

Noh Utô 善知鳥 (鳥頭)

(“Birds of Sorrow”)

A species of seabird known as utô (petrel) is said to find its young by crying out “utô” to which they reply “yasukata”. Hunters imitate this cry to catch the young. The parent birds seeing their young taken are said to weep tears of blood. A travelling priest meets the spirit of a hunter who asks him to contact his wife and child and make an offering of a hat and cloak which he used to wear. When the priest does so, the spirit appears and, now bitterly regretting having killed against Buddhist precepts, tells of his desperate misery in Hell.

Author: unknown. Thought commonly attributed to Zeami (1363?-1443?), there is no clear evidence to support this.

Scene: Early summer, first, in the mountain region of Tateyama in Etchu province, the present Toyama prefecture; then the seacoast village of Soto no Hama in Mutsu province (one of the five old northern provinces known as Michinoku), the present Aomori prefecture.

Category: Fourth category miscellaneous (male attachment) play, phantom noh in two acts, kakeri (anguish dance) piece, without taiko stick drum.

Performance practice: Performed by all five schools. The Kita school only writes the name of the play as 鳥頭

Characters (in order of appearance)

- Kokata (child actor): The hunter’s son, Chiyodô.
- Tsure (accompanying Shite main actor): The hunter’s wife. Wears a middle-aged woman (shakumi or fukai) mask.
- Waki (secondary actor): a travelling priest.
- Maejite (first half shite main actor): an old man. Wears an old man (warai-jô, asakura-jô, kojô) mask..
- Ai / Ai-kyogen (interlude actor): a Soto no Hama villager.
- Nochijite (second half shite): the spirit of a hunter. Wear an emaciated man (yase-otoko, kawazu) mask.

Synopsis: scene by scene.

The child and wife of the dead hunter enter in silence and sit.

1. Waki entrance: A travelling priest enters to nanori solo flute and tells of arriving in Tateyama to practice religious austerities while on his way to the north and Michinoku. He sings describing the horrors of the precipitous mountain trails as a living hell more frightful than any demon. In tears and with a penitent heart, he sings of descending to the foot of the mountain.
2. Shite entrance: An old man calls out to the priest asking him to take a message to Michinoku. He tells him that he was a hunter from Soto no Hama who died the past fall. He asks the priest to

contact his wife and child to have them make an offering of his straw cloak and sedge-hat. He tears off a sleeve of his kimono to show his wife as proof of their meeting. The chorus describes the old man’s tears, their farewell, and the old man watching as the priest departs amid the rising smoke and clouds of Tateyama. The dead man then vanishes too, to where, no one knows.

3. Waki and Ai exchange: The priest speaks to a native of Soto no Hama and receives directions to the house of the dead hunter.
4. Tsure’s lament: The wife of the dead hunter sings the sorrowful plight of herself and child at having lost her husband and father.
5. Waki and Tsure exchange: The priest visits the home of the hunter’s wife, recounts his meeting with the hunter’s ghost, and shows her the sleeve as proof of their encounter. In tears, yet finding the story hard to believe, the wife compares the sleeves with the kimono. The chorus describes how she is convinced of the priest’s story, how the priest begins to chant prayers on the hunter’s behalf, and the offering they make of a straw cloak and sedge-hat.
6. Nochijite entrance: The hunter’s ghost enters to issei music and sings of a kind of petrel called utô-yasukata whose parents cry “utô” to which its young reply “yasukata”, of the power of a sotoba memorial tablet and a prayer offering to deliver a spirit from evil demons, of how even in Hell, Holy Wisdom and Dharma are not extinguished, and of yet being burdened by the sin of killing. The chorus sings of Buddha’s compassion, then describes the place as the lonely fishing village of Soto no Hama in Michinoku and the hunter’s humble dwelling through whose thatch roof the moon shines.
7. Shite’s lament: The wife tells of seeing the hunter’s ghost and how mother and child clasp each other and weep. The ghost sings of his yearning for his wife and child like the utô crying for its young, and of its regret at killing the birds which must feel the same as he feels for his child. He tries to reach out and touch his child but cannot. The chorus sings of the cloud barrier of earthly lusts which separates them, of the hunter losing sight of his child, and of the tears drenching his sleeves.
8. Shite’s lament: For the hunter, the chorus sings of his past which sent him to hell and his unappeased lust for killing with which he spent his days, of how the utô build its nests on the beach so he merely had to cry “utô” and the young would answer “yasukata”.
9. Shite’s dance: The hunter dances a kakeri in which he pantomimes the hunting of the birds using his stick.
10. Shite’s dance: The chorus sings of the parent bird weeping tears of blood, of how the hunter must cover himself with his hat and cloak to escape the tears, and how the skies turn crimson.
11. Shite’s dance: The chorus describes the hunter’s tortures in Hell, and how he is now constantly attacked by mighty birds and ferocious dogs. Asking for the priest’s help, he vanishes. [Richard Emmert]