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TRADITIONAL DANCE. Professor Naoko Kihara adjusts the sash of her disciple, Eiko Moriya, at her dance studio in Mexico City. Kihara won't reveal her age, but she's been practicing the Japanese traditional Hanayagi-style dance for almost 24 years. (AP Photo/Ginnette Riquelme)

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In Mexico, a Japanese traditional dancer shows how body movement speaks beyond culture and religion

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receiving her diploma in Japan. It's like a manual of honor, Kihara said. A promise to preserve one's legacy. Thirteen students — seven of them at the basic level — study in Ginreikai, her dancing studio.

"In our performances, it's all about patience," Kihara said. "We call them 'long songs,' because they are not plays with a beginning nor an end."

Eiko Moriya, another descendant of Japanese migrants who will soon travel to Tokyo to get certified, has spent the last three years perfecting the long songs she'll perform before the Hanayagi committee.

Her mentor watches her attentively while Moriya's feet slide delicately over the wood floor, and always provides feedback. "Move your foot only when the music asks for it. Be mindful of the rhythm. Don't overbend your arm."

"Dancing is a transformation," Moriya said. "Our dances are pieces of culture that are re-signified."

The meaning of their performances is conveyed through music and movement, Kihara said. Even in front of foreign audiences who might not understand a Japanese song, their bodies are their means to speak.

Her favorite long song, a story about an unrequited love, portrays a princess convinced that the man she loves has transformed into the bell of the local temple. So, to get to him, she turns into a snake.

"There are just a few movements, but each of them portrays her belief of transforming," Kihara said. "It is a story about anger, courage. It symbolizes the suffering of humanity."

The songs that she and her colleagues perform for Mexican audiences are shorter and less complex than the original Japanese long songs — a dance can last up to five minutes instead of 20 or 30 — but creating new choreographies and adaptations for foreign scenarios does not diminish her excitement.

"Through Japanese dance, we connect," she said. "It is an exchange of cultures."

"Ginreikai," which translates into "silver mountain," was the name chosen by her predecessor for the school because she believed that Japan and Mexico share more than their sacred volcanoes. If Mount Fuji and Popocatepetl are so similar, she used to say, it's because deep down we are all the same.

"At Ginreikai we have that cosmic vision," Kihara said. "Humanity is divided by religion, by culture, but for me, dancing is a way of saying: We are all one."

Associated Press religion coverage receives support through The AP's collaboration with The Conversation US, with funding from Lilly Endowment Inc. The AP is solely responsible for content.

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