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The History of Japanese Civilization through Aesthetic Pursuit

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The History of Japanese Civilization through Aesthetic Pursuits

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PREFACE

Umesao Tadao stipulates "civilization" to be "a system of human beings and the devices they create." "Device" here means institutions, systems, facilities, and equipment, that is, "everything tangible or intangible, which human beings create and with which they surround themselves." Umesao further suggests that "human beings exist in a system constituted by the interrelationship of people and devices." It is thus essential to "understand the totality of human life as a single system" [UMESAO 1981]. My task in this paper is the application of this proposition.

The performing arts is an area in which I have a deep and continuing interest, and in this paper I shall examine it as "a system formed by the interrelationship of human beings and their devices." This is intended as an attempt to explore the history of the performing arts in the context of the history of civilization.

1. "CULTURE CENTERS"

(1) The Phenomenon of "Culture Centers"

One of the prominent social phenomena of contemporary Japan is the mushrooming of what are called "culture centers (*karuchā sentā*).” In Japan it is a matter of common knowledge that the past ten years have seen a swift diffusion of culture centers in urban areas throughout the nation.

What is meant here by "culture center" is any enterprise which offers a combination of both cultural and educational courses. Each center has its own name, and at present there is no comprehensive name for these enterprises. Journalism sometimes uses the unfamiliar term "cultural industries (*bunka sangyō*).”

There is an interesting tendency for most of these centers to be run by newspaper and broadcasting companies, enterprises already handling information as a commodity. Behind this trend lie complicated circumstances within the enterprises, the examination of which would provide fascinating work in itself. I will limit myself, however, to pointing out the fact, as my central concern is elsewhere.

Calling these culture centers "industries" is quite appropriate, since the majority are indeed housed in very large-scale facilities. The largest one in the Kansai region plans to offer in the spring of 1983 a total of 780 courses in the Kyoto-Osaka-Kobe areas and has announced a total enrollment of 45,500 persons. This easily rivals the scale of largest universities in Japan.

Courses offered at culture centers may be grouped into the two areas of aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*) and sports. Items offered are substantially the same, regardless of the particular culture center. But small or medium-size centers seem to permit better understanding of the character of culture centers than large ones. Larger centers offer lecture courses on cultural themes, in addition to lessons in *okeiko-goto* and sports. By the use of the term "aesthetic pursuit" or *okeiko-goto* I wish to convey in the broadest sense "those accomplishments studied and mastered as avocation." In principle these are pursued as a hobby or personal interest with no anticipation of practical use. Aside from personal interest, the goal of these aesthetic pursuits, if any, is the earning of licenses as certification of advancement.

These lecture courses are given because of widespread demands, and centers put great effort into them for that reason. Nevertheless, with only a few exceptions, they do not meet with the success that *okeiko-goto* do. The majority do not even break even, and scheduled lecture courses are often cancelled because of failure to meet minimum enrollment. It is not surprising that smaller centers find it too risky to offer such courses.

Regardless of the size of the center, ultimately it is from the field of *okeiko-goto* that the most abundant "commodities" are drawn, and it is here that enrollment concentrates. Courses in handicrafts, fine arts, and music may all be considered *okeiko-goto*, and while sports are a way of maintaining health, there is something of the character of *okeiko-goto* in the way even they are practiced. Even language study tends to be more *okeiko-goto* than effort towards attaining any practical goal.

Lecture courses which enjoy exceptional popularity, such as those on the appreciation of classical Japanese poetry—*haiku* and *waka*—are also related to *okeiko-goto* in this broadest sense.

(2) Instruction in *Okeiko-goto* and Culture Centers

At the risk of over generalization, the culture center's success as an enterprise may be attributed precisely to instruction in a wide variety of these aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*), broadly defined. There is something truly startling in the passion of contemporary Japanese for such instruction. Seen thus, the new enterprise called "culture center" is a veritable civilizational "device" engaged in absorbing this passion for aesthetic training: herein lies the culture center's *raison d'être* in contemporary Japanese society.

The training involved in *okeiko-goto* never goes beyond general or popular education, differing in essential character from the training and discipline necessary for expert or professional accomplishment. Of course, some do put their accomplishments and their licenses to use and become professionals. There is an old saying, however, that "there is no greater misfortune than putting an art to use." Fundamentally, such pursuits should remain throughout in the realm of avocation.

The devotion of the Japanese to *okeiko-goto* is not a recent phenomenon. Even if we set aside the aristocratic society of the ancient and middle ages and restrict our discussion to the townspeople, such pursuits have a long history beginning with entertainment for the urban dwellers of the Tokugawa period (1603–1868). I would reserve judgment as to whether or not this is a phenomenon unique to contemporary Japan. The popularity of adult education in the United States for instance may well be a comparable phenomenon.

Interestingly, the "commodities" listed in catalogues of culture centers do not for the most part include brand new lines of aesthetic pursuit (*okeiko-goto*). The great majority, including the lecture courses, were being taught individually in schools, private studios and gymnasiums long before the opening of culture centers. This indicates that the extraordinary passion of the contemporary Japanese for instruction in aesthetic accomplishments was not inspired by culture centers, but was actually latent in Japanese society.

"Center" is indeed an appropriate appellation, since its novelty as an enterprise lies in bringing under one roof a wide variety of courses previously taught independently. The relationship between the former, more specialized studios and gymnasiums and the modern culture center is analogous to that between small shops and specialty stores on the one hand and department stores and supermarkets on the other.

The culture center as a "device" for aesthetic training (*okeiko-goto*) has spread over a very extensive area. Even cultural facilities of local governments, built originally as rental meeting halls, are affording relatively inexpensive culture centers, and are used for every kind of *okeiko-goto* and educational course.

(3) The Contemporary *Iemoto* System and Culture Centers

Courses offered by culture centers are not necessarily operated directly by the center. As department stores in Japan consign many specialty retail firms, the majority of courses at culture centers are in fact offered by tenants as concessions. This tendency is most conspicuous in the instruction in *okeiko-goto*. The center managing to bring in as concessions the greatest number of leading "specialty shops" is considered itself to be first-rate.

These constituent "concessions" have reached tremendous numbers. Moreover, just as studios and gymnasiums once were, they are without question supported by the network of the *Iemoto* system. As I will explore this in more detail later, at this point it is sufficient to generalize that the relationship between instruction in *okeiko-goto* and the *Iemoto* system as it has existed since the Tokugawa period has been brought into the contemporary culture center with but minor changes.

The *iemoto*, or the grandmaster, of each school of aesthetic pursuit sends its best disciples to the centers and in essence opens a branch studio. Needless to say, the *iemoto* already has an enormous number of students constituting a fixed clientele, and yet it is prepared to absorb new clients. Much of this capacity to accommodate more students is owed to the ability of the *iemoto* to issue certification and licenses. Culture centers hope to increase enrollment both by their own ability to attract students and—in inviting *iemoto* to send teachers—by the ability of the *iemoto* and their instructors to bring in more clients. Teaching at culture centers provides instructors, on their part, with a chance to exploit a new market of students.

Whether conscious of it or not, the majority of the students attending classes at culture centers become enmeshed in the network of the *Iemoto* system and consequently serve to expand its base. Many of those who wish to be promoted to higher ranks in their particular field continue lessons at the teacher's own private studio after graduating from the culture center program or in some cases after quitting in the middle of the center course. Culture centers and *iemoto* are clearly in a mutually beneficial relationship. It is not certain as yet whether the appearance of culture centers has brought about important changes in the *Iemoto* system, but the *Iemoto* system is certainly enjoying unprecedented prosperity because of the advent of these centers.

To avoid confusion I should define the term "*Iemoto* system." This term refers to a system of instruction in *okeiko-goto* broadly conceived, which "possesses a fixed number of teachers to instruct pupils; issues licenses for a fee to mark the advancement of the students; and gives to students a sense of the 'prestige value' of their licenses and certificates." Effective operation of this system, usually relies on a large scale organization.

One aspect of the relationship worthy of note between culture centers and the *Iemoto* system as defined above is the problem of certification and issuance of licenses. Barring exceptional cases, without the backing of a system capable of "valued" certification—in this case the *Iemoto* system—no one, regardless of how prominent

an artist, is qualified to offer instruction in *okeiko-goto* at the centers. To put it in an extreme form, students at culture centers are “buying” certificates attesting to their progress in various aesthetic pursuits.

For flower arranging, tea ceremony and other traditional arts, the value of the license issued is guaranteed by the authority of the *iemoto* concerned. “*Iemoto*” in this situation does not refer only to those existing in traditional fields of endeavor, for recently, pseudo-*iemoto* organizations have emerged in both new and old areas, modeling themselves on the existing, traditional *Iemoto* system. One example of these is an organization of music studios, affiliated with a certain musical instrument manufacturing company. These new pseudo-*iemoto* organizations include establishments calling themselves associations (*kyōkai*), academies (*gakkai*), and schools (*gakkō*), some of which do not have a grandmaster (*iemoto*) as their leader. In these establishments the prestige value of their licenses and certificates is maintained by their renown, their reputations and the size of their membership. With their affiliation to culture centers, these organizations find their renown and their reputations both enhanced and guaranteed.

The contemporary *Iemoto* system is responsible for driving culture centers to their present prosperity and it is the *Iemoto* system which connects the culture center to its clientele. Above considerations allow us to understand issues relating to the passion of modern Japanese for organized aesthetic pursuit (*okeiko-goto*), the rise of culture centers as a “device” for absorbing this passion, and the *Iemoto* system as an important support for these centers. Next I would like to consider the historical background of these phenomena.

2. THE FORMATION OF THE *IEMOTO* SYSTEM AND MODERN JAPANESE SOCIETY

(1) The *Iemoto* System and the Organization of Entertainment

It may seem out of place to bring up the organization of entertainment at this point. However, formation of the *Iemoto* system and establishment of the entertainment system may both be considered characteristic phenomena in the history of modern Japanese performing arts [MORIYA 1982]. Furthermore, formation of these two systems at about the same time suggests that they both have their origins in a common historical development.

What I have tentatively called “entertainment system (*kōgyō seido*)” is a system in which artists without patrons perform for profit in a fixed theatre, and to an “unspecified audience” which assembles voluntarily and pays a fee to enjoy the program. The opposite of this is a system in which “artists belong to a certain patron, and perform on his behalf.” The preconditions for establishment of an entertainment system, as I have defined it, are (1) performers without fixed patrons and (2) a voluntary and variable audience, a category I call “potential audience.”

The *Iemoto* system has been defined above, but requires some supplemental

remarks in specific relation to the entertainment system. In contrast to instructors giving lessons in the *Iemoto* system, there are also artists who strive to perfect their own accomplishments and who neither teach nor belong to any organization. The formation of the *Iemoto* system presupposes the coexistence of "a group of teachers instructing the populace" and a certain minimum number of potential pupils, whom I call "potential *okeiko-goto* pupils," to support these teachers. These systems were not seen in medieval times and thus must be considered to have their origins in the Edo period (1603–1868).

These are also singularly Japanese phenomena in that nowhere else in Asia did similar systems appear at this time. It may already be a common view to consider the *Iemoto* system characteristically Japanese. However, the entertainment system as I have defined it is also a typically Japanese phenomenon. The formation of such a system prior to Western contact is found nowhere else in the East Asian region. This calls for our attention.

Development of these two systems as performing arts corresponds to the establishment of theatre arts and chamber arts. On the one hand, the entertainment system involved regular performances at established theatres ("*shibai*" in Edo period Japanese); on the other hand, the *Iemoto* system required chambers or halls for the display and performance of various arts ("*zashiki*" in Edo period Japanese). In short, these systems had as their foundation the diffusion of certain material "devices," namely, "theatres" and "chambers."

(2) The Audience and the Student of Aesthetic Pursuits (*Okeiko-goto*)

Of great importance for the topic under consideration is the relationship of these two systems to society, and the fact that they were able to emerge only when the support of an audience and a body of students were assured.

Needless to say, a system of entertainment is not possible without a stable population from which a viewing audience may be drawn, for it is predicated upon the availability of "unspecified audiences voluntarily enjoying performances for a fee." Similarly, so long as the *Iemoto* system is founded on the relationship among the grandmaster (*iemoto*), teachers and students, there must be students to organize: Without a certain number of people with interest in aesthetic accomplishments (i.e., "potential *okeiko-goto* pupils"), this system can not be established.

To anticipate our conclusion, appearance of these two populations, one for theatrical entertainment and the other for chamber aesthetics resulted from the popularization of culture in Tokugawa Japan, particularly in urban areas. There existed a broad spectrum of people in the large cities of this period who were receiving training in artistic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*) and absorbed in theatre, or for whom it was feasible to be so involved—a population at least large enough to support both the entertainment and *Iemoto* systems.

In other words, the entertainment system and the *Iemoto* system were institutionalized "devices" which absorbed the urban population able to enjoy theatre and instruction in the arts (*okeikō-goto*). Furthermore, formation of these two

systems extends beyond the realm of the performing arts in its significance, and may be seen more broadly as an indication of the formation of a mass society. If the appearance of these systems is in fact indexical of a mass society, then, the germ of such a society is in the cities of the early Genroku era (1688–1704).

To summarize up to this point, one respect in which Edo period Japan differed from medieval Japan and also from other countries in the East Asia of its own time is the participation of the populace in popular culture. To put it another way, the popular culture of medieval Japan was as yet immature, and further, in East Asia outside Japan, even in the seventeenth century, a mature popular culture had not appeared.

Superficially, the entertainment system and the *Iemoto* system appear to be quite separate, and this impression remains so long as each is considered in isolation. However, above considerations lead us to conclude that in fact these two systems are but two manifestations of mass society. This is the reason, as I hope the reader will understand, why I have chosen to deal with them together in this essay.

(3) Formation of the *Iemoto* System

Both in previous publications [MORIYA 1979] and in the above discussion, I have offered my own interpretation of the formation of the *iemoto* system, so I will be brief here.

The *Iemoto* system evolved as an organizational adaptation of existing professionals in artistic fields. It was perfected in conjunction with the formation of mass society in Japan, and entailed establishment of the legitimacy of the *iemoto*, organization of teachers of aesthetic pursuits (*okeiko-goto*) in urban areas, curriculum consolidation, and popularization of the content of the arts. As a result, the *Iemoto* system had already perfected its structure as a superbly efficient organization of the masses by the late Tokugawa period. In short, it provided a system for popular participation in the study of aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*). This may be interpreted as an exact parallel to the emergence in contemporary Japan of the culture center industry as a “device” in response to the surge in enthusiasm for training in the arts (*okeiko-goto*).

The history of the *Iemoto* system from its inception to the present must be seen as intimately related to popular interest in aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*). Studies of the *Iemoto* system so far have tended to focus on the system’s organizational characteristics. Their importance notwithstanding, future studies of the *Iemoto* system should shift their focus to the interest and orientation of the populace which the system organizes, or more generally, to problems relating to changes in mass society.

The *Iemoto* system, as well as the entertainment system, which developed in the Edo period did not disappear with the collapse of feudal Japan. The fact that this system has even sustained further development since that time must add a new perspective to the history of Japan in the modern period. The *Iemoto* system began in Edo Japan and maintained a certain continuity into the present. Pre-modern

history thus is the necessary background for development of Japan's contemporary mass society.

Of course, we cannot simply analyze the modern Japanese populace according to the stereotyped notion that it bears the ancient character of a previous era. We must also free ourselves from the superficial formula "Tokugawa society=feudalism =evil." Construction of a fresh theory of the *Iemoto* system cannot be undertaken without considering the larger issue of the reappraisal of our image of Tokugawa Japan.

3. THE HISTORY AND CHARACTER OF ENTERTAINMENT

(1) Tokugawa Japan as an Era of Popular Entertainment

What sort of image of Tokugawa Japan emerges when we consider this period from the perspective of "play (*asobi*)?"

I do not mean "play" in the narrow sense of amusement. I use the term "play (*asobi*)" in generalizing about what was known in Tokugawa Japan as *yūgei*, or "entertainment." Leaving further elaboration to another occasion, I would argue here that what has been known as culture, general education (*kyōyō*) or recreation in modern Japan began in fact in the "play," or *yūgei* (entertainment), of the Edo period.

The people of this period were so fond of various forms of "play" that one hesitates to even begin enumerating them. Japanese have often been called diligent or industrious, and although this characterization is normally applied in reference to their work, it applies just as well to their "play." Diligence in "play" was sometimes carried to such an extreme that they brought on their own destruction, and eventually led to a call for moderation in these pursuits [MORIYA 1980].

Naturally, "play" is a phenomenon seen in other times and in other places, but what I want to emphasize here is that during the Edo period, "play" was in fact a phenomenon of the common people. Furthermore, the "play" in which these commoners were immersed was equivalent both in scope and in standard to that of royalty or aristocracy. A good indication of this is the amazement of Westerners who came to Japan in the late Edo and observed the cultivation of flowers by commoners. In their own countries such an accomplishment was restricted to the upper classes.

In this society, the masses became assiduous in the pursuit of "play." Put another way, the level of social development in this period was high enough to afford zealous pursuit of "play" by the populace. Furthermore, the entertainment (*yūgei*) of these people was not limited to singing, dancing and musical performances. They included under the rubric of "play," what might be considered more properly in the West to be practical or even scientific endeavors, such as mathematics (*wazan*) and horticulture. Even though these were taken to be "play," or perhaps because they were considered "play," accomplishments in many fields were of a very high level of proficiency even by today's standards.

Despite their skills, the people of the Edo period never seem to have been enthusiastic in applying these skills to such fields as civil engineering or agriculture. Ultimately, they pursued the arts as "play," engaged in scholarship as "play," and even found pleasure in scientific pursuits as "play." The only way to describe the situation is to say that they were devoted to "play" and showed no interest in anything else.

What we in the modern age consider to be broadly intellectual activities all had the coloring of "play" for the people of Edo period. Commoners participating in "play" in this sense formed what might be considered an intellectual populace, and the intellectual accomplishments of this period, mediated by "play," must have reached an enormous proportion. The legacy of these achievements must in some sense have had an impact on various aspects of modern Japanese history.

(2) Entertainment (*yūgei*) as the Pursuit of Aesthetic Accomplishments (*Okeiko-goto*)

The domain of "play (*asobi*)" in the Edo period in large part overlapped that of instruction in the arts (*okeiko-goto*), for the notion of "play" presupposed the learning of an art. Thus if the Edo period was an age of "play," it was also an age of an aesthetic pursuit (*okeiko-goto*), for arts, scholarship and even science were all pursued as aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*).

Popularization of entertainment, or aesthetic pursuits (*okeiko-goto*), began in the Genroku era and was confined largely to the townspeople. It is very suggestive, in this respect, that town directories of this period all included a listing of various teachers and arts (*shoshi shogei*). The arts were to be best studied under the guidance of a teacher: hence the value of such a directory for the townspeople. One of the distinctive characteristics of Genroku cities was the abundance of arts and instructors in the arts.

Several passages in the writings of Ihara Saikaku, too, remind us of such directories. As the passage, "to study such-and-such an art under such-and-such a person," indicates, artists with primary interest in the "perfection of their own art" were becoming "instructors for educating pupils." Literature, too, sensitively reflected the trends of the time.

The *Iemoto* system took its first step towards establishing itself as a system by organizing these instructors and their students. Establishment of the modern culture center has taken exactly the same course.

(3) Entertainment as Urban Culture

If "play" is to be an urban phenomenon, it cannot be understood simply in the conventional framework of interpreting Tokugawa Japan on the basis of the relationship between feudal lords and peasants. The understanding of "play" requires an entirely different perspective on the society of this time.

In historiography, emergence of the peasant farmer in villages is supposed to have occurred through the seventeenth century. As peasant farmers were increasing

productivity early in the Tokugawa period, as if to correspond to this rural development, cities saw the formation of petit bourgeoisie known as *chōnin* ("townspeople") at about the same time. These are the urban dwellers of Ihara Saikaku's description and the people who populated the dramas of contemporary life written by Chikamatsu Monzaemon.

It was just this lower middle class (*chōnin*) which appropriated the "play" monopolized previously by the aristocracy, the *samurai* class or the urban upper class, and contributed to the popularization of "play" from the early eighteenth century on.

What I referred to above as "the potential *okeiko-goto* pupils (*okeiko-goto jinkō*)" were of this lower middle class as was the "potential audience" which supported the entertainment system. This overlap is the basis of my argument that the *Iemoto* system and the entertainment system—the two organizations which gave a distinctive character to the history of the performing arts of the Tokugawa period—are built on the same foundation.

A natural question to ask at this point is why cities of the Genroku period should have given rise to a population from which both students of the arts (*okeiko-goto*) and audiences for the entertainment world could be drawn.

There are several relevant factors. Some which come immediately to mind are the appearance of the relatively prosperous populace which accompanied urban economic growth, creation of leisure time as a result of the formation of urban work patterns, and the rising intellectual standards due to the diffusion of general education and publications.

These are essentially the same factors supporting the formation of contemporary mass culture. It is not too far from the mark to conclude that the germ of Japan's mass culture was in the cities of the Genroku period. Furthermore, mass culture emerged in urban areas in the form of popular entertainment and the pursuit of aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*).

4. CONCLUSION: THE TRAJECTORY OF CIVILIZATION AS SEEN THROUGH THE PERFORMING ARTS

Popular arts pioneered by the townspeople of the Edo period were not always given a fair appraisal during the formative period of modern national culture. For one thing, the educational policy of the Meiji government (1868–1912) and the philosophy of those in its charge were totally at variance in their derivation with the culture of the townspeople. Total involvement in the study of the arts (*okeiko-goto*) came to be widely viewed as immoral. Even the word "entertainment (*yūgei*)" took on a remarkably coarse and vulgar nuance.

Re-evaluation of entertainment probably took place in the Taisho era (1912–1926), during which time the word "entertainment (*yūgei*)" was replaced by terminology suitable to popular urban society, such as "culture (*bunka*)" or "cultivation (*kyōyō*)" There were repeated fluctuations in what was considered

fashionable, centered around the old or the new, the Japanese or the Western, and there were drastic ups and downs following changing conditions in the world. Finally the world of entertainment came to a standstill during World War II.

Still in all, popular culture in the form of taking instruction in aesthetic accomplishments (*okeiko-goto*) has continued throughout the Edo, modern and contemporary periods. Both the contemporary demand for instruction in the arts (*okeiko-goto*) and the well-being of the *Iemoto* system today are, I feel, closely related to this continuity. The overall continuity of the entertainment system, albeit with several ebbs, was no doubt maintained by the traditional urban merchant class, the descendants of the erstwhile petits bourgeois.

After the rapid economic growth of the 1960s, the orientation of the Japanese people towards culture and education—what I am referring to broadly as “entertainment (*yūgei*)”—occupied an important place in the newly formed popular culture.

This period saw the majority of the population swept into cities by a wave of urbanization, and a large petit bourgeoisie (*chōnin*) class was formed. Furthermore, people had already been freed from the Meiji and wartime value system, and the economic growth lent a certain economic security to the pursuit of artistic accomplishment (*okeiko-goto*). These new urban dwellers were able to seek without reserve their *raison d'être* in the world of avocation and personal enjoyment.

As I noted in my opening statement, this resulted in a flood of “devices,” namely cultural industries called “culture centers.” Taking another look at the course listings for a culture center today, it is hardly necessary to remark how closely it resembles *shoshi shogei*, the directory of teachers and arts of the Genroku period. Just a glance at this catalogue reveals the degree to which the demands of the market on which the present-day culture center depends have remained unchanged since those times. Development of popular arts which emerged in the Genroku period seems to be in full swing now with a mixture of the old and the new, Eastern and Western arts.

For these reasons, I feel that petty bourgeois culture, as distilled in culture center programs, is derived ultimately from the urban culture of the townspeople from the Genroku period on. To state my argument more boldly, the model for the entire contemporary Japanese civilization is found in the urban culture of the Genroku and succeeding periods.

Umesao [1974] once suggested the concept of a “civilizational trajectory (*bunmei no kyokusen*)” in connection with which he argued that the origin of modern Japanese culture might lie, not in the Meiji Restoration, but in historical developments beginning in the early nineteenth century. Umesao’s notion of a “civilizational trajectory” provides an excellent insight in the investigation of the problems with which this essay is concerned. However, my argument takes the starting point of this curve back one more century, namely to the Genroku period—from the end of the seventeenth to the early eighteenth centuries. And where Umesao’s curve shows a period of decline around the time of the Second World War, mine has an additional,

earlier period of decline during the Meiji era. This might be called the “performing arts’ trajectory of civilization.”

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