

## Neongyoku (“Chanting with Head on a Human Pillow”)

The master, who is very fond of *utai*, or Noh-chanting, happens to hear Taro-kaja, his servant, doing it marvellously well at home. So he summons him to entertain him with some chanting. Taro-kaja excuses himself, saying that it is a bad habit of his that he is hardly able to sing without drinking. The master takes it kindly and gives him plenty of *sake*. The servant, however, mentions another bad habit of his while chanting: he needs to rest his head on the lap of his wife. The master offers his own lap instead and urges him to begin. Thus he finally starts singing and, indeed, is so accomplished that the master suggests that he could do it equally well sitting on the floor. All at once his voice fails him, so the lord offers his lap again. Taro-kaja instantly recovers his voice. The master has his servant’s head rest on and off his lap several times, until the servant, totally carried away by the joy of singing and the influence of *sake*, stands up singing and dancing, with hilarious but unhappy consequences.

## Chikubushima Island

On Chikubushima, an island on the northern part of Lake Biwa, stands Chikubushima-shrine, famous for enshrining Benzaiten (a patron of music and eloquence), well guarded by the Dragon God who is the Lord of the Lake. It has long been a centre of pilgrimage for divine protection.

In the middle of March, court officials of Emperor Daigo (alternately called Emperor Engi, 901-922) leave the capital on their pilgrimage to Chikubushima, and crossing over Shinomiya and Osaka hills, arrive at a lake-shore. Happily finding a fishing-boat coming towards them carrying an old fisherman and a young lady, they ask the fisherman to grant them the favour of allowing them to board. He refuses at first, but hearing that they are visiting Chikubushima, he allows them on board and starts rowing the boat on a balmy spring day in among the beautiful spring scenery towards the sacred island.

Having arrived at the island, court officials, under the guidance of the fisherman, pay homage to Benzaiten. But noticing the young lady follows them, they ask him if women are not forbidden to enter the place. The old man replies that the object of worship enshrined here is Benzaiten, a goddess of wondrous power, and that no discrimination is exercised here on the grounds of sexual identity. He then says that he and the young lady are not human beings; and she, opening the shrine’s doors, enters and vanishes, while the old man, saying that he is the Lord of the Lake, plunges into the deep waters of the lake. (End of Part One.)

Soon the shrine shakes furiously and the Goddess appears seated within, shooting out brilliant rays. With heavenly music in the air and amid dancing flower petals fluttering down, Benzaiten performs a dance of a celestial nymph. All at once, as if in response to her dancing, the Dragon God springs up from within the lake and offers to court officials treasure of gold, silver and jewels. Both Benzaiten and the Dragon God offer a guarantee of the salvation of all people and the safety of the land. They then disappear into the shrine and into the lake respectively.

Note: In the Kongo school of Noh, Benzaiten plays the *shite* and the Dragon God the *tsure*, in contrast to all other schools of Noh where they are reversed.

by Takao Saijo