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CONTENTS

KONNO Fumiaki	Localities and the Transformation of Shakespeare in Performance: The Shakespeare Company Japan's <i>Ainu Othello</i>	1
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**Localities and the Transformation of Shakespeare in Performance:
The Shakespeare Company Japan's *Ainu Othello***

KONNO Fumiaki

Localities and the Transformation of Shakespeare in Performance: The Shakespeare Company Japan's *Ainu Othello*

KONNO Fumiaki

The globalization of Shakespeare has proliferated a wide variety of local Shakespeares. As Sonia Massai argued, the “field of Shakespeare Studies has been radically transformed by the emergence of significant world-wide localities, within which Shakespeare is made to signify anew.” An increasing amount of scholarly attention has been paid to local Shakespeares around the world. In particular, there has been a surge of interest in intercultural performances with local traditional contexts. While Japanese Shakespeare itself has long been seen as a branch of such studies, both its diversity and locality within Japan have become areas which draw scholars’ attention. At the symposium on the Meiji and post-Meiji era reception of Shakespeare in Japan, held in 2021, the long history of Shakespeare performance in Japan was classified into seven stages, with the sixth period described as “globalization” and the seventh as “diversity,” with “locality” being one of the subdivisions of the seventh phase.¹

The adaptations of Shakespeare in the Tohoku dialect by the Sendai-based theatre troupe, the Shakespeare Company Japan (SCJ), have been often referred to as an example of such local Shakespeare within Japan. For instance, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* of the Arden Shakespeare mentioned the SCJ's adaptation of the play (1996) in the introduction, as it “was set on the north Japan coast with Oberon and Titania as sea gods, Robin as a local goblin and Bottom as a fisherman” (Chaudhuri 35-36). Daniel Gallimore analyzed the vocabulary and inflexions of some lines of the SCJ's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with a computer in order to clarify the characteristics of their local dialect (*Sounding Like Shakespeare* 176-85). In all the productions of the SCJ's adaptations of Shakespeare, *Ainu Othello* is the most unique work, in that its creative process – that is, the collaboration between an Ainu co-director and Ainu artists and with an artistic director in London – was totally different from that of the SCJ's other productions. *Ainu Othello* in 2018 was a rewritten work of *Atuy Othello* in 2010, and the London production of *Ainu Othello* in 2019 was an abridged and altered version of the 2018 production.² Sae Kitamura discussed the production of *Ainu Othello* in 2018, appreciating the way in which the SCJ addressed and highlighted racism in Japan, while criticizing the downside of unsuccessful treatment of gender (96-97). Although the article and other reviews explicated the bold attempt in detail, their analyses and discussions are limited to part of its uniqueness and they do not cover the whole collaborative process of creation. Therefore, this essay focuses on the unique aspects of the production: the engagement with the work from different perspectives by three different co-directors and the transformation of locality brought by the collaboration. It is firmly believed that

this study will lead to the analysis of adaptation as a process of creation, which is one of the elements of adaptation which Linda Hucheson proposed, and illuminate the SCJ's attempt of exploring the potential of Shakespeare performance in an unprecedented way.

The history of Shakespeare Company Japan and the adaptations of Shakespeare in the Tohoku dialect

Before coming to the discussion, a brief overview of the history of the SCJ and its productions of local Shakespeare is warranted, as one of the most distinctive characteristics of the Company must be clarified. The Shakespeare Company Japan was founded by Kazumi Shimodate, a professor at Tohoku Gakuin University in Sendai, and a group of supporters who shared his dream of building a wooden theatre like the Globe in Tohoku. Since its inception in 1992, the aims of the SCJ have been focused on representing the culture of Tohoku on stage, through translating the works of Shakespeare into the local dialect, and adapting them for the local audience. It is of great interest that initially the Company was not an acting troupe, and by recruiting and auditioning actors who could speak both standardized Japanese and the Tohoku dialect, the SCJ struggled to successfully form a troupe and stage their first production in 1995: *Romeo and Juliet*. In the meantime, a meeting with the Royal Shakespeare Company's Head of Voice, Cicely Berry, in Britain and the participations in her workshops provided Shimodate with opportunities to learn how to produce and direct Shakespeare. This seems to be of immense significance for the SCJ because "[t]his combination of dialect and technique can create dynamic speech communities that enhance rather than confuse our understanding of Shakespeare, locals and outsiders alike" (Gallimore, "Speaking Shakespeare" 55).

The first performance of a version of *Romeo and Juliet* at British Hills in Fukushima met with a favorable reception, but there came a comment from the audience which made Shimodate realize the importance of adapting rather than translating Shakespeare's works for the local people: "why is Tohoku dialect spoken, when the setting itself is Verona in Italy?" (Shimodate, *Hamuretto* 43-44). In response to such a sense of incongruity among the audience members, all of their subsequent adaptations have been set in some region of Tohoku or Hokkaido, with references to local culture: *A Midsummer Night's Dream in Matsushima Bay* (a bay in Miyagi), *Much Ado About Nothing in the Jōmon Period* (in ancient times), *Twelfth Night of the Sendai Clan* (Sendai early in the Edo period), *Macbeth of Mt. Osore* (Mount Osore in Shimokita Peninsula in Aomori), and so on.

The SCJ's scripts of Shakespeare are written in the Tohoku dialect, which is quite different from standardized Japanese, in terms of vowel sounds, suffixes, intonation and vocabulary. First, Shimodate writes scripts in his local dialect, which each actor then 'adjusts into their own dialect' (*Ainu Othello*, Theatre program 15). The SCJ believes that the local vernacular is an indispensable medium which they think enables them "to express a deeper and broader interpretation of Shakespeare's world" and "to create a new slant on Shakespeare's plays both in Japan and abroad" (The SCJ, "Theatre company profile").

Another aim of the SCJ's use of local language is also to explore the artistic potential of

Japanese dialects. According to the argument of Okamoto Shigeko and Janet Shibamoto-Smith, in the beginning of the Meiji era, “A critical factor for Japanese policymakers, then, was to unify the country under the umbrella of a single language with the aim both to extend the Meiji regime’s control and to promote economic growth by producing a literate population” (37). Such standardization of language promoted the eradication of regional dialects, which have historically been considered inferior compared to standardized Japanese. Shimodate realized that such dialects need to be refined as language in works of art, particularly as dramatic language, just like standardized Japanese has been refined throughout the long history of Japanese literature. Inspired by Junji Kinoshita’s pioneering use of dialects for the play *Twilight Crane* (1949) by blending the Sado Island dialect with various regional ones of Eastern and Western Japan, Shimodate has been attempting to transform the Tohoku dialect into a theatrical language. Kinoshita successfully created a theatrical language by mixing various dialects and standardized Japanese, which he referred to as a “universal dialect” or a mixed dialect for the stage (Shimodate, “Kinoshita” 97). He believed this was a language which audiences in any area of the country could understand. Similarly, Shimodate aims to create a sophisticated theatrical language style which is comprehensible for the audience, pursuing the well-balanced language for the stage.

“Hot Spring Trilogy” for people in the disaster-stricken area

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami caused the members of the SCJ to suffer much hardship. Some of them lost their jobs due to the severe damage to their workplaces, while others had their homes washed away by the tsunami (Shimodate, *Hamuretto* 127). In the aftermath of this unprecedented disaster, the SCJ found itself on the verge of disbanding, and it was all the members could do to get through each day as they faced the dismal prospect of dissolving the theatre troupe. It was impossible for them to attempt to stage Shakespeare for the Tohoku people again. However, an encounter with a woman encouraged Shimodate to resume his work with the SCJ. While he walked on a street in Sendai, he came across a retired woman who had previously seen the SCJ performances, and she implored him to continue producing Tohoku versions of Shakespeare, albeit with happy endings (Shimodate, *The New Romeo and Juliet* 74).

In the summer of 2011, when Shimodate revisited British Hills, a resort in Fukushima where his company had staged its first production of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1995, he was astounded that the hotel was quiet and empty in the aftermath of the recent Tohoku natural disaster. Remembering the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* once produced there, he came across the statue of Shakespeare, which was placed in front of the manor house when British Hills opened in 1994. It was a moment of inspiration in which Shimodate decided once again to stage Shakespeare and to repay the Tohoku people for all their support.

The SCJ produced the ‘Hot Spring Trilogy’, three shortened adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays, with happy endings. They got the inspiration of setting these adaptations in a hot spring (*onsen*) when they went to Oiwake Onsen in Miyagi, one of the hardest hit areas, and saw the dispirited people refreshed with smiles and laughter after enjoying a bath. The company located the trilogy in a hot spring modelled on Naruko Onsen, a famous hot spring resort in Miyagi. *The*

New Romeo and Juliet in 2012 and 2013 was the first of the three adaptations, with *The New King Lear* in 2013 and 2014 the second and *The New Merchant of Venice* in 2015 and 2016 the last.³

Three Different Productions of the SCJ's adaptation of *Othello*

The first production of the SCJ's *Othello*, called *Atuy Othello*, was staged in Miyagi in 2010 and then in Aomori in 2011. The "atuy" in the title is an Ainu word which means "sea." The production was directed by Shimodate and it was also supervised by Susumu Emori, a renowned scholar of the history and culture of the Ainu people and a professor at Tohoku Gakuin University. Shimodate sets the adaptation in nineteenth-century Hokkaido, still called Ezochi, part of which Russia continued to attack while it aimed to advance southward into the northern part of Japan in pursuit of trade and the expansion of its territory at that time. In 1806 and 1807, after being denied trade with Japan, Russia conducted raids on some areas of Karafuto and burnt down a facility of the Tokugawa shogunate in Etorof. The frequent incursions of Russia after the incidents triggered the shogunate to order the clans of the Tohoku region and Hokkaido, Tsugaru, Nambu, Akita, Sendai, Shonai, Aizu and Matumae to defend Ezochi in 1855. As preparatory research for the adaptation of *Othello*, Shimodate went to the Sendai Clan Shiraoi Manor House Museum in Hokkaido in 2009 in order to get the information regarding the Sendai Clan's guarding of the border in the nineteenth century, specifically the history of the Shiraoi fort, the largest fort in Hokkaido, and other territories in charge of the Sendai Clan: Hiroo, Akkeshi, Nemuro, Tomari and Fuurebetsu. In *Atuy Othello*, Osero (*Othello*) is an Ainu who protects the region as a general of the Sendai Clan and who falls in love with Dezuma (*Desdemona*), a Japanese daughter of KUSAKARI Bانشō (*Brabantio*), a captain of Fort Nemoro of the Sendai Clan.

The initial plan of the production included the performance in Hokkaido, the setting of the play and the home ground of Ainu people. The Ainu are an indigenous people of the northern island of Japan, particularly Hokkaido, with their own traditional culture and language quite different from those of the Japanese. They had a traditional lifestyle of fishing, hunting and foraging. However, they were persecuted and oppressed by the Japanese for centuries and forced to assimilate, first by some domains in Tohoku in the eighteenth century and later by the Japanese government in the nineteenth century. Only in 2008 did the Japanese government officially recognize the Ainu as an indigenous people. Later, "a national center for learning about and promoting Ainu history and culture" called *Upopoy* was built in Shiraoi, Hokkaido, and opened to the public in 2020 (*Upopoy*). Therefore, even after Shimodate decided to take *Atuy Othello* to Hokkaido, he hesitated, as he was worried about harsh criticism leveled at the staging of the work full of words of discrimination against Ainu people. Even so, all the staging and further plans had to be cancelled and given up, since the huge earthquake and tsunami struck East Japan on March 11, 2011. Before long, the SCJ launched another project to produce "Hot Spring Trilogy," three shortened adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in the setting of a fictitious hot spring resort, and tour the disaster-hit area to bolster the spirits of local people.

After finishing the trilogy, Shimodate was invited as a keynote speaker to the 27th International

Japanese-English Translation Conference held in Sendai in June 2016. The SCJ was also requested to stage the excerpted versions of the five adaptations of Shakespeare at the conference: *The New Merchant of Venice*, *Hamure in Oshu under the Late Tokugawa Shogunate*, *The New King Lear*, *Macbeth of Mt. Osore*, and *Atuy Othello*.⁴ Their special performances were greeted with applause and one of the audience members suggested to Shimodate that he should resume staging the unabridged version of *Othello*, which had been suspended for five years (Shimodate, "Watashitachi no *Othello*" 161). He began by restarting fieldwork in Hokkaido to survey the traditional and modern culture of the Ainu people, and eventually he had a fateful encounter with Debo Akibe, an Ainu artist who is also a stage director, playwright, actor, owner of a fork craft shop, and managing director of the Akan Ainu Craft Association. Akibe contributed enormously to the revision of the script, giving importance to the authenticity of representing Ainu culture in the work. Not only that, he also joined the production of *Othello* as a co-director, and this collaboration successfully infused it with new life. After a long hiatus, the second adaptation of the SCJ's *Othello*, altered and renamed as *Ainu Othello*, was produced and staged in Sendai, Tokyo and Sapporo in 2018.

Among the audience in the Sapporo performance was Shimodate's longtime friend Jatinder Verma, Artistic Director of the Tara Arts in London, which "was launched in direct reaction to the racist murder of 17-year-old Gurdip Singh Chaggar" in 1976 and has been nurturing and supporting British Asian performers, with activist roots of promoting social change (Tara Arts, "Our Story"). Verma was invited as a guest speaker to the talks after a performance by co-directors Akibe and Shimodate, and they discussed diversity and racial discrimination in Japan. The collaborative event led to the next production of *Ainu Othello*, with the SCJ being invited by Verma to perform it at the Tara Theatre the next year. In August 2019, the staff and performers of the Company and the dancers of the Pirikap travelled to London, and co-directed by Verma, they staged the play five times in four days and received standing ovations from the audience.

***Atuy Othello* (2010)**

The SCJ's first adaptation of *Othello* is set in 1860, when a great number of samurai warriors and their families of the Sendai Clan actually moved to different forts in Ezochi under the command of the Tokugawa shogunate to guard the district. According to historical facts, the cold of winter and the difficulties of their new life there were so severe that many lost their lives. In the play, the threat of the Turkish fleet is changed into that of the Russian one, and most of the characters are Sendai Clan samurais and their families. Only four of them are Ainu: Osero, his attendant Tosuke, Montano's attendant Kūchinkoro, and Bianka (Bianca). Under constant threat of invasion from Russia, Osero plays an active and important part as an admiral in the Sendai Clan army guarding the northern seas and coasts. He falls in love with a Japanese woman named Dezuma, the daughter of the captain of the Sendai Clan's Nemoro fort, and they secretly marry. Ii Yago (Iago) is an ethnically Japanese ensign of the clan's Iturup fort, and he is a subordinate of Osero. As a racist he is envious of his senior's success and suspects that Osero may have leapt into his wife Emiria's bed: "I hate the Ainu." (Shimodate, *Atuy Othello* 37)

In order to represent the Ainu people and their culture, various costumes and properties were employed onstage, such as traditional Ainu garments, including headbands with embroidered patterns, called *matanpushi* and craftwork such as sheaths and knives. The *matanpushi* is a keepsake of Osero's mother and a gift given to Dezuma as a symbol of Osero's love for her. Like a handkerchief in Shakespeare's *Othello*, the headband is used as the catalyst for his jealousy and the brutal murder of his wife.

Besides the costume and props, the Ainu language and songs are also used in several scenes. In Act 1 Scene 3, for instance, requested to explain how he attracted and wooed Dezuma by Ujiie Hidenoshin (Duke of Venice), Osero reminisces about the happy days of his youth:

What has remained in the back of my mind and kept my heart warm is my mother *hapo*'s deep, kind voice and the smell of *mosir*, the vast land of Ezo. (*He sings.*)

Pirikapirka

Tanto sirpirka

Inaan kur pirka

Numke kusne

...chasing the brown bears of *kamuy*, *Atuy* in the summer, the emerald green waves of the great sea, ... dreams dreamt under the round moon *kunnecup*...all sweet memories. (Shimodate, *Atuy Othello* 25-26)

[...]

I spoke of such stories at this man's house. And Dezuma shed tears for me. Dezuma came to love the life I had led. I came to love Dezuma for caring about my life. This is the only magic I used. Thank you for listening to my long tale. *Iyairaikere*, *iyairaikere*. Dezuma, whom I was speaking of, has arrived. (29)

The words in italics are the Ainu language, but since they are paraphrased in Japanese just before or after the Ainu words, the audience could easily understand them: *hapo* (mother), *mosir* (the vast land of Ezo), *kamuy* (god in the brown bears), *Atuy* (the great sea), *kunnecup* (the round moon), and *Iyairaikere* (Thank you). The *pirka* song here is the same song as Dezuma sings in Act 4 Scene 3 (114), which she says she learned from Osero, and this indicates how deeply she loves her husband.

In addition to the language and songs in some scenes, the introduction of musical instruments, such as the *mukkur*, contributes to transpose the play into the world of the Ainu. In Act 3 Scene 1, Osero's attendant Tosuke enters the stage playing the *mukkur*, which draws Kashiro's attention and stirs up his interest in the unique sound of the Ainu musical instrument. Such elements serve to highlight the difference between the Japanese and the Ainu within the Sendai domain, which consequently leads to the tragedy of Osero and Dezuma through Yago's vicious plot. Whereas in a way *Atuy Othello* gives a picture of the long-term racial discrimination of the Japanese against the Ainu, it is not portrayed from the side of the discriminated minority. This is the very point that the SCJ's next production of *Othello* drastically changed, with the help of Ainu artists.

The productions of *Ainu Othello* in Sendai, Tokyo, and Sapporo (2018)

As mentioned above, the production of *Ainu Othello* had to be cut short by the earthquake and tsunami that hit the Tohoku region in 2011, and it took seven years for the SCJ to revive the work. After a chance meeting with Ainu artist Debo Akibe in 2016, Shimodate revised the script on Akibe's advice, and they also co-directed the new version, *Ainu Othello*, and invited Pirikap, an Ainu dance troupe, to join it in order to introduce traditional Ainu dance and music into the play. One of Akibe's initial aims in joining the production as a co-director was to "ensure the authentic representation of Ainu culture" (Watts). For example, he gave the actor some advice on Osero's way of giving a prayer to *kamuy* to improve the authenticity.

More importantly, a secret wedding ceremony of Osero and Dezuma was added to the first scene of the play, and various Ainu properties and utensils were newly introduced onto the stage. At the center backstage, a woven figured mat was hung on the wall, in front of which one of the Pirikap members says a prayer to *kamuy*. This mat is called *chitarape*, and it is used for *kamuy*, not for human. During the wedding ceremony, the male Ainu performer prayed to *kamuy* using a stick called *ikupasuy* and a bowl called *tuki*. According to the explanation of these on the Portal Site of Hokkaido's History and Culture – AKARENGA, "A carved spatula-like stick was created to offer liquor to ancestors and *kamuy*. The tip of the spatula is dipped in liquor, and drops on the spatula are sprinkled on the fire *kamuy* and sacred sticks. A lacquer bowl used to offer liquor to *kamuy*, was different from the bowls used during meals" ("Ainu Culture").

Dezuma initially wore a Japanese robe and then took it off and changed into traditional Ainu attire, called *attush*, with the help of Ainu dancers. This change of clothes symbolically means a Japanese woman's marriage into an Ainu family, and Osero performed another symbolic action: with a head bandana *matanpushi* in hand, he approached Dezuma, and from behind, ties the bandana around her head (*Ainu Othello* 1. 1). After he offered a prayer to *kamuy*, a dance of the Pirikap was performed to celebrate the marriage.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that through his personal experience of racial discrimination, Akibe initially aimed to give Yago an Ainu background in order to avoid just focusing on the Ainu's desire to retaliate against the Japanese. However, he instead aimed to explore the aspect that "victims of mistreatment can join up to resist, but they can also turn on each other. And that can be the more savage" (*Ainu Othello*, Theatre program 7). Therefore, Akibe suggested that not only Osero but also Yago should be of Ainu heritage and act as an Ainu villain. As Shimodate discussed, Akibe "helped to unearth the raw emotions surrounding racial discrimination and jealousy in the story, which a theatre troupe made up of only Japanese could not have expressed" (Theatre program 1). After Akibe proposed an Ainu Yago, Shimodate discussed the idea with Jatinder Verma, and it is Verma who was immensely interested in Akibe's idea and further developed it by seeing dramatic potential in a mixed-race Yago and giving him a mixed Ainu-Japanese heritage. Verma thought of this idea when he remembered a recent news story in a London newspaper about an Indian boy who was bullied by an English-Indian mixed boy, which means that "he bullied his own Indian heritage" (Shimodate, "Watashitachi no *Othello*" 164).

Shimodate and Akibe adopted Verma's idea and made Yago the villain who plants the seed of doubt in Osero's mind and destroys his life out of complicated jealousy:

Yago: I can't endure Osero. I am *rataskep*, or rather half so, but look at me. And look at him, he is wise, *pawetok*—eloquent, *rametok*—brave, *siretok*—dashing, and with dignity. I might actually love Osero. But I want the flame of jealousy to gnaw his inwards. My plan is here, but yet confused. (*Ainu Othello* 2. 1.)

The theatre program of the 2018 production in Japan has a list of Ainu language used in the play, and three words – *pawetok* (eloquent), *rametok* (brave) and *siretok* (dashing) – are asterisked with notes explaining that these are elements required to be *ekash*, or one of the Ainu *kotan* (village) seniors. In this sense, Osero is the most admirable of the indigenous people. Constantly rejecting him in the play, Yago's desire to obliterate the Ainu within himself causes him to loathe even a great man rather than resent the discrepancy in their social status despite a shared heritage. The Ainu language in the former play was thus refined and increased and also effectively used in *Ainu Othello*.

***Ainu Othello* at Tara Theatre in London (2019)**

Finally, a quick look at the history of Tara Arts and Jatinder Verma's career, along with the multicultural British theatre illustrates how *Ainu Othello* was transformed at the unique theatre in London. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a great number of Indian families migrated from India to East Africa in order to work for the British Empire, such as by their constructing the Uganda Railway. As a result, they settled and formed their communities there. Verma's parents moved from India to Tanzania and then to Kenya, and Verma grew up in Nairobi, where he studied "English and Englishness," a "colonial education" which gave him a chance to learn Shakespeare (Thomas 175). After Kenya gained independence, the government started to make migrant life difficult, which caused thousands of Kenyan Asians to flee to Britain. As part of the "Asian exodus," Verma arrived in Britain from Kenya at the age of fourteen in February 1968. It was "a pretty disturbing year: there were marches on the streets saying Asians out" (Down) and a Conservative MP, Enoch Powell, made the "rivers of blood" speech in Birmingham, and his infamous and divisive criticism of mass immigration from the Commonwealth actually divided the nation. A subsequent surge of racial hatred and discrimination led to a tragedy: the racially motivated murder of 18-year-old Gurdip Singh Chaggar by a gang of white youths in Southall on June 4, 1976. Hundreds of local Asians took to the streets to protest against the brutal crime over the weekend, leading to the beginning of a youth anti-racism movement, "the Southall Youth Movement" (SYM). In response to the tragedy, Verma wanted "do something to help the Asian community" with his friends and, at first, he thought that by producing a magazine or making a film he would be able to make a statement showing that they were there to stay (Down). Eventually in 1977, he founded the theatre company Tara Arts with Sunil Saggarr, Ovais Kadri, Praveen Bahl and Vijay Shaunak, "with a clear mission to make connections across cultures

through theatre" (Verma, "Interview").

As Artistic Director of the company, Verma produced a wide range of plays, including the inaugural production of *Sacrifice* by Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore in 1977, Moliere's *Tartuffe* at the National Theatre in 1990, "where Jatinder was the first-ever non-white director" and the Sanskrit classic *The Little Clay Cart* in 1992 (JVP). As Sita Thomas pointed out, while scholars dealt with the intercultural performances by practitioners producing work "from a dominant standpoint and encountering dominated or minority cultures," Verma produced work "from the position of the minority" and aimed to create a new approach, what he calls "Binglish" (177). According to the official website of JVP, "Binglish is a state of mind capturing the manner in which humans are intimately connected with each other across the globe" and it is a unique approach which Verma developed, "adapting Asian dramaturgical principles to European drama."⁵ Challenging the traditional and dominant conventions of the British Stage and transcending the position of the colonized subject, the aim of Verma with his new approach was to "create a unique cultural domain: a space in which South Asian minority communities could negotiate and affirm their British identities" (Thomas 178).

Verma's productions of Shakespeare and its adaptations include the following: *Heer and Romeo* (1992), *Troilus and Cressida* (1993), *The Tempest* (1994, 2007, 2008), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996-97), *The Merchant of Venice* (2005), *People's Romeo* (2010), *Julius Caesar* (2010), *Othello* (2010), *The Taming of the Shrew* (2011), and *Macbeth* (2015). In staging these plays, Verma took a Binglish approach, developing a new hybridity. For example, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was played with a multicultural cast of English, Nigerian-English, Burmese, Chinese, Afro-Caribbean, and Indian performers (Verma, "Evolution" 362). The play was "set in an English garden, devices that challenged notions of Britain as racially and culturally homogenous" (Jarrett-Macauley 6). In *Macbeth*, the three Witches are played as Hijras, "centuries-old distinct communities of transsexual / transgender people living in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh," who are believed to have sacred powers to bless and curse (Tara Arts, *Macbeth* 11). It is a tragedy in a contemporary British South Asian extended family, which reflects life of migrants and their descendants in modern Britain.

In August 2019, the SCJ took *Ainu Othello* to the Tara Theatre in London, where was co-produced by Tara Arts. While fourteen actors with five Pirikap performers joined the production in Tokyo 2019, only eight actors and four Pirikap dancers travelled to London. Therefore, the script was also excised and the running time for the performance was shortened from two hours to about ninety minutes. In addition to the performance, on the first floor of Tara Theatre, the Ainu Culture and History Exhibition displayed both information panels and representative Ainu craftwork, thereby giving the audience the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Ainu culture. Moreover, the beginning of the play opened with various kinds of Ainu traditional performances by Pirikap: *Sarorun Rimse* and *Hararki* (crane dances from different regions of Hokkaido), *Tonkori* and *Mukkur* performances (which use a stringed instrument and a type of mouth harp), and *Futtare Cuy* (a pine tree dance).

As Artistic Director, Verma reshaped the production of *Ainu Othello*, adopting his developed approach and creating a hybridity. After the premiere, in particular, through discussions with and

input from the dance troupe, he integrated the independent Ainu traditional performances into the plot of the play and dispersed the performances to crucial moments in the action, making the Pirikap dancers a kind of chorus and part of the narrative. With their contributions, the diversity of the regional identity stood out and the Ainu cultural traditions were also transformed and took on new meanings. There were three ways by which the Pirikap performances were incorporated into the play: responding to the words and action, repeating the words, and connecting dance performances to the particular scene. For instance, when Yago delivered a soliloquy or an aside including Ainu words such as *rataskep* (mixed), *pawetok* (eloquent), *rametok* (brave) and *siretok* (dashing), the Ainu women in their seats like a chorus in the play responded to these words with slight surprise, uttering a word like “Oh!” Similarly, in Act 3 Scene 1, when a jealous Osero is caught in Yago’s evil plot, he expresses his feelings of disgust: “Curse this.” The Pirikap dancers repeated these words, like an evil omen, which might foretell the coming tragedy triggered by “the green-eyed monster.” At the end of Act 1 Scene 3, moreover, Yago resolves to destroy Osero, “the die is cast and the plan has come thus far... To bring this monstrous birth to light, I’ll need help from hell and night,” the Ainu dancers performed the *futtare cuy* around him, repeatedly flipping their long hair up and down. This is a pine tree dance, which depicts the swaying of trees blown by strong winds, and it seems to symbolize the urgent tragedy with tempestuous momentum which Yago will cause with his dark plot. Furthermore, when characters imply the death or murder of someone, such as “Blood, blood, blood!” in Act 3 Scene 1 and “Better yet strangle her to stop her from speaking in hell” in Act 4 Scene 1, the Ainu chorus repeats the cries of cranes, sometimes with a crane dance and sometimes independently. The crane cries, which seem to portend a cruel murder, were actually used later when Osero suffocated Dezuma to death. However, the meaning behind the original crane dances were far from sinister, as they were meant to represent wild love, the joy of eating and the warding off of evil.

These performances and dances were reborn with different roles in the play, and the dancers explored new possibilities for their art without losing its traditions. The collaboration of Shimodate and Akibe put the presence of the minority or marginalized to the forefront of the play, recognizing the varied identities of the Tohoku region and Hokkaido; then Verma succeeded in breathing new life into the Ainu traditions and the SCJ’s staging by approaching them from a different viewpoint. As Thomas discusses, Verma’s Bilingual approach “aligned to Homi Bhabha’s theories concerning the emergence of a representative discourse of minorities” and it explored the way in which it created a space for negotiation and affirmation for the identity of minority communities (182; 178). By incorporating the ideas of co-directors with different backgrounds and different approaches into the work, the SCJ productions demonstrated that Shakespeare can be a catalyst for the local language, history, and culture which leads to “culture’s hybridity” representing the voice of the minority (Bhabha 56).

The SCJ productions of *Othello* illuminate the problems of racial discrimination, prejudice against minorities, and different responses to and consciousness of the Other in Japan. The first version, *Atuy Othello*, aimed to represent the tension between the Japanese and Ainu people and depict true love beyond racial difference. Then, by inviting Akibe and Verma to the productions of *Ainu Othello*, as co-directors who have long faced and dealt with minority problems, the work

was reshaped from the perspective of the Other as it focused on the more complicated issues of hatred and betrayal between the Ainu and those who are mixed-race. The productions of *Atuy Othello* and *Ainu Othello* thus demonstrate that the collaborative engagement in creative process by three different directors with different backgrounds led to the rich and varied transformation of the work. Moreover, since different venues have had different histories of the discrimination peculiar to the regions, taking the play to another place with collaborators does not simply mean changing performing space. Indeed, after staging *Atuy Othello* in Miyagi and Aomori, Shimodate hesitated to take it to Hokkaido for an Ainu audience in 2011 because the play was adapted and produced only from the perspective of the Japanese. However, as Akibe contributed to rewriting and producing the play from the viewpoint of the Ainu, the SCJ finally staged *Ainu Othello* in Sapporo in 2018. Furthermore, Verma's approach in directing the play in London reflected his own view of the minority or outsider in Britain, and, for example, his idea that Yago be of mixed-race drew inspiration from a newspaper article about an English-Indian boy's bullying an Indian immigrant. In this way, the different backgrounds of Sendai, Tokyo, Sapporo and London were considered respectively, and hence, in a way, the transformation of localities in Shakespeare. Although such transformation was derived from the SCJ's unique and rare style of co-direction, it must be an attempt of great importance, in that it contributed to the exploration of the diversity of localities and the further potential of Shakespeare in performance.

Notes

- 1 The division was suggested by Michiko Suematsu, one of the panelists, at the special symposium of the 93rd Annual General Meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan, held online in May 2021. Gallimore and Minami also divided the long history of Shakespeare's reception in Japan into "seven stages": "prehistory," *kabuki* adaptations, *shimpa* adaptations, early *shingeki* translations, mature *shingeki* replication of British productions, *Little Theatre* adaptations in contemporary style, and finally, reinvention (485-86).
- 2 For the detailed theatrical review of *Ainu Othello* at Tara Theatre in 2019, see Loxton and Olive. Additionally, for a detailed discussion of the SCJ productions including *Ainu Othello* and a sense of community in the Tohoku region, see Motoyama and Konno.
- 3 For more information on *The New Romeo and Juliet* and its translation in English, see Konno.
- 4 Alison Watts, a translator who saw the ten-minute staging of the SCJ's plays at the conference in Sendai, briefly writes about the performances as well as an overview of the SCJ, Shimodate and *Ainu Othello* for *Litro Magazine*.
- 5 Verma also defines "Binglish" as "a distinct contemporary theatre praxis: featuring Asian or Black casts, produced by independent Asian or black theatre companies. The attempt here, I would argue is directly to challenge or provoke the dominant conventions of the English stage." ("The challenge of Binglish" 194)

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