Hijikata was collaborating with Tanaka Min on a new dance form called Ren'sai (Love), which he hoped would infuse more positive energy and life into Butō.2

Ohno Kazuo himself has objected to the use of the term "Ankoku Butō" in regard to his current work, explaining that he feels the term has become too confining: "I am a human being, I'm a dancer. That's all."3 For much the same reasons, such New York-based Japanese artists as Eiko and Koma, who in the early 1970's worked for a very short time (two months) with

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2The Ren'sai style was shown to the public for the first time in September 1981 in a dance called Foundations, performed by Tanaka Min and held on the occasion of Tanaka's 1500th solo performance.

Hijikata Tatsumi, and a relatively longer time (two years in total) with Ohno Kazuo, object strongly to critical categorization of their work as “Butō.” Nowadays, the word Butō has come to share the very same stigma that it had originally attempted to transcend: as the movement has become stronger and more influential, paradoxically it has begun to lose its ability to escape categorization and interpretation. Witness the critical success, both in Japan and in the United States, of Kisamuki Kuniko (designated “Japan’s Dancer of the Year, 1984” by the Japan Dance Critic’s Association), who alternated performances with Ohno Kazuo at the Joyce Theater in New York City in November 1985. Kisamuki’s training has included ballet, modern dance, and Butō, and although visually and structurally her work incorporates many of Butō’s techniques, her sheer technical virtuosity glosses every movement with a sleek beauty that belies Butō’s original aesthetic.

**Butō as a Postmodern Dance Form**

Although traditional forms as they existed in the 20th century were deemed sterile and unable to cope effectively with the contradictions and anxieties of contemporary life, there were a number of compelling reasons for the avant garde to look again at some of traditional dance theater’s techniques and principles. For one thing, as dance forms unique to Japan, with extremely long histories (Nō goes back more than 600 years), it would be expected that they had evolved a vocabulary of movement eminently suitable to the Japanese body structure; a second point in their favor was that the codes of representation on which Japanese dance theater is based are in many ways the antithesis of the Western theatrical model, and could therefore be used to confront and transcend it.

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As a result, Butō choreographers had no compunction about regarding these traditional dance forms as a kind of treasure trove of technique, gesture, and principles, which could be appropriated without regard to their original context or meaning, stripped down, and transformed into *kata* (a vocabulary of movement patterns). These kata could then be combined and recombined to form a dance idiom they felt would be more suitable for the Japanese body. In fact, in this regard, the vocabulary of movements upon which Nō and Kabuki are based were supposedly given no more weight than any of the other East and Southeast Asian dance traditions—everything was ripe for the plucking—the result of this pastiche method being a dance “technique” in which can be seen glimpses of everything from Kathakali hand gestures to the Chinese martial art of Tai Chi Chuan.

Although many of these movements and gestures had quite specific meanings within their own traditional context, those meanings were stripped away in the appropriation process, becoming unintelligible (or unreadable) to the viewer. This lines up with the fact that although the metaphorical load in a work may be quite heavy, most Butō choreographers strenuously resist any interpretation or explanation of individual gestures or techniques as having some concrete, easily identifiable meaning or reference. Nakajima Natsu of Muteki-sha is typical when she states in her program notes, “The gestures do not tell a story but evoke associations—to explain a movement is to undermine its meaning.” Amagatsu Ushio of Sankai Juku put it another way when he said that he is satisfied if “the performance serves as a spark for the feelings within the bodies of the individuals watching it.”

Butō’s pastiche style, which picks and chooses among modern and premodern dance techniques, elite and popular forms, with little or no regard for their original context or meaning certainly accords well with Frederic Jameson’s characterization of the postmodern as “the random cannibalization of all styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion.” In fact, there are a number of parallels between the Butō aesthetic and the model for a postmodern art outlined by Jameson in his recent article, “Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late-Capitalism.” To begin with, Hijikata’s celebration of the carnivalesque atmosphere of the “low” culture of 19th century

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Footnote:

1. It is not, in fact, clear to me that the structure of the Japanese body is significantly different from a German or American body, or that modern dance and ballet training is any more “natural” for an American than it is for a Japanese. Considering the number of Americans who are either members of a Butō troupe or have trained with one, the repeated references in the literature about Butō to the founders’ desire to create a dance form particularly suitable for the Japanese physique should probably be taken with a grain of salt. One might consider however, the pervasive notion (only very recently challenged) that the Japanese body is unsuitable for classical ballet and modern dance. Although Hijikata’s claim to have created a style of dance specifically for the Japanese body may not have been realistic, it was certainly ideologically persuasive, and must be taken into account on that basis.

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Footnote:


Kabuki as well as elements of Taisho mass culture corresponds to the postmodern effacement of "the older (essentially high-modernist) frontier between high culture and so-called mass or commercial art" through an avocation of the "whole 'degraded' landscape of schlock and kitsch." In this, Butō follows the general shift in the dynamics of cultural pathology from the celebration of the alienated, isolated artist, to a celebration of the fragmented, schizophrenic artist. I will return to this point in more detail in the next chapter; however, I should note here that in contradistinction to Jameson's characterization of both the use of pastiche and the emphasis on the fragmentation of self as tending to be purely aesthetic and formal, with no wider social or political goals involved, Butō's use of those forms should be seen as part of an overall strategy that aims at the ultimate reunification of the self into an all-encompassing order of nature.

Finally, Butō can be seen as postmodern in its antagonism towards critical interpretation. Jameson uses E.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* as an example of the postmodern resistance to critical interpretation; the practitioners of Butō, like Doctorow, have structured their work, "systematically and formally to short-circuit an older type of social and historical interpretation which it perpetually holds out and withdraws." Butō dancers use various strategies besides pastiche to achieve this goal, including a stress on grotesque imagery and the use of metamorphosis; I will return to this point in more detail in the next chapter.

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"Jameson explains that although parody had an "ulterior motive" in its satiric impulse, the pastiche form which has supplanted it in postmodern practice is a "neutral practice" and thus has become a "blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs." Jameson, "Postmodernism," p. 65.


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