

A Japanese Performance of Intertextuality: From *Nô* to Kabuki to Film

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This paper resulted from the request by Professor Margot Fassler that I speak on a topic reflecting my research on the documentation of music history through visual sources. I responded that my research focused on sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Mughal miniature paintings (North India) that depict music and dance, but that recently I had returned to a focus on Japan. Would a visually-oriented paper on Japanese music be appropriate? Yes, she replied; the highly ritualized *nô* drama was of some interest at the Institute but familiar to few. Accordingly, the presentation was introductory and heavily laced with audio and visual material. To publish a cogent version of the text without that material is a challenge. What you read here is my attempt to retain to the extent possible the style and flow of such a scholarly production, as I develop the point that, from early instances of recorded poetry to theatrical forms to popular culture of the present day, creative Japanese, including musicians and other performing artists, have pursued “the intertextual effort” with relish. I take “intertextual effort” to mean “the complex and variegated play of borrowing, citation, implicit or explicit references . . . and substitutions, which substantiate the relationships between the texts of a given culture (and even between texts of different cultures).”¹

The intertextual examples on which I focus are both verbal and musical. They have to do with a story, a play, and three different musical-dramatic enactments of that play that traverse five centuries of Japanese cultural production. I will explore three points about this particular intertextual effort: (1) in terms of mode, it utilizes both citation and reference; (2) in terms of intention, it is both meaningful and functional; and (3) its use had to be balanced with the need for relevance for each contemporary audience.

The story that underlies my illustrative example of the intertextual effort is a very old one with a basis in factual Japanese history, at least in terms of the main characters and the relationships among them, as well as some of their deeds and the broad outlines of events. The story transports us to medieval Japan of the twelfth century c.e. By that time centuries of a governmental system in which power and authority rested with an imperial establishment were drawing to a close with several decades of epic struggle between two clans—the Heike and the Genji—for controlling power. The Genji clan, and specifically the Minamoto family within that clan, emerged victorious, and a new form of governance was instituted in which power resided with the *samurai* (warrior) class, while titular authority—such as it was—remained with the person of the Emperor. That system, initiated officially as the Kamakura Shogunate (1185-1333) by Yoritomo Minamoto, remained in place until the mid-nineteenth century, though the *samurai* clan in control changed several times. Stories of the twelfth-century struggle abounded and have survived, indeed flourished, in forms oral and literary; needless to say, they constitute much material from which artists have drawn for the practice of intertextuality—a deeply enculturated Japanese practice.

“Ataka” in the Nô Style

I will demonstrate this through a play that is based more or less on an episode in the epic *Tale of the Heike*. The play, “Ataka,” was fashioned for enactment in the style of the *nô* theater by the playwright Nobumitsu Kojiro (1435-1516), a playwright member of the Kanze lineage of hereditary actors.² By his time the story was already an old one, told in various forms,³ but the

nô drama style was still relatively recent; it was developed by the actor-theorist Motokiyo Zeami (1363?-1443?), whose lifetime probably overlapped with Kojiro's.

The aesthetics of the *nô* style lie primarily in Zen Buddhism owing to the patronage of Zeami by the third head of the Ashikaga clan of *samurai* which was then in control of the country (1336-1573). (Of the numerous sects of Buddhism in Japan, the sect of the highest-ranking *samurai* was Zen.) The Zen aesthetic expresses at once elegance and a striving for simplicity. Drawing on existing dance, music, and theatrical forms in good intertextual manner, Zeami created an intricate fusion of music, dance, mask, costume, and language.⁴ His *nô* performing style was specifically associated with the elite level of *samurai* society. Because *nô* has been transmitted very carefully from the medieval period, one can assume when watching a live or filmed contemporary performance that one is witnessing a very old form of dramatic production. *Nô* retains its elite cultural status to the present time.

In the *nô* performing style the aesthetic principle of "maximum effect from a minimum of means" is manifested in many ways. Originally (and occasionally still) presented in a small wooden pavilion on temple grounds, *nô* is now most often presented in such a pavilion that has been constructed inside a theater. Open on two sides to the audience, the relatively small, highly polished wooden stage is connected to the green room by a walkway that is utilized dramatically; the pavilion's tiled roof covers them both. The stage backdrop is always a single pine tree painted on the rear wall. Theatrical props are kept to a minimum; lighting remains consistent. The acting is suggestive rather than realistic, each motion so stylized, so slow, and pared to such a minimum that it creates a tremendous effect. Sliding their feet, with their bodies held in a certain stance, actors glide for the most part rather than walk or run. Dance segments of the plays seem hardly that. Actors (only male) sing as well as speak and dance; they are few in number, categorized as role types. A male chorus sits to stage right; two (or three) drummers and a flutist line up across the stage at the rear. Only the brocaded silk costumes are rich and elaborate, reminders of the wealth of *nô*'s medieval patrons.

The plays, too, are relatively simple. In essence, "Ataka" is about the *samurai* code of loyalty to one's superior even in the most difficult of circumstances.⁵ Yoritomo Minamoto has emerged from the Genji-Heike struggles as the most powerful individual in Japan. Unfortunately, in 1187 a desperate internecine struggle ensues between him and his younger brother Yoshitsune, a lieutenant (a *hōgan*) who had stood with him in many battles. Now Yoritomo has turned against his brother. Sorrowfully, Yoshitsune flees from the capital, forced on the orders of his brother to take a dangerous route over a mountain pass that is guarded by a military barrier.

Yoshitsune is a brave, heroic person of the *samurai* class; he is also elegant and courtly of manner as a person of his elite status would have been. (Interestingly, in "Ataka" he is usually played by a child actor, suggesting perhaps the powerless circumstances to which he has been reduced.) Fleeing with him is Benkei, his loyal retainer-warrior, who devises a plan by which they and their small band of men try to get through the barrier. Although they have a porter (a baggage carrier, *gōriki*) in their band, they disguise Yoshitsune as a lowly porter as well. Benkei and the rest of the *samurai* don the robes of traveling mountain monks (*yamabushi*, as they were called, were real characters of considerable interest in the medieval period) who pretend to be collecting funds to rebuild an important Buddhist temple in the capital that has been destroyed in the fighting between the clans. A rumor circulates about this disguise, however, and it has reached the ears of Togashi, the high-ranking officer who, with another group of

samurai, is guarding the mountain pass through which Benkei and his men must pass. Togashi has ordered that any *yamabushi* who come to the barrier be summarily executed. Indeed, some have been already; returning from scouting, the real baggage carrier reports seeing heads on stakes.

Benkei's encounter with Togashi constitutes the centerpiece of the story. Even though Benkei tries to persuade Togashi that they are real monks on this fundraising project, Togashi tells the group that they must prepare to meet their fate. Observing a ritual within the play, they proceed with "final offices" appropriate to their Buddhist faith. But then Togashi decides to pursue the matter of the fundraising project, and demands that Benkei read his official charge from the subscription document (*kanjinchô*) that he must be carrying from the temple, and on which he will write the names of donors. Pretending that he really has a *kanjinchô*, and standing at an angle that prevents Togashi's seeing it, Benkei "reads" dramatically from an empty scroll. So effective is Benkei that Togashi is letting the men go—until a barrier guard thinks he recognizes Yoshitsune in the disguised porter and they are again stopped.

This is the crucial moment of the story: the only way Benkei can convince Togashi that Yoshitsune is not Yoshitsune is to commit an act unforgivable in the *samurai* code. Ignoring the order to stop, he "accuses" the porter of not moving quickly enough, and beats his lord and master, shouting "Pass on!" Togashi has become convinced that Yoshitsune is indeed Yoshitsune, but he so admires Benkei for taking the potentially self-destructive risk he has taken to save his master that he decides to let them go. He even pledges a gift for the rebuilding of the Todaiji temple. Thus the band passes through the barrier.

Once they are away, Benkei apologizes, Yoshitsune forgives him, and we think the story is ending. But here comes the offer of a gift of sake wine which Togashi sends to redeem his rudeness to Benkei. A drinking scene ensues, complete with the enjoyment of "spontaneous" dance. Fortunately, inebriation does not result in tragic indiscretion. The play ends with the men feeling that they have "stepped on a tiger's tail" but escaped.

"Ataka" in Kabuki and Film

When Nobumitsu Kojiro wrote this play Yoshitsune and Benkei were the stuff of very lively legends-in-the-making, the shogunate system of government was showing prospects for keeping peace in the land, and a social system with a privileged *samurai* class was being worked out. About three hundred years later, however, the shogunate under the extremely powerful Tokugawa clan (1600-1868) had become extremely oppressive. Japanese society was highly segmented, and the *samurai* class was so huge, privileged, and uncontrollable, that rebellion was afoot. It was at that time that "Ataka" was transformed into a play for performance in *kabuki* theater style by the playwright Namiki Gohei III (1789-1855). This version of the play was called "Kanjinchô" in reference to the subscription scroll.

The *kabuki* theater was a lively part of urban life in the Tokugawa capital, Edo (now Tokyo). The government attempted to control it, confining theaters and, to a large extent, even the actors to the pleasure districts outside the city proper.⁶ Much of the content of *kabuki* entertainment comprised titillatingly sensual dance pieces performed by the male actors, and plays about the lives of the common people, including the courtesans of the pleasure quarters. There were some historical plays from the old epics, and plays adapted from the established and stable *nô* drama repertoire.

Still, adapting “Ataka”—a play without any female characters, and deeply expressive of religious philosophy—for the popular kabuki theater after three hundred years seems to me a choice worthy of interrogation. Because I agree that intertextual practice is in various ways functional, I cannot help but ruminate on the reasons. Perhaps it was brought into the repertoire to appeal to the elite members of the audience; there will have been some. But perhaps there was some more political reason: government pressure on the *kabuki* producers to remind the *samurai* in the audience of higher ideals of their class than they were then upholding, or, through the play’s theme of loyalty, to advocate for loyalty to the Tokugawa while their establishment was having increasing difficulty maintaining control. Or, conversely, perhaps it was a covert way on the part of the “artistic world” to encourage those *samurai* serving in rebelling groups to act loyally to their leaders. I have yet to find explanations in the work of Japanese literary historians.

What leads me to posit possible political motivations is the third appearance of the play “Ataka” in dramatized form: in 1945, when the war effort was utterly desperate in Japan, “Ataka” was adapted by the director Akira Kurosawa as a feature film for the government-controlled wartime movie industry. The title of that version, “Tora no o fumu otokotachi” (“Men Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail”) was taken from the penultimate line of “Ataka.”

Tora no o o fumi
dokuja no kuchi o
nogaretaru kokochi shite.

Stepping on the tiger’s tail
they all feel as though they go
escaping from the serpent’s poison jaw.

For the movie industry to have drawn on a traditional theatrical form was not in the least unusual. The film historian Darrell Davis describes a set of films made from the late 1930s through the war as in “monumental style because they invest a form of spirituality in traditional Japanese heritage. . . . The films enact a canonization of history, an emphasis on indigenous art forms and design, and a corresponding technical repertoire of long takes and long shots, very slow camera movements, and a highly ceremonial manner of blocking, acting and set design. The monumental style sets out to transform Japanese tradition from a cultural legacy into a sacrament.”⁷

Although that description of the style evokes images of *nô* drama performance, the traditional theater from which filmmakers drew most was *kabuki*, and therefore the historical period most invoked was the Tokugawa era with its heroic *samurai bushido* code.

“Men Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail” is an exceptional film in many ways, not the least of which is its setting in the pre-Tokugawa period, an even more idealized time. And, rather than violence and bravado, there is quiet, strong courage. I think of a ritual within the play that is retained fully in the film—the Buddhist rite by which Benkei, Yoshitsune, and their small band of men prepare themselves for death. How very meaningful, how relevant the story must have been at

that desperate time when Tokyo was in ruins from firebombing and the war's end in defeat was imminent. The play was potentially a powerful means of invoking in the suffering populace the ideals the government was depending on—courage and loyalty in the face of even the most difficult circumstances.

While the story of the crossing of the barrier could have been retold in film entirely without citations from the text and references to the stylistic content of the *nô* play “Ataka,” Kurosawa made it a deeply intertextual dramatic production. The story's potency for its audience would have been all the greater through the stylistic invocation of that particular vignette from history, by those textual reminders of traditional practices, by nostalgic re-enactment of idealized ways of being and thinking in the *nô* style, whose “sacramental gravity remains inviolate.”⁸ The layers of meaning were not lost on the censorship board of the American Occupation Forces, who banned the showing of the just-completed film.

Intertextuality in Variant Versions of “Ataka”

In subsequent productions there have been some differences in both poetry and prose from the original “Ataka.” As one would expect, the differences are greater as the medium moves from *nô* to *kabuki* and then to film. Some of the liberties in the *kabuki* and film versions are those taken when a novel is adapted to film—characters added, perspectives shifted, some segments emphasized and others downplayed or omitted. The only example I will mention concerns the character of the baggage carrier. As recounted above, in the *nô* play there is a servant porter (*gôriki*) in the original small band of men; in the play his one task is to act as a scout near the barrier and to report back to Benkei. In the *kabuki* version the *gôriki* has no function; he is merely on stage. In the film, however, the *gôriki* is a character with a real role. He has been hired locally and is acting informally as a guide. At first the lowly porter has no idea who the men are, and his relationship with them as events unfold is part of the interest of the film version. Kurosawa, who was clearly familiar with the *nô* drama tradition, knew of the comic role type called *kyôgen*. In intertextual fashion he combined the possibility of a comic *kyôgen* role in *nô* with the actuality of the porter character in “Ataka” to create a major purveyor of drama and levity in the film. For instance, twentieth-century filmgoers unfamiliar with the old story can realize from the panicked reaction of the *gôriki* that Benkei “reads” to Togashi from an empty scroll.

As for the music in these dramatic productions, one element links *nô* and *kabuki*: the ensemble of four instrumentalists, three drummers and a flutist. Coordinated vocal calls by the drummers, and the sounds of their interlocking drumming patterns, add considerably to the drama. They are basic to all music of the *nô* and to some of the *kabuki* musical genres. For “Kanjinchô” as for “Ataka,” they are arrayed in full view across the rear of the stage.

However, in *kabuki* and film the music too moves farther and farther from that of the *nô*. Most important in this regard is the place of music in the particular dramatic medium. As with opera, music is integral to the *nô* performing style; without music, *nô* would not be *nô*. Actors are singers, and the chorus members are members of the troupe who are not playing a role on a given day. For *kabuki*, however, music is not a defining feature of the performance ilk as a whole. Some *kabuki* plays include no music; in many off-stage musicians provide musical intertextual references that complement the stage text and action—the sound of an ominously, slowly beaten temple bell that the audience understands as suggestive of impending doom, or a moment of festival music on flute and percussion to suggest a celebration and fun. On the other

hand, some plays feature musical scenes, while others are musical throughout. All singing is done by specialist musicians. When a *nô* play is adapted to *kabuki*, the music integral to the play will be maintained—in its place, but not the same music necessarily, nor the expectation that the actors will do the singing.

As for films, we expect music in the course of most of them, and it can certainly fulfill dramatic purposes. However, music is generally kept very much in the background, functioning almost subliminally. The music for “Men Who Step on the Tiger’s Tail” lies somewhere between that subliminality and its place in *kabuki*: as is intended for *kabuki* audiences, I think we are supposed to be mindful of the music—or at least the soundscape—a good deal of the time. Intertextual references abound, and texted song in the film functions much as the chorus parts do in *nô* drama.

Music also moves progressively farther from *nô* in content and style. This, too, has to do with the particular performing medium. Also, I think it has to do with the aesthetic expectations of the audience. In the *nô* performing style text is rendered as heightened speech (*kotoba*), or is set to melody (*fushi*) in one of two styles. One of these (*yowagin*) is true melodic singing, but of a very stylized sort: it has three central pitches—low, middle, and high—and the singer moves certain ways among them. The other style of melody (*tsuyogin*), more like chant than “melody,” reveals the influence of Buddhist chant.⁹

To a greater extent than in most *nô* plays the text in “Ataka” is rendered either in heightened speech or in the chant-like style. The nature of the story—ostensibly being about monks on a religious mission—might be the reason.

This ponderous vocal style would not have appealed to the audience for *kabuki*. *Kabuki* belonged to the realm of popular culture, with lyrical songs. No clearer sign of popular culture exists than the *shamisen*—the long-necked plucked lute used to accompany professional singers. The *shamisen* was an instrument of urban popular music par excellence, a world away from the aesthetic of the *nô* drama. In “Kanjinchô” an equal number of singers and *shamisen* players sit arrayed at the rear of the stage, elevated on a riser behind the percussionists and flutist.

With such differences between the musical content and styles of *nô* and *kabuki*, the question arises of what happened musically when a play from the former repertoire was performed as the latter, and more specifically, when “Ataka” was performed as “Kanjinchô”? Because *kabuki* developed in a period when Japanese society was highly segmented, *nô* plays could be adapted into *kabuki*, but personnel did not move with them. Musicians of the *nô* drama world were not likely to intersect with professional musicians in the *kabuki* music world. The singers of *kabuki* music did not study the acting roles or the chorus parts of *nô* plays, and *nô* actors would not study the singing of the *kabuki* music styles; they inhabited separate socio-cultural spaces.

That being the case, we are led to consider those moments in “Kanjinchô” when the *nô* style of vocal delivery was cited. As one would expect, this occurred at crucial moments, including, for instance, Benkei’s weighty pretense of reading from the subscription scroll. At the beginning and end of the play, too, the memory of *nô* is invoked not only through text but also through the vocal delivery.¹⁰

The play begins, as all *nô* plays begin, with the second-most important character (*waki*)

introducing himself. In “Ataka” that is Togashi: we see him giving orders to the barrier guards to be on the lookout for mountain monks. Then comes another standard segment: the entrance of the most important character (*shite*)—in this case Benkei—to ensemble entry music, followed by an expressive poem sung in the chant-like vocal style by the chorus. The drummers’ calls and strokes are also very expressive here. The poem is in classical form, with lines in the syllable pattern of seven plus five (first line repeated). (The “n” of *shioruran* counts as a syllable.)

Suzukake no Tabi no koromo wa

tsuyukeki sode ya

shioruran.

Dressed in the traveling robes of monks,
sweeping the dew,
our sleeves are drenched.

In the *nô* play Benkei and his men proceed to review their journey; they explain that their Lord Benkei is disguised as chief among the monks, and they are setting out again on their difficult journey. *Nô* plays always begin with someone traveling somewhere—geographically, or perhaps psychologically. This exchange is omitted in the *kabuki* play.

Benkei and his men then set the scene in terms of time, place, and feeling in text that is retained in the *kabuki*. This text is poetry also, and it permits me to point out another instance of intertextuality: Embedded within a longer newly-composed passage are these lines from a pre-existent poem that the medieval playwright cited:

Kore ya kono

yuku mo kaeru mo

Wakarete wa

shiru mo shiranu mo

Oh, there lies the Hill of Meeting
where travelers who come and go,
both friends and strangers,
though once parted,
shall ever meet again.

In the *nô* play the singing style is still the chant-like melody, at a higher pitch. The drums continue to play in close coordination with the singing.

In *kabuki* the intertextual use of the *nô* text of the opening poem, and the scene-setting poem, is literal citation; however, the music is referential. The instrumental entry music at the beginning is imitative of *nô* but not adopted precisely. It properly begins with a shrill flute blast that unmistakably announces this moment in the play; also properly, the drums start out with an approximation of the *nô* patterns. The singers render the opening poem of “Ataka” with “choral” chant-like vocal delivery, accompanied on drums by an imitation of the *nô* pattern. However, that quickly gives way to a declaration that this is *kabuki*, with the entry of the popular-culture *shamisen*. The text is again cited from the *nô* play, but the music has become *kabuki* music—a song genre called *nagauta*.¹¹

What happens in the Kurosawa film here at the beginning? The small band of “monks” in familiar robes are on their way somewhere as in the *nô* play. True to the story, they are making their way on a mountain trail. We hear bells in the distance, suggesting the many temples the men would have been passing in the old Heike stories. Most telling in intertextual terms, we also hear the opening poem, albeit from an unseen chorus of male singers. Significantly, the chorus starts out in chant-like style, as in *nô*. The first twelve syllables are sung only once, however, and by the second line of the poem the intertextual reference is pared to only the text. The music is made more relevant to the film’s audience in two ways: by substituting for the ponderous *nô*-style melody the lush male choral sound that was widespread in Japan at the time the film was made, and by an orchestral accompaniment to the chorus. By the middle of the twentieth century Western music was the preeminent music of Japanese culture, and an orchestra was likely to be providing music for films. As the play was taken from *nô* to *kabuki* to film, then, the music also moved farther and farther away from *nô*.

These examples have shown how, at the macroscopic level, the story of Yoshitsune and Benkei at the Ataka barrier—a vignette drawn from epic history—has provided material for considerable intertextual effort. Down a level of specificity, one particular dramatized version—the *nô* play “Ataka”—has been used meaningfully for two other dramatic productions. At a more microscopic level, pieces of the text of “Ataka” and moments of its music have been cited or suggested in purposeful ways.

Though to adapt a play that was created originally for some other style of dramatic production for *kabuki* was commonplace, it seems reasonable to raise the possibility that the adaptation of “Ataka” to *kabuki* three hundred years after its creation served some political purpose. Likewise, adhering as closely as the film did to the *nô* play transported the weightiest of dramatic traditions into the contemporary medium of film at a very serious time in Japanese history. The practice of intertextuality in these examples was intellectual, aesthetic, and functional on the part of playwrights, musicians, and a film director.

For an intertextual effort to be effective, it must constitute a form of communication among those who share knowledge: audiences have to be cognizant that some text is being cited or suggested, and understand why. If they understand, the intertextual effort serves to reinforce cultural memory and also to deepen meaning. In the early fifteenth century when “Ataka” was written and enacted for its elite samurai audience, the degree of shared knowledge and understanding of meanings in the text and music could be counted upon to be great. When the play was adopted for *kabuki*, however, the degree of shared knowledge and understanding of

the original text and performance style was probably not great. Thus, the new intertextual production did additional work: while communicating through shared knowledge and understanding to those in the audience who might know, it could also be a means of disseminating some old and new knowledge and understanding to a broader audience. Kurosawa's challenge was the greatest: his introduction of the comic character, I think, gave him a mediator, a kind of translator for modern reception.

Among Japanese audiences at the beginning of the twenty-first century, cultural memory of the story and of the "Kanjinchô" version is lively. It is the canonic piece from the *kabuki* repertoire that school children learn about, in the little they learn about their traditional culture. Theatrical productions are presented regularly. A sense of its present life can be gained by an internet search under "Kanjinchô." There it is, material for new intertextual effort.¹²

ENDNOTES

1. Marco DeMarinis, *The Semiotics of Performance*, trans. Aine O'Healy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 4.
2. "Ataka," in *Masterworks of the nô Theater*, trans. Kenneth Yasuda (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).
3. See *The Tale of the Heike*, trans. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).
4. See Kunio Komparu, *The Noh Theater: Principles and Perspectives* (New York: Weatherhill, 1983).
5. See *Yoshitsune: A Fifteenth-Century Japanese Chronicle*, trans. Helen Craig McCullough (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1971, 1990).
6. See Donald Shively, "Bakufu versus Kabuki." *Harvard Journal of Asian Studies* 18 (1955): 326-56; "The Social Environment of Tokugawa Kabuki," in *Studies in Kabuki: Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context*, ed. James Brandon et al. (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978), 1-61.
7. Darrell William Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness: Monumental Style, National Identity, Japanese Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 2 and 6.
8. Davis, *Picturing Japaneseness*, 109.
9. These styles are illustrated in my book *Music in Japan: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), with CD.
10. For the texts, see my *Music in Japan*. In the oral presentation at Yale comparisons of these moments were made with audio and video clips.
11. See James R. Brandon et al., eds., *Studies in Kabuki: Its Acting, Music, and Historical Context* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1978).
12. For further information on this subject see *Traditional Japanese Theater: An Anthology of Plays*, ed. Karen Brazell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); "The Tradition of

Performing Arts in Japan: The Artistry of Kabuki, Noh, and Bunraku," in the series *Japan: The Land and Its People*, produced by Shin-Ei, Inc. 1989. VHS. 29 min. Distributed by GPN, P.O.Box 80669, Lincoln, NE 68501-0669 (gpn@unlinfo.unl.edu).

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