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A Kabuki Pose in Sculptures of Auguste Rodin

Abstract

Hanako (Ōta Hisa, 1868–1945) was an insignificant member of a small Japanese theatrical troupe when she was discovered by the well-known dancer, Loïe Fuller, who after seeing Hanako's death scene, decided to become her impresario. Thereafter, Fuller organised each of Hanako's European tours and wrote for her many Japanese-style dramas that always ended with the cruel but utterly expressive death of the protagonist. Hanako met Auguste Rodin, the famous sculpture, at the Marseille Colonial Exhibition in 1906. The master was fascinated by Hanako's performance and tried to sculpt the 'death face' that she expressed during her death scenes. This face, with a weird expression, was most probably a *nirami*, which is a type of *mie* pose in kabuki theatre. Rodin created numerous busts and faces from different materials trying to capture the emblematic moment when Hanako saw death. The present paper examines the short but interesting period of Hanako's Western career, focusing on her meeting with Rodin. I use their story as a unique and symbolic illustration of Japanese artists' efforts to transform themselves and their art to 'match' the Western eye and of the ways in which the West was looking for verification of its preconceptions of the 'strange' and 'exotic' East in the early 1900s.

Keywords: Auguste Rodin, Hanako, *kabuki*, Japanese theatre, death scene, Loïe Fuller, Colonial Exhibition, *mie*, *nirami*

Introduction

In this study I analyse the encounter between Japanese actress Ōta Hisa 大田ひさ (1868–1945), whose stage name was Hanako 花子, and the renowned sculptor Auguste Rodin (1840–1917) from the perspective of intercultural theatre history. As it is well known, the face of Hanako was sculptured several times by Rodin, who was fascinated by Hanako's death scene and attempted to sculpt it. I argue that their encounter is a symbolic example of how the West and the East used each other's preconceptions for their own purposes in the early 1900s. I focus on the special method with which the West discovered Japanese

theatre, or rather how the West created a ‘new’ Japanese theatre for itself. For analysing this process, the encounter between Hanako and Rodin proves to be a prime example.

[I]n the midst of all the actors, I spotted a sweet little Japanese girl who I would willingly have made the lead actress of the group. But for these Japanese, women didn’t count, and all the great roles were played by men. Yet I had noticed only her. She played a minor role, it’s true, but with such intelligence, such an entertaining manner, like a toddling little mouse, and she was able suddenly to transform herself with little movements which froze all the anguish of terror onto her features. She was pretty, delicate, strange, and stood out even among her fellow countrymen. When the rehearsal was over, I gathered the actors together and told them: ‘If you want to stay with me, you must do what I say. And if you don’t make this little mite your main actress you will never succeed’. And since her name was unpronounceable, I baptized her Hanako then and there.¹

This was the beginning of famous career of Ōta Hisa, whose success was owed to being discovered by a well-known dancer and performer, Loïe Fuller (1862–1928).

First and foremost, however, we have to examine the circumstances that enabled a Japanese female actress or dancer to travel to Europe in the early years of 1900s. In 1868, after the Meiji Restoration, Japan changed fundamentally. With the downfall of the last Tokugawa shogun – who led the country in the feudal period – Emperor Meiji was restored to supreme power and position. The emperor’s most important action was modernisation, since Japan wanted to join the Western powers. This was the main reason for why Japan tried to adopt Western political, social, educational, and economic institutions in a fairly short time. Due to the fact that the country became open to foreign trade, Japan gained access to Western goods. Moreover, Western literature, arts, fashion, etc. opened a new world to the Japanese people. Nevertheless, while Western culture was streaming into Japan, Japanese culture was likewise streaming out from the country to the West, which increased people’s interest in the exotic and remote country. As a result of the opening up, Japanese people, students, and theatre companies had the opportunity to travel, know the world, and spread Japanese culture.

The ‘East fever’ in Europe reached considerable proportions. The most well-known direction of it is Japonisme, which started its journey of success and conquered not only the world of Western European art but also the lives of ordinary people who bought Eastern objects, such as trinkets, fans, furniture, and lacquer objects, to decorate their homes. People were hungry for exotic items, and as a result, they welcomed every troupe arriving from the Middle and the Far East.

¹ Fuller 1913: 208; Savarese 1988: 66.

Hanako's life and career

Ōta Hisa was a dancer who showed her talent only in the West and had never stood on a Japanese stage.² She was born into a peasant family in 1868. Her family was so poor that they lived under the poverty line, so according to the local customs, she was adopted by a richer family in 1875. As Hanako received an artistic upbringing from her father,³ she became a child performer in a travelling theatre troupe when her new family had financial problems. In her teenage years, she ran away and became a geisha at the age of 16. Because of her education, she was able to acquire knowledge of moving and dancing, including of the traditional Japanese dance form *nihon buyō* 日本舞踊, which built the foundation of her stage career. In 1901 – after her two divorces⁴ – she decided to join a newly organised Japanese troupe that was looking for people with stage experience to participate in the Copenhagen Zoo's 1902 human exhibition. At first, Hanako appeared as a geisha in the exhibition, and experts suppose that she performed traditional dances in the zoo's artificial Japanese village. Following this, she became a member of a small Japanese troupe as a minor actress, but fortunately enough, she was discovered by Loïe Fuller in London in 1904.⁵ We can see clearly from the quotation above how Ōta Hisa was turned into an 'actress' by Fuller. She even gave Ōta Hisa a new name, Hanako, which means little flower or flower child. Fuller read this name in a novel and liked it because it was easily pronounceable.⁶ It is obviously visible that with this action Ōta Hisa became the 'victim' of typisation early in her carrier. First of all, her own name was too strange; in other words, it was not acceptable and familiar for the western audience. Therefore, Fuller simply changed her name with an actually overpowering gesture and turned the strange into the familiar. After this action Fuller gave Hanako the possibility to prove herself and made the 37-year-old woman the main actress of the small troupe. Assumedly, if she had not met

² The biography details see: Savarese 1988: 63–75; about her young ages in Sawada 1996: 19–24.

³ From the age of five, she danced and played the two-stringed zither (*yakumogoto* 八雲琴). Sawada 1996: 20.

⁴ She was married to Takejirō Koizumi 竹二郎小泉, who was a building contractor 20 years her elder. Their relationship were not well balanced, so after 10 years of marriage they finally divorced. Hanako almost immediately fell in love with and married a young man, Azushima 小豆島, but because of their financial difficulties the man left her, and they divorced. All in all, Hanako was not at all the symbol of the 'good wives and wise mothers' (*ryōsai kenbo* 良妻賢母) project, which was supported by the government at that time. Sawada 1996: 26–28.

⁵ Sawada 1996: 34.

⁶ Sawada 1983: 45.

Fuller, she ‘would probably have returned to Japan as she had left it: totally unknown, with only a little more money than when she had set out’.⁷

Thus, thanks to Fuller, she became one of the most well-known and famous actresses in Europe between 1904 and 1916. Everywhere she performed, the audience admired the manifestations of the strange and the exotic. Her last show, a play titled *Ki musume*,⁸ was staged in the London Coliseum in 1916. Subsequently, she travelled to Japan to enlist in a new troupe, but the First World War barred her return to Europe. After the war, she opened a Japanese style restaurant in London, and in 1922 she returned to Japan where she lived in retirement until her death in 1945.⁹

Ōta Hisa’s journey from being unknown in 1901 to achieving real success was long. After discovering Ōta Hisa’s, Fuller searched for a new producer for the troupe and organised a European tour. The first stop was Copenhagen, where Fuller saw her in a simple rehearsal how Hanako could improvise a death scene:

with the tiny, tiny gestures of a frightened child... with sighs, with the cries of a wounded bird, she curled in on herself, reducing to nothing the already slender body which was lost in the wrappings of the huge, heavily embroidered Japanese costume. Her figure became immobilized as if petrified and only her eyes retained intense life. She was shaken with little sobs, uttered a cry, yet another, lay down, a sigh. Then, like something broken, her head fell onto her shoulder while with huge open eyes she stared at the death which had come to take her. She was devastating.¹⁰

Fuller immediately recognised great potential in this death scene, and despite protests from the troupe, ‘she rewrote all the plays of the repertory in order that each might terminate with a death scene of Hanako’.¹¹ The success was immense. The troupe doubled the number of plays and within a period of nine months travelled around the whole of Europe. For example, after London they debuted in Paris in Fuller’s theatre where one year earlier the famous Sadayakko¹² and the Kawakami-troupe had performed. ‘Hanako was seen by everyone in Paris society, for whom her performances seemed to satisfy a “morbid sensationalism”’.¹³ ‘[K]neeling before a mirror and applying her makeup while

⁷ Savarese 1988: 64.

⁸ *The maiden*.

⁹ Savarese 1988: 73.

¹⁰ Savarese 1988: 66–67.

¹¹ Keene 1972: 251.

¹² Kawakami Sadayakko was the other celebrated Japanese actress that time. She and her husband’s, Kawakami Otojirō’s, troupe were also managed by Fuller in 1901–1902. See more about Sadayakko: Downer 2003, Kano 2001, Doma 2022.

¹³ Savarese 1988: 67.

chatting rapidly, until her jealous lover stepped from behind and strangled her with a scarf.¹⁴ René Chéruy, who was once Rodin's secretary, told Fuller how Hanako's talent bewitched him; despite his not comprehending the language of the play, the plot was clear and amusing.

After the nine months many of the troupe's actors returned to Japan. Hanako went to take her chance in Antwerp, but she was alone and performed only in cheap pubs. Some months later she asked for help from Fuller, who repeatedly took Hanako under her wing. Fuller sent her Japanese secretary, Kaoru Yoshikawa,¹⁵ to Antwerp to save Hanako and bring her to Paris.

Presently I found myself in Paris, manager of one of the most gifted Japanese artists, but, alas with no company to support her. I was puzzled to know what to do with and what to do for a kind, gentle, sweet little Japanese doll.¹⁶

Finally, she decided to organise a new troupe where Hanako was supposed to be the star of the company. Luckily, a theatre manager offered Hanako a chance on the condition that the future performances be successful and easily understandable. Fuller was aware of Hanako's best skills on stage and accordingly wrote the first drama specifically for Hanako, which was somewhere between the pantomime and the popular melodrama. The new drama, titled *Galatea!*, echoed the well-known Greek myth and emphasised the 'Japanese doll' thematic; thereby, Fuller gave Hanako the role of a carved statue coming alive. This way, Fuller not only positioned Hanako evidently, but she also influenced the audience's expectations. After this production, she wrote two dramas for Hanako in the 'Japanese style': *A Drama of Yoshiwara* and *The Martyr*. The latter was the first performance at Théâtre Moderne, which was Fuller's new theatre in Paris, and the two dramas became the main pillars of Hanako's repertory in the following years.¹⁷

I had in all, for all, Hanako, her companion, and a young Japanese actor. I was not discouraged. I went looking for another actor. Thanks to an intermediary, I found one in London. Then I tried to think of a play with four characters, two main roles and two supporting roles. The result of my efforts was *The Martyr*. At this point, I encountered a large difficulty: wigs, shoes, props, costumes—all were necessary. But here too I was lucky. And the four opened at the Théâtre Moderne on the Boulevard des Italiens. The play was presented thirty times instead of the ten which had been negotiated.¹⁸

¹⁴ Keene 1972: 251.

¹⁵ He became Hanako's third husband.

¹⁶ Fuller 1913: 214.

¹⁷ Keene 1972: 252.

¹⁸ Savarese 1988: 67.

It is clearly visible that these performances brought success to Hanako. She toured around the whole of Europe. Among others, she performed in England, Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, France, Sweden, Russia, Turkey, Germany, Italy, Poland, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, and the United States twice.¹⁹ In short, Hanako was very successful, and Fuller, under the pseudonym Loi-Fu, wrote more new dramas to increase their repertory. Of course, *The Japanese Doll*, *The Little Japanese Girl*, *The Political Spy*, *The Japanese Ophelia*, *A Japanese Tea House*, and *Otake* all ended with the heroine's tragic death. 'In the sparse texts – the plays were practically pantomimes – she used standard plots and imbroglios, flat characters and strong climactic scenes, borrowed freely from Japanese models and European sources. But she cleverly allowed ample space for the deployment of gestures and mime'.²⁰

A sensational drama last Saturday evening at 9:30 p.m., in the presence of Paris' best audience. Madame Hanako committed suicide by disembowelling herself. But it was suicide. An emulator of Sada Yakko, Hanako is a tiny Japanese gifted with graceful form, lively eyes, a rebellious nose, feline movements. The comedy in which she displays her varied talents as a saucy flirt, a mime, a dancer, turns into tragedy when Ossudé (the heroine's name), the prey of gloomy sorrow, suddenly changes her behavior: she takes hold of a knife and slowly thrusts it into her flesh, her eyes convulse, her nostrils palpate, her face pales and blood spreads over her white tunic. She then collapses to the floor and dies. It is almost... too realistic, at least for those audience members whose nerves are too weak to tolerate such a performance.²¹

The death scenes in Hanako's performances became the most amusing and anticipated moments, similar to Sadayakko Kawakami's death scenes. It is worth observing the usage of blood in these scenes, which is the speciality of naturalistic theatre.

In 1907, the small troupe travelled to the USA for the first time where, despite their success in Europe, they did not impress the American audience. In an article of *Des Moines Register*, we could read the following criticism:

I have seen faces on oriental fans, vases and screens, and I recall some like them in nightmares; but never hitherto have I seen them alive. Hanako, the starred tragedienne of the company, enacts a belle supposed to be irresistibly charming; yet she could be no unsightlier woman unless her pigmy size were increased to ordinary size... She dances awkwardly on stilts, and is clumsily blithesome

¹⁹ Brandon 1988: 92.

²⁰ Scholz-Cionca 2016: 54–55.

²¹ 'Mme Hanako', *L'Illustration*, 3 November, 1906. Cf. the translate: Savarese 1988: 68.

in antics that make her and the three others look like decrepit, yet still tricky monkeys in a cage.²²

Unexpectedly enough, the American audience did not find Hanako's death scene to be too realistic either.

The actress uses a trick knife, the blade of which recedes into the handle, and at the same time releases a red fluid so that the illusion of a blade slowly piercing her body to a depth of six inches and of blood spreading from the wound over her white robe is a grisly sight.²³

Nonetheless, this failure did not prove to be significant. Between 1904 and 1914, Hanako visited every main European city, and everybody was eager to witness her famous death scene.²⁴

Performing death has always been a challenge on stage. This is the only action that cannot fit into the theatre's illusory world. The action of dying on stage is never believed by the audience, but from the birth of naturalistic and realistic theatre, actors have always attempted to perform the scenes in a more and more believable and realistic manner. As an example, Sarah Bernhardt or Eleonora Duse were famous for their medically accurate death scenes. They ridded of all the learnt theatrical poses for illnesses and tried to show the real symptoms of each disease.²⁵ In short, they performed in a way that deviated from the learnt techniques, and this 'pure' imitation fascinated the audience in Hanako's case. According to a Russian journalist, dying on stage should be learnt from the Japanese actress, observing 'how to remain true to life but at the same time respect artistic proportion; how to present a perfectly credible image up to the tiniest detail, without slipping into the artless ugliness of realism'.²⁶

Hanako's (and Sadayakko's) death scenes are often called 'extreme realism'. These were so different from European stage deaths that, at first, nobody thought that the scenes might be built up from learnt poses and gestures. However, owing to an encounter between Hanako and Rodin, we already know that the realistic death scene, especially the face that Hanako made during the stage dying, was a pose from traditional Japanese theatre.

²² Keene 1972: 253.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ The critics most of the time resounded the success of Hanako, but in some cases journalists tried to uncover her non-traditional performances. That happened in Hungary, but the audience did not care about authenticity. For more on this topic see: Doma 2020: 104–106.

²⁵ Cf. Conti 2018. Principally: Foreign Invaders: The Transatlantic Consumptives of Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonora Duse chapter.

²⁶ Scholz-Cionca 2016: 56.

Meeting with Rodin

Auguste Rodin, having never learnt sculpting in a formal school of art, became a world renowned artist by the turn of the century. It was at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 – the world’s fair held in Paris – where he was given his own pavilion and had his breakthrough. This was the first occasion where he encountered the two pioneers of modern dance: Loïe Fuller and the then young Isadora Duncan (1878–1927). Rodin represented the power and beauty of the human body in all of his works throughout his life. He especially loved the naturalness of the female body, but strangely enough, he had never been interested in dancing until he met Fuller and Duncan. Thanks to this ‘new discovery’, Rodin dedicated himself to studying the dancing body in the last years of his life. On many occasions, he drew Duncan while she was dancing. Moreover, the young talent occasionally posed nude for him. In general, the elderly master was shown the freedom of instinct by dance.²⁷

It was 1906 that proved to be a special year for Rodin. Sisowath I, the new king of Cambodia, visited France accompanied by the Royal Ballet of Cambodia. Rodin saw the company perform at the Pré Catalan theatre in Paris. He made some drawings at the performance, and he was so impressed by the Cambodian dancers that he followed them to the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille. He executed about 150 life drawings of them in watercolours, notably studies of hand movements.²⁸

They [the dancers] made the antique live in me [...] I am a man who has devoted all his life to the study of nature, and whose constant admiration has been for the works of antiquity: Imagine, then, my reaction to such a complete show that restored the antique by unveiling its mystery.

It is admirably beautiful, and new. This is what convinces me that my girlfriends are perfect like the antique, whose eurythmy they have. These are the sounds of the emotion they have given me. And, to be honest, if they are beautiful, it is because they naturally produce just movements [...].²⁹

In short, Rodin could rediscover a sense of tradition in the dances of the Cambodian company based on his respect for nature.

²⁷ Laurent 2005: 132. These kinds of statues: *Eve* (1881), *Iris, Messenger of the Gods* (1895), *Dance Movement B* (circa 1911). These kinds of drawings: *Female Nude with Left Leg Outstretched* (circa 1890), *Before the Creation* (circa 1900), *Two Women Embracing* (1908).

²⁸ *Rodin and the Cambodian dancers* <http://www.musee-rodin.fr/en/exposition/exposition/rodin-and-cambodian-dancers>.

²⁹ Bourdon 1906: 2.

Through Fuller, Hanako met Rodin at the Colonial Exhibition in Marseille. The master was fascinated by Hanako's performance and tried to form the 'death face' that the audience saw in her death scenes. He invited her to Paris, and they worked together for two years in a friendly atmosphere. Hanako was the model whom Rodin sculpted the most. Sometimes they worked all day from morning to evening.³⁰

Hanako did not pose like other people. Her features were contracted in an expression of cold, terrible rage. She had the look of a tiger, an expression thoroughly foreign to our Occidental countenances. With the force of will which the Japanese display in the face of death, Hanako was enabled to hold this look four hours.³¹

He made more than 50 busts from different materials, including clay, bronze, and glass, and every work tried to capture that emblematic moment when she saw death. The most well-known of these works is the terra cotta figurine *The Face of Death*, which was presented to Hanako and now is the part of a private collection in Tokyo.³²

[H]e tried to create my 'head of death' with that cross-eyed look I made on the stage. It was difficult to hold the same expression every day. Everybody warned me that my eyes were getting funny.³³

It was thought that this difficult and weird pose had been invented by Hanako. However, now we know from the busts and descriptions that she actually made a *nirami* 睨み, which is a *mie* 見得 kabuki pose. The *mie* (which means 'to show something') is a powerful and impressive pose or *kata* 形 struck by a kabuki actor before they freeze for some seconds. It is generally accepted that these obviously learnt and prescribed poses are capable of evoking special emotions from the audience. Therefore, it goes without saying that every pose is a significant part of a kabuki play. When the play reaches a dramatic point or juncture, namely when an important moment occurs on stage, it is highlighted by a *mie*. At the end of the cadenced movements, the actor petrifies in a *mie*; their body and limbs are in an unnatural, tensed, and twisted position for some seconds. At that moment, the whole stage freezes; an utterly picturesque view is burnt into everybody's mind, intentionally evoking feelings. In the *nirami* (which means 'to glare at') pose, the actor grimaces with one eye staring into the distance with

³⁰ Sawada 1983: 69–70.

³¹ Elsen – Jamison 2003: 428.

³² Sukenobu 2001: 4.

³³ Sawada 1983: 69–70.

the other eye turned inward and then purses their mouth. The technique is connected to Danjūrō Ichikawa I, who first performed it in 1693 or 1694.³⁴

It would be interesting to know why Hanako used *nirami* (since in kabuki it is used for strong male roles, not for female roles)³⁵ and from where she learnt it. Moreover, it is not a *mie* that is used in death scenes in kabuki, but Hanako deliberately chose to do so. Moreover, what is even more incredible is that she could hold the pose for 3 or 5 minutes and could repeat it again and again while she was posing to Rodin, which was all the more unusual as kabuki education was not available for women at the end of 19th century. On the other hand, as a geisha, she learnt some traditional Japanese dances, for example *nihon buyō*, and supposedly she saw and knew some kabuki plays, so she easily could have ‘stolen’ some movements and built them into her own dance.³⁶

Rodin, of course, saw the ancient freedom in Hanako’s movements, as well as in the dance of the Cambodian company. Beside the many busts, he created a pencil drawing depicting a nude, dancing Hanako. The circumstances of this drawing have not yet been confirmed, but the event was written about in a nominal short story in 1910 by the famous and celebrated novelist Mori Ōgai. In this story, Hanako is depicted as a 16-year-old girl. She arrives to Rodin’s studio with a Japanese medical student, who interprets their conversation. Moreover, it is here that Rodin asks permission to draw Hanako nude. She consents and while the master is making the sketch, the medical student goes to Rodin’s library and reads an essay by Baudelaire. The story ends with Rodin’s description of Hanako’s beauty:

Mademoiselle has a truly beautiful body. It has not the least fat. The muscles move individually, like a fox-terrier’s. The tendons are firm and large enough for the joints to be of the same size as the arms and legs. She is strong enough to stand indefinitely on one leg while extending the other at right angles. She is like a tree with roots sunk deep into the ground. There is a marked difference between her figure and the wide-shouldered, wide-hipped Mediterranean type or, for that matter, the Northern European type with its broad hips and narrow shoulders. Hers the beauty of strength.³⁷

This story focuses on the encounter between Hanako and Rodin, so I have no possibility to analyse it. However, I highlight the description of Hanako’s beauty, which is absolutely different – her beauty is strange and originates from strength. This way, Mori tries to show the same image in his story that Rodin

³⁴ *Nirami* article in www.kabuki21.com.

³⁵ Scott 1999: 107.

³⁶ Brandon 1988: 92–93.

³⁷ Mori 1917: 17. I used the translation of Donald Keene, Keene 1996: 243.

shows in his busts and drawings. It is another interesting point that these masterpieces, which shaped Hanako's figure from a male viewpoint, emphasise the idea of Japan's fragile and feminine character much more in a traditional way than in the way that was characteristic of that time.

Conclusion

According to Donald Keene, Hanako's success on the European stage was just a part of a tendency, 'a curious by-product of the rage for great actresses that swept over Europe and America during the early years of the century',³⁸ including Sarah Bernhardt and Eleonore Duse. On the other hand, around this time new artists appeared, including Loïe Fuller, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis, who did not speak but only moved or danced. The lack of speech provided the possibility of accessibility; anybody could understand their performances. Fuller applied the same technique in her plays written for Hanako, similarly creating a feeling of 'understanding' and 'accessibility'. However, in this case, everything on the stage was artificial and a consciously created make-believe. Hanako had never performed in authentic or traditional Japanese plays, only in Japanese-styled European performances written by Fuller, who built many dancing and moving scenes into her plays for the sake of presenting the audience with something that *seems* to be authentic and that, thus, creates a feeling of 'understanding'. On the other hand, it was also at this time that the naturalistic theatre conquered the West, and European people wanted to see exotic and exciting plays that end in a brutal and realistic death. This element could also be seen in Hanako's performances. That is why Hanako was extraordinary: on the one hand she satisfied the audience's hunger for the strange with her Japanese dance, and on the other hand, with her brutal and naturalistic death scenes, she shocked the people in the way that they wanted to be shocked, the same way that they were shocked by a zoo where human beings were exhibited. Hanako became a star thanks to the naturalistic death, which was, so to speak, 'wrapped' in exoticism. Moreover, that was exactly what Rodin wanted to capture in his busts of her. Of course, Rodin first saw naturalness in this face, and it was this belief that motivated him, while this face was absolutely artistic and originated from kabuki. Rodin's busts, thus, capture not only the death face of Hanako but also the moment in which Eastern theatre became the surface onto which the European eye projected its own theatrical ideals.

³⁸ Keene 1972: 255.

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