

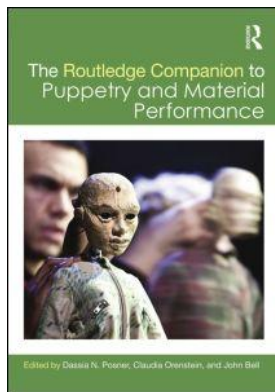
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## **The Routledge Companion to Puppetry and Material Performance**

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### **Puppet Think**

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## 15

## Puppet Think

The Implication of Japanese Ritual Puppetry for  
Thinking through Puppetry Performances*Jane Marie Law*

During the 1980s when I was conducting research on the history, demise, and revival of Awaji puppetry, one of my main contacts on the island of Awaji was an elderly woman who, after her husband was killed during World War II, worked part time as a puppeteer to make a little extra money. We spent a great deal of time together, and because my studies were focused on the issue of revival and on the loss of a context for a tradition that had once been very important in her life, we spent many hours talking about her experiences during the war. She was a follower of a new Japanese religion, Reiyūkai, and one of her core practices was reciting the title of the Mahayana Buddhist scripture, the *Lotus Sūtra*, on a daily basis after reading the names of people who had died on that particular date during the war. (Mahayana refers to the stage of Buddhism that spread to Japan from India via China.) One day, while I was staying at her house, we read a very long list of names of people killed when a passenger boat had been bombed (presumably by American bombers) and sunk. She was very moved remembering how she had heard of the event over the radio as a young woman during the war. We read the names and then she chanted the title of the *Lotus Sūtra*.

Reciting names of war dead and memorializing people one has never met is not a practice particularly unique to Japan. In Japan, though, it can have many layers of political meaning and can form a spectacle in its own right, as the war dead are manipulated for various political purposes. For my friend, it seems, she was always using this ritual to process a deep sense of loss that permeated her life. Over the years, as we met from time to time, she still maintained this Reiyūkai practice.

One day many years after my initial research was completed, I was back on Awaji, visiting. Everyone I knew was lamenting the fate of my elderly friend. Senility had crept in; she seemed to be in a perpetually muddled state, with no awareness of where she was or what year it was. Still very physically fit, she spent all of her time sewing – jackets, bags, trinkets – and in the end, as her ability to complete complex tasks failed her, she stitched at pieces of fabric, often creating seemingly nothing at all. All of her creations followed her around in a large duffel she carried with her.

On a particular (and for her a particularly lucid) day during my visit, she walked over to me, took hold of my hands, and made me form a cup with them. Into them, she poured literally dozens and dozens of tiny fabric pouches, each no larger than a thimble, and all carefully stitched to resemble a swaddled infant in its cradle. As they kept cascading out of the box she was pouring into my hands and fell onto the floor at my feet, I looked a bit surprised. She said to me, “All those names. Remember? All those names.” Together we remembered the day we had read all those names.

This experience touched me deeply. It is relevant here, not because there is anything terribly Japanese about it, but rather because it reveals precisely a certain ritual logic that will be the focus of this chapter: that to process loss, we often resort to the use of a ritual substitute to fill that void created by the very absence of what we need ritually present. We use these concrete objects to locate our overwhelming and possibly unimaginable emotional response to the loss itself. It is a fairly obvious point and is seen all over the world in ritual settings: the surrogate, the changeling, the effigy, the body substitute. What I’d like to suggest here is that, while this is not unique to Japan, the extent to which this kind of ritual logic had permeated Japanese social practices is remarkable. In this brief discussion, I’d like to reference several cases in which a ritual object is used to stand for a larger world of meaning that is lost or the loss of which is threatened. The list could be longer than the few cases I cite here, but my hope is that, for scholars and performers working with and thinking through the use of inanimate objects to create ritual or theatre, these cases will serve as reminders of one of the deepest uses of those things, which the Japanese language connotes as “in the shape of the human.” I suggest that behind the use of puppets in Japanese theatre, an elaborate and inconvenient theatre choice that fascinates us with its realism and complexity, we can glimpse a more profound, albeit obvious, ritual logic of the use of a human substitute.

### *Ningyō*

In Japanese, the general word for puppet (*ningyō*) is also the word for doll, and the two words, so distinct in English, are used interchangeably. Written with the two-character compound “in the shape of the human” or “person shape,” the word suggests that dolls and puppets fill a substitutive space in ritual. When this character compound is read another way, it is pronounced *hitogata*, and ritual objects by this name were used in ancient Japan as surrogates for people as they underwent rites of purification at particular times of the year. Heian period texts make passing reference to these *hitogata*, and even today, the practice of placing sticks on a fire at local shrines at the end of the year to symbolize the negative events of the previous year resonates with the practice of sending sticks vaguely in human shape down streams as a purification rite. All the cases I present here would be recognizable as a form of “*ningyō*” in Japan. While the concept of “doll” may be overly located in childhood in the West, our examples below suggest that the life cycle of people – from the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth to the travails of unwanted pregnancies (whether due to famine or simply bad timing in a woman’s life) to removing the emotional charge of negative events that happen to people – is

ritually worked out through mimetic action, and a *ningyō* in some form (from the crude to the very refined) serves this locative function.<sup>1</sup> The Japanese scholar Yamaguchi Masao (1991) has argued that Japanese people often negotiate the human–divine interrelationship through representational substitution (*migawari* in Japanese). In this way, he notes, rituals using effigies enable a transformative experience.

### *Amagatsu*

One human experience to which most people who have ever had a child can relate is the intense anxiety surrounding one's concern for the well-being of one's infant, especially during its most vulnerable neonatal days. New parents often confess, almost as if they are sure they are the only people in the history of the human race to have done so, that they have stood over the cribs of their sleeping infants listening for the reassuring sounds of the baby breathing.

In the Tōhoku region of Japan, there was a widespread practice during the 1800s of creating a surrogate baby out of fabric and stuffing and placing the object in a crib or bed where one would expect to find the infant. The *amagatsu* (heavenly child), as these figures were called, served as a stand-in for the actual baby. Should the age-old reapers of young infants – illness, sudden death, disaster – happen their way, those forces would be confused, distracted, and perhaps even fooled.



*Figure 15.1* A rare example of a body substitute known as an *amagatsu* (heavenly child): these infant-shaped effigies were used widely in the Tōhoku region of Japan to safeguard newborn infants against illness, sudden death, and disease by serving as surrogates (from Morioka, Iwate prefecture, 1988). Photo courtesy of the author

It is always tempting when one looks at the magical rites of other people to assume, “How quaint that they actually believed all that stuff!” – that a parent in rural Japan, in a region beset with famines, poverty, and disease in the nineteenth century, would believe they could save their baby from an unfortunate fate by using a naïve surrogate object to ward off evil! The very idea seems primitive, prescientific, an example of “the savage mind.” But if we shift our gaze in this case just a few degrees to the side and choose to look at it not in the harsh light of literalism (i.e., “I do this and therefore must take it at face value”) but rather in the realm of the poetry of ritual action, we discern another insight here: the *amagatsu* does not so much protect the baby from evil forces but rather locates the parents’ overwhelming anxiety in a secure place so that life can go on and, in the end, perhaps the baby can get more of the attention that would otherwise be squandered on futile worry. In a region where infant death from natural and even unnatural causes sat comfortably between the extremes of the exception and the rule, it is not hard to imagine the anxiety of a parent over the well-being of a tiny infant. But it is hard to imagine a worse fate than uncontrollable anxiety when it comes to such a profound human experience. The *amagatsu*, then, is best understood as a ritual place where unimaginable worry can be contained.

I was shown an *amagatsu* by an elderly woman who was the maid in an inn where I once stayed in the city of Morioka, the capital of Iwate Prefecture, during the late 1980s. I had told her I was studying *ningyō*, and from our conversation, it was clear I was talking about the manipulated kind (puppets). But from this term *ningyō* she felt the need to tell me about the *amagatsu* she owned. It was rare, she noted, because few of them still existed. In fact, the lack of physical evidence of this practice is confusing. On the one hand, we might ask, if this practice was so prevalent, why did so few of these objects survive? One obvious answer is that they were fragile, cheap objects. But perhaps another way of seeing this would be to suggest that once a ritual object has done its job (the baby either lived or died, grew up or didn’t, and the parents either coped or did not), the object has served its purpose and is no longer important. Having it around is a stark reminder of a more anxious time.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps this is the task of ritual: to allow in a mimetic space the resolution of deeply tangled emotions, often contradictory and too difficult to process in the normal spaces of human life. This is what ritual affords: a certain suspension of the laws of the human condition and an extraordinary space where the impossible (absolution, resignation, acceptance) can happen.

An *amagatsu*, then, is an example of a ritual body substitute designed to process the overwhelming anxiety of threatened loss. Now we turn to another example of a ritual object, also connected with childbirth but in a starkly opposite way.

### *Kokeshi*

Also from the Tōhoku region, we have the example of cylindrical objects made of wood, often painted to look like young maidens or simple, almost amorphous beings. These objects have been called *kokeshi*, with the word written in phonetic script, leaving us to conjecture as to the original meaning of the name. The most probable answer is that the name is made up of two words, *ko*, meaning “child,” and *kesu*, meaning “erase.” In an area where droughts and famines were almost normative,

the practice of infanticide was a common form of family-size regulation during the Tokugawa period, when this area was under continued but direct feudal control, and peasants and farmers were often the most vulnerable population, unable to accommodate growing families. The hard choice of either “erasing” a child at birth or watching that young child slowly starve to death at a later age was not an uncommon dilemma. The human question this kind of ongoing poverty raises in our minds is this: how do people ritually cope with that kind of Hobson’s choice?

A survey of *kokeshi* in museums and older collections (and the occasional flea market, if one is lucky) reveals minimalist, crudely painted objects constructed out of cheap materials – often no more than two eyes on a simple wooden body with little or no neck. While it is likely these objects served different roles for different families and women, here again we see the ritual necessity of attendance by the most absent being, accomplished through a body substitute. In other words, a simple, easily made item became a substitute for a child who never really grew up to see the hardship of peasant life.

Today, if one travels in Tohoku, noted regional folk artists sell elaborately painted *kokeshi* to collectors and tourists – Japanese and foreign alike. The decorative painting of *kokeshi* is a recent phenomenon, dating largely from the postwar era. Before these objects were discovered as souvenir kitsch, we can think of them as functioning as a folk version of the more stylized form seen in the *mizuko Jizo*, discussed next. Clearly, the use of *kokeshi* as ritual substitutes was not as processed and commercialized as the later *mizuko Jizo*, but their current popularity and even iconic status as a “Japanese doll” belies their origins in a much more somber emotional landscape.

### *Mizuko Jizō*

Another significant and oft-seen practice using physical objects “in the shape of the human” to locate grief and process loss is the *mizuko Jizō*, literally “water child” statues of the *bodhisattva* Jizō (Skt: Ksitigarbha). A *bodhisattva* is a figure in Mahayana Buddhism who, having started as a human being and achieved enlightenment in some lifetime in the past, vows to continue to incarnate in the world of sentient beings until all beings have achieved liberation from suffering. Mahayana Buddhism has a retinue of *bodhisattvas* who, through coursing through so many lifetimes, have achieved spiritual superpowers. Among these well-known *bodhisattvas* is the figure Jizō. Jizō is best known in Japanese popular Buddhist practice as the *bodhisattva* who shows his enlightened activity by tending to those who have fallen into hell.<sup>3</sup> According to a most disturbing (but only marginally adhered to) Buddhist idea, all children who die before the age of seven years old go to hell because of the suffering they cause their parents. The widespread application of this idea is that Jizō is always present in hell, helping those poor souls who, through no power of their own, have ended up there. Depictions of Jizō in ritual-specific sculptural form show him as gender-ambiguous, prepubescent, and amorphous, in spite of the highly developed Buddhist iconographic system of which Buddhist sculpture is a major part. What is the ritual use, then, of these small statues of Jizō?

In the postwar era and up through the present day, birth-control services and effective sex education have not been widely available in Japan (though since the 1970s this situation has improved immensely). As a result, abortion, rather than being a last resort, was for many women (married and unmarried alike) a first-line form of birth control. The ritual processing of the difficult emotions involved in aborting a fetus are widely developed (and, some would argue, heavily exploited for financial gain) by some Buddhist temples in Japan. The ritual process is somewhat straightforward: a woman (sometimes accompanied by a male partner) comes to a temple offering *mizuko kuyō* (appeasement) services – rituals for the appeasement and consolation of the aborted or miscarried fetus or stillborn child. She pays a fee (ranging in price, but usually beginning at around 50,000 yen, or about US\$500, but often more) and purchases a small (or not so small) statue of the *bodhisattva* Jizō. A service is conducted (often in a group format) for the child who, represented by the small statue, is understood to have been “sent back.” In some venues, the woman has the option of writing a wooden placard (*ema*) with a message to the fetus or child. These placards are hung at a public place in the shrine, understood to be messages sent to the other side. The ritual object, the Jizō statue, is often dressed in a child’s clothes, given a bib (a common marker of Jizō) and small toys, and placed in the temple grounds amidst thousands and thousands of identical, though individually clad, statues of varying sizes.<sup>4</sup>

There are numerous sites in Japan offering such services, and until recently, many were simply open to the public and one could stroll through the grounds. An astounding feature of the most prominent *mizuko Jizō* site in Japan, Hasedera Kannon in Kamakura, is the sheer volume of the small Jizō statues one encounters in the hills of the site. The vast majority of them show the signs of being forgotten markers of a past agony: the tiny bibs, perhaps once lovingly placed on the tiny Jizō figures, or the toys placed at the feet of the offering, are faded and dilapidated. The state of affairs seems to suggest that, while these objects were once emotionally charged, they have done their work and are now taking up space on the ritual landscape, a testament to a past grief long since overcome or forgotten. Life moves on. The little stone statues don’t.

### *Imon ningyō/migawari ningyō*

The final example we briefly consider constitutes one of our most fragile cases, precisely because so few of these objects survived their ritual location – the small homemade dolls made by women or schoolgirls for Japanese soldiers during World War II. Referred to as *imon ningyō*, companion or safeguarding dolls, or *migawari ningyō*, substitute dolls, the dolls were meant to represent the portability of the feminine, the loving, the domestic, and the home – all those things left behind but ultimately longed for – onto the battlefield or into the air in a kamikaze plane.

We have the excellent work of the American anthropologist and *ningyō* scholar Ellen Schattschneider to thank for bringing the existence of these dolls to light.<sup>5</sup> Through her careful reading of popular literature, poetry, diaries, letters, and magazines from the World War II era and her search for extant objects that survived the

war, she has re-created for us a vivid picture of the role (real or hoped for) these dolls played in connecting the soldiers on the battlefield with the domestic location back home from which they were separated. Her work raises the awful enigma of objects so tender and feminine and very Japanese being on the battlefield in the presence of horrific atrocities committed by some of those very soldiers carrying these dolls. What did their presence on the battlefields in China, Burma, and elsewhere, as well as in the cockpits of kamikaze pilots' planes, signify? Our concern here is with the use of ritual effigies to stand in for loss – anticipated, actual, or imagined. Schattschneider's work suggests that these *imon ningyō* allowed a surrogate replacement for the kinship that was being lost when a young man went to war. She asks:

... what roles did they play in helping to constitute fictive kinship relations among imperial soldiers, Japanese civilians, and colonial subjects and in legitimating the often-violent severing of those putative bonds? And how, ultimately, did those dolls come to play such significant roles in the memorialization of dead soldiers and in managing social and spiritual relations with those destined for death?

(Schattschneider 2005: 330)

The objects were often very simple, made of fabric and frequently dressed in tiny kimonos or other clothing. Family members made them for husbands, fathers, or siblings serving in the war and also for anonymous recipients. The making of these dolls for soldiers was a common task for girls to “support their troops” during the war, and the gifting of these dolls to soldiers, sometimes with the giver's name included and sometimes not, formed a link not only with the Japanese practices of employing dolls in a mimetic fashion, as we have noted above in other cases, but also between the giver and the soldier.

Schattschneider surmises that the total number of these dolls made may have been in the hundreds of thousands, perhaps even millions. Her discussion indicates that in many of the popular depictions of the dolls in magazines on the home front during the war, they are often shown as being gifted to Chinese children or young girls. She suggests that part of the role of the narrative of these dolls was to rewrite the history of what was actually happening to local populations under Japanese occupation or attack. They also served as a kind of *o-mamori*, or protective amulet.

Almost always depicting the female form, Schattschneider points out that these *imon ningyō*:

... were especially appropriate gifts for male soldiers, who had been separated from the domestic realm and from civilian mainstream society ... and placed into a violent, nearly exclusively male world. The dolls carried multiple messages, marking the male recipient's separation from normal sociability, while also asserting an enduring link, however tenuous, between the “home” world of women and the distant male soldiers on the empire's peripheries.

(Schattschneider 2005: 334)



In spite of their complex multivalence in the history of the war, the very existence of these *imon ningyō* in comfort bags routinely given to soldiers suggests a very Japanese obsession with concretizing a complex sense of loss in a simple object. These simple dolls had a huge job to do – restoring the domestic, humanizing the giver and receiver, intruding into (and therefore transforming) a dominantly masculine and martial landscape with the tender presence of the feminine, and, in the end, through their depiction in the media, helping to anesthetize the population back home to the horrors being conducted by the military abroad.

### Conclusion

In the examples above, selected as representations of a much larger cultural dynamic of substitutive representation of many aspects of human existence, I have tried to show how the use of dolls, effigies, and ritual *migawari* in Japan form a strong cultural undercurrent that informs Japanese puppetry. I suggest that it is possible to regard the prevalence of puppets in Japanese theatre as a logical extension of this decidedly ritual and religious sensibility.

As a scholar of Japanese ritual puppetry, I am often asked to comment on the profound influence that the three-person manipulation method we now know as *bunraku* has had on global theatre. As Japan's most ubiquitous puppetry image, it, of course, merits attention. However, the enormous popularity and deep appeal in puppetry circles of this manipulation method – lifelike dolls, manipulated seemingly effortlessly (and very realistically) by up to three puppeteers, who are often clad in *kuroko* (black robes and hoods) – is so pervasive that it has eclipsed anything else we might want to ask about Japanese ritual and theatrical sensibilities. I often feel a bit stifled by this fascination with Japan's most obvious theatrical medium. Use a black hood for a puppeteer or employ more than one puppeteer to manipulate a puppet, and one is immediately referencing a Japanese theatrical trope. And I am not suggesting it is without great effect. Peter Schumann has used *kuroko*-clad figures in his puppetry performances, and Basil Twist has redesigned the method of manipulating a doll with multiple puppeteers in a new and innovative way, also using other dimensions of Japanese puppetry in his work. Nothing about these artists could be called derivative.

But I would argue that, in some cases, the obvious fascination with the *bunraku* methods and styles often not only conceals what is perhaps most fascinating and fruitful about Japanese ritual materials, it can, if not fully appropriated by the artist stealing it (for as we have been reminded – and I paraphrase – bad artists borrow, good artists steal), border on being an orientalist icon for appropriating Japanese theatrical forms without fully engaging the ritual sensibilities that undergird these very forms.

Nevertheless, I would hope that in the case of Japanese puppetry, we can agree to something of a declaration of independence from this normal coupling of the words “Japanese puppet” and “*kuroko*.” There is a deeper tradition behind these stylized dolls, one that embraces what puppetry does best – allows a space set apart from the real to explore that which is most disturbing, or overwhelmingly sublime, in human experience.



Figure 15.2 Members of the Awaji Puppet Theatre in Fukura, Japan, perform the *Ebisu-mai* (a deity play) at its traditional location of Susaki Island in the Fukura Harbor (August 1991). The use of *kuroko*, though not traditional for this play, shows the dominance of this theatrical medium today. Photo courtesy of the author

If, in the end, ritual substitutes and locations for complex emotional pain and loss in the form of puppets serve their purpose and then are discarded or lost, it behooves us when we see other such objects on the stage, perhaps in the form of a lovely *bunraku* doll, real and lifelike – and lovingly brought to life by three people – to remember the siblings to these theatrical forms, those very ritual objects used at times in the past to confront our deepest anxieties and suffering. It is often noted that the puppet stage was where the most gory and often violent and disturbing plays of the early modern period in Japanese theatre found their place.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, it is tempting to accuse puppetry of being a sensational, even debauched medium. But perhaps there is another insight here: perhaps the emergent classical puppet theatre in Japan, drawing as it did on the ritual use of the effigies we have discussed here, recognized the ability of puppets to carry this ritual and cathartic load. And if, for a minute, we open that door, a new level of vulnerability in our experience of the possibilities for puppetry may be attainable. From there, anything could happen.

## Notes

1 I discuss these cases in more detail in my book *Puppets of Nostalgia: The Life, Death and Rebirth of the Japanese Awaji Ningyō Tradition* (1997). Readers of Japanese will find a more detailed description of *hitogata* in the work of Nagata Kōkichi (1978).

- 2 A more detailed study of *amagatsu* is not possible. Not only are the extant objects rare, but due to the perceived “superstitious” nature of their use, in the Taishō and early Shōwa periods (i.e., the early twentieth century), when folklorists in Japan combed the countryside for examples of practices from everyday life, many of those practices that smacked of anti-modernism were intentionally neglected. *Amagatsu* dolls join a long list of many objects and practices in Japan that were thus neglected and, hence, appear to us in evidence only as fragmented examples, as the one *amagatsu* I was shown certainly was.
- 3 Fortunately for English readers, Yoshiko Kurata Dykstra (1978) has translated some of the miracle tales connected with Jizō into English.
- 4 Two excellent works by historians of religions offer differing and detailed ethnographic understandings of this ritual practice: William R. Lafleur’s book *Liquid Life: Abortion and Buddhism in Japan* (1994) presents the history of infanticide in Japan and places the practice of *mizuko kuyō* within this history, while Helen Hardacre’s *Marketing the Menacing Fetus in Japan* (1998) explores the ways in which this ritual practice is implicated in attempts to control women’s access to control of their own reproduction through manipulation of feelings of guilt and fear of retaliation from aborted fetuses. The practice *mizuko kuyō* is well described in ethnographic literature and in Japanese anthropology and religious studies.
- 5 See her detailed article “The Bloodstained Doll: Violence and the Gift in Wartime Japan” (Schattschneider 2005). She also writes about another use of effigy in her article “‘Buy Me a Bride’: Death and Exchange in Northern Japanese Bride Doll Marriage” (Schattschneider 2001).
- 6 In this vein, see the recent (2012) translation by R. Keller Kimbrough of Japanese puppet plays based on Buddhist tales. Kimbrough’s introduction notes how many of the plays deal with the extremes of human behavior, from torture, human trafficking, and stylized child sexuality to idealized examples of devotion, compassion, and filial piety.

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