

Noh Go 碁

A travelling priest arrives at what was once the Nakagawa River in Kyoto and reminisces about stories in The Tales of Genji set in this vicinity. As he recites a poem about Utsusemi (“Locust Shell”) who had a brief flirtation with Genji, a nun appears and offers him lodging for the night at her home. She too recalls Utsusemi’s story and tells him that she will play a game of go for him reminiscent of the game which Genji spied upon between Utsusemi and her step-daughter Nokiba-no-ogi. Revealing that she is in fact the ghost of Utsusemi, she vanishes. The Priest offers prayers for Utsusemi and her ghost appears along with the ghost of Nokiba-no-ogi and they re-enact the game. Based on the second and third chapters of The Tale of Genji.

Author: Saami (15th c.?).

Scene: Autumn, the third ward of the capital Kyoto, near an area which was once the Nakagawa River, the present location unknown.

Category: Third category woman play, phantom noh in two acts, jo-no-mai dance piece with taiko stick drum..

Performance practice: Performed by the Kongô School only since its revival by Kongô Iwao in 1962. Previously, the only record of its performance is from the late 15th century.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Waki (secondary actor): a travelling priest.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): a nun. Wears a woman mask.
- Ai (interlude performers): a local man.
- Nochijite (second half shite): the ghost of Utsusemi. Wears a woman mask.
- Tsure (companion to shite): the ghost of Nokiba-no-ogi. Wears a companion (tsure or ko-omote) mask.
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Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Waki entrance: A travelling priest enters to shidai music and announces that he is from the eastern provinces and is visiting the capital for the first time. In a travel song, he describes the scenery he passes along the way, including the sea and mountains and the famous Shirakawa Barrier. He arrives near the area which was once the Nakagawa River in the Third Ward of Kyoto. He reminisces about the old stories set in this area and recalls how his father often recited portions of The Tale of Genji. The Priest recites a poem about Utsusemi, who fled her meeting with Genji, leaving her cloak behind just as a locust discards its shell.
2. Shite entrance and Shite/Waki exchange: A nun calls out to the priest and while walking down the bridgeway offers the priest a night’s lodging at her hut. Without revealing who she is, she tells of being drawn to this spot in the same way as the priest. With the chorus, they both refer to that tale of Utsusemi, recalling that it was set beside the Nakagawa River and quoting The Tale

of Genji as they speak of the meeting of Utsusemi and Genji which, brief though it was, filled Utsusemi with yearning.

3. Shite/Waki exchange: The nun offers to play a game of go that evening for the priest’s enjoyment. He asks who her opponent will be, recalling the game between Utsusemi and her stepdaughter, Nokiba-no-ogi, which Genji spied upon. The nun says that the same Nokiba-no-ogi will be her opponent and she evokes the season, times and place of the game played long ago. With the chorus singing for her, the nun speaks of her secret yearning, and revealing that she is wearing the same robes as Utsusemi, she vanishes in tears.
4. Ai narration: A local man tells the priest how Genji fell in love with Utsusemi, the wife of a provincial governor. When she later refused to see him, he spied on her while playing go with Nokiba-no-ogi. That night he went to her room, but she had disappeared leaving her robe behind as well as her step-daughter Nokiba-no-ogi. Genji instead spent the night with the step-daughter.

Stage attendants bring a go-board on stage.

5. Waki’s wait: The priest sings a waiting song in which he refers to laying down to sleep beneath a withered tree and offering prayers on behalf of Utsusemi.
6. Nochijite/Tsure entrance: The ghosts of Utsusemi and Nokiba-no-ogi enter to issei music. Speaking of the autumn scene once again, they suggest that if they play go once again before the priest, their past animosity will be alleviated and they may transcend the cycle of life and death.
7. Nochijite/Tsure narration: This sequence, sung largely by the chorus, describes go as following the flow of life and death. The board represents the spheres of heaven, the squares are the days in a year, the black and white stones are night and day, and the sound of the stones, the universal ah and um (ôm).
8. Waki/Shite/Tsure discussion: The chorus sings for the priest whose questions are answered with descriptions couched with numerous chapter titles from Genji.
9. The Game: Utsusemi and Nokiba-no-ogi sit down to play as the chorus describes. One by one they play their stones and Utsusemi loses which is a telling sign that her resentment has not been assuaged. The chorus recalls how Utsusemi came to meet Genji but then slipped away, leaving her robe behind. Genji went on to meet Okiba-no-ogi, but then took Utsusemi’s robe leaving her with only empty memories.
10. Shite’s dance: Utsusemi dances the slow, elegant jo-no-mai dance.
11. Conclusion: The chorus describes how the wretched Utsusemi fades away leaving behind only poignant memories. [Richard Emmert]