

Noh Kokaji 小鍛冶

(“The Swordsmith Kokaji”)

An envoy of 11th century emperor Ichijō informs the swordsmith Kokaji Munechika that the emperor requests him to make a sword in accordance with a dream he has had. As Munechika has no assistant with the proper skills, he goes to the Inari Shrine to pray. There, a boy comes to him and, urging Munechika to fulfill the request tells him that he will provide all the help he will need. Munechika returns to his home and prepares for the ceremonial forging of the sword. With his prayers, the deity Inari appears in its form as a fox and helps Munechika to complete the emperor’s request and present the sword to the envoy.

Author: Unknown.

Scene: Autumn during the Late Heian period (early 11th century), the Inari Shrine in the capital, the present Inari Taisha Shrine, Fushimi Ward, Kyoto; then the home of the swordsmith Kokaji Munechika, believed to be near the present Awataguchi, Sanjō, Kyoto.

Category: Fifth category supernatural being (miracle) play, phantom noh in two acts, mai-bataraki dance piece with taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all schools. Includes several variant performances, most notably Hakutō done in all schools and employing a large white headpiece instead of the usual red one.

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Wakizure (companion to Waki): Tachibana no Michinari, an envoy of the emperor Ichijō.
- Waki (secondary actor): The swordsmith Kokaji Munechika.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): A young boy. Wears a young boy (dōji or jidō) mask.
- Ai/Ai-kyōgen (interlude actor): A servant of Munechika (in Kanze); a god of a subsidiary shrine (in all other school).
- Nochijite (second half shite): The god Inari no Myōjin in the form of a fox. Wears a demon (kotobide “small bulging eyes”) mask and a headdress with a fox-shaped crown. He carries a mallet.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

1. Wakizure Entrance: Tachibana no Michinari enters in silence and announces that he is acting as an envoy of the emperor who dreamt that he should have the swordsmith Kokaji Munechika make a sword. Michinari is on his way to inform Munechika of this.
2. Wakizure and Waki exchange: Michinari goes the bridgeway and calls for Munechika who then appears from the curtain. Michinari explains about the emperor’s strange dream and requests Munechika to make a sword. Munechika replies that he has not skilled assistant to help him, but finally relents under Michinari’s insistence. The chorus describes how Munechika is unsettled by the request and how he hopes for some kind of miracle in order to fulfill it.

3. Waki’s monologue: Munechika decides to pray to the god Inari for divine intervention in order to fulfill this important request.
4. Shite entrance, Shite and Waki exchange: A boy calls out to Munechika surprising him by already knowing about the emperor’s request. Singing that the heavens have a voice which resounds on the earth, the chorus sings that this blessing from heaven is a sign that Munechika should fulfill the request.
5. Shite’s narration: With the chorus, the boy gives accounts of a famous swords belonging to different Chinese kings and emperors. The chorus sings in detail of the famous sword Kusanagi belonging to the legendary second century prince-general Yamato-Takeru.
6. Shite and Waki departure: Refusing to reveal who he is, the boy tells Munechika that he should hurry home and begin work on the sword. With the chorus, the boy promises that he will provide the necessary help, and then leaves to raijō music (except in Kanse). Munechika also leaves the stage.
7. Ai’s narration: A god of a subsidiary shrine (or in Kanze, a servant of Munechika) appears and summarizes the events that took place in the first half of the play. Stage assistants then brings out a platform strung with sacred white zigzag papers with a mallet, anvil, and sword.
8. Waki’s prayers: Munechika enters again and sings of how he will obey the imperial request. As the drummers begins playing the notto purification ritual music, Munechika prays for the divine assistance of the deities Izanagi and Izanami who had thrust down the divine spear which have gave birth to Japan. He names Amakuni as the founding father of swordmaking. The chorus sings again of the imperial request asking the various gods to join with Munechika in making the sword.
9. Nochijite entrance: The god Inari no Myōjin enters to quick hayafue entrance music. The chorus sings for the god that the time has come to make the sword requested. The god dances a mai-bataraki action dance. Then as the chorus describes, the god and Munechika step up on the platform and together strike the sword. The chorus sings how the sound of the mallet rings throughout the heaven and earth.
10. Conclusion: Munechika sings of how the sword is completed and how he inscribes the word kogitsune (“little fox”) on the back. The chorus sings of the two inscriptions on one sword and how it will govern the four seas and bring a successful harvest of the five grains. The god takes the sword and gives it to the envoy, and then flies off into the clouds and back to Inari peak.
[Richard Emmert]