

“Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy”: Exposing the Wounds Inflicted by Ranking People in Higher and Lesser Beings

Reflections after seeing *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy* on 20th April 2006 at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka

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Bunraku, or Japanese puppet theatre, is probably the most developed form of puppetry in the world and recognised by UNESCO (please learn more about Bunraku at <http://www.bunraku.or.jp/ebunraku/index.html>). I saw *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy* on 20th April 2006 at the National Bunraku Theatre in Osaka.

The Bunraku narrators convey emotions in ways that are unparalleled and profoundly educational from the point of view of psychological inquiry: “evil laugh,” deep sorrow and despair are performed in intensely touching ways. One narrator was 81 years old, a “living cultural heritage.”

The epic *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy* has the following historic context: “Sugawara no Michizane (known in this play as Kanshojo) was a high-ranking imperial court minister who was a brilliant calligrapher and scholar. But political rivalries forced him to be exiled to distant Kyushu, where he died. After Michizane’s death, a series of disasters in the imperial capital were attributed to his angry spirit and he was appeased by being made a god known as Tenjin, and he is now revered as the god of learning. His story was dramatized as an epic puppet drama in 1746 and the play remains a favorite in both kabuki and the Bunraku puppet theatre” (quoted from <http://www.eg-gm.jp/eg/>, please read the entire story in the Appendix further down).

The two dilemmas

Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy is a deeply touching epic story of tragic moral dilemmas. Honour, loyalty, and humiliation are central themes, and redemption is sought through ritual suicide and sacrifice of one's own children. At the core of the epic we find two incompatible loyalties: The samurai Matsuo has as his first duty to be loyal to his lord (and as a Samurai, this loyalty ought to override all other loyalties). However, there are others loyalties to take into account as well. Matsuo and his brother’s were helped to become Samurai in the first place by another lord. The problem is that Matsuo’s current master is an evil person who is intent on destroying his rival, Matsuo’s original benefactor.

In other words, on one side there is an institutionalised duty to be loyal (in the hierarchical feudal society of Japan’s past) that is pitted against a more general human duty to reciprocate with thankfulness for being helped.

This dilemma is not unique to Japan

This dilemma is, however, not unique to Japan. The German SS officers under Hitler learned that humiliating “Untermenschen” was an honourable and noble duty. *Meine Ehre heißt Treue* or “my honour is loyalty” was the German motto, loyalty to the “Führer’s” vision of a world of Aryan “Übermenschen.” Young German soldiers in Falstad, together with millions of Germans, were imbued with the ideology that pushing and holding down those who “belonged” below was their honourable obligation. An officer who disobeyed this mandate would not only risk losing his life, he would be risking the loss of his honour. Obedience to the Führer’s will was his supreme honourable duty, not merely for the sake of his immediate superordinates or political leaders, but for the sake of the entire German people, even (in his mind) of the global order as a whole. The Aryan race was the saviour of the world and young German soldiers learned that it was their highest duty to safeguard Aryan superiority and secure a bright future for the entire globe.

Knut Gjørtz, a former Falstad prisoner whom I met in October, 2002 (Falstad was a German detention camp for political prisoners in occupied Norway during World War II), told about stumbling early one morning over a very young German soldier in the basement of the Falstad building. The German, who could not have been more than 19 years old, was crying, shaking his head, and repeating “We are all crazy! We are all crazy!” When the soldier saw the Norwegian prisoner, he put his forefinger to his lips to indicate that he should not tell anyone what he saw. The next day, the same young German was back to beating prisoners just as his comrades did.

This young soldier clearly was trapped in a world in which it was legitimate to divide humans in higher and lesser beings. Internally, he suffered conflict over this external legitimacy, but he was not courageous enough to step out and oppose it. He felt obliged to abide by the rules of the honour system. During the day this young man did his “noble” duty to humiliate prisoners – but at night he decried his own deeds.

Tatort (“*Crime Scene*”) is a German crime series shown every Sunday night on the first channel of German public television since 1970. It is the flagship of German tv-police thrillers that, similar to *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy*, exposes moral dilemmas. (*Derrick* was the equivalent series on the second channel of German television until it ended in 1998.) Modern American tv-police thrillers depict the “good” and the “bad” and how a “saviour” hunts down “evil.” The saviour’s heroism is expressed through “action” (cars crashing, guns firing, “enemy” bodies disintegrating) and this is what is meant to attract the viewers’ interest. Earlier, it was the intellectual challenge that was at the core of similar thrillers. Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, or Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes outwit the “villain.” In Agatha Christie or Arthur Conan Doyle, the villain is often (not always) presented as a “given entity;” “evil” is regarded as a kind of natural phenomenon that occurs without having to be explained further. In *Tatort* and *Derrick*, in contrast, the villain’s background, and why he or she became a villain, is the core question. In most cases, the villain is shown to be “good,” not a priori “evil,” but as having been led into “evil deeds” by a moral dilemma. Presumably, Germany history informs this particular approach to police thrillers. Like in *Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy* the core of the story that is meant to touch the viewer, is the emotional torment caused by moral dilemma.

The list of similar present-time moral dilemmas in the world is long. Is female genital cutting a culturally legitimised duty in certain cultural contexts, or a violation? Is torture a duty or a violation when a terror attack could be averted (the “ticking-bomb” argument)? The list is long. Until 1991, I worked as a clinical psychologist (in the Middle East 1984-1991, among others), and was confronted with many complicated cases, including what is called honour killings. Imagine, a mother approaches you and explains that her daughter was raped and has to be killed to prevent family honour from being humiliated since the rapist will not marry her. As a human rights defender, you stipulate that marrying a raped girl off to her rapist, let alone killing the girl, is equivalent to compounding humiliation, not remedying it. The mother, in turn, regards your attitude as condescending, as humiliating her cultural beliefs. In sum, you face several layers of honour, dignity and humiliation. What position do you take? Whose honour or dignity do you protect? And which arguments do you use?

How the dilemma can be solved

In the case of Matsuo, he attempts to remedy the dilemma in two ways. First, he asks his father to disinherit him, because not honouring the benefactor of the family would be “unfilial” and by being disinherited, he would be “free” to serve his evil lord, which is his primary duty. Second, he sacrifices his son. When Matsuo’s evil lord sends Matsuo out to kill even the eight years old son of his rival, Matsuo manipulates the situation in a way that his own son dies in the place of his benefactor’s son. The sorrow and despair of the aggrieved parents at the loss of their son, a loss they volunteered in order to fulfil their human obligation to their benefactor, is deeply touching.

In present times, we have another solution: human rights. Human rights bestow equal dignity on all human beings. Nobody is anymore obliged to obey lords and be led into moral dilemmas by evil masters. Today, Matsuo’s evil master is expected to face persecution and his servant would not have to sacrifice the life of his own child. Human rights give priority to humanity and now longer to obedience within a ranked society of *higher* and *lesser* beings. Within a human rights context, all are equally bound by general human loyalties, such as gratitude for being helped.

Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy brilliantly illustrates the mutilating effects of the old hierarchical order that was not only prevalent in Japan but in many world regions. The practice of some people (elites) turning others into tools (servants, underlings) entails the danger that the underlings’ humanity is taken away from them. They are no longer allowed to be full human beings but are used as instruments in the hands of masters who might be benevolent, at best, but what if not. The underlings are being maimed psychologically and socially by being deprived of their full humanity.

Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy exposes the wounds from hierarchical social set-ups in a deeply touching way and promotes the human rights promise that inflicting and suffering such wounds, on the parts of masters and underlings respectively, is no longer necessary and legitimate.

Appendix

Sugawara and the Secrets of Calligraphy

(quoted from http://www.eg-gm.jp/eg/e_joho/e_kb_dic/bun_eep.htm#nationalB4)

Sugawara no Michizane (known in this play as Kanshojo) was a high-ranking imperial court minister who was a brilliant calligrapher and scholar. But political rivalries forced him to be exiled to distant Kyushu, where he died. After Michizane's death, a series of disasters in the imperial capital were attributed to his angry spirit and he was appeased by being made a god known as Tenjin, and he is now revered as the god of learning. His story was dramatized as an epic puppet drama in 1746 and the play remains a favorite in both kabuki and the Bunraku puppet theatre.

Kuruma Biki no Dan (The Tug-of-War Over the Carriage)

There are three brothers serving three masters. Umeomaru serves Kanshojo. Sakuramaru serves emperor's brother Tokiyo. Kanshojo has been sent into exile and Tokiyo is in disgrace. Umeomaru and Sakuramaru lament the disaster that has overtaken their masters. But they hear that the carriage of Fujiwara Shihei is coming. Shihei is the villain that has sent Kanshojo into exile. But when the two brothers confront the carriage, they are stopped by their brother Matsuomaru, who serves Shihei. Nonetheless, they attack the carriage and are driven back by the magical powers of Shihei. The three brothers agree to meet again at the seventieth birthday of their father, Shiratayu.

Satamura Chasenzake no Dan (The Birthday Celebration)

Shiratayu has long served Kanshojo and when he had three sons, he named them after the favorite trees in his garden, the pine, the plum and the cherry and had them all take service with important court nobles. However, the three lords of his sons have all been torn to separate sides. Today is Shiratayu's birthday and all three sons are to come. Chiyo, Matsuomaru's wife, Haru, Umeomaru's wife and Yae all prepare festive food for the happy event. Since the brothers haven't arrived yet, Shiratayu goes away with Yae to a shrine to pray.

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Kenka no Dan (The Fight)

Matsuomaru and Umeomaru appear and immediately start wrestling with each other, almost like mischievous children. They accidentally break the branches of the cherry tree, an omen prefiguring the tragic conclusion of this act.

Sakuramaru Seppuku no Dan (Sakuramaru's Suicide)

Sakuramaru commits ritual suicide to atone for being responsible for Kanshojo's exile.

Terairi no Dan (The New Student)

Genzo and his wife Tonami run a small school and are protecting Kanshojo's son and heir, saying that he is their son. However, word has gotten out Kanshojo's son is there and Genzo has been ordered to behead him. Moreover, Matsuomaru is to come to inspect the head. Their only alternative is to kill one of the other students as a substitute, but all of the students are farmer's children who could never pass for the son of a court aristocrat. However, a new boy arrives that day and Genzo makes the terrible decision to kill him in the place of his lord.

Terakoya no Dan (The Village School)

As it turns out, Matsuomaru has sent his own son to be sacrificed, because of his family's long loyalty to Kanshojo. But he must face the most terrible situation for a father, inspecting the head of his own son and lying when he says that it is the genuine head of the son of Kanshojo. Finally Matsuomaru reveals his true feelings to Genzo and he and his wife Chiyo mourn their dead son.