

Europe's only Shinto master gives faith a touch of Holland's tradition

By MARJAN BEX

AMSTERDAM (Kyodo) Dutch former actor Paul de Leeuw is recognized as the only Shinto master in Europe. An actor before becoming a Shinto priest, he now gives classes and lectures about meditation.

The classical author Zeami, known as Kanze Motokiyo, used to say, "it is all about concentration." Zeami (1363-1443) is considered the father of noh. Concentration is everything, not only in theater, but also in Shinto, from which noh emerged. De Leeuw, 58, combines both.

"My aim as an actor was to show another world. In a way, I do the same now as a ceremony master. I feel I am acting in a way," de Leeuw said at the Japanese-Dutch Friendship Foundation building in a newly developed part of Amsterdam.

His house, which includes the Dutch Yamakage Shinto Shrine, incorporates a "kami-dana" household Shinto shrine and a "shime-nawa" (sacred rope). It is also home to the Dutch Shinto Association.

"When I was approved as a Shinto priest by the Rev. Yamakage, I was told to apply Shinto to Dutch society," de Leeuw said. "So in that sense I decided to change the interior of the shrine a little bit from the interior I knew from Japan.

"As Holland has for ages been a maritime country, this is integrated here. Unlike shrines in Japan, the kami-dana is to be found at the north side. For Dutch seamen, the north was of vital importance as they navigated by the North Star. You can say that placing the kami-dana to the north is to honor the seamen."

Having studied Dutch literature and theater at Leiden University, de Leeuw came into contact with Shinto in 1977 when as a theater producer he attended a workshop in Paris.

Two years earlier, he had been one of the initiators of the renowned international theater circle Dogtroep, based in the Netherlands.

"The inspiration for Dogtroep was to be found in movies like 'Rashomon,' directed by Akira Kurosawa, theater works by Shuji Terayama, and in Japanese kabuki theater," de Leeuw said.

After a performance by Yoshi Oida's Yoshi and Company in the Amsterdam Mickery Theatre, he came closer to his dream of studying with Japanese masters.

"I received a grant from the Dutch government to participate in an international program (in Paris), where Yoshi Oida, assisted by four of his countrymen, each skilled in a different Japanese discipline, initiated a select group of dancers and actors into the Japanese secrets of gesture and sound."

Oida, having undergone similar experiences as de Leeuw in theater and spiritual life, wrote the book "An Actor Drift" about how he lived for acting and doing Shinto.

De Leeuw still views him as a mentor.

For de Leeuw, everything he learned was intersected: Shinto and aikido, the ideas of philosopher and literary theoretician Roland Barthes, who wrote a book about the importance of empty space in Japanese art titled "The Empire of Signs," and his personal background in theater.



"It was during the workshop that I learned the importance of cleaning, or 'misogi' (a purification ceremony)," he remembered.

"Before every session we had to clean, our master said. When a famous actress attending the workshop asked her servant to do the cleaning, she was sent out right away. She clearly did not understand the meaning of misogi," he said.

The workshop left de Leeuw with many questions, which he put in a letter to his Shinto teacher, Motohisa Yamakage, 81, the 79th head priest of Yamakage Shinto Shrine in Koda, Aichi Prefecture.

"The answer I received was an invitation to meet again and to take classes -- with clearly set conditions, however," he said, laughing.

He had to commit to 100 days of classes, was not allowed to stop once he started, and every morning he had to bathe in Lake Hamana in Shizuoka Prefecture. The lessons were being held in winter.

After thinking it over, de Leeuw left for Japan on Jan. 18, 1979.

"The hardest part was the preparation for the cold water of the lake," he said, again laughing.

"From that summer I started to take cold showers every morning. I still do now."

On returning to the Netherlands, he started giving classes on Shinto, both to students of philosophy and to theater buffs.

At Yamakage's request, he went in search of a holy place in the Netherlands, and after three summers of walking tours, he came to a place where he said, "I felt my hands vibrating. I knew it was a holy place indeed."

It was a pine tree in the middle of the De Veluwe nature park and he sent a picture of the tree to Yamakage in Japan. After verification by two priests who came over for the occasion, the pine was accepted as a Shinto holy place. Today, besides teaching Shinto in the Netherlands, de Leeuw performs Shinto rites for the inauguration ceremonies of Japanese companies all over Europe.

"In Prague, I did a ceremony for Takenaka Corp. In Pilsen, I inaugurated a branch for Panasonic," or Matsushita Electric Industrial Co., he said.

His main occupation, however, is to train people in Shinto.

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