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Zenchiku's *Mekari*: Staging Ambiguous and Hollow Worlds

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Abstract: Konparu Zenchiku (1405–c. 1470) was the son-in-law of Zeami Motokiyo. Zeami is the most famous nō actor–writer–composer–showman–impressario, but Zenchiku brought nō back from the shōgun's court to the temples, effectively resacralising the art form for a troubled, violent age. This paper asks whether Zenchiku's approach to theatre has anything to teach us as contemporary creators and audiences in our own unstable era and, simultaneously, whether contemporary modes of interpretation, such as queer musicology, can highlight new aspects of Zenchiku's work. Focusing on the under-studied and under-performed play *Mekari*—which dramatises a ritual cutting of seaweed at the Kanmon Strait between the islands of Kyūshū and Honshū as the new lunar year dawns—this paper explores how Zenchiku's work plays with—crosses back and forth over—multiple physical, temporal, and spiritual boundaries in both its text and performance, leaving the audience with a sense of ambiguity and questioning the received wisdom of conventional capitalist reality. This paper concludes with a look at Kyōto School philosopher Ueda Shizuteru's concept of the hollow expanse, or a place of limitless possibility. This paper argues that the audience viewing these ambiguities cultivated by Zenchiku's sacred dramas—via the music, words, and staging together—might themselves be given a glimpse into the radically open place of the 'hollow expanse'. The first full English translation of *Mekari* is included in Appendix A.

Keywords: Konparu Zenchiku; nō; Mekari; seaweed; Japanese aesthetics; Kyōto School; queer musicology; queer theory

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1. Introduction

Zeami Motokiyo (世阿弥元清 c. 1363–c. 1443) was the first nō (能) actor to receive a formal courtly education, having, as a beautiful and talented 12-year old, captured the attention of the 17-year-old 3rd Ashikaga shōgun Yoshimitsu (足利義満) (Hare 1986, p. 16)[1]. Yoshimitsu's attraction led to a lengthy period of patronage, which included a classical education generally unavailable to young men of the class to which actors belonged. Zeami became not only literate but deeply knowledgeable in Chinese and Japanese classics, poetry, and religions. The nō—known as *sarugaku* (猿楽) in his time—which he inherited combined the arts of appealing to an audience of city-dwellers through a combination of singing, dancing, and, above all, the ability for a man to convincingly imitate (Jp. *monomane* 物真似) anyone through body and voice, from a young warrior to an aged crone, from a famous beauty to a demonic spirit, from a cherry tree to a deity: these arts were extended, enhanced, and became more sophisticated in response to both Zeami's education and the expectations of his new audience of high-ranking warriors and the nobility.

As Noel Pinnington and others have pointed out, there are a plethora of material reasons behind the direction of development Zeami took for *sarugaku* nō (Pinnington 2006, p. 69*ff*.). Among these is the reality of competition; multiple nō troupes in Kyōto competed

among each other at competitive theatrical festivals for fame and patronage throughout this period. Tips and tricks for capturing an audience's attention, dealing with differing levels of sophistication among diverse audiences, and how to conduct oneself on stage in the presence of the highest-ranked warriors and nobility are the subject of a significant proportion of Zeami's secret treatises on nō—trade secrets intended to give his Kanze troupe heirs a continuing advantage in competitions even after Zeami's own retirement and death (Zeami 2008).

Among the other troupes active at that time (and today) was the Konparu (金春), headed by Konparu Zenchiku (金春禅竹, 1405–c. 1468), Zeami's son-in-law. The Konparu had a distinctly different position to the Kanze and other troupes in that they were located in Nara and had a permanent patronage relationship with the Kōfukuji/Kasuga Taisha (興福寺 · 春日大社) temple–shrine complex which de facto ran Yamato Province (modern Nara prefecture). This relationship provided both a religious education for Zenchiku as a young man and a relatively secure source of income for his troupe. These factors (among others) meant that Zenchiku's troupe did not face the same competitive commercial pressures that the Kyōto-based troupes did. This allowed Zenchiku to take the nō skills he learned from his father-in-law, Zeami, and develop them in a completely different direction, creating a nō in which the prime motivation was not monetary rewards or competitive advantages over another troupe's performance but rather the spiritual awakening of the actor and audience together through the ritualistic power of the performance. Where for Zeami the *shite* (シテ) in *kami* (神, En. deity or spirit) plays *imitated* (*monomane*) *kami* on stage, for Zenchiku, the *shite* manifested as—transubstantiated into—a *kami*.

In developing his vision through a series of treatises written from c. 1444 to 1466, collectively called *Rokurin Ichiro* (六輪一露), and the later *Meishukushū* (明宿集, 1460s), Zenchiku drew on not only various schools of Buddhist and early Shintō (神道) philosophy but also Confucianism and secular thought from Japan and China. In this paper, I will outline this confluence of ideas from different philosophical and religious traditions, how this manifests in Zenchiku's works in comparison to Zeami's, and finally, taking the example of an under-performed and under-studied work, *Mekari* (和布刈), consider how Zenchiku's religious, ritualistic nō can be interpreted in the present day, utilising approaches from both Japan (i.e., the third-generation Kyōto School philosopher Ueda Shizuteru's (上田閑照) aesthetics) and the west (i.e., New Musicological approaches such as queer musicology).

2. Okina and Allegoresis

Zenchiku's immersion in a variety of religious traditions is clear in both his treatises and plays. As he explains in *Meishukushū*, his *Rokurin Ichiro* set of texts was based on a vision, a visitation from the Sumiyoshi deity he experienced while praying on a poetically auspicious date at the Sumiyoshi Shrine (住吉大社), which bequeathed the six circles and one dewdrop image to him. Sumiyoshi Daimyojin (住吉大明神), a god of poetry and war, appeared to him as an *okina* (翁) figure—a revered old man of nō. As Susan Blakeley Klein has argued, it seems that at least Zenchiku himself honestly believed that this vision occurred (i.e., he does not seem to have cynically concocted it) (Klein 2021, pp. 87–88).

Zenchiku was at pains to have prominent scholars from a variety of backgrounds read and comment on the significance of his visions. Nittō Shamon Shigyoku (入唐沙門志玉) of the Kegon (華厳; Ch. Huáyán) sect of Buddhism, the Confucian scholar Ichijō Kaneyoshi (一条兼良), and Nankō Sōgen (南江宗沅), a Zen (禅) monk and poet, were all asked by Zenchiku to read his text and provide commentary on it. The interpretations given in these commentaries on an already syncretic but Shintō-focussed text were incorporated

into subsequent versions of *Rokurin Ichiro*, allowing Zenchiku to refine his interpretation of his vision in accordance with up-to-date ideas from across multiple intellectual traditions.

One important intellectual tool used by Zenchiku which is less familiar (considered less rigorous) now is allegoresis. This is an intellectual tool which was widely used in esoteric Buddhist schools (and in esoteric religions elsewhere). To quote Susan Blakeley Klein, '[i]t is evident from *Meishukushū* that Zenchiku believed in the signifying power of signs, that is, that the linguistic/symbolic relation of signifier and signified is not arbitrary, but motivated, and that homonyms and graphs can therefore be analyzed to reveal hidden identities' (Klein 2021, p. 90) and that he 'assumed that such associative identifications, when properly understood, conveyed something important about the true nature of reality: specifically, that associative identifications were a legitimate basis for the efficacy of rituals performed in connection with *sarugaku* noh' (Klein 2021, p. 82).

Okina, mentioned above as an important figure in Zenchiku's late treatise *Meishukushū*, is a good example of how Zenchiku uses allegoresis. *Okina* is the name of the prototypical nō play, a play which is more ritual than play, with a provenance so old that some of its lines were incomprehensible even in Zenchiku's time. The play is to this day performed as the first play of the new year or on other auspicious occasions by nō troupes as a kind of purifying ritual for the stage. In *Meishukushū*, Zenchiku uses allegoresis to integrate Buddhist, Shintō (kami-worship), and Confucian ways of seeing the world—different points of view and different ways of experiencing or interpreting the same underlying reality—and, in this way, connects the Okina of the nō play to the Buddhist deity Dainichi Nyorai (大日如来), *kami* such as Sumiyoshi Daimyōjin and Kasuga Daimyōjin (春日大明神), as well as the great courtier and *waka* (和歌) poet Ariwara Narihira (在原業平 825–880). Narihira is also considered by Zenchiku to be both a bodhisattva as well as a *kami* of yin–yang—i.e., Confucian *onmyōdō* (陰陽道). This allegoristically reflects the then-prevalent paradigmatic concept of *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹)[2]. Through the prevalent concept of *bonnō soku bodai* (煩悩即菩提 carnal passion as the nondual equivalent of enlightenment), Zenchiku identifies the prolific seducer and poet Narihira-*cum*-Okina—'the benevolent deity of song and dance'—with *kōjin* (荒神) and the raging spirit of creative energy (and Konparu ancestor) Hada no Kawakatsu (秦河勝), in other words, to himself and his own artistic inheritance (Klein 2021, p. 93). There are numerous other examples of Zenchiku's deployment of allegoresis in relation to Okina—a use so frequent that Nakazawa Shinichi has referred to it as a kind of 'Okina monism' (2002, 196)—but one more which deserves a mention in relation to *Mekari* is Zenchiku's identification of an Okina of salt and purification (*Iwotsutsu-no-Okina* 塩土ノ翁) with the Buddhist sea dragon god Ryūjin (龍神) in the *Meishukushū* (Konparu [1974] 2016, p. 400; cf. Nakazawa [2003] 2022, pp. 172–76). Zenchiku thus manages to show a command of contemporary techniques of allegoristic hermeneutic discourse, positing an original interpretation of both the *Okina* play and the spiritual importance and heritage of *sarugaku* nō.

3. A Queer Musicological Approach

Now, just as Zenchiku used intellectual tools—such as allegoresis—and concepts—such as the unity of local deities (*kami*) and universal buddhas (*honji suijaku*), or the buddhahood of non-sentient beings (*sōmoku kokudo shikkai jōbutsu* (草木国土悉皆成仏), more commonly shortened to *sōmoku jōbutsu* (草木成仏))—of his time to interpret the world and compose his nō, in this paper, I am going to make use of interpretive tools of my time to make sense of his writings. Though I doubt that many readers will object to this approach to the analysis of non-Western and pre-modern music theatre, in light of Philip Brett and Elizabeth Wood's observation that 'ethnomusicology has been even more nervous of categories of sexual behaviour manifest in music than has historical musicology' (Brett and

Wood 2006, p. 373), I want to take a quick moment to explain why I use an interpretive approach derived from queer musicology to talk about Zenchiku and *Mekari*, a play with no overt romantic or sexual content in it at all.

I emphasise musicology rather than the broader literary category of queer theory for a simple reason: the strategies developed within queer musicology since the early 1990s have been developed to deal with texts (=scores) with little to no explicit verbal content: absolute music and music without words. Though there is of course a rich seam of queer literary theory which analyses texts with no explicit queer content for undertones and gestures enacted from deep within metaphorical closets, queer musicology often deals with texts that have no linguistically meaningful content at all. And if I approach a nō play such as *Mekari*, which is largely plotless, and which is more ritual than drama, as I would a musical score with words—with the non-verbal equal to or more important than the verbal content—than queer musicology has more tools to assist in this interpretation than queer (literary) theory does. I would also like to point to avant-garde theatre director Suzuki Tadashi's (鈴木忠志, b. 1939) comments about the physicality of nō: 'the audience is drawn to the physiological feeling of high tension an actor expresses, rather than the meaning of the language or psychological expressions. […] The physiological energy that emanates from [the unnatural style of the actor's body] resonates with the audience's own physiological rhythms—rhythms that accompany breathing' (Suzuki 1976, p. 26; trans. Hori Tanaka 2022, modified). Note that rhythm (a musical element) and breath (a physical element which is also essential to New Musicology's and queer musicology's focus on the embodiedness of music in the physical body of the performer) are elevated above language in this contemporary account of the nō actor.

I also contend that this queer approach is valid not just because it is a contemporary mode of interpretation, but because it is a kind of post-modern allegorises—like Zenchiku in his day, I will be offering an interpretation which is not orthodox, and which focusses on teasing out hidden connections through allegory and association. As a researcher who is a composer first and scholar second, I approach Zenchiku's works with empathy, for he too was a working composer–writer–performer trying to make sense of the world through song, poetry, and dance first and only as a scholar secondarily, later in his life.

Furthermore, Zenchiku is known as the most *yūgen* (幽玄) of all the nō composers, and, as Hare points out, for Zenchiku's father-in-law and mentor Zeami, 'boyish "prettiness"', which Hare identifies with *yūgen*, is considered to be 'the basis for all yūgen in the noh' (Hare 1986, p. 19). In pre-modern (pre-1868) Japan, homosexual behaviour could in general be openly practiced and was not condemned in either society or religion[3]. It was celebrated in art, including nō—including in at least one play attributed to Zenchiku, *Matsumushi* (松虫). But there are other kinds of closets: Japan then and now does have a pervasive cultural of secrecy and esoterism (Scheid and Teeuwen 2011) which might—via allegoresis—be usefully examined using analytical tools developed within queer musicology. And, like in many non-Abrahamic religions the world over, queer people—people who in their bodies and souls transcend the binaries of gender and of sexual desire—have in pre-modern Japan been elevated to positions of spiritual power[4], positions which allow them—via allegoresis—to transcend the binaries of the conventional world and the absolute nothingness/emptiness/hollowness which is the ultimate reality where *kami*, buddhas, humans, and all other beings engage in generative play together. This connection between spiritual experience and sexuality will be important in discussing Zenchiku's patently spiritual aesthetic.

To reiterate, my central claim here, then, is that queer musicology, because it does not have any linguistic content to analyse, is already always doing allegoresis, is a contemporary Western form of allegoresis, and, as such, is in fact an apposite theoretical approach

to Zenchiku's nō. This is not to claim that Zenchiku himself was queer or to divine a queer subtext within the spiritual motivations of his art (even for someone like Zeami, for whom a same-sex relationship is attested, such a claim would be anachronistic, given that the term 'queer' only began to be widely used in the present sense in the 1980s (Taavetti 2024, p. 139)). Rather, it is to claim that for contemporary interpreters, reading through queer musicology and theory opens up new and worthwhile perspectives on Zenchiku's oeuvre.

4. Zenchiku's Nō

In the previous section, I noted that—in common with many queer-identified people today—seeking alignment with mainstream society was not the motivation behind Zenchiku's nō. This is in contrast to Zeami, whose aim was to popularise nō among the elites (i.e., potential patrons), merchants, and other city dwellers, while distancing it from the rural peasantry (i.e., people of lower classes and lower incomes) with which it had previously been associated. These different perspectives have often been remarked upon: Klein notes that 'unlike Zeami, Zenchiku puts very little emphasis on audience response.… Instead, he devotes a great deal of attention to the Konparu troupe's connection to Kasuga and sarugaku noh's spiritual efficacy' (Klein 2021, p. 318, n. 6). And Paul Atkins states that 'Zeami … builds his aesthetics around the human subject. Zenchiku, on the other hand, … seems to regard the actor as a mere part of the vast universe, a conduit through which cosmic energies flow' (Atkins 2006, p. 47).

Zenchiku's under-theorisation of the actor's role might actually reflect his lack of confidence in his own abilities as a performer of nō (Zeami, in one of his two extant letters to Zenchiku ('The 5:14 Letter'), spends a whole paragraph reassuring a seemingly self-doubting Zenchiku that, though he has never seen his son-in-law perform, he has heard good reports) (Zeami 2008, p. 432). However, regardless of his acting ability, Zenchiku was undeniably in demand as a playwright, writing plays not only for his own Konparu troupe but also writing on commission for other performers and troupes to perform (the late 15th-century text—considered the most reliable mediaeval source of nō composer attributions—*Jika denshō* (自家伝抄) credits Zenchiku with 32 plays, 17 of which were written for seven other performers, including three for Kanze Matasaburō (観世又三郎 1429–1470) and seven, including *Mekari*, for the Hōshō school (宝生流)) (Atkins 2006, p. 252).

So how did the religious and philosophical ideas swirling around Zenchiku's mind and through his milieu find expression in his plays? Obscurity is one technique he used to prime an audience for a deeper engagement with the mysteries of artwork and thence the universe (recall that *Okina*—the ur-play of nō and a touchstone for Zenchiku—includes some passages which were even in Zenchiku's time incomprehensible). It can be artistically dangerous, because obscurity and ambiguity can be experienced as alienation that discomfits the viewer, but this denial of the audience's conventional expectations also affords opening them up to new, spiritual, and revelatory experiences instead. And, aside from its value in opening audiences up to the wonder of the unexpected, obscurity—i.e., coded meanings—is also a crucial tool of communication utilised by queer interpreters, especially in cultures in which queer identities are repressed. As Wayne Koestenbaum points out, 'In Wilde's novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Lord Henry Wotton's "musical words said with musical utterance" awaken homoeroticism in the inexperienced Dorian *because they evade explicit meaning*' (Koestenbaum 2001, p. 190; italics mine). Zenchiku fills his plays with references to Confucian, Buddhist, and Shintō concepts (often syncretically combining these traditions), not to mention far more classical Chinese poems and obscure *waka* than other nō writers, that would go over the heads of all but the most well-educated of his contemporaries. One example of Zenchiku's use of relatively obscure poetry, in con-

trast to Zeami's injunction to use poetry which everyone would know, is Zenchiku's use of Fujiwara no Teika's (藤原定家) *waka* (and indeed, an entire play called *Teika* about Teika in which Teika himself does not appear). Teika is known for complexity, ambiguity, and *yūgen*, and Zenchiku is the only nō playwright to use Teika's poems in, at least, the classical period of nō. Thornhill also notes Zenchiku's commitment to an overall aesthetic of *yūgen*, which he glosses as 'tonal darkness' and 'gloomy obsession' (Thornhill 1997, p. 38). Secrecy—obscurity—is also an essential element of *yūgen*.

To borrow Atkins' words, '[r]efusal to provide the audience with catharsis' (Atkins 2006, p. 65) is another technique Zenchiku frequently uses in his plays, one which can add to their difficulty from the audience's point of view. This lack of catharsis stems not only from the circular narrative structure of his plays, in which the characters do not develop, but also the musical and rhythmic structure, which is cyclical rather than teleological: Rather than the breathless climaxes brought about by the circular but ever-increasing intensity of Zeami's *jo-ha-kyū* (序破急), Zenchiku's structures tend to make a return to the slower opening *(jo)* rhythms at the end of the play (after the *kyū*). Together, the circularity of both the dramatic and musical structures constitutes a practical and relatively unique utilisation of *kōko kyakurai* (向去却来), a Zen phrase that means 'having experienced enlightenment, to return to the [conventional] world' (Thornhill 1993, p. 30, n. 25). Zenchiku's uniquely circular, non-cathartic, *yūgen* structures can also be read in a similar way to the structural ambiguities of the music of queer composers, such as Schubert, the pervasive sense of tragedy in whose music has been identified by multiple musicologists as relating to the queer trope of unrequited love (Fisk 2022, pp. 342–43; McClary 2006, p. 226*ff.*)—i.e., a passionate emotional arc which ends in the same unfulfilled state as it begins.

It is also worth noting, in this context, Zenchiku's sustained interest in the potential for enlightenment of women and non-sentient beings (*sōmoku jōbutsu*). Two of his plays have main characters which are plants (*Bashō* (芭蕉) and *Kakitsubata* (杜若)) and other plays where characters are *kami* of non-sentients (*Tatsuta* (竜田) and *Mekari*). *Teika* has both, in a way—the *shite* Princess Shikishi's (式子内親王) attachment to Teika has taken the physical form of *teika-kazura* (テイカカズラ) vines curled around Shikishi's grave. And while it would be self-evidently foolish to suggest that an interest in women is inherently queer, it is undeniable that for gay men at least, identification with powerful female characters has been a longstanding trope, and the ability for many cis-gendered gay men to identify with women is one manifestation of the transcending of binaries that queer interpretation excels at. It is also worth reminding ourselves that the characters in nō—regardless of gender, species, or metaphysical status—were all (at least, prior to the early 20th century) played by men or boys.

The techniques Zenchiku deploys in order to create a dramatic atmosphere which affords opening both the performers and audience out to the hollow world—obscurity, cyclical structures, and finding ways to express being between or outwith seemingly solid binary states of existence—are techniques which are also crucial expressive tools for queer artists.

5. *Mekari*

I am going to go a bit deeper into these ideas by looking at a very under-discussed[5] play—*Mekari*—from two perspectives: a perspective rooted in Japanese religion and ontology, as well as one rooted in queer musicology[6]. *Mekari*'s focus on the sea as a site of religious meaning and fertility does allow us to delve into some unique areas of Zenchiku's art[7]. *Mekari* exhibits many of the esoteric religious qualities mentioned above, while also providing a wealth of examples of binaries being transcended which have religious significance for him—and, by allegoresis, can be interpreted in the present as queer.

The main action of *Mekari* is a re-enactment of what is claimed to be the oldest annual *kami*-worshipping ritual in Japan, the putatively 1900+-year-old seaweed cutting ceremony which takes place in the pre-dawn hours of the lunar new year on the shores of the Kanmon Strait (関門海峡), between the islands of Kyūshū (九州) and Honshū (本州)—in other words, a location on neither sea nor land and neither island nor mainland. The *shite* and *tsure* (ツレ) are, respectively, an old fisherman (identified as an *okina* in the script) and his daughter, an *ama* (海人, En. diver), coming to seek a connection with the deity of the sea at this ceremony of absolution for the past years' sins (such as the taking of life in the course of their jobs) and blessings for the new year. The *waki* (ワキ) is the priest of Hayatomo who conducts the seaweed-cutting ceremony.

Fabio Rambelli points out that there is a dearth of scholarship on the ocean's place in studies of Japanese religions (Rambelli 2018, p. xii *ff.*). This is despite the ocean's fundamental place in the creation stories in the *Nihon Shoki* (日本書紀) and the *Kojiki* (古事記). Especially in the latter, the sea is presented as both the original state of things before the islands of Japan were created and is also presented as an equal plain (*unabara* 海原) along with the *takama no hara* (高天原) and *ashihara* (葦原), respectively, or the plains of sea (water), high heaven (light), and reeds (land). The process by which the centralised spiritual institutions of Japan became disconnected from the sea is allegorised into a myth in the *Kojiki*, in the story of Hoderi-no-mikoto (火照命, a deity of fishing sacred to the Kyūshū-based Hayato (隼人) people) and his hunter brother Hohodemi-no-mikoto (火火出見尊)[8] (Teeuwen 2018, pp. 5–6). This story is likely to have been the principle source material for Zenchiku's *Mekari*; it is referred to throughout the play. To quickly summarise the myth, the brothers exchange their tools and, through a series of accidents, the land-focussed hunting brother, Hohodemi-no-mikoto, ends up in the deep-sea palace of the Dragon God (identified in by Zenchiku's script as both the Buddhist Ryūjin and sea *kami* Watazumi (海神, En. sea god)), marries his daughter, Toyotama-hime (豊玉姫), and brings her back to Kyūshū. Hohodemi-no-mikoto uses the wealth and magic powers he acquired at Watazumi's palace to impoverish and almost drown his fisherman brother, Hoderi-no-mikoto, eventually forcing him to submit and become his servant. This story can be read as an allegory of the inland Honshū-based Yamato people conquering the Kyūshū-based divers and sea-worshippers and thenceforth treating the sea as spiritually inferior to the land (especially mountains).

In *Mekari*, however, Zenchiku does not tell the second half of this mythological story and indeed makes the fisherman and *ama*—identified with the sea *kami* Hoderi-no-mikoto—his main characters rather than the victims.[9] In Zenchiku's theoretical writings, too, the sea appears multiple times as a prominent metaphor for the absolute, the emptiness from which creativity springs—what Thornhill names as Zenchiku's 'Theory of Primal Water', associated with Shintō creation myth, the Buddhist concepts of impermanence and creation, and as one of the Confucian elements—an association crystallised into the non-dual culmination of his *rokurin-ichiro* system, the one dewdrop (Thornhill 1993, pp. 156–63).

And while this play does not offer a *sōmoku jōbutsu* literal personification of a non-sentient being (i.e., the sea), at the end of the first act—as is typical in deity nō—the *shite* and *tsure* reveal themselves to be the *kami* of, respectively, the sea (i.e., Ryūjin—a *honji suijaku* equation/replacement of the native Watazumi with a Buddhist sea dragon—who initially manifests as Okina—and is thus also related to Dainichi Nyorai, Sumiyoshi Daimyōjin, Narihira, etc.) and sky (a pun on *ama*, which means both diver and sky/heavens), while the *ai-kyōgen* (アイ狂言, a comic actor who appears between the two acts of the main play) is a *kami* of seaweed.

At the temporally ambiguous, in-between point in the year where the last day of the old year has gone and the first day of the new year is yet to dawn, through the ceremony of cutting the seaweed, the old separation of (animosity between) land and sea is dissolved:

SHITE and **TSURE** together

In this Hayatomo kami festival

There is no separation between land and Watazumi

Thanks to this offering of seaweed,

Both the plants on the ocean floor and those floating on the waves

Recall that the first island of Japan created in the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* myths was just a reed bed floating on the ocean: what Zenchiku has the actors enact on stage is a subversion of what the source Hohodemi-no-mikoto myth accomplishes: it is a purification via a return to the primal oceanic state, when sea, sky, and land—the three places of *unabara*, *takama no hara*, *ashihara*—are once again unified and non-dual. It can thus be read as a radical reimagining of the Yamato Shintō myth which celebrates, rather than subjugates, the sea, aided by the *honji suijaku* Buddhist sea dragon/Okina as the principal character, spirits of both women and seaweed as secondary characters, and an ambiguous setting at the point between Kyūshū and Honshū, or land and sea.

I do not wish to claim any radical, heretical motive behind Zenchiku's reinterpretation of the Hohodemi-no-mikoto myth. Rather, what I want to emphasise here is that the syncretic religious/philosophical milieu of 15th-century Japan was a fertile, open ground in which different traditions influenced each other, and the surface stories (myths, rituals, and plays) could be reshaped to reflect what was assumed to be a unified core shared by these diverse traditions. It was a moment of openness that for a creative thinker like Zenchiku, one who himself had a mind-opening/expanding revelatory experience, was itself a kind of 'hollow' field in which he could explore and play. This also gives weight to Thornhill's interpretation of Zenchiku's treatises, in which he reads as Zenchiku, positing that water—the sea—is the primal element from which all else is generated: it is the source of sacredness.

6. *Mekari*'s Hollow Expanse

This is also, of course, a play of in-betweennesses and ambiguities, or commonplace binaries transcended as illustrations of the Buddhist truth of the unity of opposites. *Mekari* temporally takes place between the old and new year, and the physical setting is doubly in-between—neither Kyūshū or Honshū and neither the ocean nor the land ('In this Hayatomo kami festival/There is no separation between land and Watazumi'). There is the ambiguous divinity mentioned above, the *shite*'s manifestation as a god playing a fisherman (the fisherman identified as Okina and thus all the Buddhas and poets and *kami* associated with Okina allegoristically manifest as well), and the fact that divinities representing three non-sentient beings (one also manifesting as a woman) are on stage, the sea, the sky, and seaweed itself, and the unusual choice to have the comic interlude *ai-kyōgen* actor play the seaweed *kami* in-between the first and second acts. The music sung by the *ai-kyōgen* part also repeatedly approaches climaxes without reaching them, which is an unusual gesture in nō but one which reflects Zenchiku's characteristic refusal of catharsis both dramatically and musically.

It is undoubted that Zenchiku, in all his work, hoped to effect a purifying realisation of spiritual oneness in his audience, mirroring the unity of elements on stage. Obliterating these binaries (there are more in the play than space permits me to explore here), bringing the audience to the brink of climax (neither listless nor fulfilled), and setting up a situation that affords an intense spiritual experience but making the audience take the final step

themselves surely had a soteriological function for Zenchiku. But does this play retain its soteriological potential in the 21st century?

I have previously written about reading nō texts and rhythms through the lens of Ueda Shizuteru's aesthetics (Jamieson 2022), which I will expand on here: through alienation techniques, such as obscurity of location, ambiguity of textual meaning (i.e., openness to multiple avenues of interpretation), irregularity of rhythm[10], and circularity of form (ending his *jo-ha-kyū* with a return to the slow opening rhythms of the *jo*), Zenchiku's nō (similar to Zeami's, but more so), in general afford being interpreted as 'hollow' (虚 *kyo*) in the soteriological sense of Ueda's 'hollow words'. I also want to underline that while the language barrier (even for modern Japanese speakers) may prevent the subtleties of the text's word-play from contributing as much to this effect as in Zenchiku's time (though in general increasing the experience of alienating obscurity), the musical (rhythmic and structural) alienation effect is, given the sheer amount of steady teleological rhythms and short, self-contained tonal or modal musics that we are unavoidably exposed to in daily life, if anything, even more pronounced in our late-capitalist era than in when these nō were first performed.

All of these elements offer the potential to trigger an awareness of conventional reality not being the entirety of reality and that conventional reality is ensconced in the hollow expanse (kyo *no sekai* 「虚」の世界; akin to the 'emptiness' (*kokū* 虚空) of Mahāyāna thought or absolute nothingness (*zettai mu* 絶対無) of Nishida Kitarō 西田幾多郎). They do not reveal the hollow expanse per se; they suggest the possibility of there being more than the conventional narrative of capitalist realism typically allows. That crack in the certainty of convention is what *mugen* nō (especially Zenchiku's) still offers us in late-capitalist modernity—a glimpse into different potential ways of being in the world. And, to pivot to the queer reading, what is the point of 'queer' (instead of 'straight' or even 'gay') readings if not to emphasise the multiplicity of ways of being in the world? To quote Koestenbaum on opera again: 'Opera is not very real. But gayness has never been admitted into the precincts of reality. And so gays may seek out art that does not respect the genuine.' (Koestenbaum 2001, p. 145). *Mugen* nō (夢幻能, En. nō of dreams and illusions) is also, by definition, a subversion of conventional reality; a queer musicological reading is, perhaps, simply a post-modern set of interpretive tools through which we can glimpse the hollow expanse, the emptiness of ultimate reality that Zenchiku identified with the limitless primal ocean.

7. Conclusions

The theme of this special issue is Spaces Between. In landscape, islands are areas of land between vast stretches of sea, and archipelagos are ocean straits flowing between groups of islands—in either case, a counterpoint of land and sea. In *Mekari*, the binaries of land and sea are transcended, and conventional interpretations of myth are upended. For a contemporary interpreter, this can have queer implications; at least, it affords being queered. Takahashi Mutsuo 高橋睦郎, one of Japan's foremost living *waka* poets, has already done this in his inimitable and humorous way:

> 和布刈のうみ潮の八百合に立つ脛の脛毛なびくはわれへならなく
>
> *Mekari no umi shio no yaha ai ni tatsu sune no sunege nabiku wa ware he naranaku*
>
> The briny tide of Mekari meeting his leg hairs standing up and waving, but not at me. (Takahashi 2005, p. 132; translation mine)

Here, the maleness of the speaker can be assumed; the maleness of the bearer of those leg hairs—the seaweed-cutting priest—is undoubted.

Zenchiku's work retains its soteriological potential today, not only because of its focus on the environment—the agency and importance of non-humans—the equality of women,

and the importance of reconnecting with the universe (and, often, the tragedy of failing to do so). Its ambiguity is its strength and resilience, our permission to interpret spiritually, anti-capitalistically, queerly, or through whatever theoretical lens we choose to view the world: not just because Roland Barthes gave us post-moderns permission to interpret without undue deference to the intention of the author, but, by his own example, so does Zenchiku himself.

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Appendix A. Translation of *Mekari*[11]

CHARACTER LIST

Waki: Mekari Shrine Priest
Waki tsure: two attendants
Mae-shite: old fisherman
Mae-tsure: young Ama (female diver)
Nochi-jite: Ryūjin, god of the sea (manifesting in the form of a dragon)
Nochi-zure: Tennyo (a heavenly maiden)

Time: Lunar New Year's Eve
Location: Mekari Shrine

MAEBA (Act I)

[*SHIDAI*][12]

WAKI and **WAKITSURE**
Today is already the Festival of the Hayatomo *kami*.
Today is already the Festival of the Hayatomo *kami*.
How auspicious is the everlasting reign of the Emperor!

WAKI
I am a priest of Hayatomo Myōjin in Nagato Province
There are many ceremonies held at this shrine
Among these is the ceremony held at the end of the twelfth month[13]
We call the Rite of Mekari[14].
This night, at the hour of the Tiger[15]
Ryūjin[16] oversees the sea:
The waves recede in all four directions
And are calmed.
At that time, the shrine priests go to the sea
And they cut seaweed from the bottom of the sea
And make an offering of it before the *kami*.
This year there have been many mysterious and auspicious signs
So we must venerate the *kami* with even more vigour.
We must perform this ceremony.

[*WAKI SASHI*]

How thankful we are to hold the ceremony for the Hayatomo *kami* today.
This festival at the end of the year also celebrates the Emperor at the beginning of the new year.

[*AGEUTA*]

WAKI and **WAKITSURE**
Going to the field in spring and picking the young shoots[17]
Going to the field in spring and picking the young shoots
Those young shoots show no signs of withering.
Today is the festival of the *kami* of Mekari,
Which remains green, though we are at the end of the year.
We prepare ourselves and pray for the blessing of the Emperor.
We prepare ourselves and pray for the blessing of the Emperor.

[*SHIN NO ISSEI*]

SHITE and **TSURE**
Ever since the creation of heaven and earth
The realm of the *kami* and the Emperor have been blessed.

TSURE
Oh, how quickly Hayatomo's[18]…

SHITE and **TSURE**
…Year comes to its close.
Ah, this year!

[*SHITE SASHI*]

SHITE
How fortunate that in our country,
Even though there are a great many kinds of rites performed before *kami*
In this Hayatomo *kami* festival
There is no separation between land and Watazumi[19]
Thanks to this offering of seaweed,
Both the plants on the ocean floor and those floating on the waves
Bloom like flowers in the surf held up as an offering to the *kami*,
The *kami* spread their blessings to all[20] without fail.

[*SAGEUTA*]

We have been travelling a long way to make a connection with this *kami*.

[*AGEUTA*]

In Hayatomo,
In Hayatomo,
Boats are adrift, rudderless amidst the rough waves[21].
So we make many offerings;
The *ama*'s[22] work shall also be rewarded by the *kami*.

WAKI
How strange!
In the dusk, there are the shadows of people making an offering before the *kami* –
I wonder who they are.

TSURE
I am a humble person,
An *ama*.
I'm an unimportant drifter
Just making an offering.

SHITE
I'm an old man from this harbour
Terrified of my old fisherman's sins[23].
In order to purify my humble, insignificant self
I am making a offering.

WAKI
Undoubtedly
Not only humans, but even fish are not excluded from the *kami*'s pledge of salvation in this harbour.

SHITE
The fire used by *ama*[24] burns out,
The radiant light of Buddhist salvation shines without cloud.

[*SAGEUTA*]

JIUTAI[25]
Heaven and Earth is bright
Just like it was in the first generation of *kami* who created the earth.
And the minds of humankind should be honest and meek.
How wonderful it is that auspicious signs are appearing!

[*AGEUTA*]

The wide open ocean!
Hakata Sea is nearby.
Hakata Sea is nearby.
The tide withdraws, and we can look across the sea to Hikushima Island.
The plovers of Hayatomo,
And the gulls out at sea,
Are on the wing[26]
In spring and autumn
Geese descend from the clouds
Not even the Border Guard of Moji
Can stop my words from getting through[27]
I empathise with this poet.
I empathise with this poet.[28]

[*KURI*]

There, the fourth generation of earthly gods Hohodemi-no-mikoto
Lay with Princess Toyotama.
And so united land and sea;
Nothing came between them.

[*SHITE SASHI*]

SHITE
At the time Princess Toyotama was giving birth
She said to Hohodemi-no-mikoto:

JIUTAI
'Do not, under any circumstances, look at me after I give birth.'
He promised her this,
And they mades oaths to each other.

[*KUSE*]

But it seems that after a while, he became worried about her,
And so he sneakily looked at her.
She was astonished, shocked, and disappointed;
She complained and cursed him;
She blocked the path between land and sea,
Abandoned their precious child,
Then returned to her dragon father's castle under the sea.
After that, the tide ebbed and flowed at dawn and dusk,
And the world of the Dragon God and the human world were separated.

SHITE
But since the days of the gods…

JIUTAI
During the Hayatomo Festival
The *kami*'s promise extends everywhere
From above the clouds
To the Dragon God deep under the sea.
Profound belief
Makes the deep ocean akin to land,
And manifests an unobstructed channel at Nagato Province
So that everyone can access the jewels of the ocean as they like.[29]

[*RONGI*]

Truly as they like!
Truly as they like!
Though everyone has their own prayer for the *kami*,
If they worship correctly, all will be fulfilled.

TSURE
There is no more need for concealment.
Our place of residence is far away.

JIUTAI
The heavenly maiden's sleeve of clouds[30],

SHITE
And my hairpin-flower[31] are offerings to the *kami*.

JIUTAI
Even though the colour is different,

SHITE
From Watazumi[32]…

JIUTAI
… comes these sea-foam flowers[33] –
Offerings from the Sea Dragon's Palace.
Heaven and earth joined together in sincere worship.
The heavenly maiden floats away on the clouds,
While the old man into the wave-furrows
Sinks and disappears,
Sinks and disappears.

***AI* (Interlude)**

AIKYOGEN
As I am, I am the *kami* of the seaweed who dwells off Hayatomo in the province of Nagato. Now, in this shrine, among the many rituals performed, there is one particularly auspicious ritual called the Seaweed Harvest Festival[34], performed on the last day of the twelfth month. The reason for this is that on this night, at the Hour of the Tiger, the Dragon God parts the waves that rise and transforms them into sand. Then the priests, lighting their way with a torch, enter the sea and cut the seaweed from the bottom of the waters in order to offer it to the *kami*. In truth, since the Age of the Gods even to this day, nothing separates this place from the Ocean Palace of the Dragon God Watazumi, and this ritual has unfailingly been performed to honour Watazumi. And so the imperial reign is auspicious.

How splendid is this ritual, this night the Princess of the Dragon Palace and the old man Shiozutsu-o showed themselves. The priest noticed their offerings of abundant treasures and the ardour of their worship. Then, when he asked who they were, the dragon lady answered that she was a humble *ama* diver, and the old man declared that he was an inhabitant of this harbour. He gave a brief account of Hohodemi-no-mikoto, of the fourth generation of the *kami* of the earth. Then he said that their offerings came from the Palace of the Dragon God, that heaven and earth worship together, and when, with a word revealing herself as a Heavenly Maiden, the woman disappeared into the clouds, the old man entered the sea.

I offer myself up before this worthy god simply because I live in this harbour. And since the occasion is so auspicious, I am going to perform a song before I return:

Ah how providential is this moment

[*SANDAN MAI* (Dance)]

Ah yes!
Ah yes!

How auspiciousness!
How providential!
Since the occasion is so auspicious,
Other humble seaweed like me
Come floating to the surface[35] before the *kami*,
Venerating these sacred mysteries,
Venerating these sacred mysteries,
To the sea I return!

***NOCHIBA* (Act II)**

[*DEHA*]

JIUTAI
Kami manifest on the shores of Hayatomo!
Kami manifest on the shores of Hayatomo!
Music in the limitless heavens
Harmonising with the wind in the pines.
Moonlight reflected in the water,
Extraordinary aroma drifting.
The Dragon Princess, head adorned with sea-foam,
Dancing, tossing her sleeves like the waves.

[*TENNYO MAI* Dance of the Dragon Princess]

NOCHI-ZURE
And so, and so,

JIUTAI
The time for cutting the seaweed has come!
The wind roars fiercely like a tiger,
The Dragon growls,
Summoning rain clouds.
The surf shines.
The ocean rumbles and crashes.
The Dragon King appears from the depths!

JIUTAI
The Dragon King manifests!
The Dragon King manifests!

NOCHI-JITE
At the place of the Seaweed Cutting Ceremony
I reveal the ocean floor.

JIUTAI
The tide held back;
Picking seaweed from Koyurugi's rocky shore.

NOCHI-JITE
Don't get the *ama*s wet!
Stay back, waves![36]

JIUTAI
Waves from the deep stay back!
The tide is folded back like a folding screen;
The sand at the bottom of the ocean is smooth and flat.

[*MAI BATARAKI* dance of the Dragon King]

WAKI
The priests hold torches aloft.

JIUTAI
The priests hold torches aloft.
Holding the sacred scythe,
They inch forward, clambering down over the wet rocks,
About thirty paces beyond the shoreline.
They cut the seaweed, then bring it back.
Suddenly the tide rushes in,
Its tempestuousness restored.
The waves become white again,
As if trying to soak even the heavens.
The clouds of sea-smoke blowing across the waves
Calm, and sink back into the ocean,
Calm, and sink back into the ocean.
The Dragon King leaps out of the sea,
Then dives back to his Palace.

Notes

1 Hare provides a detailed biography of Zeami's career (Hare 1986, pp. 11–38).
2 *Honji suijaku* is the Buddhist appropriation—perhaps colonisation is a more accurate term—of local deities by claiming them as expedient means of local traces of Buddhist Bodhisattvas rather than as independently local spiritual manifestations of place; see Rambelli (2001, p. 52 *ff*).
3 Though, as Hare writes, Yoshimitsu's infatuation with Zeami was mocked by some courtiers, it was not because of his homosexual nature but because of Zeami's low class status (Hare 1986, p. 16).
4 See, for example, the sexual consecration of feminised adolescent male acolytes (*chigo kanjō*) in Tendai Buddhist monasteries (Porath 2022) and popular narratives around this practice (*chigo monogatari*) (Schmidt-Hori 2021).
5 See my translation of *Mekari* in the Appendix A, which is its first English publication. The only previously published version in a European language is René Sieffert's French translation (Sieffert 1979, pp. 364–75).
6 For reference, a translation of *Mekari* by the author is included as Appendix A. A musical analysis was done based on the 21 December 2007 performance of *Mekari* at the National Noh Theatre in Tokyo starring Hōshō school *shite* Ōtsubo Kimio (Konparu 2007).
7 Like almost all mediaeval nō, attribution of authorship is uncertain and disputed. Of the three major scholars who have addressed the attribution of *Mekari*, Nishino Haruo accepts *Mekari* as definitely being by Zenchiku, Itō Masayoshi says it is possibly by Zenchiku, and Atkins does not include *Mekari* on the list of fifteen plays he accepts as being by Zenchiku but also states that his list is 'not intended to be exhaustive' (Atkins 2006, pp. 251–56).
8 This *kami* is also commonly referred to as Hoori (火折尊), including by Teeuwen in the chapter referenced. Zenchiku uses Hohodemi-no-mikoto, so for consisteny between this text and the translation in the Appendix A, I have followed Zenchiku's usage throughout.
9 It should be noted that this story is also retold in Zenchiku's late treatise *Meishukushū* (400). In keeping with that text's focus on an exegesis of Okina, this myth repeated there has some differences with the *Kojiki* version and the version referred to in *Mekari* (Nakazawa [2003] 2022, pp. 172–73).

[10] Zenchiku writes in his *Go-on sangyoku shū* (五音三曲集) that 'All actions should be executed in the interval [between beats].… The state when heaven and earth have not yet divided is the interval; the division is the beat' (Thornhill 1993, p. 46, n. 131)—yet another instance of Zenchiku valorising and sacralising that which is in-between.

[11] This translation has been principally prepared based on the Kanze school (観世流) version of the text edited by Kanze Motoshige (Konparu 1920) which does not include the *Ai Kyogen* interlude, with reference to Sanari Kentarō's 1931 edition (Sanari 1931) and René Sieffert's 1979 French translation (Sieffert 1979), both of which include the *Ai*.

[12] Bracketed all-caps italics indicate genre names of the individual musical–dramatic sections.

[13] The end of the 12th month refers to the lunar calendar, i.e., the eve of what is commonly called, in contemporary English, the Lunar New Year or Chinese New Year.

[14] *Mekari* literally means seaweed harvesting.

[15] The Hour of the Tiger is the last lunar hour before dawn and so begins around two hours before dawn, or around 5am in modern clock time.

[16] The Dragon King of the Sea.

[17] This refers to a famous *Kokinshū* poem, also anthologised as poem 15 in the *Ogura Hyakunin Isshū* (小倉百人一首) by Emperor Kōkō (光孝天皇) 830–887.

[18] This is a pun on the character '*haya*' in 'Hayatomo', which means quick.

[19] Watazumi is the *kami* of the ocean, a Japanese name for the Buddhist Ryūjin (via *honji suijaku* (本地垂迹), which is the mediaeval Japanese idea that *kami* were local manifestations of Buddhas).

[20] The unusual character *chiri* (塵) used here seems to be a reference to the Buddhist concept of *wakōdōjin* (和光同塵), meaning that an enlightened one (Bodhisattvas, or—via *honji suijaku*—*kami*) foregoes paradise in order to immerse themself in the mundane world for the purpose of saving all in the world.

[21] This is quotation from poem 46 of *Ogura Hyakunin Isshū* by Sone no Yoshitada (曽禰好忠) (dates unknown); it makes an analogy between the lack of control of a boat with the unpredictable course of love.

[22] *Ama* are female divers; the *mae-tsure* character (the manifestation of the *tsure* in the first act of the nō) is an *ama*.

[23] Taking the life of fish is considered a sin in Buddhism.

[24] This fire is used to attract certain species of fish at night. Metaphorically, this refers to the fires of hell which await those who take life for their own profit, such as fishers.

[25] *Jiutai* refers to the chorus.

[26] This is possibly a reference to the second poem of the *Man'yōshū* (万葉集; *c.* 760) by Emperor Jomei (舒明天皇) 593–641: lines 9–10 read 'The wide open ocean! Gulls are on the wing' *unabara ha/kamome tachitatsu*. Compare the first line of the Ageuta with the footnoted line *unabara ya/… kamome mo muretatsu*.

[27] These four lines are a complete quotation of a poem by Saionji Kintsune (入道前太政大臣) from the Shinchokusen Wakashū (新勅撰和歌集; complied in 1234). The word Moji, the name of the town across the Kanmon Strait from Hayatomo, can also be written with characters that mean 'written word'.

[28] Literally, 'I can understand this poem', meaning that the character, being across the strait (only a few hundred metres) from Moji, can feel the meaning of the poem more deeply.

[29] In other words, only here at Hayatomo during this lunar new year festival is the path between humans and gods and land and sea, which Princess Toyotama had closed, open.

[30] Via the metonym of sleeves floating in the air, this line implies an offering of a dance rather than sleeves themselves.

[31] I.e., the foam of the waves.

[32] I.e., the Sea Dragon God; i.e., the deep ocean.

[33] I.e., waves.

[34] *Mekari no go-shinji* (和布刈の御神事).

[35] *Ukami ide* (浮かみ出で) seems to imply becoming a Buddha, which is perhaps a reference to one of Zenchiku's favourite tropes, the Buddhahood of non-sentient beings, e.g., plants.

[36] Koyurugi, a town in modern-day Kanagawa on the coast south of Tokyo, is an *utamakura* (a place name which by convention is associated with a certain thing, action, or emotion) for *iso*, which is the area of the shore that is between the high- and low-tide points. These three lines were taken from an anonymous *waka*, *Kokin Wakashū* #1094 (古今和歌集; c. 920).

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