

Her Kabuki-Not His: Kabuki of today might well be defined as dance-theater that features male dancers in traditional Japanese costume and makeup, performing both the male and female roles. But wait, not so fast. Women played an important role in the area from Manchuria, China, Korea and Japan to the Ryukyu Islands. Women were priests, soothsayers, magicians, prophets and shamans in the folk religion, and they were the chief performers in organized Shintoism. In Japan these women were called *miko*.

Miko traditions date back to ancient Japanese women prophets who went into trances and conveyed the words of the gods, comparable with the pythia or sibyl in Ancient Greece. Toudaiki historical data tells of a woman Kuni, also called Izumo no Okuni (Okuni from Izumo), who came to Kyo (now Kyoto) dressed in a strange-looking man's costume and danced what was called "Kabuki-odori." And thus, Izumo no Okuni, a *miko* at the Grand Shrine of Izumo, is chronicled as the originator of kabuki theater.

Okuni (1572?-?) grew up in the vicinity of the Izumo shrine, where her father Nakamura Sanemon worked as a blacksmith and where several other family members served. Eventually Okuni joined as a *miko* where she was known for her skill in dancing and acting, as well as for her beauty. As it was custom of the time to send priests, *miko*, and others to solicit contributions for the shrine, she was sent to Kyoto to perform sacred dances and songs

And so it was that around 1603, Okuni began performing a new style of dancing, singing, and acting on the dry riverbed of the Kamo River and at Kitano Shrine in Kyoto. At a time when Kyoto was in disarray after the Battle of Sekigahara, the performances of Okuni dressed in flamboyant men's costumes delighted and caught the imagination of the people and received tremendous acclaim

Okuni's kabuki was the first dramatic entertainment of any importance that was designed for the tastes of the common people in Japan. Early performances often considered gaudy and cacophonous, were equally lauded as colorful and beautiful. She assembled around her a troupe of wandering female performers who danced and acted.

Okuni accepted as her performers the female outcasts and misfits of the region, particularly those involved in prostitution, giving them direction, teaching them acting, dancing and singing skills, and offering them rehabilitation, in order to form her troupe. Due to their eccentricity and social daring, Okuni's troupe's performances were labeled kabuki. The word "kabuki" derived from the late 16c colloquial verb "*kabuku*" can translate to mean eccentric, shocking, forward leaning, out of step with the accepted norm, not conforming to the social order of the time, perhaps even a woman (women) ahead of her (their) time

Okuni's troupe was exclusively female. Thus, she required her actors to play both male and female roles. In particular, Okuni herself was best known for her roles as samurai and Christian priests. This new style of exclusively female troupes became known by the alternate names of *shibai* or *onnakabuki*, (from *onna*, the Japanese word for "woman" or "girl").

Okuni's *kabuki* quickly became very popular and many other companies of courtesans and other female performers appeared not only in Kyoto and Edo ((Tokyo) but in many Japanese prefectures. The Kabuki-odori performed by these women was called "onna-kabuki" (women's kabuki). The sensuous character of the dances (and the prostitution of the actors) proved to be too disruptive for the government, which in 1629 banned women from performing

Due to the 1629 order prohibiting the performance of onna-kabuki because it was deemed to be corrupting public morals, it gradually disappeared and Okuni, herself became absent from historic records. A new concentration was directed on "Wakashu-kabuki" performed by boys too young to shave their forelocks in adult style. However, they also were deemed to corrupt public morals, and a prohibition on Wakashu-kabuki was issued around 1652.

In the beginning of the Edo period when *onna kabuki* (kabuki played by women) was banned as a corrupting influence on social morals and after the second prohibition was issued, against young boys, the period of "Yaro-kabuki" performed by adult males with yaro atama (man's head after the forelock was shaved off) began. Men took over, even playing the female roles (*onna-gata*), and the resulting theater performances developed into the kabuki of today.

NOTE: In November 2002 a statue of Izumo no Okuni was erected in her honor and to commemorate 400 years of kabuki. It is located on Kawabata Street at the north of the Shijo Ohashi, near the shore of the Kamo River in Kyoto.

Sources: http://www2.ntj.jac.go.jp/unesco/kabuki/en/2/2_01.html,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Izumo_no_Okuni