

The Face of Noh (Part 1)

By Kongo Hisanori

In the world of noh the item that actors cherish most highly is the mask, known as the *omote*. Noh masks are not esteemed simply because they are valuable art treasures from antiquity, but rather are prized as the most authentic symbols of the art's spirit. The types of masks currently in use include those used in *sarugaku* and *dengaku*, before noh matured in the middle ages, and others that made their appearance as the performing art was taking its final form. It was the mask that greatly influenced the determination of noh's artistic character over time.

Masks passed on from generation to generation and owned by the main noh schools are referred to as *honmen*. Families prize these masks more than their own lives with the understanding that they must bequeath them to their own descendants. It is exactly due to this awareness that *honmen* have been handed down to the present for more than 600 years, surmounting numerous calamities.

While the innate sense that the noh mask is a co-actor that assists in the execution of the drama is nurtured in actors, at the same time the mask exists as a kind of instructor, teaching us how to perform. Moreover, the more excellently crafted, the more superior skill and spiritual strength the actor requires to bring a performance to life, so an excellent mask exists as a sort of rival to the actor.

When the noh actor "covers his face" (putting on the mask is referred to as "covering the face") before going on stage, he customarily takes the mask in both hands, raises it high, and bows to request a good performance together on stage. In this fashion it is often said that the noh mask, which forms a continuous whole with the actor on stage, is alive. When looking at the lifeless expressions of masks that are simply displayed in art museums and are no longer in use, it leads me to believe that a noh mask really does absorb the spirit

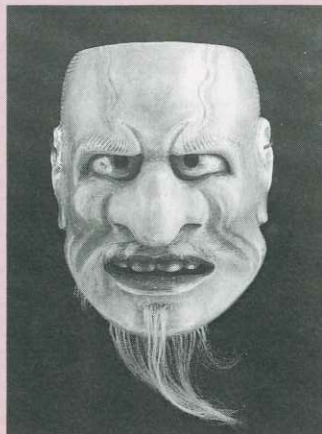
of the actor during performances, giving the mask a life of its own.

There is a story involving Nomura Manzo, the former living national treasure in the field of *kyogen* who created wonderful *kyogen* performances with noh masks. He thought that a mask used by a certain noh troupe was so splendid that he tried to borrow it to make a facsimile, upon which he was surprised to learn it was actually one

of his own works. When I heard this story it dawned on me that there actually were instances in which the noh mask acquired a life force from the performing actors, maturing to the extent that even the person who made it did not recognize it. To the noh actor the true mask, after all, is the one that seems vital and alive on stage.

When I was a small child I would often go into the household storehouse and have fun taking noh masks out to look at them. Looking at the reverse side, it seemed as though something similar to the spirits of the actors who had assiduously performed with them on stage had naturally become engraved in the masks. Noh techniques are also handed down from generation to generation, but I think it can be said that the spirit of the noh family is transmitted through the masks.

In my family it has long been customary for wives to keep a beautiful female noh mask close at hand and constantly look at it when pregnant. In the world at large it is customary for pregnant women to be forbidden to view unsightly objects and to the extent possible have them look at beautiful things. It could also be said that viewing a noh mask is a wish to absorb the serenity, purity, and beauty of the mask and to



Aku-jo by Haruwaka

link a deep affinity with noh to the child from the time it was in the womb, thereby transmitting the spirit of the art through the mask.

The message of the mask

The first time a noh actor puts on a mask and appears on stage is referred to as the "mask-donning ceremony" (*omen-kake no shiki*). This is comparable to today's Coming of Age ceremony

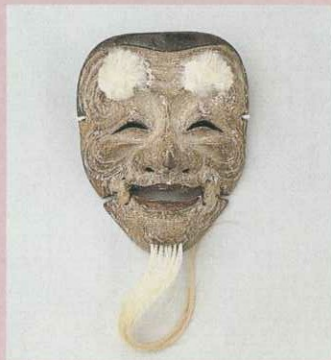
and is conducted at around the age of the old-style rites that marked the attainment of manhood (age 15 or 16). Until that age, young men perform without a mask even if a role calls for one to be used. This distinctive type of performance is specifically referred to as *hitamen*, meaning that one's own face is used in place of the mask. The conventional actor performs without, to the extent possible, changing the expression on his face. In this respect it is the diametric opposite of a similarly ancient Japanese performing art, *kabuki*, in which an extremely exaggerated facial expression is employed.

My mask-donning ceremony was at age 16 in a performance of *Okina* (*The Old Man*). From ancient times *Okina* has been described as extremely distinct, "noh, but unlike noh." Rather than theater it is similar to a religious ritual and the actor purifies himself in order to take on this role. The *okina* (*Hakushiki-jo*) and *sanbaso* (*Kokushiki-jo*) masks are used here. These were not originally noh masks, but were employed as the faces of objects that were worshiped at shrines. It was said that the power of these sacred masks transformed actors into gods and that the performance of these roles could then confer happiness upon people. *Okina*, the old man in

white, is the lead role and prays for peace in Japan and tranquillity in the nation, that is, for peace in society, while sanbaso, the old man in black, dances in order to request an abundant harvest. Because they are also aged gods they were said to confer long life on people.

The aspect of the okina mask is that of a broadly smiling face, inducing a feeling of serene happiness in onlookers. Even today in some districts it is customary for the audience to toss monetary offerings when the actor wearing this mask appears on stage, enabling a sense of how piety of spirit has continuously been passed down through the ages among Japanese.

Another special characteristic of the okina mask is a unique construction in which the chin is detached and dangles by a string. There are no other noh masks that have this feature and due to this difference in form it has been said that the okina mask is from a more



Okina (Hakushiki-jo) by Nikko



Sanbaso (Kokushiki-jo) by Nikko

ancient period than other noh masks.

The Hakushiki-jo and Kokushiki-jo masks were created well before Zeami popularized noh, but are still used on stage today. There are approximately 100 varieties of masks that are used in today's noh performances and many different masks are employed for the role of the old man. Here I would like to introduce three typical old man masks besides the okina—the Koushi-jo, Sanko-jo, and Aku-jo. (The word *jo*, used in the names of all of the old man masks, was originally the name of a type of government official's rank and it is said that because people were already aged by the time they achieved this rank the word came to signify an old man.)

The Koushi-jo mask was created by Kogyu Kiyomitsu, a mask artisan from the early Muromachi period, and is mainly used for high status roles such as characters embodying gods or Chinese (foreigners). The Sanko-jo mask was created by a priest named Sanko-Bo in the middle Muromachi era and is used for old man roles depicting fishermen, salt makers, or other ordinary laborers. As I mentioned in the last issue, noh had been a form of character portrayal (*monomane*) until that time. Advancing to a higher level through a process of abstractionism, it did not favor realistic expression and as such the very abstract Koushi-jo is considered to be of a higher degree of quality than the Sanko-jo, which faithfully copies the wrinkles and other features of an old man's face.

Remembering the special relationship between the actor and mask, it is not surprising to learn that mysterious tales are connected to many masks. For example, there is a legend connected with the Sanko-jo mask. As can be seen by looking at the photo, the mask is spotted with surface stains from wood resins and, as if foretelling the future, the number of stains increase and become darker in color before a calamity befalls the Kongo family. From long ago, this mask has been known by the nickname "Stained Sanko."

The Aku-jo mask has a very fearsome expression, but the mask's name does not denote an evil old man. In the mid-



Koushi-jo by Kogyu



Sanko-jo (Stained Sanko) by Sanko-bo

dle ages the word *aku* (which today means evil) signified the words strong or frightening so the name Aku-jo referred to a powerful old man. The mask is suitable for roles such as the old dragon king or aged *tengu* (long-nosed goblin) and is also used for roles that represent the exotic facial expressions and appearance of other countries' gods. It is surely a wonderful thing that in *nohgaku*, Japan's unique and ancient traditional performing art, this type of mask, offering a sense of the locus of the East-West cross-cultural exchanges of those far-off times, also permits those of us who live in today's age to cast our thoughts all the way back to the people of the far-away countries along the ageless Silk Road.

(Third in a six-part series.)

Kongo Hisanori, a famous noh performer, is head of the Kongo School. In 1991 he was designated as an important intangible cultural asset.