

ŞEBNEM SÖZER ÖZDEMİR

Düzce University, Türkiye

sebnemsozerozdemir@yahoo.com.tr

orcid.org/0000-0001-5957-4306

Liberation Through Constraint: Discovering a 'Dance Self' Through *Kamigatamai*¹

ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the learning experience of Japanese dance practitioners in relation to well-being. It is based on the researcher's fieldwork in Kyoto, particularly at the regular classes given by Nao Yoshimura in kamigatamai. The discussion revolves around unstructured accounts of Nao sensei's (Japanese, female) students concerning their reasons for starting and continuing kamigatamai classes, and how this has changed/enhanced their lives. Supported by observation of the classes, these accounts demonstrate that learning kamigatamai induces pleasure that grows out of experiences such as feeling a sense of achievement in developing new skills, attaining self-awareness and self-efficacy, finding a purpose in life (ikigai), finding a valuable distraction during the difficult time of the pandemic, belonging to a group, being able to express inner experiences through dancing, and getting in touch with one's own culture. Whereas prior studies on Japanese dance training connected it to different aspects of self-development, this research argues that learning kamigatamai in this specific context involves an affective becoming, which is achieved through the transformation of the students' bodies, manners, and values in compliance within the strict frame of the tradition in question. Yet this process also brings about a sense of liberation, as it opens up to its students an opportunity to discover a new 'dance self' that goes beyond the constraining norms of daily social life and thereby contributes to their well-being.

KEYWORDS

Dance

Well-being

Kamigatamai

¹ The draft of this article was presented orally at the Anthropology of Japan (AJJ) Annual Meeting 2022 (Kyoto, Japan). The research was based on the project titled 'Embodied Transmission of Culture through Dance: A Practice-based Investigation of *Nihonbuyō* Training' carried out at Osaka University (Japan) between April 1, 2022 and March 31, 2023. It was supported by the 2219-International Postdoctoral Research Fellowship Program (no. 1059B192001007) provided by The Scientific and Technical Research Council of Türkiye (TUBİTAK).

Introduction: The Alluring Beauty of *Jiuta*

Get off the underground train, climb the stairs to reach the daylight of central Kyoto, head towards the narrow streets just next to the busy avenue. Just a few minutes walking distance from the Apple Store and Louis Vuitton, you will reach a shop in a traditional town house, which has been producing and selling hand-made Japanese folding fans for a century. When you reach the entrance area in the courtyard and sit down to take off your shoes, you will hear from the depths the tranquil sound of a *jiuta* song (a genre of traditional Japanese music). Upstairs, there is a *kamigatamai* dance lesson. Silenced by listening to the arhythmic beats of the *shamisen* (a three-stringed lute) that is perfectly harmonized with the expressive voice of the singer, you go up the dimly-lit narrow stairs and sit in front of the sliding paper door in the traditional Japanese greeting posture. When the door opens, what greets you is an empty *tatami* (traditional Japanese wooden mat) room with the sound of the *jiuta* and with two women in *kimonos* (traditional Japanese outfit) —a *sensei* (master) and a student— dancing to it. I am here, in this fan shop, to observe the Kyoto-based professional dancer and teacher Nao Yoshimura's private classes of *kamigatamai*.

“The kimono covers my body completely. Likewise, the *jiuta*. They envelope me. Like a cocoon. No, better to say, they embrace me”.² These are the words of Indigo san³, a retired English teacher, who started learning *kamigatamai* five years ago in her early seventies. It was the time after her mother died and left her *kimonos* to her as an inheritance. Until that time, Indigo san was not interested in traditional Japanese dance or music at all; indeed, she even did not know how to wear a *kimono*. Being a divorced women with no daughters, but two unmarried sons, she started to worry about what will happen to these *kimonos* when she herself dies. Then she decided to start taking traditional dance lessons so that they could be worn for a good, meaningful reason. Indigo san is quite sure that her mother's *kimonos* are happy to be worn during her *kamigatamai* practice.

² The accounts of *kamigatamai* students are edited excerpts that were taken from interviews and casual talks made with them by the researcher. These conversations were in oral and written form, in English and Japanese. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Japanese to English are made by the author.

³ The names used here are nicknames given to the students by the author according to the connection of each with *kamigatamai*; the name of the dance piece they study (Pure Clementine san, Bamboo san), the figure on their dancing fan (Moonlight san), their favourite color in *kimono* (Tea Green san), and a traditional tale they mention in relation to their learning experience (Indigo san). *San* is the honorable suffix used in Japanese, meaning Mr/Ms.

“When I was a college student, I did an internship in France for three months. When I came back to Japan, I thought I should get to know my culture more”, says Pure Clementine san, a working middle-aged woman, who started learning *kamigatamai* almost a year ago. Although she first intended to take Japanese dance classes, eventually she practised instead *jiuta-shamisen* for a year. Then she practised *ikebana* (the Japanese art of flower arrangement) as well, and even got a licence for it. One and a half years ago, she went to a traditional Japanese music concert and was fascinated by *jiuta* once again. Although she had not played the *shamisen* for many years, she wanted to restart lessons. As playing instruments is not allowed in her current apartment, this time she decided to learn *kamigatamai* instead as an alternative way of enjoying *jiuta*. For her, these two are the same, as they both possess ‘*nihon bunka no kokoro* (the spirit of Japanese culture)’, which is, according to her, characterized by a special connection with nature.

“I have been interested in watching Japanese theatre, including Japanese dance, for 50 years. But I had no intention of practising it myself”, says Tea Green san, a professional tour guide in her 60s. During the winter just before the pandemic, she found in her mail box a leaflet and instead of throwing it away as she usually does, she decided to go to a trial lesson of *kamigatamai* thinking that it would be interesting to experience it at least once. Eventually, she started taking Nao sensei’s classes without being sure how long she could continue due to her irregular work schedule. As an irony of fate, the Japanese borders were closed to tourism in the following spring due to the COVID-19 pandemic, allowing her to follow the classes regularly until October, 2022. “Within these stagnant two and a half years of the pandemic, without having *kamigatamai* classes, life would be quite boring,” says Tea Green San.

“I love *kimonos* and was wondering if there was anything I could do in *kimonos*, when I saw a poster of Nao sensei’s dance class”. This is how Bamboo san, a nurse in her 50s, who got her *natori* (professional dancer) licence in the autumn of 2021, explains how she started *kamigatamai* classes eight years ago. According to her, the primary change that *kamigatamai* made to her life was learning to express herself in a feminine way in compliance with the norms of traditional Japanese beauty: “I am happy when I learn how to dance and learn how to dance more beautifully. I like it more and more with time”.

Similarly, Moonlight san, another middle-aged nurse who started Nao sensei’s classes six

years ago and has been practicing Japanese dance for about sixteen years, relates her interest in *kamigatamai* with her love of wearing *kimonos*, as well as her connection with other Japanese traditions: “Since I was a child, I have been blessed with opportunities to experience Japanese culture, such as watching *kabuki* (a form of traditional Japanese drama) and tea ceremonies, and it was wonderful to wear a *kimono*”.

All these accounts belong to the students of Nao sensei, whose classes I observed between May 2022 and February 2023 as a part of a one-year research programme that focuses on the transmission of traditional Japanese dance. In this study, I would like to look closely at the data I collected for initiating a discussion about the connection of Japanese dance practice to well-being in contemporary Japan.

Research Context and Methodology

Kamigatamai is a genre of traditional Japanese dance that falls within the broader category of *nihonbuyō*. Whereas *buyō* (舞踊) is a word for dance, the term *nihonbuyō*, which literally means Japanese dance, is employed at the beginning of the 20th century in order to distinguish classical repertoire from other forms. It combines two characters — *mai* (舞/circular) and *odori* (踊り/leaping)— which, together with *furi* (mime), refer to three different movement styles that *nihonbuyō* inherits from older forms of shrine, court, and folk dance (Griffith and Mariko, 2016: 141). The *mai* style has its own characteristics, distinguishing it from more dynamic style of *odori* and more mimetic style of *furi*:

The word *mai* comes from the verb *mau* (舞う), a contraction of *mawaru* (to rotate), signifying slow and deliberate circling movements. The body is held stiffly, the center of gravity low, knees bent slightly, while the soles of the feet are in continuous contact with the floor (*suriashi*). This strong relationship between dancer and floor is further emphasized by occasional stamping. The origins of *mai* can be traced back to the earliest forms of *miko kagura* in which shrine priestesses circle around to reach a state of trance, as well as *bugaku*, the stately court dance imported from China. *Mai* became the principal movement style in the *noh* theatre, [...], then subsequently exerted a major influence on popular *kabuki* dance (Griffith and Mariko, 2016: 141–142).

Kamigatamai, as the name suggests, originates from the Osaka-Kyoto region called Kamigata. It dates back to the Edo period (1603-1868). Since it was nurtured in the pleasure quarters of the region at that time, dancers were mainly women such as

courtesans and *geisha*. Today, one of the four main schools of *kamigatamai* is Inoue school, which has developed the *kyomai* style that is performed by the *geiko* (generally known as *geisha* outside of Kyoto) and *maiko* (apprentice *geiko*) of Kyoto. It is typically practised as solo performances accompanied by traditional *jiuta* songs, originally in small-scale Japanese-style *tatami* (a rush-covered straw mat) rooms (*zashiki*), and is therefore also known as *jiutamai* and *zashikimai*. In contrast to kabuki music that is performed by several *shamisen* (a traditional Japanese three-stringed lute) players, singers, and percussionists, *jiuta* is usually performed by a single *shamisen* player who sings at the same time. Subdued in character, it reflects the Japanese aesthetic of *wabi* and *sabi* (impermanence and melancholy). Shaped under the influence of these characteristics of *jiuta*, compared to other genres of Japanese dance, *kamigatamai* is known for its serenity, subtle minimalist movements, and an emphasis on the inner expression of the practitioners (Griffith and Mariko, 2016: 143–144; Japanese-English Bilingual Corpus of Wikipedia's Kyoto Articles, n.d; Kamigatamai Yoshimura-ryu Association, n.d; Yoshimura, 2012).

During my one-year research on the transmission of *nihonbuyō*, I observed the classes of an *odori* style master (Yayoi Wakayagi) as well. But, considering the defining characteristics of *kamigatamai*, in this research that investigates the place of well-being in learning Japanese dance, I have opted to focus on Nao sensei's classes. As defined in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, the concept of *wabi* denotes simple, austere, understated beauty that best manifests itself in the emptiness and elegant simplicity of the Japanese tea house, especially in the beauty of its modestly designed alcove which is “[a] simple structure, but a special and evocative one, a place of deeply philosophical depths” (Parkes and Loughnane, 2024). On the other hand, *sabi* refers to the beauty in aging well as a result of close connection with nature. It has a connotation of desolateness, which is revealed in the subdued grace of a solitary cypress tree that exists in contrast to colourful blossoming trees. Here there is “a significant existential consideration: the sheen of older things connects us with the past in ways that shiny products of modern technology simply cannot” (Parkes and Loughnane, 2024). Based on the aesthetic of *wabi* and *sabi*, *jiuta* music and *kamigatamai* are meant to touch the depths of one's inner self.

Nao sensei, whose teaching constitutes the scope of this research, acquired her *natori* licence in 2009, and her teaching licence in 2014 from the Yoshimura school of

kamigatamai. Besides performing professionally, she gives one-to-one private classes three times a month at a rented *tatami* room in a fan shop or a temple in Kyoto. Her classes are open to any age, gender, and nationality (Yoshimura, 2012). During my fieldwork period, she had ten different students with varying levels of dance abilities, skills, and experience. Within the scope of this research, the experiences of five of her students, who were relatively regular and long-standing at the time of my fieldwork, are taken as samples. All are female adults and started learning *kamigatamai* as a hobby that promised a good change in their lives. Despite the limitation of the study to a small sample of students of one teacher, my uninterrupted observation of their private classes and continuous communication with them that deepened over time, allowed me to collect enough data to make a thorough analysis on the connection of their learning experience with well-being.



Figure 1. Nao Yoshimura (Yoshimura, 2012)

Ever since its emergence, the transmission of *nihonbuyō*, as in other Japanese performing arts, is based on the Japanese master-pupil system called *iemoto*, in which the pupils learn by observing and emulating as faithfully as possible the live performance of their master. Nao sensei's classes follow this basic principle. The duration of the dances learned is around three to ten minutes and learning a new dance usually takes from three to six months (sometimes more according to the abilities of the student). In the world of Japanese dance, as an unspoken rule, the dance that will be learned is chosen by the

teacher. Certainly, the degree of difficulty is a factor in this selection and the teacher considers the current level of the student. In the case of Nao sensei, the suitability of the dance to the student was also a factor. Although her thoughts and intentions behind this are not completely clear, thanks to the non-direct communication style that is typical of the relation between the teacher and the students in traditional Japanese culture, the decision is not made only according to a student's bodily features such as look, strength or abilities, but also according to their personal characteristics and needs. For example, after studying for a long time an emotional and melancholic dance that will be discussed in the following pages, Indigo san was advised by Nao sensei to take a break and learn a less emotionally challenging dance, in which the character happily remembers the good old days. On the other hand, Pure Clementine san first studied a dance about love to which she related well. Then she was encouraged by Nao sensei to study a new dance that portrays a teenager *maiko* who enjoys the beauty of nature.

During my fieldwork, I used the well-known method in qualitative research, participant observation, in which the researcher collects data not only by observing others, but also by experiencing what they research in person (Kawulich, 2005). Although I could not take dance classes from Nao sensei due to health problems, I observed her classes regularly by being a part of the training space so that I was able to communicate closely with the students. For collecting data for my research, I also used interviews, bearing in mind the remark of Brenda Farnell (1999) on the limits of participant observation in doing research on a movement practice —that observing others and experiencing the movement are necessary, but not sufficient for understanding the perspective of other practitioners without speaking with them about their own experience. To allow space for spontaneous conversations as well, I conducted semi-structured interviews that involved both pre-prepared and spontaneous questions (see Appendix I). For this study, I specially focus in these interviews on the accounts that are related to the students' personal connection with *kamigatamai*, about why they started and continued learning this tradition, and what kind of impact this experience had on their lives. In this way, I aimed to uncover both similar and different motivations behind learning *kamigatamai*, as well the transforming power of this process. Besides this, I made video recordings of the classes in order to do movement analyses that might help me understand the learning process of the students better and compare the learning experience of different practitioners.

Dance and Well-Being

There are a number of studies that discuss the connection of dance with well-being. In an article that makes a comprehensive review of the publications between 2000 and 2019 on this subject, Kerry Chappell, Emma Redding, Ursula Crickmay, Rebecca Stancliffe, Veronica Jobbins, and Sue Smith identify seven interrelated contributions of dance to health and well-being: “embodiment, identity, belonging, self-worth, aesthetics, affective responses and creativity” (2021: 1). As they articulate, the practice of dance induces well-being through the development of (personal, cultural, and/or artistic) self-identity, a process that is connected to an increase in self-esteem, as well as agential, self-expressive and creative capacities. Through dancing, the practitioners are enabled to create links to affective experiences of their past and present, as well as of their past or future selves. Consequently, positive effects such as the regulation of emotions, the enhancement of life by providing a purpose, feeling more in control of daily lives, and even an opportunity to reclaim humanity or to restore an inner self emerge (Chappell et al., 2021: 8–9). Dance also creates a sense of ‘belonging’ to a group by increasing positive social interaction and meaningful communication with others (Chappell et al., 2021: 9). It enhances ‘self-worth’ as a result of a sense of achievement, learning and development while practising dance, and thereby contributes to the practitioners’ self-confidence, self-assurance, self-awareness, and self-efficacy (Chappell et al., 2021: 9–10). These are all connected with an increase in the practitioners’ ‘creativity’ and imagination (Chappell et al., 2021: 10–11), as well as their ‘aesthetic appreciation of dance’ (Chappell et al., 2021: 11–12). The practitioners experience a positive change as a result of the ‘embodied’ quality in dance activities that connect mind, body and spirit and provide an alternative way of expressing emotions (Chappell et al., 2021: 11). Dancing creates ‘affective responses’ such as happiness, hopefulness, positivity, enthusiasm, pleasure, and enjoyment that help the practitioners cope with stress and difficulties in life (Chappell et al., 2021: 11).

Regarding their experiences of learning *kamigatamai*, the students of Nao sensei expressed many thoughts and feelings that touch these interwoven themes in one way or another. Considering the multi-layered and complicated nature of these experiences, I would like to employ an inclusive frame, that is, the discovery of a ‘dance self’, which is also touched on by previous studies on Japanese dance training (Deschênes and Eguchi, 2018; Hahn, 1995; Sellers-Young, 1993). I argue that learning *kamigatamai* in this specific

context, opens for the practitioners a new space for self-realization that goes beyond the constraining norms of daily social life and thereby acts as a means for well-being.

Discovering a 'Dance Self' through the Search for Beauty

In her article *The Power of Dance: Health and Healing*, Judith L. Hanna argues that dance contributes to healing by enabling its practitioners to “gain a sense of control” (1995: 325) in four different ways: “(1) Possession by the spiritual manifested in dance, (2) mastery of movement, (3) escape or diversion from stress and pain, and (4) confronting stressors to work through ways of handling their effects” (1995: 326). The first is the way of the healers, who help their patients by using the supernatural power of a deity or spirit by being possessed by it. Hannah underlines that, among other treatments of the healer, there is also the mediation of social conflicts that patients are not able to remedy by themselves (1995: 326). Secondly, the mastering of dance movements induces a positive self-perception, self-esteem, and self-confidence by increasing the practitioner’s bodily awareness (Hannah, 1995: 326). Thirdly, dancing brings some changes in physical capability, emotions, and state of consciousness so that the practitioners experience a change of focus from pain and stress to pleasure, which induces a sense of release, relief, and well-being. It also provides an opportunity to move into a fantasy world (to be a princess, animal, etc.), “offering escape from the task of attempting to change an often difficult and ugly world” (Hannah, 1995: 326–327). Lastly, the act of pretending in dance enables practitioners to experience past, current and future events and emotions without feeling the impact of real life, and to confront stressful situations in a playful and protected environment (Hannah, 1995: 327–328).

When I started my fieldwork, Indigo san was studying a well-known Japanese dance piece called *Kurokami* (Raven Hair). The character in this piece is a mistress longing for her lover who does not come on that winter day. Indigo san learned this piece some years ago, but Nao sensei suggested that she should study it again instead of starting a new piece so that it would improve. The lyrics of the *jiuta* are quite suggestive, gradually unfolding the sorrow and melancholy in the character’s heart:

It is the pillow
We shared that night,
When I let down
My jet-black hair.

That is the cause of my lament.
When I sleep alone
With my single robe
To cover me.
“You are mine,” he said.

(interlude)

Not knowing the heart
Of a simple girl
The voice of a temple bell,
Sound into the quiet night.

Awakening from an empty dream
In the morning,
How lovely, sweet,
And helpless is my longing.
Before I know it
The silver snow has piled up (Tsuge, 1983: 81).



Figure 2. Indigo san practicing *Kurokami* (Sözer Özdemir, 2022b)

The piece starts in a half sitting pose, during which the performer’s gaze is directed forwards and downwards with her arms crossed on her belly, while her hands are concealed inside the sleeves of the kimono. This introverted pose allows spectators to

sense the silent desolation of the character. During the first stanza, the dancer's body slowly unfolds itself in a two forward one back rhythm, implying the gradual opening of the character's heart to her lover. The arms are opened and closed and then opened again. The dancer stands up and takes some steps forward and back. In the following parts of the song, the dancing fan turns into certain things that are mentioned in the lyrics. While the lyrics talk about the pillow she shares with her lover, the dancer grabs the closed dancing fan in the kimono's sash and shows it to the spectators in a gentle pose, as if it is the special pillow that has witnessed this great love. When the lyrics talk about the character's lover holding her, the dancer opens the fan fully, and turns it into some kind of being she loves. Through such movements and poses, rather emotional moments, which recall both past memories and future hopes and express both nostalgia and longing, are created. Towards the end, the dancer's body gradually turns inward and the piece ends again with a half sitting pose, but this time with the fan lying on the floor, as the dancer drops it a little later the lyrics talk about awakening from an empty dream. Throughout the piece, the movements of the dancer are slow, soft and tranquil, so that the character is portrayed as graceful. Indigo san expresses her experience of learning *Kurokami* as such:

Kurokami is very emotional. It is not an easy dance. But having a story that impresses me makes it easier for me, as I can give my heart to the story. The song is very serene, and it also has some deep emotion. I practiced it a lot at my house since the last class and today I thought I danced it perfectly. But the teacher pointed out many things that are still not good enough. The deeper I practice it, the deeper it goes, there is no end. But I enjoy it more, when I go deeper and deeper. My movements improve little by little and the teacher instructs me more and more. When I started to learn this dance, I thought that I was the lady in the story. I said to myself 'I am this girl'. From the first moment, I practiced it by adopting the *kimochi* (mood/feeling) of the character. As my waist went down, as my neck tilted a little bit and so on, I became this character more and more. I hope I can do it better and better and better, until I die. I have the sensation that *Kurokami* is my beloved ones. I don't know how to say this. I will be very happy if I can dance this piece until I die. I really like it.

This heartfelt account of Indigo san shows that she somehow had a connection with her deeper emotions while learning *Kurokami*. The actions in the piece seem to have made her remember, rethink, and even relive the experiences with her beloved ones. Besides,

portraying such a character induced her not only to understand, but also to be able to express her inner self. I cannot help but connect Indigo san's words above with a story she told during my interview with her. When I asked about her other hobbies such as reading folk tales, she had a good long talk about a Canadian folk tale that she was reading at that moment. This is the story of a little girl called Indigo:

Indigo knew very well how to extract colours from nature. Her colours were so beautiful that whoever wears the cloths dyed with these colours becomes healthy, younger and happier. One day, the king asked her to bring him the colour indigo. She got anxious, as until then she had not been able to find this rare, precious colour. She tried in vain to seek it everywhere. One day, the god of colours told her that she could find indigo in a remote place that was very hard to access. As the king refused to go there, Indigo herself went. But she did not come back, and no one knows what happened to her. Did she find the colour indigo, did she die or is she still searching for it?

This is certainly a story about the search for one's true self.

Reconsidering the above-mentioned literature on dance and well-being, Indigo san's practice of *kamigatamai* definitely contributes to her well-being by providing "a sense of control" that works against the difficulties and loss of control in daily life. As she says, all her hobbies (reading folk tales, gymnastics for old people, playing guitar, English for old people, and *kamigatamai*) are "*omoshiroi* (interesting, amusing)" for her. In this way, they certainly create a change of focus to pleasure. But this does not mean that there is no stress in *kamigatamai* classes. Indigo san always says that the training of *kamigatamai* is challenging for her in many ways, including the difficulty of memorizing the detailed movements, pushing physical boundaries, etc. Nevertheless, in a manner particular to *kamigatamai* and different from her other hobbies, she notes that enduring the never-ending search for perfection, as in Indigo's search, have made her feel less anger in daily life. Moreover, her identification with *Kurokami* seems to provide her with an opportunity to experience and express difficult emotions in a controlled environment, that is, within a protective cocoon created by *kimono* and *jiuta*. The result is the emergence of a new 'dance self', which is liberated from both her past and present selves, and, in this manner, enables Indigo san to make peace with her past and present, and even her future. She also says that learning *kamigatamai* works as an *ikigai* for her, which is a term in Japanese that can be translated as 'purpose in life'.

At this point, one might reasonably argue that *Kurokami* repeats the dependent, helpless stereotypical identity of a woman within the traditional male-dominated Japanese social system and ask how practising it can promise liberation from the restrictions Japanese women experience in daily life. However, arts, and especially dance, do not work with reason alone. In her book *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*, Tomie Hahn argues that, contrary to common preconceptions, the stereotypical characterizations in Japanese dance do not constrict the practitioners' "sense of individual identity", but instead, "reinforce an expanded image of self", as they allow the practitioners to act out many different characters beyond their real life (2007: 160–161). In this sense, learning Japanese dance becomes a liberating activity, as it "offers [...] powerful expressive means to transcend the boundaries that might confine" the practitioners in their daily life and empowers women in particular "through transformative, shared, embodied experience of multiple identities as well as flexible notions of self, within a society that had historically restricted their expression" (Hahn, 2007: 162).

The piece that Moonlight san was practising during the first months of my fieldwork was *Guchi* (Complaining), in which the character is a woman suffering from jealousy. But portraying of such negative emotions in a *kamigatamai* dance does not result in imprisoning the practitioner within a notorious female stereotype and its related sense of ill-being. *Guchi*, as a more advanced level *kamigatamai* piece, involves challenging circling movements, during which the dancer struggles to spin around repeatedly by keeping her hips quite close to the ground. Besides, at some moments, the dancer completely or partly conceals herself by holding the open fan in front of her face. As a result, spectators see the portrayal of a woman who is somehow trapped in a loop of her own emotions. Moonlight san speaks about dancing *Guchi* this way: "I think that *Guchi* is a piece that elegantly represents a sad woman's heart and feelings that are difficult to express. 'Don't be too lewd.' " Although Moonlight san's motivation to start learning *kamigatamai* is not as emotional as Indigo san's, but is related to a general interest in traditional Japanese arts, these words show that she appropriates the ethical aspect of these arts. Portraying a troubled and distressed character opens a way for her to regulate emotions, and thus contributes to her well-being.



Figure 3. Moonlight san practicing *Guchi* (Sözer Özdemir, 2022c)

With her motivation for learning *kamigatamai* similar to Moonlight san's, Pure Clementine san's experience of learning this tradition involved a liberating expansion in self-image as well as self-expression. The dance she was practising when we made the interview is called *Oboko Giku* (Pure Clementine), in which the character is a lovely, pretty, young girl. Consequently, the dance movements include *kawai* (cute, pretty) gestures that she cannot act out in real life, but that she really enjoys embodying during the practice. She relates her experience thus: "I imagine a teenager *maiko* at Pontocho [an area at the center of Kyoto known for its *geikos* and *maikos*], looking at clementines in the garden. Recently, Indigo san told me that this piece suits me. I also think that it suits me. Though I am much older, a kind of girlish part of me sleeping deep inside of me awakens. Japanese people like *kawai* things, you know." The piece that Pure Clementine san had practised before was *Tsuru no Koe* (The Voice of the Crane), which is based on the emotional love story of a man and a woman who experience a one-night affair on a rainy day in a small hotel by the sea. There, they have a long talk, hear the voice of the crane together and become closer. Before she meets the man, the woman watches the raindrops falling from

the roof of the hotel, dreaming to meet the lover she had wished to have for a long time. Pure Clementine san says that, at first, she did not understand why she performs such a long gaze at the beginning of the dance. Then she understood this very emotional moment by connecting the movements with the lyrics. This led her to dance better, and that was the time that Nao sensei was finally satisfied with her performance. Referring to such experiences Pure Clementine san remarks that *kamigatamai* can be described as “the release of humanity”. She also mentions that she would like to express more of such sensitive feelings, after she gets used more to dancing. As one can see, practising *kamigatamai* gives the students the opportunity to experience a variety of emotions so that they can discover their own deep emotions and inner self.



Figure 4. Pure Clementine San practicing a cute pose in *Oboko Giku* (Sözer Özdemir, 2022d)

As mentioned above, Tea Green san started *kamigatamai* classes within the gloomy atmosphere of the pandemic. Unlike other students, what predominantly provided ‘a sense of control’ to Tea Green san through learning *kamigatami* was her gradual mastery of the movements.

At the beginning, I thought it is totally impossible to imitate Nao sensei’s movements, setting my own level too low with the feeling of resignation, but after getting more serious in taking lessons, I found a joy in becoming able to

do some particular movements that I could not do at all after repeating the same part again and again. Thus, I learned that one's efforts can be rewarded.

Tea Green san would like to continue practising *kamigatamai* as long as she can, and her wish, although it still seems impossible to her, is to get closer —even a little bit— to the beauty of Nao sensei's dancing.



Figure 5. Tea Green San learns by imitating Nao sensei (Sözer Özdemir, 2022e)

As one can see, for the students, learning *kamigatamai*, is above all a never-ending search for beauty, which is tough but which always contributes to their well-being by allowing them to discover a 'dance self'. As in the tale of *Indigo*, one cannot be sure if they can attain this beauty, but the search itself promises inner peace, healing and well-being. Here the patient and the healer are not separate; the patients are their own healers who seek to be possessed by the tacit beauty of the *kamigatami* dance they learn by devoting themselves to embodying the strict frame of the tradition in question.



Figure 6. Bamboo San in a graceful pose (Sözer Özdemir, 2022a)

Conclusion

The literature on dance and well-being is largely centred around studies done at the Western world. Besides, it mostly focuses on the practice of modern or popular dance forms. There are no studies that investigate well-being in *kamigatami*. Nevertheless, as discussed throughout this study, the learning experience of Nao sensei's students largely overlaps with the findings conveyed in this literature that are summarized above through these keywords; a) identity (self-esteem, self-expression, agential capacity; links to past, present, and future; emotional regulation, enhancement of life, sense of control, finding purpose in life), b) belonging (positive social interaction, meaningful communication), c) self-worth (a sense of achievement, self-confidence, self-assurance, self-awareness, self-efficacy), d) creativity, e) aesthetics, f) embodiment (connection of mind, body and spirit), and f) affective responses (happiness, hopefulness, positivity, enthusiasm, pleasure, and enjoyment; coping with stress). But what specially stands out in the experience of learning *kamigatamai* is the development of self-identity, which is somehow related to all these themes and is formulated in this study as the discovery of a 'dance self'.

The concept 'dance self' is closely related to building a connection with one's inner self, as well as to deeper thoughts, emotions, beliefs, etc. that are not easily expressed in words. Through embodying the actions of the characters that go much beyond their daily life, the

learners of *kamigatamai* enter an unseen, unknown realm, in which they will discover and be able to express a newly liberated self through dancing. Even though it seems surprising, this happens through the repetition of already-established patterns instead of free improvisation. This method of learning might look constraining at first sight, but is in fact the opposite and provides an opportunity for practitioners to liberate themselves from their everyday identities by connecting them with their deeper selves. Indigo san, Pure Clementine san, Tee Green san, Moonlight san, and Bamboo san become in effect different selves from those who had not yet started learning *kamigatamai*. They all added a precious dancing identity to their lives. Although she even got the licence of a professional dancer, Bamboo san told me that she did not share her experience in *kamigatamai* with everybody around her, but only with those who can understand and appreciate it.

As discussed above, the discovery of a 'dance self' in *kamigatami* is related with a search for beauty as well. This is not only about looking, dressing, or moving beautifully, but about acting in a beautiful manner, that parallels the aesthetic ideals of *wabi* and *sabi*. Embodying the simplicity, the modesty, the gracefulness, the nostalgia, the awareness of impermanence, and even the serene joy in *kamigatamai*, the students of Nao sensei make peace with their past, future, inner self and (even negative) emotions so that a way towards well-being is opened for them.

Certainly, this study has its own limitations. Future studies, which would include learners of *kamigatamai* from different genders, ages, classes, places, etc., are needed. Besides, conducting fieldwork at professional environments might possibly reach different results and provide findings that would allow researchers to make meaningful comparisons. I hope that this study might act as a pioneer and provide an incentive for new studies and further discussions on the subject.

REFERENCES

Chappell, Kerry; Redding, Emma; Crickmay, Ursula; Stancliffe, Rebecca; Jobbins, Veronica and Smith, Sue. (2021). "The Aesthetic, Artistic and Creative Contributions of Dance for Health and Wellbeing across the Lifecourse: A Systematic Review" *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*. 16: 1–20.

Deschênes, Bruno; Eguchi, Yuko. (2018). "Embodied Orality: Transmission in Traditional Japanese Music" *Asian Music*. 49(1): 58–79.

Farnell, Brenda. (1999). "It Goes without Saying – But Not Always" *Dance in the Field: Theory, Methods and Issues in Dance Ethnography*, Ed. Theresa Buckland: pp. 145–160. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Griffith, Paul; Okada, Mariko. (2016). "Interlude: Nihonbuyo: classical Dance" *A History of Japanese Theatre*, Ed. Jonah Salz: pp. 141–149. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hahn, Tomie. (2007). *Sensational Knowledge: Embodying Culture through Japanese Dance*. Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Hanna, Judith L. (1995). "The Power of Dance: Health and Healing" *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*. 1(4): 323–331.

Japanese-English Bilingual Corpus of Wikipedia's Kyoto Articles. (n.d.). *Kamigatamai* (上方舞). Access on December, 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.japanese-wiki-corpus.org/culture/Kamigatamai.html>.

Kamigatamai Yoshimura-ryu Association. (n.d.). *What is Jiutamai (kamigatamai)?* Access on December, 2022. Retrieved from <https://yoshimura-ryu.com/en/what.html>.

Kawulich, Barbara B. (2005). "Participant Observation as a Data Collection Method" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 2(6): -. Retrived from <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/466/997>

Parkes, Graham; Loughnane, Adam. (Spring 2024). "Japanese Aesthetics" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Ed. Edward N. Zalta; Uri Nodelman: - . Retrieved from <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2024/entries/japanese-aesthetics/>

Sellers-Young, Barbara. (1993). *Teaching Personality with Gracefulness: The Transmission of Japanese Cultural Values through Japanese Dance Theatre*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America.

Sözer Özdemir, Şebnem. [videographer] (2022a). Nao Yoshimura's Private Class with Bamboo san [Video field recordings of dance]. July 12, 2022. Kyoto, Japan: Private

Collection.

Sözer Özdemir, Şebnem. [videographer] (2022b). Nao Yoshimura's Private Class with Indigo san [Video field recordings of dance]. October 11, 2022. Kyoto, Japan: Private Collection.

Sözer Özdemir, Şebnem. [videographer] (2022c). Nao Yoshimura's Private Class with Moonlight san [Video field recordings of dance]. September 27, 2022. Kyoto, Japan: Private Collection.

Sözer Özdemir, Şebnem. [videographer] (2022d). Nao Yoshimura's Private Class with Pure Clementine san [Video field recordings of dance]. August 2, 2022. Kyoto, Japan: Private Collection.

Sözer Özdemir, Şebnem. [videographer] (2022e). Nao Yoshimura's Private Class with Tea Green san [Video field recordings of dance]. November 16, 2022. Kyoto, Japan: Private Collection.

Tsuge, Gen'ichi. (1983). *Anthology of Sōkyoku and Jiuta Song Texts*. Tokyo: Academia Music Ltd.

Yoshimura, Nao. (2012). *Kamigatamai Yoshimura Nao*. Retrieved from <https://www.yoshimuranao.com/>. (Access on December, 2022).

APPENDIX I- Pre-Prepared Interview Questions to *Kamigatamai* Students of Nao Yoshimura

- Could you introduce and talk about yourself?
- When did you start learning *kamigatamai*? Have you had lessons regularly without a break? Is Nao sensei your first sensei? How many *mai* pieces you have learned till now?
- Why did you start learning *kamigatamai*?
- Do you plan being professional? What did you do/are you doing for this?
- What does learning in general mean to you? Do you like learning in general? Is learning *kamigatamai* different from other learning experiences?
- What was/is easier and harder in learning *kamigatamai*? Did these change in time?
- What do you like in learning *kamigatamai*? Did these change in time?
- Did learning *kamigatamai* change something in your life; in your body, in your soul, in your thoughts and emotions about dancing and the world?
- If there are no *kamigatamai* lessons in your life, would it be different? What would be different?
- Which *mai* do you learn right now?
- How is *mai* you would learn selected?
- Do you observe other students/performers? Why?
- How would you describe the teacher-student relationship in *kamigatamai*?
- How would you describe a good *kamigatamai* learner?
- Is performing different from learning? How? Are these connected?
- What is/was hard in the performance process? Did these features change in time?
- What do you like in performance process? Did these features change in time?
- How would you describe a good *kamigatamai* performer?
- What does *kamigatamai* mean to you? If you were to answer with a single sentence, what would you say?
- Did learning *kamigatamai* teach you also something else?
- What is your motivation for continuing the classes?

- Is there anything that you did not tell before to anybody about your *kamigatamai* learning experience? Will you share it with me or others or do you prefer to keep it to yourself?