

# Taiko

The Formation and Professionalization of a Japanese Performance Art

An Honors Project for the Program of Asian Studies

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# Abstract

Taiko, a performance art originally from Japan, has spread quickly since its origin in the early 1950s, establishing professional and amateur groups across five continents. As taiko has spread, it has changed, accommodating the needs of both its performers and its expanding audience base. In a process of professionalization that mimics such established Japanese “high arts” as noh, taiko has developed from an inchoate collection of folk and religious rituals and popular entertainments to become an independent performance art, with a body of rules to govern style and a self-identifying “taiko community” that follows them. In the process, taiko has become the symbol for a range of social movements, from Japan’s post-war nativism to Asian-American pan-ethnicity, all of which have exerted influence on taiko’s development, either in concert or at odds with the forces audiences exert through their selective patronage of particularly entertaining taiko groups. Although these conflicts arise from taiko’s particular history, the tension they place on the art form mirrors the development of many other performance arts. As the innovations of taiko’s first practitioners became the traditions of the next generation of taiko players, the shape of the art form has changed, balancing taiko between innovation and standardization.

# Preface

## Usage

Taiko as a subject of academic study is still young. Standards of usage have yet to develop, and so I must clarify the vocabulary of this discussion of taiko.

The names of Japanese citizens appear in Japanese order, family name first, while I have written the names of citizens of the US and other Western countries according to the convention of those countries, with personal name first. Thus, Nagano resident Oguchi Daihachi's family name is Oguchi, while the family name of Seiichi Tanaka of San Francisco is Tanaka. I have avoided honorifics such as “master” or “sensei.”

In my transliterations of Japanese words I use the Hepburn system, in which the reader pronounces consonants as in English and vowels as in Spanish or Italian. Macrons over vowels (ō and ū—and in loan words ē and ī) indicate a drawn-out pronunciation of the vowel. Words from Japanese or other non-English languages that appear in my text I have rendered in italics (ex. *kumi-daiko*) with non-italicized proper nouns (ex. Osuwa Daiko), and plain typeface for any word that appears in the Oxford English Dictionary (ex. kabuki).

The words in common usage in the English-speaking American taiko community form the only exceptions to this rule. As English and Japanese meanings of words like “taiko” have diverged, I have left the common vocabulary of American taiko groups un-italicized in order to distinguish between American and Japanese usages. The Japanese word *taiko*, for example, means “drum.”<sup>1</sup> In English, the definition of “taiko” is broader

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<sup>1</sup> The original meaning of the word “*taiko*” in Japanese is simply “a drum,” but even some Japanese writers refer to “the music called ‘taiko’” (*taiko to iu ongaku*), as in Asō Fumio’s introduction to Daihachi Oguchi,

and people may use the word in several different sense, but when I write to “taiko,” I refer to a style of ensemble drumming, in which percussion and choreography form the basis of the performance. This usage should be the most familiar to English speakers, who do not say “go stand in front of that taiko over there” but instead “taiko is fun to watch.”<sup>2</sup> The instruments themselves I call “drums,” in general, or refer to them by their types when speaking specifically. When translating Japanese sources, I generally treat the word *taiko* as “drum” unless the context suggests otherwise. In cases of ambiguous meaning, I note the original Japanese word or phrase in footnotes.

To best facilitate readers’ understanding, I have referred to Japanese concepts or objects by their English translations whenever possible. In the first usage of these phrases, I have included the original Japanese word in parentheses. In direct quotations from other sources, I have left name order, transliteration, translation methods, italicization, and capitalization as in the original material.

## **Taiko**

Taiko is a performance art of Japanese derivation that consists of an ensemble of drummers who combine music with choreography. Taiko has grown steadily in popularity since its creation in 1951,<sup>3</sup> but I know many readers will find themselves unfamiliar with this music, even as many others will judge my work based on far more experience with taiko than I possess.

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*Tenko: Oguchi Daihachi No Nihon Taikoron* (Nagano, Japan: Ginga Shobo, 1987). Most Japanese sources use the similar construction, “drum music” (*taiko ongaku*) to refer to the performance, rather than the instrument.

<sup>2</sup> Some authors use the terms *wadaiko* (Japan-drums) to refer to Japanese drums or Japanese drumming, while *kumi-daiko* (ensemble drum[ming]) appears often in the literature as the technical name for the musical style. Outside of scholarly discussions, however, “taiko” still enjoys the most widespread usage when referring to this musical style.

<sup>3</sup> I date the creation of taiko from the 1951 founding of Osuwa Daiko by Oguchi Daihachi. Although conceptions of taiko as a musical genre did not arise until later, Osuwa Daiko is the first group to fit the definition of “taiko” that I use in this paper.

I hope the taiko players who read my paper find it interesting and enjoyable, even if they do not agree with my conclusions. I feel nothing but awe for those with the skill to play taiko professionally, and nothing but respect for their personal views on their art. This study represents my own interpretation of taiko, but I hope my logic and data are sufficiently clear that readers may easily judge my conclusions and form their own.

To those with no taiko experience I will try to communicate some of taiko's pull, the forces that bind performer to performer and performers to audience. This is the thrill of taiko, a fascinating subject of study, but infinitely more rewarding to actually play.

# Introduction

## YOU JUST STRIKE IT WITH STICKS

In 1964, at the Tokyo Olympic Games, the world witnessed the international debut of a new form of music. This music had grown during the 1950s and early 1960s, during a nation-wide re-interpretation of Japanese identity in the wake of World War II. The prewar glorification of Japan's martial spirit<sup>1</sup> had lost its credibility, and so the postwar government used the more peaceful image of a "unique and beautiful" Japanese culture to motivate national pride.<sup>2</sup> The government therefore chose to rebuild the nation as a "culture state" (*bunka kokka*), celebrating the artistic history of Japan as opposed to its discredited military.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of the culture state gained currency in the 1950s, but when state officials turned their perspective outward, they saw a distressing lack of foreign esteem for the country they had rebuilt. As Yashiro Yukio, member of the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties, noted, "Japanese art does not appear to be held in very high repute, except in the eyes of a few cognoscenti."<sup>4</sup> In order to combat this apathy, Yashiro and his compatriots decided to turn the culture state outward and showcase their nation's arts to the world.

In 1964, the Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties found the opportunity to promote their "culture state" in the form of the summer Olympic Games. While the games themselves would demonstrate to the world the recovery of the Japanese

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<sup>1</sup> E. Bruce Reynolds, "Peculiar Characteristics: The Japanese Political System in the Fascist Era," in *Japan in the Fascist Era* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 179.

<sup>2</sup> Noriko Aso, "Sumptuous Re-Past: The 1964 Tokyo Olympics Arts Festival," *Positions: East Asia Cultures Critique* 10, no. 1 (2002): 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*: 9.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*: 17.

economy since 1945, the Festival of Arts that accompanied the games would, as Yashiro stated, “correct the shallow image of Japan held by Westerners...providing them with a more accurate understanding of the important traits most prized by Japanese, that is, the spirit and culture of Japan.”<sup>5</sup> This use of art as a means to advertise culture succeeded admirably. The first Olympiad ever to be held in Asia and the first major international event hosted in Japan since World War II, the Tokyo Olympics became the international showcase for the Japanese “culture state.”

By the early 1960s, the Japanese government had already begun to build support for performance groups it considered to be emblematic of Japanese art, of which six categories found venues at the Olympics Arts Festival in 1964.<sup>6</sup> Groups from all over Japan performed kabuki, noh, *bunraku*, *gagaku*, classical dance, and a group of performances that the organizers of the Arts Festival billed as generic “folk performance arts” (*minzoku geinō*).<sup>7</sup> This collection included some local rituals of great antiquity,<sup>8</sup> but one group appeared without any recognized history. Although they appeared next to other drumming groups with histories stretching back four hundred years, the members of this particular “folk performance” group had not trained under masters or studied the secrets of their artistic school; no such secrets or masters existed for their art in 1964. In a festival that sought to display only “the purest Japanese examples”<sup>9</sup> of art, the Osuwa Daiko drum ensemble performed a repertoire that the group’s own members had invented.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> William K. Guegold, *Volunteerism and Olympic Music Venues* [Online] (Lausanne Symposium, 2003 1999, accessed 2005 Oct. 6); available from <http://www.blues.uab.es/olympic.studies/volunteers/guegold.html#four>.

<sup>7</sup> Aso: 21.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see *Gojinjo Daiko: The History, the Tradition, the Spectacle*, [Online] (May 15 2003, accessed March 4 2006); available from <http://www.wajima-city.or.jp/english/essay15/gojinjo.htm>.

<sup>9</sup> Aso: 16.

Though unnamed by the organizers of the Arts Festival, taiko entered the world stage for the first time in 1964.<sup>10</sup>

In the forty years since taiko's international debut, this art form has changed from a body of disconnected rituals to amateur performances of particular local groups, and then to an international musical genre with its own body of dedicated musicians. This process of "professionalization" forms a crucial aspect of the dissemination of taiko. Paralleling the history of such established Japanese arts as noh, taiko has risen from a disincorporate collection of elements, as diverse as Shinto ritual dance and jazz, to grow into an independent performance art. Supported in Japan by the rising "folk performance" preservation movement and in America by minority groups seeking to celebrate their heritage and break stereotypes, taiko's development has reflected the expectations of many different communities. As taiko players have disseminated taiko across continents and oceans, they have molded a previously unconnected series of rituals and folk practices into a defined performance art, supporting a group of dedicated professionals. Behind this rapid growth have run social currents that bridge time and space, moving the development of taiko in a pattern common to many ages and cultures.

Taiko functions as a model for understanding how artistic genres form and develop under the tensions between audience and performers, and between performers' differing visions. The history of taiko demonstrates the creation of a new art form from a variety of styles, which then become codified into a recognized set of standards. Tension develops between those who strive to incorporate new elements into the art, and those who tend to emphasize the sole legitimacy of one particular style. Innovation allows for flexibility and the ability to entertain paying audiences, but can lead to the fragmentation

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<sup>10</sup> Takeshi Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," *Look Japan*, 1/1998 1998, 30.

of the genre and the failure of its mechanisms of transmission. The protection of standard styles, either laid down in text or learned from influential teachers, creates a community that can aid the spread of the art form and pass it to subsequent generations, but can stifle the development of new material and result in stagnation. Successful art forms must trace a path between these two extremes.

Taiko contains many reflections of the opposing dialectics of novelty versus fidelity to standards, manifesting as conflicts between the celebration of heritage and the discarding of the past, the desire for accurate transmission of style and the reinterpretation of style, and the use of recognized Japanese forms to establish authority and the rejection of Japanese forms as players claim legitimacy for taiko as an art in its own right. Performers have called both taiko both “unquestionably ancient”<sup>11</sup> and “absolutely new”<sup>12</sup> without contradicting each other, and this tension between old and new forms the core of taiko, an internal dialectic that many performance arts share.

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<sup>11</sup> Deborah Anne Wong, *Speak It Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 203.

<sup>12</sup> Kenny Endo, Personal Interview, Nov. 4 2005.

# Chapter 1

## A HISTORICAL TEMPLATE

To interpret the history of taiko, one must understand that taiko forms only one example of a trend repeated many times in many places. Noh, a widely-recognized and much studied Japanese theatrical form, serves well as a template for the path of professionalization, as the history of noh parallels that of taiko in many instances. In the mid-twentieth century, noh occupied a central place among the symbols of Japan. With established philosophies of style, hereditary masters to control and transmit lore across generations, a long tradition of patronage by both the state and private individuals, and a body of written self-analysis that stretched back nearly six centuries, noh differed greatly from the yet-unnamed taiko of 1964. The histories of these two art forms, however, illustrate a common pattern of professionalization. An examination of noh's history should provide readers with a new perspective on taiko as the new manifestation of a process that extends across all times and all civilizations.

### **No better than beggars: The Rise of *Sarugaku* (1374-1408)**

Noh made its first break into popularity between 1374 and 1375, at a large-scale public performance at Kyoto's Jizō Temple. At this venue, noh's artistic predecessor, the ignominiously named *sarugaku* ("monkey-music"), began the process that would transform the music into a profession. This event took place early during the rule of the Ashikaga Shogunate (1338-1573), a time when the wealthy and powerful congregated around the imperial capital, courtiers mingled with warriors, and the performance arts the nobility had formerly eschewed could flourish under the patronage of the new warrior rulers of Japan. In the case of *sarugaku*, the 16-year-old shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu,

de facto leader of the country, attended a performance of the Yūzaki troupe at the Jizō Temple.<sup>1</sup> The group's skill evidently impressed the young shogun, as Yoshimitsu became *sarugaku*'s first influential patron, allowing the art's professionalization and awarding lifelong support to the group's leader, Kiyotsugu Kan'ami.

Kan'ami belonged to the first generation of *sarugaku* performers to enjoy the benefits of private patronage. Before the Ashikaga rise to power, the lives of *sarugaku* performers of *sarugaku*, *hōshibara*, fell under the domain of shrine and temple organizations, performing acrobatics, comic plays, and religious rites for money and food.<sup>2</sup> Their livelihood relegated the *hōshibara* to very low social status. Called "little better than beggars"<sup>3</sup> by court nobles as late as the 1370s, the *hōshibara* lived divided from the rest of society along with butchers, workers with leather and bamboo, prostitutes, fortune tellers, and undertakers.<sup>4</sup> *Sarugaku* groups made a leap toward financial independence from religious organizations when they began to collect funds for their own upkeep by means of "subscription performances" (*kanjin nō*),<sup>5</sup> and with a source of wealth independent from the religious institutions, the lives of *hōshibara* began to improve.<sup>6</sup> Troupe leaders gained from their growing audience base the resources to reexamine their craft and organize it into a defined art form. In this task, none succeeded so well as Kan'ami, who attracted the attention of the young Ashikaga shogun.

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<sup>1</sup> Zeami and Erika de Poorter, *Zeami's Talks on Sarugaku, Japonica Neerlandica; V. 2.* (Amsterdam: J.C. Gieben, 1986), 19, 25-28.

<sup>2</sup> Benito Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre: From Shamanistic Ritual to Contemporary Pluralism* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1990), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Donald Keene and Motoichi Izawa, *Some Japanese Portraits* (New York: Kodansha International, 1978), 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 24.

<sup>6</sup> By the beginning of the Ashikaga hegemony in 1336, the actors had claimed status as Shinto priests, with court ranks and titles. See Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 60.

Scholars such as Benito Ortolani attribute much of Kan'ami's success and fame to his innovative approach to his music. An accomplished dancer and a musical virtuoso, Kan'ami attracted audiences with an eclectic repertoire of pieces, quite at odds with the standardized forms that would later grow from his work. Early composers owed much of their success to their innovative mixing of musical forms, including other dramatic arts such as *dengaku* "field music," literary prose like Buddhist *enkyoku*, classical court theater (*bugaku*), and the "bent-dance," *kusemai*.<sup>7</sup> "Strange in the extreme," with a beat that "defies comprehension," *kusemai* occupied a place even lower in the esteem of high society than *sarugaku*, and cultural conservatives like the Emperor Gokomatsu (1337-1433) criticized Kan'ami for his interest in "the music of an age of turmoil."<sup>8</sup> This innovation, however, widened the stylistic distinctions between *sarugaku* and other similar dramatic forms, allowing Kan'ami to develop his art in its own terms.<sup>9</sup> As with taiko over four hundred years later, the mixture of musical styles created a new kind of performance, one with elements from a wide range of sources but defined independently from them.

The shogun, impressed by Kan'ami's performance, made the Yūzakai troupe part of his government's official entertainment in the manner characteristic of the artistic patronage practiced by the Ashikaga.<sup>10</sup> Yoshimitsu also took Kan'ami's 10-year-old son, Zeami Motokiyo and had the boy brought up as his personal companion in his own household. Zeami grew up as a companion to Yoshimitsu at the apogee of political power

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<sup>7</sup> James T. Araki, *The Ballad-Drama of Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 75.

<sup>9</sup> Araki, *The Ballad-Drama of Medieval Japan*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Steven D Carter, *Literary Patronage in Late Medieval Japan* (Michigan: Center for Japanese Studies: University of Michigan, 1993), 5.

in Japan and could observe the relationship between the military government, also called the shogunate or *bakufu*, and the court nobility, both of which grew more interested in *sarugaku* as Yoshimitsu continued his campaign of support.<sup>11</sup> As he learned the court's favorite literary classics and polished his poetic style under noble tutelage, Zeami realized the inability of the temples and shrines to sustain *sarugaku* actors. Instead, *sarugaku* needed a wealthy clientele with the disposable income and free time to enjoy year-round performances. Yoshimitsu's endorsement provided an abundance of rich and powerful nobles and warriors who fit the role perfectly.

As the court patronized *sarugaku* hoping for the favor of the shogun, they attracted their own subordinates to performances. *Sarugaku* became fashionable, and the audience for performances soon included nearly all members of the court.<sup>12</sup> By the end of the fourteenth century, *sarugaku* had shifted from a collection of ad hoc performance by impoverished actors "no better than beggars" to a centrally recognized performance art that grew to command enormous cultural authority.

### **The Miraculous Flower: Transformations in *Sarugaku* (1408-1443)**

As Zeami took on the leadership of his father's troupe, now called "Kan'ze,"<sup>13</sup> events forced the playwright to realize that the shogun's patronage alone could not sustain his art. Income could vanish at any time as the whims of the authority shifted, and in 1408, it did so. Yoshimitsu's son and successor, Yoshimochi, withdrew all state support for *sarugaku* upon his ascension to office.<sup>14</sup> The new shogun banished Zeami

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<sup>11</sup> Jacob Raz, *Audience and Actors: A Study of Their Interaction in the Japanese Traditional Theatre* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1983), 86.

<sup>12</sup> Steven T. Brown, *Theatricalities of Power: The Cultural Politics of Noh* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 33.

<sup>13</sup> A combination of the initial characters of the names "Kan'ami" and "Zeami"

<sup>14</sup> Yoshimochi's actions probably stem less from a dislike of *sarugaku* in particular to the new shogun's anger at his father, Zeami's patron, who attempted to bypass Yoshimochi as ruler of Japan by adopting a

from the court and installed his competitor, the “field-music” (*dengaku*) actor, Zōami, as the principle court entertainer.<sup>15</sup> With the older *dengaku* ascendant and *sarugaku* yet to achieve definition as an independent art form, *sarugaku* stood in danger of demotion to a subset of the *dengaku* repertoire.

Zeami’s experience at the hands of Yoshimochi revealed that *sarugaku* could not depend on the capricious attentions of a handful of wealthy patrons. The actor and playwright needed to find a way to sustain his art, and here again the Ashikaga government had supplied the solution to Zeami’s problems. While the head of the Ashikaga house had scorned *sarugaku*, the house itself had done the art form an enormous service. The Ashikaga policies of forcing the wealthiest and most powerful men in the nation into Kyoto created an environment that nurtured the professionalization of many arts, from *sarugaku* to linked poetry (*renga*), the ancestor of haiku.<sup>16</sup> Even without the good will of the shogun, Kyoto still teemed with wealthy courtiers, warriors, and merchants, all clamoring for entertainment. Zeami set out to attract these people to *sarugaku*, to ensure that *sarugaku* would flourish and remained worthy of their attention.

Venues at noble residences proved more lucrative than shrine or ticketed performances, and so the actors tailored their styles to the tastes of these wealthy households.<sup>17</sup> The concept of *yugen* (*yūgen*), modern *noh*’s “hidden quality of graceful beauty or mystery,”<sup>18</sup> entered the *sarugaku* repertoire at this point, as performers like

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younger son into the Imperial line. Zeami also fell under suspicion due to his own son’s relationship with Yoshimochi’s younger brother. See Patrick Geoffrey O’Neill, *Early Noh Drama: Its Background, Character and Development, 1300-1400* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974), 38.

<sup>15</sup> Yoshinobu Inoura and Toshio Kawatake, *The Traditional Theater of Japan*, 1st one-volume ed. (New York: Weatherhill in collaboration with the Japan Foundation, 1981), 91.

<sup>16</sup> Carter, 5.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, 12.

<sup>18</sup> *Yugen*, [Online] (Oxford English Dictionary, May 16 2006, accessed May 16 2006); available from <http://www.oed.com/>.

Zeami sought to appeal to the capital's literati with this philosophical allusion.<sup>19</sup> Zeami also wrote volumes on how to perform for noble audiences, stating for example that: "In the presence of noblemen, one should [have the same mental attitude] as during religious services and please them."<sup>20</sup> Throughout the rest of his life, Zeami worked to mold *sarugaku* to fit the demands of a professional performance art, changing its audience, purpose, philosophy, and the primary source of its funding.

Zeami's enormous body of written work began with a history of *sarugaku*, unreliable as a source of historical fact, but very effective as a tool of legitimation. Rather than retell the ignominious history of the *hōshibara*, Zeami spun a mythology around his art, attracting the interest of audiences and infusing performers with confidence and pride for the long and illustrious history he created for their art. Zeami constructed the roots of *sarugaku* in deep Japanese antiquity, alluding in his writing to the creation myth of the *Kojiki*, Japan's oldest surviving written history:

The beginnings of *sarugaku* in the age of the gods, it is said, occurred when Amaterasu, the Sun Goddess, concealed herself in the heavenly rock cave, and the whole earth fell under endless darkness. All the myriad deities gathered at the heavenly Kagu Mountain, in order to find a way to calm her. They played sacred music to accompany their comic dances. In the midst of this Ama no Uzume came forward, and, holding a sprig of *sakaki* wood and a *shide*, she raised her voice and, in front of a fire that had been lighted, she pounded out the rhythm of her dance with her feet and became possessed by divine inspiration as she sang and danced.<sup>21</sup>

The legend of Uzume forms a common trope of Japanese performance art, with links to both the distant past and to contemporary Shinto dances performed to entertain the gods

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<sup>19</sup> Brown, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 128.

<sup>21</sup> Eric C. Rath, *The Ethos of Noh: Actors and Their Art, Harvard East Asian Monographs*; 232. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Asia Center: Distributed by Harvard University Press, 2004), 71.

(*kagura*).<sup>22</sup> The allusion to Japan's creation myth proved so appealing that many Japanese performers, including twentieth-century taiko players, would appropriate this story. Zeami, fully aware of the power of allusion to religion, stated unequivocally that "*Sarugaku* is *Kagura*."<sup>23</sup>

Moving from the age of gods into human history, Zeami credited the first *sarugaku* plays to Hada no Kōkatsu, advisor to the semi-mythical Prince Shōtoku (574-622). In addition, Zeami described Kōkatsu's previous life as the first emperor of China and his later transformation into Bishamon, the Buddhist protective deity of the North.<sup>24</sup> Zeami also used Buddhist musical and poetic vocabulary to describe his art<sup>25</sup> and advocated *sarugaku* as a means "to spread Buddhist Law, drive out evil, and ensure long life and happiness."<sup>26</sup> He also alluded to the sacred dances performed "at the suggestion" of Gautama Buddha as ancestral to *sarugaku* in the manner of Uzume's dance.<sup>27</sup> Tracing *sarugaku*'s ancestry to both Shinto and Buddhist motifs and presented Zeami with no logical problem, since his art actually drew influence from a diverse assemblage of practices.

The appeal of *sarugaku* to its diverse audience stemmed from its syncretic nature, which not only allowed *sarugaku* popularizers to cite a variety of impressive historical precedents for the art but also meant that any performer could draw upon a wide range of styles and sources for repertoire. Indeed, Zeami specifically instructed his students to avoid specialization in their training: "One should not... be content with only one kind

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<sup>22</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 6.

<sup>23</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 80.

<sup>24</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 73.

<sup>25</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 61.

[of music] and shun all others, in the same way as one should master all the styles of acting.”<sup>28</sup> Zeami demanded familiarity with all aspects and variations of music, dance, and drama from his students; aspiring *sarugaku* performers had to study both contemporary and historical acting styles as well as musical theory: “After exhaustive study, when performance and music fuse into one, [the level of] success where the miraculous flower of ten thousand virtuous blooms will be reached.”<sup>29</sup> Only by dint of wide experience could one create a truly great performance, and before *sarugaku* had established an exclusive repertoire, actors commonly trained in a number of styles, creating an art form of extreme internal variation.

The problems arising from this diversity of style, however, soon became apparent as Zeami tried to forge an organizational basis for *sarugaku*. Without standards to separate “good” performances from “bad,” acting styles varied widely between troupes and individual actors. Individual experimentation could damage performances when the performers’ styles did not match, and *sarugaku* needed to present its audience with a unified aspect. A professional, Zeami warned, “has to know the conventions. In a combined performance, no matter how many actors [participate], they should dance with the same gestures.”<sup>30</sup> Zeami’s push toward standardization foreshadowed the strict regimentation that governs modern *noh*, but the fourteenth-century playwright emphasized that the actors should concentrate upon pleasing the audience rather than following established norms as the guiding principle for these conventions: “Everything

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<sup>28</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

is artistic effect...If the artistic effect is good, the bad points are not noticed so much. If it is beautiful, even poor gestures are not ugly.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite Zeami’s emphasis on “artistic effect,” however, *sarugaku* players quickly shifted focus from standardization of style to the preservation of conventions for their own sake. By the mid fifteenth century, writers on *sarugaku* had begun to express the importance of a set of established rules, a “Way” that mimicked the behavioral codes of religious communities. Invoking terms from Shinto ritual (*kagura*), students of Zeami such as Zenchiku described *sarugaku* as a “sacred profession” (*shinshiki*) and a path (*michi*) to religious understanding.<sup>32</sup> The conventions of a *sarugaku* performance, according to Zenchiku, do not exist for the entertainment of the audience or the convenience of the performers, but for a higher purpose:

Our way follows Shinto and Buddhist ritual, not personal preference...Even if a family of this sacred profession lacks fame, by performing *kagura* and preserving the Way, it will be blessed with divine protection. Evil conduct which does not accord with the Way incurs sin.<sup>33</sup>

Although he admitted that *sarugaku* “also serves as...an amusement for all under heaven to enjoy,”<sup>34</sup> Zenchiku placed a much higher priority on the form and religious significance of a performance than upon its value on entertainment.<sup>35</sup> If the audience could glean some pleasure from watching *sarugaku*, so much the better, but actors should concentrate on remaining true to the rituals codified by Zeami and not attempt to innovate away from these standards. In the next century and a half, this push toward upholding

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>32</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 77.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> A predictable action given *sarugaku*’s original function as part of the Shinto performance repertoire.

the “Way” of *sarugaku* would become more apparent, as style and convention accompanied the rise of another fundamental aspect of modern noh, secret transmission.

Zeami wrote many of his group’s trademark styles into books of secret history, keeping the techniques he invented away from his competition. Zeami’s personal history indicates he used his body of secret documents as a source of control over the artistic community, refusing to relinquish his secrets to On’ami, Zeami’s nephew and favorite *sarugaku* player of Yoshimochi’s successor, Yoshinori.<sup>36</sup> This assertion of power annoyed the shogun Yoshinori, who exiled Zeami, then in his seventies, to Sado Island, off Japan’s northwest coast.

Zeami’s legitimation of this art form succeeded, however. *Sarugaku* survived Zeami’s banishment from the capital and steadily grew in popularity from the 1430s onward. Even after shogun Yoshimochi had withdrawn his patronage, popular support maintained *sarugaku* until the next Ashikaga successor, Yoshinori, renewed state patronage. Although Zeami died in obscurity after years of humiliation and exile in 1443,<sup>37</sup> *sarugaku* had by then become an established part of Japanese art, both in the capital and in the provinces.

### **This sacred profession: From *Sarugaku* to Noh (1443-1964)**

*Sarugaku*’s popularity grew through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. New forms sprang up under the encouragement of the developing professional groups: all-female *nyōbō sarugaku*, *chigo sarugaku* composed of boy performers, and amateur *te sarugaku* performed as a hobby by people across the country. As *sarugaku* spread and diversified, the other *sarugaku*-like performance arts—*dengaku* field music, *ennen*

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<sup>36</sup> Inoura and Kawatake, 92.

<sup>37</sup> O’Neill, *Early Noh Drama*, 40.

Buddhist fetes, and the ascetic rituals of *shūgen*—had largely died out by the mid-sixteenth century, leaving *sarugaku* a fixture of Japanese entertainment.<sup>38</sup> Having absorbed or driven its competitors to extinction, *sarugaku* lost the few remaining trappings of its rustic origin, dropping the name “monkey-music” in the sixteenth century in favor of the more general word for “skill,” *noh*.<sup>39</sup> *Noh* continued to gain popularity through the turmoil following the collapse of the Ashikaga shogunate. The powerful hegemon Toyotomi Hideyoshi used *noh* as a way to legitimate himself to the country’s cultural elite, implying the high status to which *noh* had grown in the late 1590s.<sup>40</sup>

The next great shift in *noh* began when Tokugawa Ieyasu took control of Japan and founded the powerful Tokugawa shogunate. The shogunate designated *noh* as a “style-music” (*shikigaku*) in 1615 and named five official *noh* guilds—Kanze, Hōshō, Komparu, Kongō, and Kita—each with a single “family head” (*iemoto*) and hereditary position of command.<sup>41</sup> As part its class-separation policy, the Tokugawa government also declared that these five guilds perform only for government personnel and warriors, and punished amateur performers as well as any of the five legitimate groups that performed before commoners.<sup>42</sup> Troupes that did not find themselves within one of the official houses either fused into one of these guilds, died out, or banded together under the name of another art form, such as the nascent kabuki.

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<sup>38</sup> Inoura and Kawatake, 100-102.

<sup>39</sup> Usually spelled *nō* in transliterations from Japanese. While people began applying “*noh*” to *sarugaku* performances in the 1500s, this designation only replaced “*sarugaku*” under the Tokugawa regime in the 1600s.

<sup>40</sup> Shawn Morgan Bender, “Of Roots and Race: Discourses of Body and Place in Japanese *Taiko* Drumming,” *Social Science Japan* 8, no. 2 (2005): 231 and Keene and Izawa, 69.

<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Theatricalities of Power*, 21.

<sup>42</sup> Donald H. Shively, *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971), 248.

Tokugawa regulations institutionalized noh troupes, and noh under the Tokugawa regime developed the “painstaking fidelity to the tradition”<sup>43</sup> that characterizes the dramatic form today. By 1600, there had already emerged a profession of treatise-writing concerning noh, in which noh actors like Zenchiku defined the direction noh’s professional development should take.<sup>44</sup> Over time, this body of thought formed an identity for noh, the basis from which both the audience and the actors viewed the art. Amateur players had added new styles to the noh repertoire, but the limits placed on the number of legitimate noh groups destroyed this source of novelty. Then, when leadership within groups became hereditary in the seventeenth century, genealogy and the possession of secret manuscripts formed the basis of power for the “family heads,” descendants of the founder of the school and masters of all their schools’ secret knowledge.<sup>45</sup> By the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1868, the Family Head system had become an official part of noh practice, with the Heads given absolute control over the practice, financing, and dissemination of their art.<sup>46</sup>

By the end of the Tokugawa shogunate in 1869, noh had already assumed its modern form as a fully professionalized art. Noh constituted a discrete aesthetic sphere, with its own standards of poor and skillful performance and a long-established audience base among the educated population. Under the patronage of the new Meiji emperor, noh entertained such guests as the Prince of Wales and US President Ulysses S. Grant, and

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<sup>43</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 103-104.

<sup>44</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 37.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 2, 4, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 105.

esteem for the art began to grow overseas.<sup>47</sup> In Japan, noh maintained an audience amongst the educated, an audience that could also maintain financial support for the art.

In the process of achieving its status as a “high art,” however, noh has lost much of its early flexibility. Noh has developed a codified and limited repertoire of plays and styles,<sup>48</sup> and now lacks the wide appeal that *sarugaku* enjoyed in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as the vernacular language has changed while the scripts have not, making modern performances nearly incomprehensible to the uninitiated.<sup>49</sup> The state’s patronage of noh, however, has assured a steady interest in the art, despite its lack of appeal to popular audiences.<sup>50</sup>

In the past six centuries, noh has changed into nearly the philosophical antithesis of its early self—Kan’ami’s incorporation of a music as outré as *kusemai* into his repertoire would be unthinkable to a twenty-first century noh master—but each step in its professionalization occurred for understandable economic and aesthetic reasons. As the new art established itself in the world of professional performance, it defined itself and established both a history and a system of maintaining and disseminating itself. Competition between groups and the demands of an educated audience mandated the study of noh’s conventions for all professionals, and the flow of outside ideas into the art’s repertoire slowed. As noh developed norms and a set of principles to justify those norms, further developments in noh could arise only from within the ranks of the professional elite. In the words of noh scholar Eric Rath:

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<sup>47</sup> Raz, *Audience and Actors*, 230.

<sup>48</sup> The “family heads” discourage modern authors from creating new pieces. See Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 250.

<sup>49</sup> Modern noh performances must make use of a narrator, who appears during intermissions to explain the events that just took place to the audience in contemporary Japanese. See Araki, *The Ballad-Drama of Medieval Japan*, 59.

<sup>50</sup> Raz, *Audience and Actors*, 231.

The case of noh illustrates how one occupation borrowed from the ideology of rulers, the ideas of other artists, and the occupational tricks of tradespeople to transform a distinct and powerful core of traditions into an ethos, which became a focus for group identity and a vehicle for the construction of individual and group authority.<sup>51</sup>

Since Zeami's performance before Ashikaga Yoshimitsu in 1374, noh had gained the attention of those in political authority, and the loose, pattern-less folk entertainment of *sarugaku* became a rigid, codified practice with a central place in Japan's cultural identity. Noh appeared in this capacity as a cultural emissary for Japan in the Tokyo Olympic Games Arts Festival, but the audience who had come to watch this lofty pinnacle of Japanese high art also witnessed the birth of a new performance art.

In October of 1964, taiko began its own process of professionalization, mirroring the development of countless other art forms through history. To address all of these arts<sup>52</sup> extends beyond the scope of this study, but all genres of art balance between innovation and standardization as they age. The first practitioners of art forms like noh and taiko bring with them influences from their previous training, which their artistic descendants refine into standards of "good" versus "bad" performance. While innovation keeps the art form entertaining and relevant as the make-up of the audience changes, standards of performance define the identity of the art form, creating boundaries that prevent its assimilation into another genre. Since artists cannot survive without making money, this definition takes place in the direction the artists find most financially rewarding and patronage, whether from audiences, the government, or individuals such as

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<sup>51</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 6.

<sup>52</sup> Such as opera, which similarly rose from a confluence of diverse influences and innovation and later developed more rigid standards.

the Ashikaga shoguns, propel the development of art forms. Though “absolutely new,”<sup>53</sup> taiko’s development follows an “unquestionably ancient”<sup>54</sup> trend.

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<sup>53</sup> Endo.

<sup>54</sup> Wong, 203.

# Chapter 2

## THE FIRST GENERATION

Taiko and noh, though they arose at different times from very different backgrounds, share many features of their development into professional performance arts from inchoate collections of rituals. In both the cases of *sarugaku* and taiko, early innovators combined a hitherto unrelated series of musical forms to produce the foundation of an art both novel and rooted in the past.

### **The Hidden Stream: Developments in folk performance (1868-1945)**

Like noh, Taiko's formation became possible during a period of extreme economic and political change. When the Tokugawa shogunate fell in 1868 and Japan ended its two hundred year policy of isolation and the country underwent rapid industrialization, Japanese people gained a new perspective on their own customs as part of a national identity. Ideas became "Japanese" or "traditional" as opposed to "Western" or "modern," and previously unrelated customs came under the common grouping of Japanese "folk culture."

The idea of "folk" took root in Japan in the late nineteenth century, under the influence of German conceptualizations of *volk*, giving rise to a perceived body of folk performances<sup>1</sup> in the early twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Scholars found themselves attracted to the new field of "folklore science,"<sup>3</sup> which investigated the social structure, religion, and language of Japan's rural communities. This study gained popularity from 1890 until 1945 as specialists, scholars, and government officials flocked to the nascent field of

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<sup>1</sup> Called *minyō*; "folk-songs," or *minzoku geijutsu*; "folk-art"

<sup>2</sup> Naoe Hiroji, "Post-War Folklore Research Work in Japan," *Folklore Studies* 8 (1949): 277.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

sociology and became.<sup>4</sup> One such scholar, Yanagita Kunio, conducted Japan's first serious ethnological research, creating a branch of scholarship that would greatly influence the place of folk conceptions in post-war Japan.

A researcher of Japanese folklore before and after the war, Yanagita wrote extensively on the festivals and religious rites of both rural and urban Japan as part of his seminal work on Japanese society. Director of the Rural Life Research Institute since 1935, Yanagita worked to spread awareness of the customs practiced in Japan's small rural communities and support the field workers who gathered information from such places. In 1948, his organization became the Japanese Folklore Society and expanded its purpose to include the publication of field studies conducted in Japan and glossaries of local folklore-related vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> This new wave of research set the tone for much of later Japanese ethnography, concerning itself mostly with the preservation of local performances as villagers moved to cities and Japan's changing social climate sapped support for rituals.<sup>6</sup> Despite efforts to maintain these performances in their pre-1868 form, however, many had already changed drastically in the seventy years since the Meiji Restoration of 1868.

With the Meiji Restoration had come a wave of reform that transformed the social and political structure of the old Tokugawa regime and fundamentally altered Japan's folk rituals. Rejection of the old ways had grown as thinkers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi railed against "Asian conservatism."<sup>7</sup> As belief in the literal power of religious rituals had begun to wane, justification for the existence of many folk performances disappeared.

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<sup>4</sup> John C. Pelzel, "Japanese Ethnological and Sociological Research," *American Anthropologist* 50, no. 1 (1948): 56.

<sup>5</sup> Hiroji: 278-279.

<sup>6</sup> Raz, *Audience and Actors*, 215.

<sup>7</sup> Duncan McCargo, *Contemporary Japan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 189.

Yanagita noted this trend, saying that “with changes in agricultural methods and the introduction of new products, the old holidays lost much of their meaning.”<sup>8</sup> With their spiritual underpinnings disintegrating, the emphasis of festivals had shifted from religion to a display of technical prowess.

The modernization that accompanied the Meiji Restoration dissolved the underpinnings of Japan’s festivals while the new Japanese rail network allowed an increase in tourism. As rituals previously hidden in inaccessible villages came under national purview, the inhabitants of these villages found new profits in marketing their particular arts to the growing tourist trade, catering to wealthy city residents.<sup>9</sup> In reaction to the influx of new tourist money in the 1890s, local performers increasingly elaborate performances and competitions, creating communities based around the dissemination of their particular performances. As they did so, the performances shifted in focus from the other members of the community to their paying audience, and the rituals became divorced from the religion that had created them. Those folk performances that did not attract patronage in this way became under-funded as civic priorities shifted, and many became extinct.

### **Cultural Properties: The rise of folk performance arts (1945-1990)**

Only with the advent of the modern age did the idea of “folk performance arts” as a distinct body of practices begin to arise. Before the nineteenth century, there existed no concept to describe these unofficial performance arts, and only in the 1920s and 30s had the phrases of “folk art” (*minzoku geijutsu*) and “local dances” (*kyōdo buyō*) arisen as

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<sup>8</sup> Kunio Yanagita, *Japanese Manners and Customs in the Meiji Era*, ed. Jigy Okai Kaikoku Hyakunen Kinen Bunka, *Japanese Culture in the Meiji Era*, vol. 4 (Tokyo: Toyo Bunko, 1969), 268.

<sup>9</sup> Hiroyuki Hashimoto, "Between Preservation and Tourism: Folk Performing Arts in Contemporary Japan," *Asian Folklore Studies* 62 (2003): 231.

scholars began a critical examination of “the people’s” customs.<sup>10</sup> The phrase “folk performance art” (*minzoku geinō*) does not appear in the literature until well after World War II, and then only as an alternative to terms like “local performance art” (*kyōdo geinō*).<sup>11</sup> The phrase “Folk performance art” only gained wide use as a term with the work of Honda Yasuji in the 1960s, giving a name to the quickly growing social movement to preserve Japan’s past in the face of modernity. Honda argued for the preservation of folk performances on the basis of their ancestral relationship to better-recognized professional arts such as *noh* and *kabuki*,<sup>12</sup> a rationale that remains a central part of the folk performance movement.

The next event to set the stage for *taiko*’s creation took place after another political transition, the end of the military regime that had governed Japan during World War II and the American occupation of the country. As with the Meiji Restoration, a widespread rejection of Japanese practices took place in the late 1940s as people turned away from the nationalist rhetoric favored by the old regime. By the 1960s, however, the “culture state” program, a reaction against this “Westernization,” called for the preservation of Japan’s folk performances. Post-war ethnologists viewed the tourism that had first fostered the growth of some local rituals as a corrupting influence on the body of folk performance and sought to limit their further professionalization. The folklore studies boom in the 1960s culminated in the establishment of the Japanese National Theatre in 1966, with the stated purpose of “preserving and passing on traditional arts.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara E. Thornbury, "The Cultural Properties Protection Law and Japan's Folk Performing Arts," *Asian Folklore Studies* 53, no. 2 (1994): 214.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*: 215.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*: 214-215.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*: 212.

Japan's Agency of Cultural Affairs expanded enormously, allocating significant subsidies to the promotion of native Japanese arts.<sup>14</sup>

In 1975, the Japanese government began to specifically fund "folk performance arts,"<sup>15</sup> creating a support structure similar to the patronage *sarugaku* and *noh* enjoyed during Ashikaga and Tokugawa rule. This Cultural Properties Protection law focused on performances that either informed upon the history of other more established forms,<sup>16</sup> or displayed some characteristic unique to a particular area of Japan. Performances that fit one of these prerequisites could become "important intangible folk cultural properties" (*juyō mukei minoku bunkazai*), eligible for state funding and state-mandated venues.<sup>17</sup> The cultural properties protection law also established funding for grassroots preservation societies (*hozonkai*), which schedule performances to showcase local arts and ensure the transmission of those arts to the younger generation.<sup>18</sup> These societies have formed clubs to encourage children to participate, and in many cases have broken the hereditary transmission of certain roles and bans on female participants in order to broaden the pool of potential performers.<sup>19</sup>

National and community support for folk performance arts encouraged the processes of professionalization that had already begun in the late nineteenth century with the advent of tourism. As had occurred with *sarugaku*, when local festivals began to attract paying audiences, performers discarded those aspects of their rituals that did not

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<sup>14</sup> Raz, *Audience and Actors*, 233.

<sup>15</sup> Thornbury, "The Cultural Properties Protection Law," 212.

<sup>16</sup> Surviving examples of early kabuki, for example.

<sup>17</sup> Such as the National Convention of Folk Performing Arts (*Zenkoku Minzoku Geinō Taikai*), a yearly event started in 1950. See *Rinzubu Kōen*, [Online] (March 29 2006, accessed 2006 April 30); available from <http://www.hi-ho.ne.jp/yoshi-hoshino/ayako-0011.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Thornbury, "The Cultural Properties Protection Law," 219.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*: 220.

please audiences and used their funding to create more entertaining spectacles.<sup>20</sup> These changes attracted much criticism against the consumerism of previously sacred performances. Modern ethnologists such as Hashimoto Hiroyuki and Sasahara Ryōji refer to the entire body of folk performance as “a kind of tourist culture”<sup>21</sup> and “a sham,”<sup>22</sup> while Thornbury quotes newspaper editorials that rage against “touristification” (*kankōka*), calling it “a grave problem—not just for music and drama but for folk culture in general.”<sup>23</sup> Many others, such as Thornbury herself, have expressed the concern that the designation of particular rituals as cultural properties will suppress change within folk performance arts, retarding innovation and repelling potential artists.<sup>24</sup> As happened with *noh* under the patronage of the Tokugawa shogunate, when the receipt of government support depends upon their form rather than their aesthetic value, folk performance arts may stagnate and lose their relevance to their audiences.

For good or ill, the folk performance art movement has changed all the arts it has touched. While earlier courtiers sneered at the rustic dances of the commoners, the National Japanese Theater in Tokyo now gives “appreciation classes” (*kanshō kyōshitsu*) devoted to folk performance arts.<sup>25</sup> Many twenty-first century scholars, both in and outside of Japan, now treat this country’s folk performing arts with reverence, calling them an “inexhaustible reservoir of inspiration...the hidden stream” that has, in the words

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<sup>20</sup> Hashimoto: 231.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*: 230.

<sup>22</sup> Barbara E. Thornbury, "From Festival Setting to Center Stage: Preserving Japan's Folk Performing Arts," *Asian Theatre Journal* 10, no. 2 (1993): 170.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*: 171.

<sup>24</sup> Thornbury, "The Cultural Properties Protection Law," 221.

<sup>25</sup> Thornbury, "Preserving Japan's Folk Performing Arts," 167.

of drama scholar Benito Ortolani, “nourished the surprising periodical renewals of the Japanese performing arts throughout their history to the present time.”<sup>26</sup>

The money and attention lavished on Japanese folk performance arts created the concept of Ortolani’s “hidden stream,” grouping previously un-related local rituals together into the single genre of “folk performance” and establishing the importance of this genre as the primal source of all other Japanese art. Although no such conception existed before the 1880s, folk performance art became a twentieth-century symbol of pre-modern Japan, un-contaminated by modern influences. This social movement created in environment in which taiko could flourish.

### **The Rain Will not Fall: The Birth of Taiko (1951)**

Even with the rising interest in rural rituals in early twentieth century Japan, no reference to taiko exists before 1951. Of course, Japanese percussion predates recorded history, but “taiko,” a performance centered around an ensemble of drums,<sup>27</sup> arose only as the concept of “folk performance arts” allowed people to group previously disparate local rituals in a single genre. Before this time, drums functioned only as part of the accompaniment to various rituals.

Pre-modern drum venues included Shinto ceremonies, Buddhist events such as festival of the dead (O-Bon)<sup>28</sup> various civic and military functions,<sup>29</sup> and a multitude of local rituals simply called “festivals” (*matsuri*). Performers beat drums during these festivals as part of the “festival accompaniment” (*matsuri-bayashi*), but such venues did not employ professional musicians. Instead, volunteers practiced a few rhythmic patterns,

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<sup>26</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Technically called “*kumi-daiko*” or “ensemble drums.” See the preface for details on usage.

<sup>28</sup> Also written “Bon,” the “O-” is an honorific

<sup>29</sup> Generals used drum beats to communicate orders to their soldiers. Drums also functioned like European church bells for Japanese villages, but many of the stories attached to this use may be apocryphal.

or performers learned songs passed down through their families and stepped into the role of musician for the duration of the festival before returning to their real jobs. Linda Fujie, an ethnomusicologist, characterizes these performers as amateurs, supporting themselves as farmers or merchants and playing their music not as a means of livelihood but as “an offering to the gods, as well as a service to the community.”<sup>30</sup>

When the community began to change and the belief in the gods to weaken as Japan modernized, the support for local rituals began to dissolve. Historian Mogi Hitoshi provides the example of “rain prayers” (*amagoi*) accompanied by “rain prayer drums” (*amagoi taiko*), which fell into disuse not only due to the fact that “the services of reservoirs and water systems make rain prayers unnecessary” but because “most believe that even if one does play the drums, the rain will not fall.”<sup>31</sup> This erosion of belief put many local customs in danger of extinction, necessitating the folk performance movement and the creation of the Cultural Properties Protection Law.

Scholars like Mogi also see a positive side to the uncoupling of performances from their ritual backgrounds, however. Mogi writes that drums’ function as accompaniment for rituals prevented a musical style from forming around the instruments, and only when the rituals had become defunct could taiko as we understand the music today exist: “we have lost our basic awe of the gods (*kami e no ifu nado no haikai*), as well as the belief in the magic that folk rituals once supported. As a result, we have begun to appreciate this [drumming] as pure entertainment.”<sup>32</sup> The separation of folk

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<sup>30</sup> Linda Fujie, "Effects of Urbanization on Matsuri-Bayashi in Tokyo," *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 15, no. East Asian Musics (1983): 40.

<sup>31</sup> Hitoshi Mogi, *Nyūmon Nihon No Taiko: Minzoku Dentō Soshite Nyūwēbu* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 2003), 139-140.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

performances from their religious backgrounds allowed innovation, while the tourist trade and the growing push to preserve Japan's traditions set these arts on the path to professionalization. Taiko began as performers used elements of ritual percussion in the context of pure entertainment.

Taiko became possible as this extinction of rituals opened their musical elements to new interpretation and experimentation. While the potential loss of folk performances created the public desire to preserve these rituals, the same dissolution of old rules allowed the musicians themselves to innovate. Taiko began, therefore, as a new musical form that grew from a movement to preserve old musical forms. Oguchi Daihachi found success in this innovative approach in 1951, and while ritual percussion formed part of the foundation of the new music he created, Japan's traditional drumming played no greater a part in the history of taiko than did jazz.

### **Music of an Age of Disorder: The invention of taiko (1951-1964)**

Born in 1924 in Hirano Village,<sup>33</sup> Oguchi Daihachi created taiko in the wake of the devastation of World War II. Conscripted from Tokyo University, Oguchi gave up his studies in music and went to fight in China,<sup>34</sup> where he remained for two years after the war's end as a prisoner.<sup>35</sup> Upon returning to his home in Northwestern Japan, Oguchi performed locally, playing tango, Hawaiian music, and jazz with his amateur band until a relative asked him to examine some sheet music discovered in a miso warehouse.<sup>36</sup>

Although Oguchi had no training in Japanese musical notation, the town regarded him as

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<sup>33</sup> In Nagano Prefecture. See Shawn Morgan Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity: Taiko and Neo-Folk Performance in Contemporary Japan" (Unpublished dissertation, University of California San Diego, 2003), 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 30.

<sup>36</sup> Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 70. Miso is the base of miso soup and other dishes, made from fermented and salted soy.

the best qualified performer in the area and asked him to play this music at an upcoming festival at the local Shinto shrine.<sup>37</sup> In search of guidance, Oguchi eventually located a blacksmith who helped him to decipher the notation and produce a performable piece of music, the accompaniment to a *kagura* ritual.<sup>38</sup>

Six hundred years after Zeami proclaimed the deep relationship between his art and Shinto ritual,<sup>39</sup> Oguchi, too, found himself inspired by sacred music. In the words of Tanaka Takeshi, editor of *Taikology* magazine and the source of much of the literature on early taiko in America, Oguchi was unsatisfied with the rhythms of the original music, finding them “rather monotonous and humdrum.”<sup>40</sup> Oguchi therefore decided to make the music more entertaining, fell back on his previous training, and incorporated jazz rhythm and technique into his performance.

The fusion of Shinto religious music with jazz may seem incongruous, but Oguchi’s decision to incorporate jazz rhythms into the framework of *kagura* parallels a similar decision in early noh. In the fourteenth century, Zeami’s father, Kan’ami, found fame as an innovator in *sarugaku* for his fusion of Shinto rituals like *kyōgen* with the rhythms of the circle dance *kusemai*.<sup>41</sup> With its unconventional rhythms this “music of an age of disorder”<sup>42</sup> offended many sensibilities. Like Kan’ami, Oguchi found a use for a new and radical musical form within a more established context. As Kan’ami used a foreign musical style to inform his previous training in *sarugaku*, Oguchi relied on his

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<sup>37</sup> The Suwa Taisha Shrine. Ibid., 71.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Zeami and Poorter.

<sup>40</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 31.

<sup>41</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 76.

experience as a jazz musician to turn Shinto percussive accompaniment into entertainment.

Oguchi's borrowing from jazz went beyond musical style to stage setting, as he consciously mimicked a Western drum set in his new arrangement of the *kagura* piece. As he recounted in an interview with anthropologist Shawn Bender: "I thought, 'Aren't there differently sized drums in Japan that could mimic the pitch of a snare, a bass, and a tom-tom?'"<sup>43</sup> Oguchi set different kinds of drums to play different parts of the performance dividing the central rhythm into several lines, using small, high-pitched drums as the music's backbeat and larger drums for the main rhythm.<sup>44</sup> In this way, Oguchi ensured the simplicity of each rhythmic line, so that his fellow performers, all relative amateurs, could learn the piece quickly. Tanaka would later identify this ease of training as one of taiko's chief strengths.<sup>45</sup>

In 1951, Oguchi gathered some friends, assembled a collection of drums bought from antique stores and borrowed from neighbors,<sup>46</sup> and created the group *Osuwa Daiko*<sup>47</sup> around his drumming style.<sup>48</sup> Into this music, Oguchi introduced arm movements, the outcries used in *noh* accompaniment (*kakegoe*), and the lively rhythms of samba and jazz, creating an entertaining musical style. Although Oguchi and others have classified this art form as a "reinvention" of forgotten rituals, *Osuwa Daiko*'s music bore little resemblance to Shinto ritual. A few shrines denounced Oguchi's musical fusion as a sacrilegious derivative of their sacred music, but Oguchi notes that most of the shrines

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<sup>43</sup> Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 72.

<sup>44</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 31.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Oguchi, *Tenko*, 18-21.

<sup>47</sup> lit. "Honorable Suwa Drums."

<sup>48</sup> Mogi, *Nyūmon Nihon No Taiko: Minzoku Dentō Soshite Nyūwēbu*, 155.

encouraged his innovations, especially since they attracted attention and money to the community.<sup>49</sup>

The fame of Osuwa Daiko proved the value of Oguchi's innovations, which have set the standards for all the taiko groups that have followed. Osuwa Daiko continued to grow in popularity over the course of a decade, which closed with appearances of the group on Japan's public television networks and the birth of other taiko groups throughout Nagano prefecture.<sup>50</sup> By the time of Osuwa Daiko's performance at the 1964 Olympics, ensemble drumming had already established itself and began to refine the developments that would turn taiko into a professionalized performance art.

#### **Vigor and Sensitivity: Oedo Sukeroku Taiko (1959-1964)**

While Oguchi's musical innovations form the basis of modern taiko, the physical aspects of ensemble drumming spring from a different source. Performers in Oguchi's original ensemble sat behind an arrangement of these different drums in the manner of a trap set,<sup>51</sup> a style that has since become rare in comparison to the more active choreographies of another group, Sukeroku Taiko.

After World War II, migration from rural Japan into Tokyo drastically altered the city's social environment and caused new developments in Tokyo festival music. Waves of newcomers both added to the pool of rituals and decreased interest in any particular ritual. Without attachment to the old songs of other communities, the multifarious urban population simplified the music played at their festivals and in many cases dropped live

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<sup>49</sup> Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 73.

<sup>50</sup> Organizations such as the Hokuiku Taiko Association formed as early as 1958. See Bruno Deschênes, *Japanese Taiko Drums* [Online] (Dec. 4 2004, accessed April 9 2006); available from [http://pages.infinit.net/musis/matsu\\_take\\_eng/2\\_AMG\\_Taiko.html](http://pages.infinit.net/musis/matsu_take_eng/2_AMG_Taiko.html).

<sup>51</sup> Yoshitaka Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," in *Transcending Boundaries: Asian Musics in North America*, ed. Yoshitaka Terada, *Senri Ethnological Reports* (Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), 38.

music entirely in favor of recordings festivals.<sup>52</sup> Increasingly, drumming became the only live aspect of festival music, supported by a network of volunteers who traveled between neighborhoods during the festival season performing for money.<sup>53</sup>

Like the *hōshibara* of seven hundred years previously, the drummers of the Tokyo circuit sought a form of employment that could support more than a single drummer per event and extend past a single season.<sup>54</sup> In 1959, Kobayashi Seikō founded the Oedo Sukeroku-kai,<sup>55</sup> where he adopted the techniques he had learned with his relatives in Niigata<sup>56</sup> to form a new style of festival drumming. Kobayashi also added choreographies and stances of his own invention to his music, most notably the slant stand,<sup>57</sup> creating a dynamic playing style that many modern groups still emulate.<sup>58</sup> Kobayashi's innovations began as changes within the context of O-Bon drumming, in which a single drummer stands on a small tower in the center of a circle of dancers as part of the celebrations of O-Bon, the Buddhist day of the dead. As Bender argues in his thesis, however, the Sukeroku-kai formed in an environment that encouraged innovation. With so many people leaving the countryside for life in Japan's cities, Tokyo contained a regionally diverse population, weakening the hold of local standards over performances and introducing a wide range of different styles into the same area, often by way of folk

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<sup>52</sup> Jo Anne Combs, "Japanese-American Music and Dance in Los Angeles, 1930-1942," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6, no. Asian Music in North America (1985): 43.

<sup>53</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 31.

<sup>54</sup> Mark Tusler, "Sights and Sounds of Power: Ensemble Taiko Drumming (Kumi Daiko) Pedagogy in California and the Conceptualization of Power" (Unpublished Dissertation, University of California Santa Barbara, 2003), 48.

<sup>55</sup> The name of the group derives from the name of Kobayashi's noodle shop, Sukeroku Seimen, a name which itself derives from the character Sukeroku in the kabuki play "Sukeroku Yūen Edo Zakura." See Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 78.

<sup>56</sup> Also the home prefecture of Oguchi Daihachi.

<sup>57</sup> In Japanese *naname*, Sukeroku, or *oritatami dai*; "oblique," "Sukeroku," or "folding stands." A slant stand holds the drum at an angle to the ground, forcing the player to strike the head obliquely, rather than straight horizontally or vertically.

<sup>58</sup> Tusler, "Sights and Sounds of Power", 47.

music (*minyō*) recorded in the country and replayed in city festivals.<sup>59</sup> The size and density of the population also encouraged novelty as a way of standing out from one's competitors.

As Osuwa Daiko's name began to spread through Japan, four young men from the newly established O-Bon drumming competition circuit in Tokyo joined the Sukeroku-kai. These high-school aged drummers, Onozato Ganei, Ishizuka Yukata, Ishikura Yoshihisa, and Kobayashi Seikō's younger brother, Seidō had competed against each other for the chance to play the single drum around which the O-Bon dance forms, and even as musicians in the same group, the Sukeroku-kai drummers retained an idiosyncratic, solo-based style.<sup>60</sup> Like Oguchi, the members of the Sukeroku-kai experimented heavily with their music, extemporizing off of common O-Bon dance beats, but these innovations took place within the context of the intense competition between these four teenagers. At least two of the four sought outside aid in order to get ahead of the other three, and their instructors added further to the mix of elements in the developing Sukeroku style.

A new group formed in 1961, the members of the Sukeroku-kai created the new group, Oedo Sukeroku Taiko, named after the Kabuki character, Sukeroku, and Edo, the old city of Tokyo. Sukeroku Taiko became increasingly popular in Tokyo, sparking the creation of many other taiko groups in the area. This group characterizes itself by the "savoir-faire" (*iki*), of the character of Sukeroku, a kabuki personality with whom many Tokyoites (or *Edokko*, the "children of Edo") identify. As the Music Scholar Nishitsunoi Masahiro wrote for Sukeroku Taiko's English-language website, "Sukeroku Taiko has

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<sup>59</sup> Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 77.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

become a great accomplishment, and it embodies the perfect harmony of the Edokko's vigor and sensitivity.”<sup>61</sup>

More than its effects on the local music scene, however, Sukeroku Taiko established many of the principles that form the basis of taiko performance across the globe. While Osuwa Daiko created a musical standard for taiko, Sukeroku Taiko focused on performance, utilizing sound, voice (*kiai* and *kakegoe*), space (*ma*), and style (*iki*), and all of which modern taiko groups reference in their own discussions of taiko.<sup>62</sup> Many groups also use Sukeroku slant stands in their own performances, and some of the pieces invented by the group, such as “Matsuri Daiko” and “Yodan Uchi,” composed by Kobayashi Seidō and debuted in 1962,<sup>63</sup> have become nearly universal in the repertoires of American taiko groups.<sup>64</sup>

### **The Grand Master: American Taiko begins (1968-Present)**

Taiko in North America began nearly two decades after Oguchi Daichi began Osuwa Daiko, and a student of both Osuwa Daiko and Oedo Sukeroku Taiko established taiko on this continent. Seiichi Tanaka,<sup>65</sup> however, founder of the first taiko group outside Japan and the original source of North American taiko, left Tokyo in the late 1960s with no experience in drumming and intention of teaching taiko.

Born in Tokyo in 1943, Tanaka grew up in Nagano prefecture, where Oguchi Daihachi began Japan’s first taiko group in 1951.<sup>66</sup> Although this coincidence of time

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<sup>61</sup> *Oedo Sukeroku Taiko Official Homepage*, [Online] (Jan 27 2006, accessed Feb. 5 2006); available from <http://www.oedosukerokutaiko.com/english-1.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Some taiko players define their art from others by citing its use of *ma*.

<sup>63</sup> *Oedo Sukeroku Taiko*, (accessed).

<sup>64</sup> Kobayashi Seikō also claims to have coined the term “ensemble drumming” (*kumi-daiko*) to describe this music in 1965. See Tusler, “Sights and Sounds of Power”, 47.

<sup>65</sup> As a US resident, Tanaka’s family name comes after his given name in this paper.

<sup>66</sup> *Seiichi Tanaka*, [Online] (Discover Nikkei, May 5 2006, accessed Feb 27 2006); available from <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/people/profile.php?profile=Tanaka%2CSeiichi>.

and place might have exposed Tanaka to taiko in his teenage years, his online biographies make no reference to any musical influence on his early life, and instead show a childhood devoted to sports and martial arts.<sup>67</sup> Like Oguchi Daihachi, Tanaka came into taiko late in life, after he had immigrated to the United States with the intention of founding a martial arts dojo.<sup>68</sup> Tanaka noticed an open niche, however, when he saw a dance at a San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival performed without the accompaniment of drums.<sup>69</sup> As Oguchi had done nearly two decades earlier in Japan, Tanaka borrowed drums from the local Buddhist temple,<sup>70</sup> gathered together a group of friends, and performed in the Fall Festival (*Aki Matsuri*) of 1968.<sup>71</sup> The would-be martial arts instructor named this group the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, the first taiko group in America.

Although the Tanaka apparently performed well in his first venues, the majority of his training in taiko actually occurred after he had founded Taiko Dojo. Traveling back to Japan, Tanaka studied with both Sukeroku Taiko and Osuwa Daiko, linking his group to the expanding taiko movement in Japan.<sup>72</sup> In tandem with his studies of Japanese musical styles, the director of the Taiko Dojo spread the influence of his group in America through a rigorous performance schedule, appearing at Japantown festivals and collaborating with American musicians such as the Temptations and jazz drummer Art,

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.(accessed).

<sup>68</sup> Paul Jong-Chul Yoon, ""She's Really Become Japanese Now!" Taiko Drumming and Asian American Identifications," *American Music* 19, no. 4 Asian American Music (2001): 422.

<sup>69</sup> Heidi Varian, *The Way of Taiko* (Berkeley, Calif.: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), 31.

<sup>70</sup> Probably the Buddhist Church of San Francisco. See *Buddhist Church of San Francisco*, [Online] (April 10 2006, accessed).

<sup>71</sup> *Seiichi Tanaka*, (accessed).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.(accessed).

introducing people outside the Japanese-American community to taiko music.<sup>73</sup> A 1975 performance for Japan's Emperor Hirohito during his visit to San Francisco further increased the reputation of the San Francisco Taiko Dojo.<sup>74</sup>

Seiichi Tanaka still constitutes a powerful force in the North American taiko community, hailed widely as "Grand Master Tanaka," and the "grandfather of North American taiko." The performance styles he has learned and communicated or simply invented have become widespread in North America, to the point where variations of his song "Matsuri" form part of the repertoire of nearly every taiko group on the continent.<sup>75</sup> Through the Taiko Dojo, Tanaka has worked to spread and popularize taiko, seeking to ensure, as his website states, that "the word 'Taiko,' like 'karate' and 'sushi' would one day become an integral part of the American vocabulary."<sup>76</sup> In doing so, Tanaka sparked the spread of taiko in North America, forming the basis from which nearly all of this continent's taiko music, style, and performance philosophies descend.

The originators of taiko continue to exert an enormous influence on the taiko communities of both Japan and America, but ironically, this first generation of taiko players had little or no previous experience in taiko before they founded their groups. Because taiko did not exist before they invented it, these players came into the art from other backgrounds. Oguchi, Kobayashi, and Tanaka created new musical or choregraphical forms by borrowing from their experience as jazz musicians, festival drummers, or martial artists, creating an art form with loose and ever-expanding boundaries.

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<sup>73</sup> *History of San Francisco Taiko Dojo*, (Nov. 28 2005, accessed March 4 2006); available from [http://sftaiko.com/about\\_history.html](http://sftaiko.com/about_history.html).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*(accessed).

<sup>75</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 39.

<sup>76</sup> *Seiichi Tanaka*, (accessed).

# Chapter 3

## IDENTITY: TAIKO'S USE IN AND USE OF

By 1970, the first handful of taiko groups had formed and established some recognition through high-profile performances like the Olympic Arts Festival, but taiko had not yet spread much beyond its founding groups. The first generation of taiko players, however, worked effectively to speed the growth of the taiko community, not only by inventing new musical forms, but by their involvement in the politics of taiko's dissemination.

Osuwa Daiko and Oedo Sukeroku expended a great deal of effort to extend the geographical as well as the musical boundaries of their art. These two groups founded several taiko organizations to raise interest in taiko and aid new groups,<sup>1</sup> and toured extensively in Europe,<sup>2</sup> America, and Southeast Asia, conducting both concerts and taiko workshops and tutorials. Oguchi, in particular, worked to spread taiko in Japan, where his spin-off groups now number nearly 500, and by the 1980s he had conducted workshops in France, Singapore, Kuwait, Canada, and the United States.<sup>3</sup>

These activities did much to build international interest in taiko, but given the expense of the instruments and the rarity of teachers, these initial international tours did not establish many permanent groups overseas. Instead, the music's earliest footholds outside of Japan depended upon pre-existing social groups.

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<sup>1</sup> These organizations included the Osuwa-Daiko Preservation Society, the All Japan Taiko Federation, and the Tokyo Taiko Association. See *History of Osuwa Daiko*, [Online] (May 5 2006, accessed Feb. 6 2006); available from [http://www.geocities.jp/fuurinkazan\\_tenko/osuwa.htm](http://www.geocities.jp/fuurinkazan_tenko/osuwa.htm). See also *Oedo Sukeroku Taiko*, (accessed).

<sup>2</sup> *Oedo Sukeroku Taiko*, (accessed).

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## Celestial Musicians: Buddhist Taiko

Decades before the founding of the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, immigrant farmers from southwestern Japan practiced their own music in California and Hawaii.<sup>4</sup> As early as 1910, Japanese communities in Hawaii had begun to celebrate the Buddhist day of the dead, O-Bon, with dances (*odori*) and musical performances, and in the 1930s, the Kanazawan People's Association (*Kanazawa-ken Jinkai*) brought drums to San Francisco for the same use.<sup>5</sup> In the context of O-Bon accompaniment, Japanese drumming spread through Hawaii and America's west coast, creating an environment similar to the O-Bon drumming circuit of 1950s Tokyo.

The onset of World War II brought a halt to O-Bon dances, however, as the Japanese-American community became the object of popular suspicion and all expressions of Japanese culture became politically dangerous. Japanese-Americans, segregated from the rest of the country in internment camps, continued to practice O-Bon celebrations in confinement, but the community fared less well at preserving its rituals after the war's end. Internment camps broke up the geographic concentration of Japanese-Americans, and even with the war over, former internees remained reluctant to make any outward display of their ancestry.<sup>6</sup> Instead, first- and second-generation Japanese-Americans, who had experienced interment as adults, sought to fit in as much as possible with perceived American norms.

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<sup>4</sup> Susan Miyo Asai, "Transformations of Tradition: Three Generations of Japanese American Music Making," *The Musical Quarterly* 79, no. 3 (1995): 431.

<sup>5</sup> *The History of Taiko: The Heartbeat of Japan*, [Online] (Dec. 21 2005, accessed Feb. 5 2006); available from [http://www.taiko-center.co.jp/english/history\\_of\\_taiko.html](http://www.taiko-center.co.jp/english/history_of_taiko.html).

<sup>6</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 40.

The few Japanese performance arts that survived the war associated themselves with Buddhist temples,<sup>7</sup> the nuclei around which the scattered Japanese-American communities re-formed. These arts generally found venues in Buddhist ritual music (*hōraku*),<sup>8</sup> performances designed to entertain the worshippers and showcase talent within the community. Before the war, *hōraku* had included classical *gagaku* music and Buddhist morality plays,<sup>9</sup> but from the late 1940s to the 1960s, temple entertainment shifted toward the American mainstream. In response to lingering wartime paranoia of the non-Japanese populace and the Americanized upbringing of the new Japanese-American generation, piano recitals outnumbered shamisen or shakuhachi performances, and English became the common language of temple services.<sup>10</sup> As the civil rights movement of the 1960s grew, however, Japanese-Americans began to search for ways to re-introduce Japanese music into their *hōraku* programs in an effort to teach their children about their heritage. Taiko fit the need well.

As with Oguchi Daihachi's adaptation of a Shinto ritual for his taiko group, Masao Kodani of Los Angeles adapted performances that already included percussive accompaniment to begin America's second taiko group. The story told among taiko players holds that a young Kodani and his friends, Johnny Mori and George Abe,<sup>11</sup> played drums for the Los Angeles Senshin Buddhist Temple's annual O-Bon dance in 1969, and decided after the event to expand O-Bon dance accompaniment into a new

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<sup>7</sup> Christine R. Yano, "The Reintegration of Japanese Bon Dance in Hawaii after World War II," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 6, no. Asian Music in North America (1985): 115.

<sup>8</sup> literally "[Buddhist] law-music," but figuratively "joy-in-piety."

<sup>9</sup> Susan Miyo Asai, "Hōraku: A Buddhist Tradition of Performing Arts and the Development of Taiko Drumming in the United States," *Selected Reports in Ethnomusicology* 4 (1985): 163-164.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*: 164.

<sup>11</sup> Stan Shikuma, E-mail, "Taiko: Spirit and the Drum", Jan 15 2006.

taiko group.<sup>12</sup> With some instruction from Seiichi Tanaka, Kodani, Mori, and Abe wrote new music and invented new performance styles, which they performed under the name Kinnara Taiko, named after the *kinnara* “Celestial Musicians” of Buddhist mythology.<sup>13</sup>

Kinnara Taiko’s most important innovation from the perspective of the later development of taiko in North America solved the fundamental problem of instrumentation. American temples possessed neither the money to purchase nor the expertise to make drums in the Japanese manner, and had instead depended upon the instruments that immigrants had shipped to their new homes.<sup>14</sup> This unreliable supply could not support a community of taiko groups, so Kinnara Taiko bypassed the expense of shipping drums from Japan by manufacturing their own. Rather than boring out a tree trunk to make the shell in the manner of Japanese taiko drum manufacturers, however, Kinnara taiko made their drums out of oak wine barrels, a material readily available in California.<sup>15</sup> Kodani and his group did not invent the barrel drum,<sup>16</sup> but the Los Angeles group did popularize this affordable method of drum manufacture. Today, wine-barrel drums make up the majority of America’s supply of taiko drums, and many groups manufacture their own instruments in this way.<sup>17</sup>

Kinnara’s use of taiko within a strictly American context marked a significant distinction from the work of Seiichi Tanaka, whose philosophy of performance depended

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<sup>12</sup> Masumi Izumi, *A Brief History of Taiko* [Online] (Discover Nikkei, Jan. 10 1997, accessed Feb. 19 2006); available from [http://www.discovernikkei.org/wiki/index.php/Taiko\\_History](http://www.discovernikkei.org/wiki/index.php/Taiko_History).

<sup>13</sup> *Japanese American National Museum to Open Exhibition July 14*, [Online] (Big Drum: Taiko in the United States, May 17 accessed May 17 2006); available from <http://www.janm.org/exhibits/bigdrum/press.php>.

<sup>14</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 42.

<sup>15</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko: Spirit and the Drum".

<sup>16</sup> Japanese immigrants in Hawaii had made similar instruments out of salmon barrels and oilcloth since before the war. See Yano, "Bon Dance in Hawaii," 152.

<sup>17</sup> Some people, most famously Mark Miyoshi, have become professional taiko drum makers using this barrel technique. American taiko players like Elaine Fong take pride in this indigenous method of drum manufacture as being “more eco-friendly” than Japanese techniques. See Elaine Fong, Telephone Interview, Nov. 11 2005.

more heavily on his own experiences in Japan. Through popularization of the barrel drum and the introduction of taiko to the Japanese-American Buddhist community, Kinnara made taiko accessible to amateurs in a way that the more musically exacting Taiko Dojo did not. Although Tanaka has trained many of America's professional taiko players, many of whom have spread the music by founding their own groups, the popular basis for the taiko movement spread by means of the Buddhist temple network.<sup>18</sup>

Ethnomusicologist Susan Asai, writing in 1985 from her perspective as a student of Kodani, actually subsumed taiko completely into the context of religious music, saying that "the function of taiko in the United States is principally a Buddhist one."<sup>19</sup>

Even as Kinnara taiko's wine-barrel drums paved the way for the growth of North American taiko, the group's philosophy spread this music through the continent's Buddhist communities. The fact that drums already provided accompaniment to many Buddhist rituals allowed taiko to quickly assume religious significance as this music spread throughout the Japanese-American Buddhist communities.<sup>20</sup> Asai states that "drumming functions to increase both the viewer's and the performer's awareness of the *dharma*, or Buddhist teaching and values."<sup>21</sup> Arthur Takemoto brings even greater detail to the purpose of taiko in this context on the Dharma-Rain website when he states:

The drummer becomes part of the Sangha or the body of "players" that despite their delusions or attachments to the world of birth and death (samsara) become able to hear Namu [*sic*] Amida Butsu together. The *bachi*, or sticks used to hit the drum, becomes the Dharma or the link between the realm of enlightenment and the human realm of birth and death.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 32.

<sup>19</sup> Asai, "Hōraku," 164.

<sup>20</sup> Asai, "Transformations of Tradition," 441.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Takemoto, *Buddhist Taiko* [Online] (Hou-u: Dharma Rain, July 8 2004, accessed May 9 2006); available from [http://www.vbtemple.org/dharmarain/dr12\\_tai.htm](http://www.vbtemple.org/dharmarain/dr12_tai.htm).

The uses to which Buddhist temples put taiko extended past the enlightenment of individual players, however. Taiko entertains audiences, and groups like Kinnara Taiko used their music to teach Buddhist concepts and to attract people to temples. Takemoto records that Kinnara Taiko held concerts, conducted workshops, and even published Buddhist pamphlets in their mission to spread Buddhism through music.<sup>23</sup> Taiko fulfilled the requirements of the Buddhist temples looking for Japanese arts to perform in their services, and they quickly incorporated ensemble drumming into their *hōraku* repertoires.

As temples became the primary vector for taiko's dissemination, taiko also became a symbol of these communities' identity as both Buddhist and Japanese. Buddhist temples formed the centers for America's scattered Japanese-American communities, and they used taiko during O-Bon festivals and other holiday programs in an attempt to encourage youth involvement and cohesion in Japanese-American communities.<sup>24</sup> Immediately accessible and easy to learn, taiko had not existed before World War II and therefore avoided the stigma still attached to older Japanese performance arts.<sup>25</sup> Taiko became a symbol for not only Buddhist temples but for the Japanese-Americans who attended the temples' events and ensemble drumming could now assume a new and more powerful social role.

### **Who They are and Where They are Going: Taiko and Japanese heritage**

The nature of taiko as a symbol of Japanese heritage eclipsed its role in Buddhist music when the music became part of the Civil Rights movement in the early 1970s. As

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.(accessed).

<sup>24</sup> Hideyo Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance: Creating Japanese American Traditions," *The Japanese Journal of American Studies* 12 (2001): 110.

<sup>25</sup> Asai, "Hōraku," 164.

memories of World War II and the internment camps receded, Japanese-Americans began to reassert their heritage and interest rose among the new generation in the Japanese arts their parents had rejected.

Reclaiming Japanese art proved difficult, however. Even without the lingering wartime hostility that made older Japanese-Americans afraid to practice performance arts such as *gagaku* and *noh*, the structures of accreditation and apprenticeship that supported the transmission of such complex arts did not exist in America. Taiko, however, avoided both problems by dint of its novelty. Taiko summoned up no uncomfortable memories of imperial Japan since taiko did not exist before 1951. At the same time, a newcomer to taiko could quickly pick up enough basic technique to perform adequately, as opposed to the years of study necessary to produce a *noh* musician.

Taiko performances also possessed broad accessibility, entertaining audiences without demanding the educational background necessary to appreciate Japan's more venerable art forms. Taiko avoided the problem of recontextualization, which damaged the appeal of many performance arts as they left the social context in which they developed and appeared before foreign audiences. Because taiko has existed only since 1951, and because Oguchi Daihachi designed it specifically to entertain an audience, viewers could watch and enjoy taiko on stages anywhere in the world. Linda Fujie comments on this attribute, calling taiko "a highly successful reinterpretation of Japanese folk music that requires little "recontextualization" because its context is already the stage."<sup>26</sup> Japanese in origin, yet easy to learn and without the rules and strictures that

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<sup>26</sup> Linda Fujie, "Japanese Taiko Drumming in International Performance: Converging Musiocal Ideas in the Search for Success on Stage," *World of Music* 43, no. 2-3 (2001): 100.

limited the accessibility of classical Japanese performance arts, taiko spread quickly among Japanese-Americans as a way to display ethnic pride.<sup>27</sup>

Even as taiko spread from one Buddhist temple to another across western North America, social activism assumed central importance for many performers. In the words of taiko player and essayist Stan Shikuma, taiko embodied the “rejection of the notion that Japanese-Americans should be ashamed of their heritage,”<sup>28</sup> an idea that remains important today. In a 2004 interview with the *New York Times National*, for example, UCLA student Jason Osajima speaks of playing taiko: “You just feel you’re preserving a part of your Japanese ancestry.”<sup>29</sup> The idea of ethnic pride created around taiko a new symbolism beyond Buddhist religious music.<sup>30</sup> Asai identifies this symbolism, “as a form of social commentary and ideology, defining who people of Japanese ancestry are and where they are going.”<sup>31</sup>

Taiko appealed to the rising third generation of Japanese-Americans in its power and intensity, acting against the stereotypes that pervaded American society of Japanese-Americans as weak, passive, and un-creative. Many first- and second-generation Japanese-Americans remembered the internment camps too well to risk further persecution by speaking out against these stereotypes. Some, however, especially members of the third generation, rejected the characterizations of passivity created around them, and did so through taiko.

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<sup>27</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 32.

<sup>28</sup> Stan Shikuma, E-mail, "Taiko as Folklore", Jan 15 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Mireya Navarro, "Young Japanese Americans Honor Ethnic Roots," *New York Times National* 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 41.

<sup>31</sup> Asai, "Transformations of Tradition," 439.

These people used taiko to declare their identity as Japanese-Americans, turning the act of striking the drum into a political symbol. The ethnologist Konagaya Hideyo clarifies how Japanese-Americans used taiko:

Physically acted out their resistance against inequality and injustice in American society and against their own passivity and weakness through actions such as whirling sticks over their heads, shouting, jumping, turning, and pounding on *taiko*.<sup>32</sup>

Stan Shikuma comments on the same power of taiko to combat stereotypes, contrasting images of “quiet, passive, stoic” Japanese-Americans to taiko players, who “were loud, proud, emotional, and often politically active.”<sup>33</sup> The forceful, creative nature of taiko performances did much to undermine these that Shikuma identifies, and many Japanese-Americans found themselves attracted to this music for its use as a social statement.<sup>34</sup>

Paul Yoon, an ethnomusicologist, stressed the importance of this protest against stereotypes, the rejection of the image of “effeminate men and subservient women” implied in the physical power of taiko performances.<sup>35</sup> Taiko CDs with names like “Quiet no More”<sup>36</sup> and “Making Waves”<sup>37</sup> demonstrate how taiko groups advertised their social goals,<sup>38</sup> while groups like San Jose Taiko<sup>39</sup> explicitly state that their music “seeks liberation from oppression, self-definition in place of stereotypes, and self-reliance and persistence in the face of adversity.”<sup>40</sup> Japanese-Americans not only found taiko useful

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<sup>32</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 107.

<sup>33</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko as Folklore".

<sup>34</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 41.

<sup>35</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 424.

<sup>36</sup> Released by Katari Taiko in 1994

<sup>37</sup> Released by Seattle Kokon Taiko in 1997

<sup>38</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 42.

<sup>39</sup> San Jose Taiko continues to further its perceived social duties, requiring apprentices to participate in conferences on such subjects as “the role of *taiko* in the Japanese-American community.” Kimberly Powell, "The Apprenticeship of Embodied Knowledge in a *Taiko* Drumming Ensemble," in *Knowing Bodies, Moving Minds*, ed. Liora Bresler (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2004), 184.

<sup>40</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 422.

as a display of Japanese art but in particular as a forceful art that denied specific stereotypes.

### **Claiming it as their own: Asian-Americans Pan-Ethnicity**

Just as the use of taiko as a declaration of Japanese-American pride widened its pool of performers beyond the Buddhist temples and into the Japanese community in the 1970s and '80s, further modifications of taiko's social activism have extended its borders yet further. Some Asian-Americans felt that the American White majority applied many of the same stereotypes to them as to Japanese-Americans specifically, people of many Asian backgrounds also found themselves attracted to taiko. Elaine Fong, director of Odaiko New England, traces her own initial interest taiko from its nature as "a very charged expression of cultural identity,"<sup>41</sup> and as a member of the New York group Soh Daiko recounted a similar first impression in an interview with Yoon: "I'd never seen Asians do anything remotely as cool or powerful... it was clearly an expression of affirmation and power and I was totally taken with it."<sup>42</sup>

Asian-American women have found themselves particularly targeted by stereotyping as passive and submissive and have joined the taiko movement in large numbers.<sup>43</sup> As ethnomusicologist Deborah Wong quoted one female taiko player, "In this day and age, even with opportunities for equality, women need outlets to feel power. Playing the taiko fulfills a need."<sup>44</sup> This influx of women taiko players marks a significant change from early taiko groups, which did not ban women explicitly, but

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<sup>41</sup> Fong.

<sup>42</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 425.

<sup>43</sup> Some groups have become exclusively female, as in the case of Vancouver's Sawagi Taiko, which seeks to "offer an alternative to the stereotype of Asian women as quiet and demure." See *Sawagi Taiko (English)*, [Online] (Sawagi Taiko, Oct. 1 1999, accessed April 15 2006); available from <http://www.shinnova.com/part/86-sawa/index.htm>.

<sup>44</sup> Wong, 217.

tended to favor men for performances, citing their greater upper-body strength.<sup>45</sup> Large-scale professional groups like Kodō placed women on stage as dancers or musicians, and male drumming pieces far outnumbered these “feminine” performances.<sup>46</sup> Other groups in Japan and America followed the same practice and dominated the early taiko movement and public performances featured mostly-male groups well into the 1980s.

The appearance of women in performances has grown noticeably in only the past two decades. Heidi Varian estimates that women make up 60 percent of all taiko players in the US and Canada,<sup>47</sup> while Terada Yoshitaka of Japan’s National Museum of Ethnology estimates that women account for more than two thirds of American taiko players.<sup>48</sup> Women now drum onstage in the Japanese group Kodō, and their appearance has accompanied a shift in ideology, which Kodō staff member Fujimoto Yoko expresses: “Kodo women need to be strong and independent.”<sup>49</sup>

Many taiko groups have taken on a wide range of political agendas. The members of Toronto’s Wasabi Daiko claim “an overtly political focus” for their group, and have performed at such events as the Earth Spirit Festival, Lesbian and Gay Pride Day, and the East Asian Youth and Alienation Conference.<sup>50</sup> In New York, Soh Daiko participates in political rallies for immigrants’ rights and has performed at the memorial service for hate-crime victim Vincent Chin, using taiko to voice support for the larger community of Asian-Americans.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Mark Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum: The Life of Japan’s Kodo Drummers* (Hong Kong: Lightworks Press, 1997), 16.

<sup>46</sup> Jacques Holender, *Kodo: Heartbeat Drummers of Japan* (New York: Rhapsody Films, INC).

<sup>47</sup> Varian, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 42. states that men still occupy the majority in the Japanese taiko community, but notes that this majority is diminishing.

<sup>49</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> Tamai Kobayashi, "Heartbeat in the Diaspora: Taiko and Community," *Fuse* 12, no. 5/6 (1994): 26.

<sup>51</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 425.

As taiko spread in the 1990s to include people of non-Japanese backgrounds, however, ethnic identity became a source of conflict. Paul Yoon, a one-time member of Soh Daiko, has dealt with the question of identity extensively in his own work, documenting the co-opting of taiko into the context of Asian-Americans pan-ethnicity. Soh Daiko members have downplayed the Japanese element of their rhetoric in favor of a more general appeal to all Asians: “[taiko] says pretty clearly... that Asian-Americans can be strong, can be self-determined, can be pan-Asian, can be joyful, can be expressive.”<sup>52</sup> According to Yoon, this approach to taiko in North America as a Pan-Asian art form has grown prevalent as the music has extended further beyond the boundaries of the Japanese-American community, and histories of taiko on websites and in books support this statement, emphasizing the similarities between taiko drums and the percussion used in Korea, China, and India.<sup>53</sup> The webpage of the Vancouver group Sawagi Taiko, for example, blurs the distinction between taiko the musical genre, Japanese percussion in general, and all Asian percussion, stating its purpose to continue “the historical and cultural connections amongst different Asian cultures - the instrument originated in China; the artistic form originated in the rural communities of Japan.”<sup>54</sup> Tamai Kobayashi of Wasabi Taiko calls her group’s music “a space in which Japanese Canadians and other Asian Canadians can meet each other and work together across...historically cultural/natural divides,”<sup>55</sup> and Yoon quotes a taiko player who states Asian Americans’ propriety over taiko as “one thing Asian-Americans can claim as

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.: 424-425.

<sup>53</sup> Varian, 21. See also *Taiko Drums from a Small Planet*, (2006, accessed May 3 2006); available from <http://www.mninter.net/~thomasjp/taiko.html>, *Taiko: Myth and History*, [Online] (Shumei Taiko, Sep. 10 2002, accessed May 3 2006); available from <http://www.shumeitaiko.org/history.html>, *Wadaiko Newark Taiko Group*, (May 17 2006, accessed March 17 2006); available from <http://www.taiko.us/wadaiko/>.

<sup>54</sup> *Sawagi Taiko (English)*, (accessed).

<sup>55</sup> Kobayashi, "Heartbeat in the Diaspora," 26.

their own.”<sup>56</sup> With these sentiments, the Soh Daiko member has re-conceptualized the role of taiko as a part of a larger body of Asian-Americans culture, de-emphasizing its ties to Japan.

Yoon comments upon this rising conception of Asian pan-ethnicity, which treats the “Japanese-American experience... as a ‘segment’ that forms a larger body of Asian-Americans experience.”<sup>57</sup> This pan-Asian mentality has encouraged fusion and experimentation with other Asian performance arts, as group member Alan Okada told Yoon, “We had four members that were Chinese American and when we got to the Fifth Anniversary concert...they wanted to incorporate something from Chinese culture.”<sup>58</sup> Soh Daiko attempt to fuse their performance with a Chinese lion dance in 1985 proved unsuccessful, but despite this disappointment, however, the pressure induced by the pan-Asian movement among Soh Daiko’s members recently produced an experiment with Korean drumming (*samulnori*).<sup>59</sup> Other groups have experimented with *samulnori* as one of many influences in taiko without making reference to its particular nature as an Asian performance art, most notably Odaiko New England.<sup>60</sup> Yoon states, however, that Soh Daiko’s attention to *samulnori* and the lion dance springs directly from the ethnic identities of the group’s members: “The desire to wed members’ ‘own’ non-Japanese musical traditions with taiko arose in part through an acknowledgement that taiko alone was not sufficiently ‘Asian-American.’”<sup>61</sup> After its use as a symbol of specifically Japanese-Americans in the, taiko found a place in the context of larger social movements

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<sup>56</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 425.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.: 426.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.: 430.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Fong.

<sup>61</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 430.

of ethnic identification. The dissemination of taiko in North America therefore depended heavily on the status of this continent's minorities.

### **Utopia Around the Drum: Japanese Social Movements**

Most taiko players assume that the use of taiko as a symbol of minority solidarity constitutes a uniquely North American aspect of the taiko movement. One does not expect Japanese taiko players, for example, to use taiko as a way of clarifying their ethnic identity. As Odaiko New England director Elaine Fong supposes, "I don't think that taiko groups in Japan think about cultural identity," quoting a member of her group, Japanese-born Shigeru Watanabe: "I didn't get into taiko because I wanted to get in touch with my Japanese heritage. I know who *I* am."<sup>62</sup> However, though people in Japan do not feel the need to assert their heritage in relation to majority as Japanese-Americans do, a similar social force rose in Japan during the 1960s as the country undertook a program of national self-identification.

By the 1970s, young adults in Japan therefore faced problems similar to those of Japanese-Americans across the Pacific, namely the need to reinterpret their heritage and clarify their identity.<sup>63</sup> Their country's defeat in World War II created a sense of inferiority in comparison to Europeans and Americans in the 1950s and '60s that parallels the mind-set of Japanese-Americans. Shawn Bender notes the conception in post-war Japan that the body shape of Japanese people limited ability to excel in Western performance arts and demonstrates how taiko overturns this notion. Instructors in the Sukeroku Taiko Hozonkai and the Nihon Taiko Dōjō often told Bender the tall, long-limbed bodies of Whites made playing taiko more difficult for them than for Japanese

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<sup>62</sup> Fong.

<sup>63</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 28.

people,<sup>64</sup> while professional taiko player Hayashi Eitetsu, expressed a similar sentiment to Bender, saying “I’ve had the opportunity to teach my ‘Odaiko’ to tall white guys (*hakujin*). They can move their arms pretty well, but their knees are weak...The same is true for tall Japanese people...In my view, my ‘Odaiko’ playing style fits best the ‘old-model’ Japanese person, with short legs and long torso.”<sup>65</sup> In a time when many Japanese people turned toward American forms of artistic expression, taiko constituted a native art in which people could take pride.

In his discussion of taiko in the early 1970s, editor of *Taikology* magazine Takata Takeshi speaks of the “intense guilt felt for all that had been lost and abandoned during the growth process...the taiko became a symbol of the good old days...an appealing activity that everyone could participate in.”<sup>66</sup> This same nostalgia for Japanese “traditions” had fueled interest in folk performances, and in the 1960s and ‘70s it became an important political tool in the 1960s to protest a government that many felt had turned too far toward America. As taiko historian David Leong writes, taiko became a symbol for those “disaffected with modern big city life,” some of whom collected into artist communes, attempting to preserve and spread the ways of life that they saw threatened by Japan’s modernization.<sup>67</sup> These activist groups enjoyed varying success with their political goals, but in the sense of performance and dissemination of art, at least one group excelled.

Kodō, arguably the most famous taiko group in the world, owes its existence to the radical social movement of the 1950s and 60s, which Takata calls “left-wing

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<sup>64</sup> As a six foot six taiko player, I can confirm that height presents a difficulty in taiko, but not an insurmountable one.

<sup>65</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 202-203.

<sup>66</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 32.

<sup>67</sup> David Leong, "Taiko Overview and History."

nativism.”<sup>68</sup> A member of this movement, Den Tagayasu,<sup>69</sup> paved the way for Kodō’s development when he established a commune on Sado Island in 1969.<sup>70</sup> Called “an eccentric musicologist,”<sup>71</sup> and “an activist from the rancorous labor movements of the fifties,”<sup>72</sup> Den built a Japanese art conservatory on Sado Island.<sup>73</sup> The Sado Islanders called the commune “either left-wing crazies, nationalist fanatics, or a religious cult,”<sup>74</sup> but Den quickly established his group’s purpose as the preservation of Japanese music and dance. He sent students to learn the drumming and dancing rituals of various communities around Japan and invited musicians and musicologists to Sado to teach their techniques, including both folk performers and modern musicians, such as jazz drummer and composer Max Roach.<sup>75</sup> Soon, the focus of the group shifted from Japanese music in general to taiko in particular, and the commune formed a professional taiko group, which Den named after a drum ritual native to Sado, Ondekoza, or the “Demon-drums Group.”<sup>76</sup>

Although it began to function as a conventional performance group, supporting itself with tours and concert admissions, Ondekoza retained its original social goals. As Fujie wrote:

One can see in hindsight that Den and his followers wanted to create a kind of social and cultural utopia around the drum and drum playing, a kind of utopia based on traditional values and on the nature of large

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<sup>68</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 33.

<sup>69</sup> Originally Tajiri Kōzō, according to Riikka Länsisalmi, "Crafting Traditions: Expressions of "Japaneseness" in Modern *Taiko* Drumming", 10/27/2005 2004.

<sup>70</sup> *Profile*, [Online] (Za Ondekoza, May 5 2006, accessed March 7 2006); available from <http://www.ondekoza.com/en/profile.shtml>.

<sup>71</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 33.

<sup>73</sup> The site of Zeami’s exile

<sup>74</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-14.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

drums—but musically not actually based on any specific folk music tradition.<sup>77</sup>

As the 1970s progressed and the public interest in folk performances rose, this version of taiko enjoyed great success in performance, but Den did not exercise this philosophy solely to please crowds. The director of Ondekoza attempted to realize the “utopia around the drum,” in the social structure of his group, and extended his vision to all aspects of the group members’ lives.<sup>78</sup> Taiko became a path to self-fulfillment, an ideal to which San Francisco’s Seiichi Tanaka and Masao Kodani in Los Angeles also ascribed, and Den imposed harsh restrictions upon the members of Ondekoza to further this goal. Ondekoza’s director demanded a harsh regime of physical training from his drummers, including daily marathons, and banned “drinking, smoking, and girlfriends” for his students.<sup>79</sup> In the words of Oi Yoshiaki, one of these drummers, “[Den] was a dictator.”<sup>80</sup> The tensions building in Ondekoza resulted in the group’s dissolution in 1980, and Den left Sado, taking the group’s drums and the remainder of its money. Oi recounts this episode as “a very upsetting time, like sons leaving their father,”<sup>81</sup> but the remnants of Ondekoza bought new drums and formed their own group, Kodō, in 1981 under the leadership of Kawaguchi Toshio.<sup>82</sup>

Kodō retains much of the social philosophy that created Ondekoza, albeit expressed in a less extreme way. In the group’s tenth anniversary video, group director Kawauchi enumerated the new expression of the “utopia around drums”: “I don’t mean to deny all the benefits of modern society and its technology, but we are concerned that in

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<sup>77</sup> Fujie, “Taiko Drumming in International Performance,” 96.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

our obsession with technological development, we tend to forget the environment.”<sup>83</sup>

The group’s players, support staff, and apprentices still live in a close-knit community on Sado for most of the year, and the group focuses a great deal of attention on the socialization of new apprentices in their lives away from modern society.<sup>84</sup> Apprentices still wake at 4:50am, stretch, and run ten kilometers before breakfast at 6:30 and perform morning drum maintenance before they ever set bachi to drum head.<sup>85</sup>

Shawn Bender reveals that this training composes a social statement about Japan’s native performance arts in the technological and America-influenced modern country. Apprentices must sit *seiza* for long periods of time, with calves folded under thighs and back straight in a way that quickly becomes painful for those used to sitting in chairs. Bender interprets this training in proper sitting as “integral; to ridding apprentices of modern ‘habits’ (*kuse*) they had incorporated before entering the program.”<sup>86</sup> Apprentices also grow and eat their own food in an effort to strengthen the sense of community between members, creating an identity around taiko players that references pre-modern Japanese village life.<sup>87</sup> Kodō stresses the importance of common identification among group members, as the 1991 video stressed, saying, “to be a member of Kodō, it is not enough simply to have musical ability. A willingness to live and work

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<sup>83</sup> Holender.

<sup>84</sup> *Kodo Cultural Foundation Apprenticeship Programme*, [Online] (Kodō, May 5 2006, accessed March 15 2006); available from <http://www.kodo.or.jp/kcf/kcfapprentice.html>. states that Kodō apprentices live and train on Sado for two years before some are given probationary Kodō membership, which after a third year may become full membership in the performing group. Some other groups have adopted the same method of apprenticeship for new members, most notably San Jose Taiko, see Powell, "Apprenticeship of Embodied Knowledge," 185.

<sup>85</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 9.

<sup>86</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 206.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*: 205.

as part of a collective is equally important,”<sup>88</sup> while the group’s 2001 DVD made frequent references to the members of the group as “cells in a single organism.”<sup>89</sup>

While it has focused on constructing an identity for players within the group, Kodō no longer emphasizes the preservation of Japanese culture, but instead the spread of taiko around the world, as the group states in their DVD, “crossing nationality, race, and culture.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Contributions to their Field: Taiko Support**

To some extent, the social movements that produced Kodō succeeded in preventing the erosion of pre-modern Japanese practices; as the left-wing protests continued and Ondekoza rose in popularity in the late 1970s, government funding began to focus on the folk performance arts, beginning a large-scale program of support in 1979. During the economic boom of the 1970s and ‘80s, the Agency of Cultural Affairs, a branch of the Ministry of Education, stepped up its program of distributing funds to towns and villages, in an effort to preserve local performance arts and slow the migration of the young from rural districts to cities. In the interest of “community promotion,” town councils used this money to fund local performance groups, enlivening community events and attracting tourists and money as some famous folk performance arts had done.<sup>91</sup> Local preservation societies (*honzonkai*) formed using this money to ensure the continued practice of particular arts, including some drumming rituals.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Holender.

<sup>89</sup> Image Entertainment (Firm) and Kodō (Musical group), *Kodō* (Chatsworth, CA: Image Entertainment), 1 videodisc (69 min.).

<sup>90</sup> “*Kokuseiki, jinshū, bunka o koe...kokoro no kodo o toketai.*” from Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Takata, “The Thundering World of Taiko,” 32.

<sup>92</sup> Thornbury, “The Cultural Properties Protection Law,” 219.

As government support increased, taiko groups, easy to establish and cheap to maintain after the initial investment, capable of doubling as the accompaniment to a range of older folk performance arts, began to attract this funding. By the late 1970s, towns had begun to fund taiko extensively, celebrating the music as an expression of Japanese culture and an attraction for artists and young people.<sup>93</sup> Taiko's popularity increased steadily, necessitating in 1997 the creation of the Nippon Taiko Foundation (*Zai Nippon Taiko Renmei*) under the direct jurisdiction of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (*Bunka-chō*).<sup>94</sup> New taiko groups often grew out of local preservation societies, and in fact taiko co-opted the *honzonkai* system so thoroughly that some writers mistake preservation societies for "a kind of taiko group."<sup>95</sup> By the beginning of the 1980s, government involvement in taiko had triggered an explosion of new groups, and in 1990s, folk performing arts festivals such as the National Youth Convention featured seven taiko pieces out of eight performances in the "new works" category.<sup>96</sup> The estimate of taiko groups in Japan now stands at about four thousand,<sup>97</sup> with professional groups like Kodō forming only a tiny minority among thousands of small, local groups using government funds to buy drums and practice space.

The United States government has also extended support to taiko, and though this country's government does not patronize taiko on the scale of its Japanese counterpart, taiko in both countries attracts support for its use as a symbol of identity. Like Japan, the American government classifies taiko as "folk music" and providing venues for the art at

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<sup>93</sup> Oguchi, *Tenko*, 210-235.

<sup>94</sup> This organization began in 1979 as the privately-run All-Nippon Taiko Federation (*Zen Nippon Taiko Renmei*). See (*Zai*) *Nippon Taiko Renmei*, [Online] (March 27 2006, accessed March 9 2006); available from <http://www.nippon-taiko.or.jp/index.html>.

<sup>95</sup> Varian, 26.

<sup>96</sup> Thornbury, "Preserving Japan's Folk Performing Arts," 165.

<sup>97</sup> *The History of Taiko*, (accessed).

the National Endowment for the Arts Folk Art Festival in 1974 and the 1983 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife, which included a performance by New York's Soh Daiko.<sup>98</sup> Seiichi Tanaka, the originator of taiko in North America, received a National Endowment for the Arts National Heritage Fellowship in 2001<sup>99</sup> "in recognition of his work promoting the art of taiko."<sup>100</sup> One of 13 people so awarded for "artistic excellence, authenticity, and contributions to their field,"<sup>101</sup> Tanaka's award suggests that at least some government officials consider taiko part of the sphere of American folk music.

While the Japanese government rewards taiko as an expression of Japanese national identity, the majority of American taiko patronage derives from the music's nature as an art of minority communities. The Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, the Japan Foundation, and the Japan-United States Friendship Commission have extended support to the taiko movement, and The Japanese-American Cultural and Community Center of Los Angeles sponsored the first Los Angeles Taiko Festival, organizing concerts by domestic taiko groups and tours by Japanese groups like Kodō.<sup>102</sup> In return, these organizations use taiko as part of their advertising campaigns, such as the 1999 hundred-taiko-player concert of the Japanese-American National Museum of Los Angeles, an event that "proclaimed," in the words of Konagaya Hideyo, "the ethnic pride of Japanese-Americans more loudly than ever in American society."<sup>103</sup>

The idea of taiko as a fundamental part of Japanese-American identity provided the growing performance art with valuable support and patronage. The Japanese-

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<sup>98</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 113.

<sup>99</sup> *History of Osuwa Daiko*, (accessed).

<sup>100</sup> *Seiichi Tanaka*, (accessed).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*(accessed).

<sup>102</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 113-114.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*: 113.

American Museum has established taiko classes to “tell the story of the Japanese-American community,”<sup>104</sup> and the museum has advertised taiko’s central place in Japanese-American history in their large-scale taiko exhibit “Big Drum.”<sup>105</sup> Another private organization, the Japanese-American Cultural and Community has expressed support for taiko in a way that Konagaya cites as “instrumental in the institutionalization of *taiko* as a performing art in Japanese-American festivals and community events,”<sup>106</sup> making possible the North American taiko conference.

In 1994, the JACCC organized a “Taiko Gathering” as part of the Nisei Week Japanese Festival in, an event that expanded in 1997 into a “taiko conference” bringing together groups from across North America.<sup>107</sup> Since 1997, taiko conferences have taken place every other year, working, in the words of the mission statement of the most recent conference:

To build a network and community between taiko groups in North America, to document the history of North American taiko, to pass on the traditions and repertoire of North American taiko, and to support the artistic development of North American taiko.<sup>108</sup>

Attendance and scale of taiko conferences have grown with every event, and by bringing together taiko players from across the continent, the conferences have established networks of support for smaller taiko groups as part of an expanding taiko community.

As in Japan, the rationale for this funding derives from the desire to preserve Japanese arts and support celebrations of Japanese culture. Konagaya characterizes the The Japanese-American Cultural and Community Center as a group of “public

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid.: 114.

<sup>105</sup> See the Japanese-American National Museum’s Big Drum exhibit: *Big Drum*, [Online] (May 27 2006, accessed April 24 2006); available from <http://www.janm.org/exhibits/bigdrum/>.

<sup>106</sup> Konagaya, “Taiko as Performance,” 114.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.: 115.

<sup>108</sup> Chelsey Ruth and Philip Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko” (Stanford University, 2004), 13.

folklorists,” supporting “ethnic or minority folk traditions in getting fair recognition in society,”<sup>109</sup> a function comparable to Japan’s folk preservation societies. Like these government-sponsored organizations, these organizations “take the initiative to raise funds to administer and coordinate a festival, exhibition, and concert.”<sup>110</sup> Japanese-American organizations thus work much the same way as Japanese civil organizations such as preservation societies, providing a grassroots structure that sustains taiko on an amateur level. Although more general pan-Asian groups have yet to make large contributions to taiko’s spread, the art form’s inclusion within various frames of identification has proved essential to its survival. As noh prospered by re-defining itself as a symbol of the Japanese nobility in the fifteenth century, taiko has enjoyed similar patronage as a symbol of national, religious, or ethnic communities.

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<sup>109</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 114.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

# Chapter 4

## CONFLICTS WITH SYMBOLS

Although identification within various social movements aided in the dissemination of taiko, the changes that these movements imposed have not always complimented each other. As taiko players try to balance their own self-identification with the desires of their audience, conflict has arisen between the symbols taiko players use to express social messages and the symbols they express to audiences in the interest of financial success.

### **Singing for their supper: Advertising taiko**

Financial considerations take on particular importance in North America. Although American taiko players do possess a support system of non-profit and government patronage accumulated by using taiko to express the identities of various groups, these groups cannot sustain the entirety of the American taiko community. Making, purchasing, and transporting the instruments costs more than most private individuals can afford, and one fundamental difference between the American and Japanese taiko movements springs, therefore, from the source of their funding. Some of Japan's taiko groups draw funding from private sources,<sup>1</sup> but most of Japan's local taiko groups depend upon government funding.

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<sup>1</sup> Asano one of the two large drum manufacturers in Japan, provided Kodō with financial support in the early eighties, and has also built a large rehearsal hall for local groups to use, sponsors taiko events, and contributes money to publish *Taikology* magazine. See Lorne Mallin, "Wood and Skin: The Making of Taiko Drums," *Intersect* (1993): 26-29.

Many taiko players have noted this monetary distinction between Japan and America and commented upon the differences it produces in the two countries' respective taiko movements. Elaine Fong of Odaiko New England, for example, states:

In Japan, people take taiko for granted. [In America,] you really have to seek out a taiko group...you start with no instruments, you have to make your drum. The level of commitment is much higher [in American taiko players], it's not like you can just...travel to Tokyo and take taiko classes.<sup>2</sup>

Takata Takeshi agrees that the comparative difficulty of maintaining taiko in North America has made its taiko community stronger, opining that “there is much that Japan’s overly-coddled taiko groups, in most (but not all) cases the product of government fiat, could learn from their North American counterparts.”<sup>3</sup> In the words of Canadian taiko player Tamai Kobayashi, “taiko groups must ... ‘sing for their supper,’”<sup>4</sup> an economic necessity that has affected taiko’s development even as this music became associated with social and political movements. American taiko groups cannot rely upon outside support for its continued existence, and so taiko players on this continent must work to cultivate another source of funding: a paying audience.

As any performers seeking the support of paying audiences, taiko players have advertised interpretations of their music that best appeal to potential audiences. Taiko players have taken advantage of taiko’s links to the Japanese- and Asian-American community to construct an attractive image for taiko. The emphasis on taiko as an expression of ethnic identity that drove the spread of this music in the ‘70s and ‘80s created the concept of taiko as a cultural showcase, with Asians as performers. Big Drum, the historical project conducted by the Japanese-American National Museum, refers to

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<sup>2</sup> Fong.

<sup>3</sup> Takata, "The Thundering World of Taiko," 33.

<sup>4</sup> Kobayashi, "Heartbeat in the Diaspora," 26.

taiko as “a musical force that has the potential to connect the spirit and energy of Japanese and Japanese-Americans to a diverse audience,”<sup>5</sup> placing audience and performers into separate ethnic categories. This coupling of race to conceptualizations of performers and audience becomes stronger in Japan, where instructors in the Sukeroku Taiko Hozonkai and the Nihon Taiko Dōjō often told the American anthropologist Shawn Bender that the tall, long-limbed bodies of Whites made playing taiko more difficult for them than for Japanese people.<sup>6</sup> As taiko became more widely known in the 1990s, therefore, both audience and performers associated it with Asia.

As Deborah Wong has noted, “taiko excites an expectation of the foreign in the White American spectator,”<sup>7</sup> and many taiko players have taken advantage of this expectation to advertise their art. In order to make this music more appealing and attract larger audiences, taiko players have altered the history of their art, constructing a mythology around taiko as an art of ancient Asia. Created through manipulation of the definition of “taiko” itself, this mythology casts taiko in the image of antique mystery, with roots in worship, war, and folk magic extending back into prehistory.

### **Method of Expression: Manipulating definitions**

The first tool used to construct taiko’s history arose out of the confusion surrounding the definition of the word “taiko” itself. This word’s ambiguity has resulted in many incorrect assumptions about taiko, which taiko players may manipulate to gain better recognition for their art.

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<sup>5</sup> *Kenny Endo: Connecting to Heritage through Music*, [Online] (Big Drum, May 5 2006, accessed March 5 2006); available from <http://www.janm.org/exhibits/bigdrum/interviews/endo.php>.

<sup>6</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 202.

<sup>7</sup> Wong, 209.

A good example of the misunderstandings that arise from manipulations of taiko's definition occurred in 2001, when Kodō released a documentary on their group's history in celebration of their twentieth anniversary. The documentary begins with an image of one of the group's players, Kaneko Ryutarō, chanting and beating a drum in a crowded underground thoroughfare. As the Japanese voiceover begins, English subtitles on the DVD of the documentary overlay this image with the words "Taiko, Japanese drum, is the simplest method of expression created by humans."<sup>8</sup> As one might expect from a taiko group's treatment of its own music, this sentence seems to declare a special role for taiko as a basic part of human experience. Also, since the sentence defines "taiko" as a "Japanese drum," it further implies that Japan has tapped into a form of expression different from the arts of other nations. Viewers might debate this point, but given that Kodō began as a nationalist movement and this documentary first appeared on Japanese television, they might forgive and dismiss this parochial treatment of taiko.

A more knowledgeable viewer, however, would find this sentence more troubling. As the words "Japanese drum" appear in the subtitles, Kaneko is not playing a Japanese drum but instead a Native American hand-drum, which the viewer later learns he received from the Red Willow Dancers of Taos New Mexico. The writers of this documentary seem to spread their propriety over all forms of percussion, implying with their juxtaposition of text and images that the definition of "Japanese drums" includes this Native American instrument.

This conflict arises, however, not from the appropriation of Native American music by Japan, but from the fact that "taiko" has yet to define itself as a word. The original Japanese voiceover in this sequence does say "*taiko*," but despite the translators'

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<sup>8</sup> Kodō DVD 2001

decisions for the subtitles, the word does not mean “Japanese drums.” Rather, “*taiko*” translates in this context simply as “drum,” implying a universalist, rather than Japan-specific, perspective on percussion: “It is the most fundamental form of expression we humans have created. The Drum.”<sup>9</sup> This sentence, in conjunction with the image of a Kodō player beating a Native American drum in a Japanese subway, conveys an entirely different meaning from the English subtitles. The documentary’s writers do not claim any propriety of Japan over human expression but instead say that “the drum” forms a basic form of expression for all of “us humans.” These two translations differ enormously in implication, but the difference between them hinges on the word “taiko.”

In English, people use “taiko” to refer to both an instrument and a style of music, a usage which has created some confusion in taiko discussions, especially in cases in which either meaning could apply. Since Japanese lacks plurals and articles, English speakers cannot use these cues to distinguish between the abstract and concrete meanings of the word “taiko.” Depending on the context, one could translate *taiko* as “a taiko,” “the taiko,” or “many taiko,” and phrases such as “samurai used taiko to bolster their courage”<sup>10</sup> could refer to either an instrument or a kind of music. Using this technique, English-speaking taiko players can make their music more interesting by making statements that are both factually correct by one definition of “taiko” and misleading by the other.

### **An Aura of Centuries-Old Tradition: Constructing an Image**

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<sup>9</sup> My translation of “*Watashitachi ningen ga umidashita mottomo kongenteki na hyōgenshu da. Taiko.*” Image Entertainment (Firm) and Kodō (Musical group), *Kodō*.

<sup>10</sup> *History and Background*, [Online] (San Jose Taiko, Aug. 19 2005, accessed April 24 2006) available from <http://www.taiko.org/history.html>.

Susan Asai demonstrates the utility of this linguistic confusion in her catalogue of influences on North American taiko, listing “*o-Suwa daiko*, Chichibu *yataibayashi*, and Buddhist *uchiwa daiko*” as representative of “Taiko drumming styles that have shaped performance in the United States and Canada.”<sup>11</sup> Asai seems only to state a fact, making no claims for taiko’s artistic merit, but a closer examination of the elements in this list reveals a manipulation of taiko’s ancestry to make the artform appear more appealing.

Although Asai states that the three elements she cites compose a group of the “taiko drumming styles” that informed American taiko, her list does not actually include any drumming styles. Rather, she conflates Oguchi Daihachi’s fifty-year-old taiko group with a particular drumming ritual local to Chichibu in Yamanashi Prefecture and the handheld drum called a “fan drum” (*uchiwa daiko*) for its shape. As a musical group, a piece of music, and an instrument, these three elements belong to entirely separate categories, but a reader of this paper might assume that the “styles” Asai cites compose the cultural underpinning of American taiko, conferring to this music the legitimacy of a direct descendant of centuries-old Japanese practices and instruments. This subtle misdirection might not have resulted from the author’s intention, but whether Asai chose her three “styles” specifically or simply wrote down the commonly held beliefs of the taiko community, the result is the same.

The ambiguity of the meaning of “taiko” allows English-speaking authors to manipulate discussions of taiko’s history, constructing an ancient history around their art form. As the word for drums in general, “*taiko*” extends back to the eighth century, first mentioned in the document *Saidaiji Shizairyū Kichō*, or the “Registry of the Property of

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<sup>11</sup> Asai, “Transformations of Tradition,” 441.

the Great Western Temple.”<sup>12</sup> This earliest usage of the word in a Buddhist context agrees with the commonly-held notion that drums of the kind used in modern taiko ensembles first came to Japan from the Asian mainland as an accompaniment to Buddhist rituals, and then joined the repertoires of court music and dance (*gagaku* and *bugaku*, respectively),<sup>13</sup> Shinto “god-music” (*kagura*) and “festival accompaniment” (*matsuri bayashi*).<sup>14</sup> Modern taiko groups make references to this history, conflating the ancient uses of drums (“*taiko*”) in Japan with the modern practice of ensemble drumming (“taiko”), as if both words referred to the same idea.

Generally “taiko” refers to the musical genre of “ensemble-drums” (*kumi-daiko*) and technical discussions often use this phrase to distinguish drums from performance style. Some writers note that “though the taiko instrument has been played in Japan in different context for centuries, *kumidaiko* first appeared in Japan only in 1951.”<sup>15</sup> Other taiko histories may not use this phrase, but still avoid confusion by carefully defining “taiko” either as an instrument or as a musical style. The English language website of Japan’s Taiko Center, for example, prefaces the word “taiko” with “the,” indicating the instrument rather than the art form, and notes that the historical uses for the drums differ greatly from their role in modern taiko ensembles: “the taiko existed and was used in the [sic] ancient Japan over 2000 years ago...However, the percussion they used is guessed to be quite different from the one used today.”<sup>16</sup>

Some authors, however, do not distinguish one possible definition of “taiko” from the other and in fact use this ambiguity to their advantage. In Konagaya’s article on

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<sup>12</sup>“Short Take: A Different Drum,” *Stanford Magazine*, March/April 2006 2006, 625.

<sup>13</sup> Bender, “Drumming between Tradition and Modernity”, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Ortolani, *The Japanese Theatre*, 13-15.

<sup>15</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 5.

<sup>16</sup> *The History of Taiko*, (accessed).

American taiko in *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, for example, the author states, “In pre-modern Japanese villages, *taiko* served to enliven spirits, conquer fears and protect community boundaries against evil spirits.”<sup>17</sup> Konagaya could have written “the *taiko* served to enliven spirits” and made an accurate statement about the historical uses of drums in Japan, but the absence of the article “the” implies that by Konagaya refers to the musical genre taiko.<sup>18</sup> The reader will therefore imagine that the rituals pre-modern Japanese villages used to protect their borders against spirits share some fundamental attributes with modern ensemble drumming. In the same way, Kodō’s tenth anniversary English-language video mentions the fact that the “The *shime-daiko* has remained...unchanged for over six hundred years,”<sup>19</sup> although the use to which Kodō puts these instruments dates back no further than fifty years.

Such claims to taiko’s ancestry do not actually misinform the reader, as taiko does draw influence from older Japanese performance arts. The percussive accompaniments to Shinto rituals and festivals, for example, include rope-bound *shime daiko*, larger, cylindrical *okedō daiko*, and tacked *miya daiko* (lit. “shrine drum,” called *chu-daiko* in other contexts) that became the basis of the modern taiko ensemble.<sup>20</sup> Sukeroku taiko rose out of the drumming circuit that surrounds O-Bon, and Buddhist taiko players introduced into their music the *uchiwa daiko* Asai mentions.<sup>21</sup> Taiko players have also taken instruction in noh and kabuki,<sup>22</sup> theatrical arts which in many cases use the same

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<sup>17</sup> Konagaya, “Taiko as Performance,” 107.

<sup>18</sup> Konagaya’s use of italics does not specify the definition of “drums” as it does in my paper. Konagaya used “*taiko*” to refer to both instruments and artform.

<sup>19</sup> Holender.

<sup>20</sup> Bender, “Drumming between Tradition and Modernity”, 62-63.

<sup>21</sup> An invention of the Nichiren sect of the Buddhism in the 1200s. See *Ibid.*, 64-65.

<sup>22</sup> Endo.

instruments as taiko groups.<sup>23</sup> Since the roots of taiko tap into many different musical forms, taiko players can legitimately point to nearly any aspect of Japan's musical history and find some relationship between it and the current form of taiko.

By selecting which parts of its history to emphasize, one can cast taiko as a "traditional" Japanese music. As Linda Fujie has observed, interpretations of taiko's history tend to create the "aura of centuries-old historical tradition,"<sup>24</sup> as websites, books, and scholarly articles emphasize taiko's ancient roots over its more recent origin.<sup>25</sup> Paul Yoon notes the same trend in his own work with Soh Daiko: "Present-day drumming troupes in Japan and the United States often emphasize (or more specifically construct and imagine) the taiko's role in premodern Japanese life by highlighting the 'ancient' or 'authentic' roots of the music or musical endeavor."<sup>26</sup> In the same way Zeami crafted an illustrious history for his *sarugaku* from rituals "that existed in ancient times,"<sup>27</sup> taiko players have retroactively constructed an ancient form of taiko as a musical genre that they did not create but upon whose basis they innovate.

Varian refers to this "reawakening" of taiko as a fact, saying that "the art of taiko was part of everyday life before fading into obscurity in the wake of World War II."<sup>28</sup> Stan Shikuma, writer of many essays on taiko, also describes the inception of the current taiko movement in 1951 as the rebirth of an existing style, stating that "taiko, like many traditional arts and customs, experienced a period of decline during the Meiji

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<sup>23</sup>Bender, "Drumming between Tradition and Modernity", 61-62.

<sup>24</sup> Fujie, "Taiko Drumming in International Performance," 98.

<sup>25</sup> According to Endo., this tendency to cast taiko in the role of "centuries old tradition" is particularly strong in America since other, older forms of Japanese percussion are rare in this country and audiences "don't know the cultural context" and lack the ability to discern taiko from truly ancient practices.

<sup>26</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 420.

<sup>27</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 88.

<sup>28</sup> Varian, 61.

Restoration.”<sup>29</sup> This interpretation of taiko’s history has proven attractive because it allows the writer to extend taiko’s roots back into legend, creating a mythology around taiko that supplies inspiration to performers and attracts the interest of audiences.

### **Japan of Old: Taiko Mythology**

Taiko’s imagined history does not simply extend the origins of the music further back in time, however. Popular images of taiko advertise the music’s connection to spirituality in the same way they construct antiquity. These two concepts often emerge at the same time in discussion of taiko, as in an introductory sentence at the beginning of the Kodō tenth anniversary video: “The beating of drums is an ancient ritual in Japan, its lineage buried in the mists of pre-historic Asia, when men sought spiritual understanding through legendary healing powers of specially endowed leaders called shamans.”<sup>30</sup>

Newspapers such as the *New York Times* also refer to the group Soh daiko as a an attempt “to recreate what are believed to be the rhythms of misty, long-ago ages when gods walked the earth.”<sup>31</sup> Some American authors have gone so far as to say that the taiko drum “is the principal instrument for the folk music” of Japan,<sup>32</sup> while in Japan itself, observers tie taiko’s spirituality to a pre-modern Japanese cultural purity, as in Françoise Morechard’s observations of the Japanese taiko player, Miyuki Ikeda, where he speaks of a spirit, “long forgotten in Japanese culture” in Ikeda’s drumming.<sup>33</sup> Such statements result from the mythology surrounding taiko, a collection of stories and images that

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<sup>29</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko: Spirit and the Drum".

<sup>30</sup> Holender.

<sup>31</sup> Douglas Martin, "Banging the Drums Not So Slowly: In Soh Daiko, Japanese Drumming Calls to the Ancient Gods and Leaves the Drummers Breathless," *New York Times*, 10/22/1995 1995.

<sup>32</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko as Folklore".

<sup>33</sup> Françoise Morechard, "Emotions That Japanese Have Forgotten," in *Wadaiko: Miyuki Ikeda + Koichi Inakoshi*, ed. Inakoshi Koichi (Tokyo: Kawada Shobo Shinsha, 1995), 22.

extends taiko's history back into Japanese folklore, casting a beguiling image of the art for its potential consumers.

The stories that surround taiko stimulate the audience's nostalgia for a simpler, pre-technological life, the "time of our ancestors," as Varian states, "when we were bodies dancing on hillsides, not a pair of eyes staring at a TV or computer screen."<sup>34</sup> This emphasis on taiko's links to the spiritual past of Japan has caused a proliferation of anecdotes and legends revolving around taiko's functions in pre-modern Japanese life. In one common story, the drums function to literally define the borders of communities with their sound, as Kodō's tenth anniversary video states: "in Japan of old, the village boundary was set by the sound of a sacred drum."<sup>35</sup> Andrew Thalheimer, co-director of St. Louis Osuwa Taiko, writes in his *History of Wadaiko* that "if you could hear the *taiko* being played in the center of a village, you were part of that village,"<sup>36</sup> implying that those who play taiko and those who hear it may also belong to the same village. The village drum story proves problematic as cohesive villages arose only in the fifteenth-century,<sup>37</sup> but the idea that taiko drumming identifies all those who hear it as members of the same community carries enormous appeal both for taiko players and their audience. Toshio Kawauchi of Kodō made this point most clearly: "When we tour around the world, the people who hear our drum become part of the village."<sup>38</sup>

To further strengthen the perceived relationship between taiko and the "Japan of old," many within the taiko movement have drawn connections between modern taiko and Shinto ritual. In the most obvious example of this use of Shinto symbolism to

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<sup>34</sup> Varian, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Holender.

<sup>36</sup> Andrew Thalheimer, "Jazzing up Tradition," in *Japan Notes: Japan America Society of St. Louis* (2003).

<sup>37</sup> Conlan, Thomas, personal communication.

<sup>38</sup> Holender.

legitimate their art, taiko players have again paralleled Zeami and added the story of Uzume and the Heavenly Rock Cave to their mythological repertoire. Stan Shikuma has spread the most common version of the Uzume myth in America, in which the goddess “opened a barrel of sake, dispensed its contents and turned it upside down. Then she began the most boisterous and frenetic dancing upon the head that any there had ever seen or heard.”<sup>39</sup> This retelling differs little from the original Uzume myths in *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, and only Shikuma’s statement that the story tells “how sunlight returned to the world and how the first taiko was made” specifically links Uzume to taiko. Other authors use the myth more explicitly, as in the version that appears in Varian’s book, *The Way of Taiko*: “Uzume...opened a sake barrel and turned it upside down. Then she began the most boisterous beating upon the head and frenetic dancing that any had ever seen or heard.”<sup>40</sup> Although Varian cites Shikuma as the source for the Uzume story she includes in her book, she changed Shikuma’s “dancing upon the head” to “beating upon the head,” deliberately suggesting that Uzume beat on her barrel with bachi [drum sticks], rather than with her feet. Varian further reinforces this image with the illustration that accompanies this story, a line drawing of a woman beating on a drum with bachi.

Since the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, the first records of the Uzume story, date back to the eighth century, this myth creates both an alluring image of taiko as a fundamental part of Japanese religion and reinforces the music’s antiquity. Kodō, for example, claims on its website that “the traditions that Kodo are helping to keep alive began with ancient fertility festivals, and have mythological origins in the music and dancing which lured the

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<sup>39</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko: Spirit and the Drum".

<sup>40</sup> Varian, 20.

sulking sun-goddess Amaterasu out of her cave and brought light to the world.”<sup>41</sup> In the group history and information section on the webpage of Seattle’s Uzume Taiko the group cites their name’s origin: “*Ame* [sic] *No Uzume No Mikoto* - the Heavenly Alarming Female<sup>42</sup> who, according to legend, first began taiko drumming. Taiko has held a centuries-old place in Japanese culture, and it is from the power and athleticism of traditional drumming techniques that Uzume Taiko draws its inspiration.”<sup>43</sup> Other groups use Uzume to represent the taiko community, as in a 1994 article in *Fuse* magazine in which Tamai Kobayashi of Wasabi Taiko in Toronto writes of Uzume’s “drum” luring Amaterasu “from her cave, returning her to the community.” Kobayashi goes on to specify that “this idea of community is central to the practice of taiko drumming,”<sup>44</sup> making Uzume a symbol of social consciousness as well as antiquity. As community groups who must reinforce the identities of their members and as professional groups in need of attracting an audience, such mythology<sup>45</sup> has served taiko well.

### **Samurai War Drums: Image Conflicts**

Not all of taiko’s historical revision has meshed the needs of audience and performer, however, and conflict has arisen between the definitions taiko players give to their own art and the definition they project at their audiences. The mythology that surrounds taiko, designed to cater to Wong’s “expectation of the foreign in the White American spectator,”<sup>46</sup> has reinforced these expectations, leading to an image of taiko

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<sup>41</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 11.

<sup>42</sup> This translation of goddess’s name, “Ama no Uzume no Mikoto,” probably comes from Post Wheeler and Yasumaro Ō, *The Sacred Scriptures of the Japanese* (New York: H. Schuman, 1952).

<sup>43</sup> *About Uzume Taiko*, [Online] (Sep. 30 2005, accessed March 16 2006); available from <http://www.uzume.com/about1.html>.

<sup>44</sup> Kobayashi, “Heartbeat in the Diaspora,” 24.

<sup>45</sup> For other versions of the Uzume myth in the context of taiko, see *Taiko: Myth and History*, (accessed). See also *Wadaiko Newark Taiko Group*, (accessed).

<sup>46</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 209.

that many taiko players now reject as “Orientalist.” The notion of Orientalism, conceptualized by Edward Said in the late 1970s, refers to the practice in Western literature to cast the Middle and Far East in the role of a timeless exotic “Other,” a reflection that defines European civilization by negative example.<sup>47</sup> Wong declares that “taiko resists Orientalist stereotypes,”<sup>48</sup> referring to its challenge of passive images of Asians, but by advertising taiko as an art of Asian antiquity and themselves as the inheritors of its ancient secrets, many taiko players have furthered the Orientalist conceptualization of taiko. As Terada Yoshitaka ironically notes, “the performing art Japanese-Americans took up as a means of fighting stereotypes came to be used in effect to reinforce them.”<sup>49</sup>

Paul Yoon has documented the protestations of New York’s Soh Daiko against the promotional material that accompanied the sale of their first CD, which characterized taiko as ancient and Japanese: “Developing as it did out of primitive agricultural rites and the ancient music of shrines and temples, the beat of the taiko resounds throughout Japanese history.”<sup>50</sup> Although it clarifies its use of “taiko” to mean “a drum” and therefore constitutes a technically accurate statement, Yoon records that this advertisement raised complaints among several of the members of Soh Daiko. Perhaps rejecting the references to “primitive rites” and to Japan as opposed to all of Asia as the pre-modern home of taiko, these Soh Daiko members disapproved of this statements as “detrimental, if not racist.”<sup>51</sup> Lyrichord’s source material, however, comes from the press kit that Soh Daiko

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<sup>47</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 1.

<sup>48</sup> Masumi Izumi, "Reconsidering Ethnic Culture and Community: A Case Study on Japanese Canadian Taiko Drumming," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 47.

<sup>49</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 51.

<sup>50</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 433.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

sent to the CD distributors. The Orientalism to which Soh Daiko's members objected originated from within the taiko movement, and indeed, many taiko players have employed similar language on their own websites and in their own essays.

In her book *Speak it Louder*, Wong blames the "susceptibility of American audiences to Orientalist pleasure,"<sup>52</sup> for the slippage between performers' intentions and audience response, but performer and audience do not exist in so simple a relationship. The "Orientalist pleasure" audiences derive from taiko performances do not come only from the audience members' prejudices, but arise in response to similar messages broadcast by taiko players. Of course, taiko players did not set forth intentionally to construct this popular image of taiko, but instead advertised their art in such a way as to best appeal to the populace at large. The relationship between the expectations of the audience and the needs of the performers created an environment in which an Orientalist image of taiko could prosper.

Despite its usefulness in advertisement, this image can come into conflict with the personal beliefs of taiko players and with the dissemination of their art, as demonstrated by the contention surrounding one of taiko's most widespread myths, its martial origins. In his many publications and talks on taiko in English and Japanese, Oguchi Daihachi popularized the fact that Japanese field commanders used drum beats to communicate orders to their troops. Materials such as the thirteenth century scroll depicting the "Former Nine Years War,"<sup>53</sup> verify the fact of this practice, but the founder of the taiko movement took the story of "war drums" further.

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<sup>52</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> Shigemi Komatsu, *Zenkunen Kassen Ekotoba. Heiji Monogatari Emaki. Yūki Kassen Ekotoba*, Zoku Nihon No Emaki; 17. (Tōkyō: Chūō Kōronsha, 1992).

In his book *Tenko*, Oguchi states that “during the medieval age of civil wars in Japan... [drum] rhythm began to be used to instill courage and bravery in the army,”<sup>54</sup> an image which audiences found appealing. The unofficial Osuwa Daiko English-Language webpage refers to the “samurai war drums” that famous generals used to “raise the morale of samurai before going into war.”<sup>55</sup> American taiko players also speak of “beating out war tattoos” on taiko drums,<sup>56</sup> and the myths linking taiko to the battlefield has become so prevalent that some sources even cite war as the earliest use of the instruments in Japan.<sup>57</sup> The San Jose website states that “samurai used taiko to bolster their courage,”<sup>58</sup> while the Stanford University Alumni magazine says in its profile of the professional group On Ensemble, that “Japanese used the taiko (“big drum”) to muster warriors, communicate orders, and scare off the enemy.”<sup>59</sup> The presence of this myth on the National Endowment for the Arts website, based off Tanaka’s materials, indicates its ubiquity.<sup>60</sup>

Although the wide public consciousness of taiko as a martial art form that has grown has proven quite lucrative for taiko, “war drums” have also sparked controversy among those who practice this music. Hollywood brought this problem to the attention of the taiko community at large when the producers of the 1993 movie “Rising Sun” hired Seiichi Tanaka and the San Francisco Taiko Dojo to appear in what many taiko players felt was an unfair representation of their art. In her discussion of the use of taiko in

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<sup>54</sup> Oguchi, *Tenko*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> *History of Osuwa Daiko*, (accessed).

<sup>56</sup> Thalheimer, "Jazzing up Tradition."

<sup>57</sup> Wendy Whiteside, “The Beat Goes On” (Student Paper, Washington University of St. Luis, 2001), 1.

<sup>58</sup> *History and Background*, (accessed).

<sup>59</sup> "Short Take: A Different Drum," 71.

<sup>60</sup> *2001 Nea National Heritage Fellowships: Seiichi Tanaka*, [Online] (National Endowment for the Arts, June 11 2001, accessed March 4 2006); available from <http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/Heritage01/Tanaka.html>.

“Rising Sun,” Deborah Wong protests against the movie’s use of images of Tanaka in a rape scene to equate “the militarism, volume, and masculine strength of taiko” to “the man’s sexual conquest of the beautiful White woman.”<sup>61</sup>

Wong places the blame for this unappealing image squarely on the audience, calling the “physical and sonic presence of the taiko players” in the movie a “stage for xenophobic anxiety over Japanese corporate conspiracy.”<sup>62</sup> Wong fails to mention, however, that the martial images to which the movie alludes do not differ from the comments taiko groups publish on their own web pages. The line “Taiko drums! Long ago, they were used to drive away evil spirits”<sup>63</sup> in “Rising Sun,” for example, bears marked similarity to comments on the San Francisco Taiko Dojo’s own webpage: “Regarded as sacred since ancient times, the drum<sup>64</sup> was first used to drive away evil spirits and pests harmful to crops.”<sup>65</sup> “Rising Sun” and the many other movies that have used taiko in their soundtracks<sup>66</sup> provided taiko with a very effective means of advertisement, but the martial idealization of taiko that Hollywood promotes has also alienated potential audiences. Stan Shikuma quotes an anonymous protester against a taiko performance at the 2003 Hiroshima to Hope memorial in Seattle made clear conflicts between the various images taiko projects, stating that “taiko is a militaristic art form, more representative of war than peace.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 211.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Note that the Taiko Dojo’s statement specifies “drums,” not “taiko” as the sacred instruments that drove away spirits, turning a myth about taiko into a historically accurate fact about drums in pre-modern Japan.

<sup>65</sup> *About Taiko*, [Online] (San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Nov. 28 2005, accessed April 23 2006); available from [http://www.taikodojo.org/about\\_taiko.html](http://www.taikodojo.org/about_taiko.html).

<sup>66</sup> See Michael Brennan, *Mainstream Movies with Featured Taiko Performances* [Online] (Dec. 11 2004, accessed March 19 2006); available from <http://studorgs.bowdoin.edu/taiko/whatistaiko.htm>.

<sup>67</sup> Stan Shikuma, E-mail, "Letter to Martha on Taiko, War and Peace", Jan 15 2003.

The members of groups like Soh Daiko have created tension as their own vision of their music and the audience reception that music receives no longer match each other. Appealing to the “pan-Asian” ideal has given rise to conflicts as the concept of a pan-Asian identity rejects the celebration of performers’ specifically Japanese identity, the backbone of the earlier taiko movement. Konagaya states that early taiko groups intentionally added a Japanese flavor to their performances and “asserted themselves more clearly in American society,”<sup>68</sup> but when the Asian-American community appropriated taiko, these Japan-specific symbols became a liability.

While Japanese-Americans had viewed taiko’s national derivation as a source of pride, this history became a cause for unease for other taiko players given the actions of the Japanese military in East Asia during World War II. Yoon cites Korean-American members of Soh Daiko who “faced disapproval” from their parents and relatives, who objected to the music’s Buddhist implications, as well as its overt Japanese identification.<sup>69</sup> Wong, a member of a taiko group operating out of the Taiko Center of Los Angeles, also mentions the “specifically and authentically Japanese” uniform she wears, which stimulates “moments of confusion, wondering why I have become so Japanese in order to feel Asian-American.”<sup>70</sup> Yoon comments upon the faction within Soh Daiko that objected to the group’s uniform of happi-coat and obi, “so visually identified as Japanese,”<sup>71</sup> a faction which suggested a more culturally neutral uniform of black shirts and pants.<sup>72</sup> Wong also records the annoyance and confusion of Asian-

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<sup>68</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 107-108.

<sup>69</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 428.

<sup>70</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 214.

<sup>71</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 428.

<sup>72</sup> The group as a whole has not chosen to adopt this suggestion and continues to wear a Japanese-style uniform, however.

Americans taiko players when mistaken by audience members for Japanese Americans, and some ridicule those who have approached these performers speaking “classroom Japanese.”<sup>73</sup> Such statements reflect the deep changes that taiko has undergone since its inception in America, when taiko players would have viewed such a tight relationship between taiko and Japan as a success in their social mission.

### **Mere Imitation: Legitimizing Taiko**

As taiko players seek to construct their music as a legitimate performance art, they define themselves in contrast to an alternate form of drumming, often drawing their characterizations from imagined differences between taiko in Japan and in North America.

American writers claim that performers in the US possess an ability to innovate that their Japanese counterparts lack, as in Susan Asai’s 1995 article on taiko in *The Musical Quarterly*, where she states, “taiko drumming in Japan is a tradition that mainly preserves repertoires that have been passed down for generations.”<sup>74</sup> Although she does not discuss this idea further in the 1995 article, her earlier article on the subject of Buddhist entertainment (*hōraku*), uses more detail to define American taiko in contrast to a Japanese archetype:

The elements [in taiko] I consider American include the aspect of improvisation, the active participation of young people in *hōraku* performances, the playing of newly composed pieces, and the secularization of the musical form... appearing to be more a form of pure entertainment.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 209.

<sup>74</sup> Asai, "Transformations of Tradition," 441.

<sup>75</sup> Asai, "Hōraku," 171.

Asai casts Japanese taiko as intolerant of improvisation, inaccessible to young players, and incapable of composing new pieces, an odd assertion given the fact that few taiko groups in Japan adhere to these characterizations.

Poor communication between Japan and the United States during the 1980s might bear some responsibility for this mistake, but the work of more recent scholars continues in the same vein. Izumi Masumi's<sup>76</sup> article in the *Journal of Asian-American Studies* states, for example, that "in Japan, taiko is in most cases played in a traditional setting, with traditional scripts and traditional ways of beating."<sup>77</sup> This characterization allows American taiko players to create a positive image of themselves, an identity in contrast to an imagined "Other." These images present Japanese taiko as an outdated, normative art form, more concerned with preserving the past than with breaking artistic ground, while American taiko innovates based upon the patterns passed down from Japan, giving the taiko community on this continent legitimacy both as the inheritors of an established musical "tradition" and as artists creating novel works.

The relegation of Japanese taiko to the form of "Other" appears in discussions of the teaching and practice styles of Japanese and American groups. Soh Daiko, for example, calls its adoption of rotating practice leaders a consciously "'un-Japanese' move" to create an environment "distinctly American in as much as the United States was ostensibly founded on the ideals of equality or equal opportunity."<sup>78</sup> Paul Yoon recounts that "many members of Soh Daiko stereotyped 'Japanese' pedagogical methods as stiff,

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<sup>76</sup> Izumi is Canadian, but a current faculty member of Doshisha University, and therefore shown with family name first.

<sup>77</sup> Izumi, "Reconsidering Ethnic Culture and Community," 43. In her endnotes, Izumi admits that "some taiko groups" such as Kodō, "while firmly based in Japanese taiko tradition, [are] creating some contemporary music as well."

<sup>78</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 423.

austere, and Zen-like in contrast to their more ‘American’-based meritocratic system.”<sup>79</sup>

Other taiko groups, including Kinnara Taiko, make similar assertions about the workings of Japanese taiko groups, stating that: “in contrast to the master-student hierarchic relationship...typically exercised by Japanese *taiko* groups, Kinnara has no master and no rules among its members.”<sup>80</sup> Such discussions lead one to understand that Japanese taiko groups enforce a strict separation between student and teacher at the expense of the fun and creativity that American taiko groups enjoy.

Despite these differentiation between “Asian” and “Western” teaching methods that American taiko groups declare, however, the evidence suggests that the exercise of greater control over artistic transmission has occurred in all countries as performance arts become professionalized. Shawn Bender’s history of Sukeroku Taiko, for example, theorizes that the informal relationship between the group’s founding members and their various teachers, allowed the group’s founders to “experiment and innovate.”<sup>81</sup> Experiences of other American taiko players in Japan show that these relaxed behavioral standards extend past professionals to local groups, such the Gaina Taiko Preservation Society in Yonago, which Burlington Taiko visited in 2002. As Stuart Paton, the group’s director, stated: “I remember the leader of the Gaina taiko group...being embarrassed because Burlington Taiko’s etiquette was a lot more formal than his own group’s.”<sup>82</sup> Even Kodō, the most well-known taiko group in the world, does not follow the commands of a single director, but has operated under a council of senior members since

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 110.

<sup>81</sup> Bender, “Drumming between Tradition and Modernity”, 77.

<sup>82</sup> Stuart Paton, Telephone Interview, 12/16/2005 2005.

1989.<sup>83</sup> In my own experiences with community taiko groups in Toyoura on Hokkaido and Kojō Taiko in Shiga Prefecture, members with less experience learned from members with more experience, a relationship that does not differ from any American taiko group I have seen.

The other side of the argument uses similar language, as Varian states that

In a Western environment, there is sometimes more discussion, rules may be more relaxed, and practice can be very democratic. In a taiko dojo, however, the rules are more strictly observed... There should be no idle chatter, eating, chewing gum, smoking, or drinking in the place of study.<sup>84</sup>

Varian's own teacher, Seiichi Tanaka, expresses this style of pedagogy as "the discipline of mind and body, in the spirit of complete respect and unity among the drummers."<sup>85</sup>

Tanaka's persona of taiko master, influenced by his prior training in martial arts, formed the basis for many of the apparently American/Japanese discussions of practice procedures in North American taiko.

Tanaka's dictatorial conduct as a practice leader alienated many of his students. Stuart Paton, director of Burlington Taiko, for example, recounted an instance in which "another member felt that Tanaka-sensei was being really mean to me... So she confronted Tanaka-sensei saying, 'you know, he's really in a lot of pain you shouldn't make him do that.' So she got excommunicated from the group."<sup>86</sup> Other taiko players objected to Tanaka's physically demanding, and sometimes violent practices, as Soh Daiko members "recounted the sore muscles from hundreds of push-ups and the bruised

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<sup>83</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 14.

<sup>84</sup> Varian, 93.

<sup>85</sup> Terry Liu, *Seiichi Tanaka: Go for Broke* [Online] (National Endowment for the Arts, June 11 2005, accessed March 4 2006); available from <http://www.nea.gov/honors/heritage/Heritage01/Tanaka2.html>.

<sup>86</sup> Paton.

areas where Tanaka forcefully corrected their drumming stance,”<sup>87</sup> and Paton similarly recalls “a lot of hitting, [I] got kicked a few times, push-ups and sit-ups.”<sup>88</sup>

Tanaka’s many former students regard their time with the “Grand Master” as “a badge of honor”<sup>89</sup> because of the physical difficulty of his practices, but very few of these people have modeled their own practice structure off of their teacher’s.

Most North American taiko groups have rejected Tanaka’s autocratic teaching style, as in the case of Soh Daiko when, in response to the model of authority Tanaka promotes, emphasized the equal status of all group members, without a single director but instead with “several rotating... ‘practice leaders.’”<sup>90</sup> Soh Daiko’s comments on their “consciously un-Japanese” practices concern less a rejection of Japanese modes, therefore, than of the particular teaching methods of Seiichi Tanaka. Rather than challenge this individual, however, Soh Daiko and other American taiko players construct an impersonal Japanese “Other” against which to react.

Given the limited communication between their own taiko community and Japan’s American taiko players tend to associate Japanese taiko with a small range of experiences, limited largely to Sukeroku Taiko, Kodō, and the various preservation societies that include drumming as part of their repertoire. Groups like the Chichibu Yatai Bayashi Preservation Society often perform in taiko festivals,<sup>91</sup> and, lacking the context to distinguish these societies from taiko performance groups, American observers tend to confuse the two. A comparison between the professional group Oedo Sukeroku Taiko and one of the group’s offshoots, the Sukeroku Taiko Preservation Society

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<sup>87</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 424.

<sup>88</sup> Paton.

<sup>89</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 424.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*: 423.

<sup>91</sup> Endo.

(*Sukeroku taiko hozonkai*), however, demonstrate the wide gulf in philosophy and purpose that separates community taiko groups and preservation societies. Sean Bender recounts his experiences in Sukeroku's preservation society, writing that "experimentation was openly discouraged... 'Getting it right' meant embodying the inherited form...they looked not to expand their technical competence but continually strove to refine their form and movements to greater levels of aesthetic presentation."<sup>92</sup> Kenny Endo, a professional taiko player with much experience in the Japanese taiko community, places such societies as only one of three kinds of taiko groups in Japan, with the other two representing the familiar or community groups with influence from "a festival tradition," and "absolutely new" groups that "stem out of no tradition."<sup>93</sup> By selectively observing only the preservation societies, however, American taiko players can draw the conclusion that Japanese taiko groups concern themselves only with preserving specific pieces of music.

The mistaken characterization of the difference between Japanese and American taiko formed as the latter group attempted to establish its legitimacy and distinctiveness from the former. Canadian taiko player Tamai Kobayashi explicitly declares this desire, saying "taiko in Canada is not the mere mimicry of taiko in Japan,"<sup>94</sup> and like all such declarations implies the opposing viewpoint. Many taiko players outside Japan feel they must prove the novelty of their music, and many have done so by constructing contrasting images of "traditional" Japanese and an "innovative" American taiko. These two taiko communities, however, do not differ so much in performance or philosophy, and in fact strongly resemble each other.

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<sup>92</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 201.

<sup>93</sup> Endo.

<sup>94</sup> Kobayashi, "Heartbeat in the Diaspora," 25.

Taiko players in Japan have also worked to establish their art as distinct from other forms of Japanese percussion. The group Ecchū Oshima, for example, expresses their mission on the Japanese-language website: “Pursuing the ‘Way of Taiko,’ we work to have taiko recognized as music, able to stand on its own not only as a single tool in a festivals, but as a new local performance art.”<sup>95</sup> Asano Kaoly, director of the Tokyo group Gocoo, known for their part in the soundtrack of the American movie “Matrix: Revolution,” also declares her pursuit of an art form “uninhibited by traditional rules.”<sup>96</sup> Even Kodō, the most famous taiko group on Earth, faces the problem of proving its right to perform its music.

As a professional group that performs variations of folk performance arts, Kodō must take special care to honor the propriety of the originators of the music that they use. Den Tagayasu founded Ondekoza in the late 1970s to preserve Japanese folk performances, but the proliferation of the state-sponsored preservation societies has complicated this mission. While Kodō continues to incorporate various local dance and percussion rituals into its pieces,<sup>97</sup> these local performances now form the basis of preservation groups whose business Kodō’s competition might damage. In an effort to prevent themselves from appearing to steal or co-opt music, therefore, the members of Kodō have stressed the superiority of local performances to their own, and defer to the originators of the music at all times.

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<sup>95</sup> My translation of “*Taiko o tan ni matsuri no dōgu to shite dake denaku, “taikodō” o tsuikyū nagara, taiko ga ongaku toshite ninshiki sare, dokuritsu dekiru koto o mokuteki shi, atarashi kyōdo geinō to shite...ganbatteimasu.*” *Ecchū Oshima Taiko Purofiru*, [Online] (Feb. 19 2002, accessed April 21 2006); available from <http://www3.canet.ne.jp/~kyon2/prof.html>.

<sup>96</sup> Ian Chun, *Gocoo: Reinventing Taiko* [Online] (Metropolis, May 17 2006, accessed May 17 2006); available from [http://metropolis.japantoday.com/tokyo/484/music\\_beat.asp](http://metropolis.japantoday.com/tokyo/484/music_beat.asp).

<sup>97</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 10.

For example, Kodō has taken the folk performance of *Yatai Bayashi* (lit. “parade float accompaniment”),<sup>98</sup> and made this piece into a famous part its own repertoire. Kodō’s song “Yatai Bayashi” enjoys great fame and has become the standard for other groups around the world that play the piece, but according Shawn Bender, Kodō members who watched the piece in its original context praised this version over their own. “The drumming at the festival had a unique spirit, they told me, which was impossible to express fully in the context of stage performance, but which they nevertheless now hoped to evoke.”<sup>99</sup> Bender interprets such statements as “a belief in the vigor of rural individuals...the power of ‘local people’ (*jimoto no hito*) [to] embody their indigenous folk performances.”<sup>100</sup> At a more prosaic level, however, this belief functions to shield Kodō from accusations of appropriation. While local performers also preserve their authority over their music by dismissing Kodō’s arrangements as “lacking in the *namari*, or ‘local nuance,’ of the original,”<sup>101</sup> Kodō recognizes the originators’ authority over their music, and gains the ability to change that piece in its own performances without fear of accusations of “mere imitation.”

Taiko players have created two identities for their art, one for themselves, and one for their audience. While taiko players consider their music innovative and modern, an expression of the present-day social environment, they broadcast an image of taiko as an ancient folk ritual in the interest of attracting audiences. These roles may conflict, as when taiko’s popular image as an ancient, martial, and Japanese art interfere with the modern, pacifist, and non-Japanese social statements that taiko players may make.

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<sup>98</sup> A performance local to Chichibu, north of Tokyo

<sup>99</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 209.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.: 210.

Identification of taiko with Japanese folk ritual also casts doubt on the legitimacy of taiko, as both Japanese and American taiko players try to prove that they did not simply copy someone else's music. Some have avoided such accusations of appropriation by emphasizing the novelty of their particular music over other, similar forms of music, as when American taiko players compare themselves to their Japanese equivalents. Distancing one's group from traditional Japanese music may damage revenues, however, as emphasis of the same model of Japanese folk music has proven an effective way to attract audiences and government subsidies. Taiko hangs suspended between the two opposing ideals of "tradition" and "novelty," a tension that extends beyond its image to the heart of its definition as a musical genre.

# Chapter 5

## BALANCING EXTREMES

Within the taiko community, two opposing models for taiko's future development have emerged, each with its drawbacks and benefits. Some taiko players, especially professional musicians, continue to emphasize the innovation and fusion that created taiko in the 1950s, but others see danger in musical experimentation. Too much emphasis on individual innovation could distance taiko groups from each other stylistically, damaging taiko's coherence, its definition as a musical genre discrete from all others. Setting forth standards in taiko will strengthen the taiko community by breaking down stylistic barriers between groups, while a respect for taiko's "traditions" will allow taiko players to transmit their music to students, preserving the genre over time. Rules that define some performances as taiko will exclude others, however, limiting the spread of the taiko community, and insistence upon the use of standard forms might cause taiko to lose its audience appeal as society changes and taiko remains the same. Caught between the forces that expand and those that contract taiko's boundaries, taiko players have begun to address the issue of what makes "taiko."

### **Some Background: Innovation and Prior Experience**

Taiko began with no definition at all, as early taiko players fused different musical forms according to personal whim. The inventors of taiko began to play this music only as adults and so the first elements of taiko music came from a wide range of sources. This pattern begins with Oguchi Daihachi, whose initial interpretation of taiko consisted of little more than extended jazz percussion solos using Japanese instruments in

place of a drum set. Oguchi has developed his style a great deal since then, but jazz remains at the core of his music. Even while his promotional tracts draw close links between his music and the traditions of ancient Japan, they also mention that the creator of Osuwa Daiko “was favorably compared with the celebrated Jazz drummer, Art Blakely.”<sup>1</sup> In this way, innovation in taiko has derived not from the preferences of a particular culture, but from the backgrounds of particular taiko players and the mixing of those backgrounds in a new context.

The ranks of current professional taiko players consist nearly entirely of similar instances of earlier practices adapted for use in taiko. Seiichi Tanaka draws his own style of performance, as well his methods for conducting practices, from his initial training in martial arts. Elaine Fong, founder and current director of Odaiko New England in Boston, counts her experience in choreography, with ten years of dance training, and experience in African dancing, ballet, and the dancing/body percussion TaKeTiNa, as major sources for her personal style.<sup>2</sup> Fong stated that “taiko is a combination of movement and drumming [and]...because I have some background in body movement, I think what I’m very good at [is a] more efficient way of drumming.”<sup>3</sup> Other members of Odaiko New England have experiences with other percussive forms, such as marching band drumming in the case of Tim Jordan, who “will use his virtuosic drumming technique to get that fast sound that you might expect from a trap drum set.”<sup>4</sup> Most of Kodō’s senior members also come from non-taiko backgrounds, from Chida Michiko, a piano player by training,<sup>5</sup> to Kaneko Ryutarō, originally a rock drummer and trumpeter. Kodō’s first director,

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<sup>1</sup> Daihachi Oguchi, "Tenko: Osuwa Taiko," (1980): 8.

<sup>2</sup> Fong.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Kodo Close-Up: Michiko Chiba, Staff," *The Kodō Beat*, Autumn 2004 2004, 3.

Kawaguchi Toshio, played shamisen before he played taiko drums.<sup>6</sup> This mixing of performers of many different backgrounds created the basis of taiko music, which then developed under the pressures exerted by performance.

### **Natural Selection: Developments in taiko**

The worth of performance is relative, not inherently “good” or “bad”, and so early taiko players could base their opinions of performances on only one source, the reaction of the audience. Taiko groups with no access to public funding must attract money, and groups that present spectators with more entertaining performances tend to prosper more than their competitors. Performers have recognized this pressure toward more entertaining performances, and Fujimoto Harumi, stage lighting designer for the Japanese taiko player Miyuki Ikeda, calls this process “natural selection,” which in many ways it resembles.<sup>7</sup> As in many performance arts, taiko groups consciously follow the path that this selection dictates, and this continual pressure has resulted in many changes to taiko as players have made their performances more entertaining.

One major trend in taiko’s development has consisted of the display of emotions by performers while playing. Linda Fujie recounts learning “festival music in Tokyo,” when she “was told to avoid all traces of a smile when we performed, and other groups were ridiculed if they showed any kind of emotion while playing.”<sup>8</sup> This performance style may have derived from the performers’ earlier experiences in other Japanese percussive forms, such as noh accompaniment or *kagura*, but has progressively weakened under audience pressures. At one time, Ondekoza also proclaimed a performance style of

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<sup>6</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Harumi Fujimoto, "My Original Image of Drums," in *Wadaiko: Miyuki Ikeda + Koichi Inakoshi*, ed. Inakoshi Koichi (Tokyo: Kawad Shobo Shinsha, 1995), 30.

<sup>8</sup> Fujie, "Taiko Drumming in International Performance," 98.

“stoic introspection,”<sup>9</sup> but this desire for drummers to play without sign of emotion quickly gave way to the more crowd-pleasing techniques employed by Kodō, whose members grin and grimace during performances. Burlington Taiko director Stuart Paton recalls that when San Jose taiko toured Japan in the 1980s: “they were promoted as “Sunshine Taiko,” because they were smiling and they were *happy*. It exudes from San Jose Taiko. I think that was an eye-opener, it really caused great waves in Japan.”<sup>10</sup> Whatever the reason, both Japanese and American taiko performers now work to project emotions on stage in an attempt to better please audiences. Yamato Wadaiko, another Japanese professional group roughly ten years younger than Kodō, has taken this trend to extremes, displaying exaggerated grins, frowns, rolling eyes, and comic body language in performances they advertise as “ ‘feel-good’ display[s] of technical brilliance and euphoric concentration.”<sup>11</sup>

In the case of the professional and semi-professional taiko groups that depend upon paying audiences for group funding, the necessity of an entertaining performance has also encouraged further musical fusion and experimentation. Kodō’s English-language news publication, “The Kodō Beat,” demonstrates the push toward fusion in the comments Kodō members recorded from the audience of a 2004 combined performance with the gypsy brass band Fanfare Ciocarlia: “ ‘*Fanfare* sounded even better with a big percussion section!’ to which came the reply, ‘Yeah, and Kodo might want to think about adding some horns!’”<sup>12</sup> The interest that both audience and performers expressed in fusion does not restrict itself to Kodō, and other taiko groups have indulged in similar

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<sup>9</sup> Ondekoza (Musical group), *The Ondekoza* (Los Angeles, CA: Jvc), 1 sound disc.

<sup>10</sup> Paton.

<sup>11</sup> *Yamato Website*, [Online] (*Yamato Wadaiko*, Jan 29 2006, accessed March 23 2006); available from <http://www.yamato.jp/>.

<sup>12</sup> “Ec 2004...in the Wake of Typhoon 15,” *The Kodō Beat*, Autumn 2004 2004, 1.

experimentation. San Jose Taiko explicitly states their group mission of seeking to “constantly challenge, change, and create new dimensions in Asian-Americans music, dance, and...performing arts.”<sup>13</sup> Odaiko New England has accompanied a Greek drama and Indian dance performances, of which Elaine Fong said, “Both directors felt that the taiko comes from the same core feeling, it’s very primal and very visceral.”<sup>14</sup> Fong also notes that “the audiences really liked both,”<sup>15</sup> implying that audiences look favorably on fusion.

This experimentation has proven threatening to the more conservative elements of the performance art sphere. As Linda Fujie records, practitioners of other Japanese performances have censured taiko, as the “mixing different instruments and their strictly separated schools of playing into new composed pieces...threatened the traditional music world as many professionals knew it.”<sup>16</sup> Coutts-Smith also noted the concerns of Yamaguchi Motofumi, Kodō’s artistic director in the early 1990s: “Much of our early success was overseas, where there is no prejudice about how Japanese drumming should be presented. In Japan, some traditionalists still don’t approve of us.”<sup>17</sup>

As taiko has become more widespread and established itself as a performing art, these outside attacks have become less common, but ironically the same process of growth and legitimation has given rise to conservative elements within the taiko community itself as some players have pushed to slow the innovation that first began the taiko movement.

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<sup>13</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 422.

<sup>14</sup> Fong.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Fujie, "Taiko Drumming in International Performance," 97.

<sup>17</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 14.

## The Way: Standardization of Form

Early taiko players judged the merits of their performances based upon how well they could draw and keep audiences, but as time has passed another set of criteria for judgment has grown in taiko. Aside from the developments imposed by Fujimoto's "natural selection," taiko players have changed their art by mimicking each other, creating standards of performance that may also function as a rubric for determining excellence.

Most taiko players now recognize the stances and basic choreography first established by the first taiko groups as "correct" and train new recruits to assume their stances in preference to any other. Heidi Varian gives step by step instructions on how to assume the "correct posture," including such particular directions as "slightly bend your left knee," "straighten your left leg," and "Your shoulder, elbow, and wrist should be in line with your imaginary drumstick."<sup>18</sup> Kimberly Powell describes a technique of slanted drumming, "a typical stance used by San Jose Taiko,"<sup>19</sup> as "the *sukeroku* style,"<sup>20</sup> but in most cases performers discard the information regarding the origins of a particular stance and choreographic technique, practicing that style as the inherently proper way to play taiko.

Aside from judging the extent to which a performance pleases its audience, one cannot identify an expression of art as intrinsically correct or incorrect, a fact that causes problems for those who wish to exert authority over taiko style. Since its creation, however, taiko has developed standards of performance, rules distinct to this art form that

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<sup>18</sup> Varian, 90.

<sup>19</sup> Powell, "Apprenticeship of Embodied Knowledge," 185.

<sup>20</sup> Powell mistakenly claims that San Jose Taiko named this style for "its Japanese region of origin," rather than the name of the group Sukeroku Taiko.

one can use to judge and compare the pieces that different groups play. Varian, worried that “dissemination of the art has led to some diluting of core values,”<sup>21</sup> sets out in her book to enumerate these rules in an effort to impose some order on taiko.

As the first book written on taiko in the US, Varian’s *The Way of Taiko* organizes and standardizes taiko performance in a collection of rules, a “Way” of taiko. Although Varian’s choice to call the conventions she proposes a “Way of Taiko” reflects Japanese constructions like “the Way of the Warrior” (*bushidō*) and “the Way of Tea” (*sadō*), there exists no historical “Way of Taiko” (*taikodō*).<sup>22</sup> Varian’s use of the phrase reflects the common desire of much of the taiko community to establish more stringent standards of taiko. In this book, rules that originally had pragmatic purposes for enlivening performances or protecting performers from injury now exist simply as “correct taiko.” Although Varian states that “to deviate from the correct angle is to risk injury,”<sup>23</sup> she rarely justifies her rules but simply states them as intrinsic to the taiko “Way,” often simply stating conventions as facts: “Playing the large odaiko when the heads are perpendicular to the floor requires the bachi to be straight, shoulder-width apart.”<sup>24</sup>

By removing specific practices in taiko from the context of their original purposes, taiko players like Varian have grown a series of rules, an idealized “correct” standard of performance to which they can compare their own practices. Taiko players use *ma* (“space”),<sup>25</sup> for example, as a tool to increase the audience’s interest in a performance, as drummers heightened the tension between loud beats and silent spaces. Kurita Kan,

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<sup>21</sup> Varian, 36.

<sup>22</sup> The Japanese taiko group Ecchū Oshima Taiko uses the term “Way of Taiko” (*taikodō*) on their website, but as a neologism. See *Ecchū Oshima Taiko Purofiru*, (accessed).

<sup>23</sup> Varian, 88.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>25</sup> American taiko players use “*ma*,” rather than the English word “space” to refer to this idea, so I will adopt the same convention.

former Kodō drummer, demonstrates the powerful affect of this technique in performances when he recounts *ma* as the element that first attracted him to drumming: “At first they were calm and silent, like monks. Then they exploded with all their power. A chill went through my body.”<sup>26</sup> Varian, however, does not justify use of *ma* as an aspect of an entertaining performance, but instead emphasizes the idea’s intrinsic importance to taiko: “Anyone may beat the drum, but to have a true sense of taiko, you must learn the concept of *ma* as well.”<sup>27</sup>

If Varian did not read Zeami’s writings before she wrote *The Way of Taiko*, the similarity of the advice given by these two performers suggests deep commonality between performance arts at this stage of professionalization. In many cases, Varian’s statements parallel Zeami’s as logical performance advice turned into aphorisms such as, “In a taiko performance, it is not only the strength that inspires, but the grace.”<sup>28</sup> Paralleling Zeami’s advice that “One should not... be content with only one kind [of music] and shun all others,”<sup>29</sup> Varian calls for diverse skills in performers: “diversity breeds innovation; innovation fosters growth.”<sup>30</sup> Also like the early writings on *sarugaku*, Varian makes a point of de-emphasizing the importance of performance in taiko and recasts this art form as a philosophical outlook. In the same way Zenchiku described *sarugaku*’s chief function as preservation of “the Way” and warned that “...conduct which does not accord with the Way incurs sin,”<sup>31</sup> Varian demands that “one who practices must follow the Way.”<sup>32</sup> Varian stresses the unimportance of technique relative

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<sup>26</sup> Coutts-Smith, *Children of the Drum*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Varian, 86.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>29</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 95.

<sup>30</sup> Varian, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> Varian, 83.

to the spiritual rewards of playing taiko, calling skill “a byproduct of training, not the goal.”<sup>33</sup> This goal, as Varian states, “is to reach a level inside yourself where you are truly communicating with the drum”<sup>34</sup> rather than entertaining an audience. Linda Fujie also identifies a “philosophy of... spiritual living through the *taiko* drum,”<sup>35</sup> and other taiko players, including Stan Shikuma, speak of becoming “one with the drum.”<sup>36</sup> These statements exemplify the movement to establish philosophical underpinnings for taiko, treating performance as a byproduct of the process that allows them to experience these sensations.

In the same way that Zeami’s successors placed their greatest emphasis on *sarugaku* as a sacred ritual rather than “an amusement,”<sup>37</sup> taiko players extend the importance of their art from entertainment to personal and spiritual fulfillment, building legitimacy for their practice as an art. Wong quotes Shuichi Thomas Kurai, Buddhist priest and leader of several Los Angeles taiko groups, believes that “taiko is a way to improve your life.”<sup>38</sup> As Varian states, “The art, at its finest, should allow the performer to lose himself in the here and now.”<sup>39</sup> In redefining taiko as a lifestyle rather than a performance, the taiko community takes the first step in a process of professionalization like that which turned *sarugaku* into *noh*.

### ***Dageikyoku*: Establishing Authority**

As this rubric of rules has developed, it has allowed some taiko players to gain authority over others by virtue of their experience. Oguchi Daihachi, for example, has

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 83-86.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>35</sup> Fujie, "Taiko Drumming in International Performance," 98.

<sup>36</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko: Spirit and the Drum".

<sup>37</sup> Rath, *The Ethos of Noh*, 77.

<sup>38</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 207.

<sup>39</sup> Varian, 67.

worked assiduously to build himself into a position of authority as the ultimate teacher of all taiko groups. Taiko players revere Oguchi as the creator of the first taiko group, but the “grand-father of taiko” also claims hereditary authority as the heir of “a family which, for generations, had been well known for upholding the traditions of the Osuwa Drum.”<sup>40</sup> The Japanese government has given him the further legitimacy of the title of Intangible Cultural Property,<sup>41</sup> which Oguchi has used to construct an establishment around himself as keeper of Osuwa Daiko’s secrets and history, holding the power to grant or deny legitimacy to others. Osuwa Daiko issues diplomas to its students, giving these students the right to teach taiko themselves, implying that those without such certification should not disseminate the art.

Taiko players support and respect this system of knowledge transmission in part because they can use official recognition to bolster their own legitimacy. The San Francisco Taiko Dojo website declares that Seiichi Tanaka “mastered all the Suwa Taiko arts,” and received the “highest degree of diploma” from Osuwa Daiko, with the permission to teach what he learned in Nagano to his own students in San Francisco.<sup>42</sup> The website stresses the fact that Tanaka’s sources granted him permission to teach their styles in America, a fact that lends weight in matters of musical style to both the Taiko Dojo and its director. Sukeroku Taiko lends further authority to Tanaka in their own decision to use him as their “official representative” in the United States, and reprimanding those who attempt to contact the Tokyo group by other means of communication for their “breach of protocol.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> *History of Osuwa Daiko*, (accessed).

<sup>41</sup> Varian, 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Seiichi Tanaka*, (accessed).

<sup>43</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 204.

As Konagaya notes, Tanaka “affirms that having roots in Japanese *taiko* should be the criterion that distinguishes “real” or “genuine” *taiko*,”<sup>44</sup> and as the “father of American taiko” has taught a large fraction of America’s professional taiko players, his ideals have in many cases become fundamental to taiko in this country. Heidi Varian, a student of Tanaka’s, reinforces the importance of legitimate transmission of knowledge, saying that “it is essential that you find a reputable instructor,”<sup>45</sup> a master, “whose title was bestowed by his or her instructors when the practitioner achieved a certain level of skill and was thus granted permission to teach others.”<sup>46</sup> The development of such protocols has placed limits on taiko dissemination, allowing masters to exercise more control over the music’s development.

In contrast to the limitations imposed by this concept of teacher legitimacy, taiko owes its initial rapid spread to the idea that a student in one group could become the teacher in another. The spread of taiko in North America has proceeded in this way as students of one particular teacher reached Varian’s “certain level of skill” and begun to instruct students of their own. As the website *Taiko.us*, a “public service taiko resource” cautions, “Treat your fellow Taiko players with honor and respect their hard work and talent! Don’t pay other groups music without permission. Give full credit to the authors of the music you play. Don’t re-arrange someone else’s [sic] work and take credit for it.”<sup>47</sup> Taiko players like Tom Warm of Okii Taiko advocate a slightly stricter system in which groups may only use and modify songs based from their “parent groups,” the groups to which their founding members belonged, saying “I put a lot of work into [the

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<sup>44</sup>Konagaya, “Taiko as Performance,” 119.

<sup>45</sup> Varian, 83.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>47</sup> *A Brief History of Stanford Taiko*, [Online] (Stanford Taiko, Jan. 18 2006, accessed Feb. 19 2006); available from <http://www.stanford.edu/group/stanfordtaiko/history.htm>.

songs] , and I don't want others benefiting from them."<sup>48</sup> These standards of instruction hold especially true for community groups, most of which identify with particular "parent groups" from which their founders received their primary training.<sup>49</sup> This lineage of groups ties together the taiko community, creating a network of support for taiko in both Japan and North America.

This spread of taiko styles from one group to another has promoted much cohesion in the taiko community, but at the expense of the interests of professional groups. Performers who depend upon taiko for their livelihood have an interest in seeing that the styles they invented remain in the control of their groups, and as taiko has become more established in the world music market, a group's propriety over the songs it creates has become an issue of great importance. Oedo Sukeroku Taiko, for example, originator of many of the choreographic techniques that have formed the basis of the style of many groups in the US, began a conflict over the ownership of these techniques. Taiko essayist and webmaster of the Rolling Thunder web page,<sup>50</sup> David Leong expresses Sukeroku Taiko's point of view in this matter: "It would not be a far reach to say that most groups in North America owe a stylistic debt to Oedo Sukeroku. In fact, many groups play Oedo Sukeroku's repertoire, often improperly, without permission, and without realizing where the material originated from."<sup>51</sup> Acting from this perspective, Sukeroku Taiko launched a program to protect its authority over its music.

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<sup>48</sup> Tom Warm, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Guestionnaire", Jan. 15 2006.

<sup>49</sup> The lineage of my own group, for example, runs "San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Sacramento Taiko Dan, Stockton Bukkyou Taiko, Bowdoin Taiko."

<sup>50</sup> Now offline, contact Rolling Thunder at [http://www.taiko.com/index.php?option=com\\_contact&Itemid=3](http://www.taiko.com/index.php?option=com_contact&Itemid=3) for more details.

<sup>51</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 204.

In a letter delivered through Seiichi Tanaka at the second North American Taiko Conference in Los Angeles in 1999, Oedo Sukeroku Taiko announced their exclusive rights over the forms the group's members had created. In an effort to limit the spread of their performance style to their potential competition across the Pacific, Sukeroku Taiko trademarked its stances, songs, and physical accoutrements, grouping together the distinct elements of a Sukeroku performance under the classification "percussion-performance pieces," left un-translated in the letter as "*dageikyoku*." This term, a neologism in Japanese, presented an entirely opaque face to the largely non-Japanese-speaking American taiko community, allowing Sukeroku Taiko to define "*dageikyoku*" themselves.

**\*Dageikyoku:** All the music by O-Edo Sukeroku Daiko which is played with the "Folding Tilted Stand©," the "Assembling Odaiko Stand©," and performed with "diagonal beating and choreography." It also includes the compositions (Shiraume, Matsuri, Nidan-Uchi, Yodan-Uchi, etc.) created by the artistic director, Seido and other original members.<sup>52</sup>

Sukeroku Taiko established authority over their "percussion-performance pieces" in the same way Kodō concedes the authority of local preservation societies over their music, and to much the same end. As Kodō players emphasize the inferiority of their performances in comparison to the local rituals that inspired them, the Sukeroku letter denies the legitimacy of any taiko music of the Sukeroku style played outside its context: "All these compositions are played with the specific style of Taiko, the Sukeroku style. Therefore, it is impossible to play this music unless the players have mastered the basics of the Sukeroku method."<sup>53</sup> By constructing performance as a totality in which the music, choreography, and the background of the performers must all draw from the same

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 224.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

source, Sukeroku Taiko established criteria for an “authentic” taiko performance that no other group could emulate.

With this logic, Oedo Sukeroku Taiko attempted to construct a taiko “Way” specific to their own group. Unlike the later efforts of Heidi Varian, however, Sukeroku’s “Way” did not include all forms of taiko, but only their particular “School,” (*ryū*), a concept that the leaders of the Tokyo group took from older Japanese performance and martial arts. Sukeroku Taiko instructed those players who wanted to use their “*dageikyoku*” in their own performances, to “study with O-Edo Sukeroku Daiko” or the group’s representative, Seiichi Tanaka, and obtain permission from “artistic director of O-Edo Sukeroku Daiko,” Kobayashi Seidō.<sup>54</sup> All groups who used these stylistic elements must register with the “Sukeroku School Organization” (“Sukeroku-ryū-kai”), with a registration fee of \$12,000 per year and an agreement to pay royalties to the Sukeroku organization of “7% of the proceeds per performance.”<sup>55</sup> With the construction of a “Sukeroku School,” the group hoped to gain greater recognition as a part of the larger genre of taiko, greater control over the taiko community on both sides of the Pacific, and the ability to extract money from a wider pool of sources.

This effort to declare legal proprietorship over taiko style failed fairly quickly, however. Although the announcement in 1999 generated a great deal of discussion, little of this discussion entered into the published media.<sup>56</sup> Stan Shikuma attributes this paucity of public information to reluctance on the part of taiko players to disagree with a group they respected, and states that most of the discussions concerning the Sukeroku letter

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> At present, the only source that contains detailed information about the Sukeroku letter comes from Wong. Her source material comes from the work of David Leong, webmaster of the now-offline Rolling Thunder webpage.

took place in private and unofficial context.<sup>57</sup> Even this discussion soon ceased, however, and by 2000, most groups had decided simply to ignore Sukeroku Taiko's demands.<sup>58</sup> Shikuma does not believe in the possibility of any other conclusion, since very few groups could pay the Sukeroku School Organization's fees and there exists no body with the authority to negotiate with the Tokyo group on behalf of every taiko group in North America: "perhaps some sort of compromise could have been reached, but who should have/would have negotiated it/signed it/enforced it?"<sup>59</sup> Shikuma expresses sympathy for the members of Sukeroku Taiko, who see their creations so widely spread without recognition, but rejects the creation of a "Sukeroku School" as impossible: "I personally did not think the idea would ever fly in the US or Canada; I think it would even be hard to institute in Japan at this point."<sup>60</sup>

At present, Sukeroku Taiko's claim of ownership has become a dead issue, even with Sukeroku Taiko itself, whose English-language website makes only a single oblique reference to the issue: "The foldable diagonal stand and the portable stand used for the big drum (both patented) were both created with research into human engineering and proper angle. Therefore, taiko performance using these stands is called sukeroku style."<sup>61</sup> This claim of exclusive ownership failed because it undermined the net of authority American taiko groups use to establish the standards of taiko performances. Because of Sukeroku Taiko's influence upon Seiichi Tanaka, Kenny Endo, and other respected disseminators of taiko style, players regard many of the inventions the Tokyo group as

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<sup>57</sup> Stan Shikuma, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Question", March 3 2006.

<sup>58</sup> I was a student in a Californian taiko group beginning in 2000 and attended the Taiko Conference of 2003 and never heard the Sukeroku Taiko letter addressed explicitly.

<sup>59</sup> Shikuma, "Re: Taiko Question".

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> *Oedo Sukeroku Taiko*, (accessed).

basic elements of “correct” taiko, not the particular style of a specific group, and so do not recognize the “Sukeroku School” or its ownership of “*dageikyoku*.”

### **Is This Still Taiko: Dissolution and Stagnation**

Oedo Sukeroku Taiko does not form the only voice calling for control over the dissemination of musical forms in taiko, however. As more people join the taiko movement as performers, the boundaries that once defined taiko as a Buddhist, Japanese, or Asian-American art form have blurred, and some of the people who joined taiko as members of these groups have become disenfranchised. Izumi Masumi notes discusses this trend of taiko in terms of the dissolution of taiko’s roots, voicing the much-feared “martial arts” scenario of taiko’s future development:

We do not know yet whether or not taiko will become the next Judo, Karate, or Aikido—Japanese cultural forms whose popularity has expanded so much beyond Japanese ethnic boundaries that the majority of practitioners and students have no connection with Japan or Japanese communities abroad.<sup>62</sup>

As taiko shifts its focus from social activism to pure entertainment, the standards that developed during the 1980s may no longer apply to performances, and the social movements who used taiko as a symbol have grown concerned that new groups may discard the elements that gave taiko meaning. Stan Shikuma expresses this worry that with taiko’s social message gone, consumerism will become the driving force in the music’s development. “The market imperative strives to create one homogenous mass, one global market, in a world where diversity is defined and circumscribed by America’s Top 40.”<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Izumi, *A Brief History of Taiko*(accessed).

<sup>63</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko as Folklore".

The diversification of taiko groups has lead many taiko players to examine their own art and find its definition. Taiko players have begun to note forms from their music incorporated into new contexts, causing some negative reaction. Burlington Taiko director Stuart Paton calls these performances “taiko knockoffs,” performed by “people who don’t study taiko [but] try to imitate it.”<sup>64</sup> Paton cites a particular act in *Circe du Soleil* as an example of “taiko knockoffs,” referring to the circus’s “huge drums that were made in Montréal by some dude from Maui and they look like taiko drums so that’s cool, but coming down from the ceiling and someone in make-up trying to fake [playing taiko on them].”<sup>65</sup> Faced with a musical genre evolving in several directions simultaneously, taiko players now must ask themselves, in the words of taiko player Masaye Nakagawa, “is this still taiko because it is playing on taiko [drums] by a taiko group?”<sup>66</sup> Many members of the taiko community have therefore begun to push for a more rigorous definition of taiko and more aggressive defense of the symbols and performance techniques that identify this music against appropriation.

This movement to establish better boundaries around taiko has so far met with little success because of as-yet undefined nature of taiko. Taiko players do not agree on what defines their art, as demonstrated in a survey of taiko players,<sup>67</sup> where responses to questions such as “how would you define taiko?” and “What distinguishes taiko from other forms of percussion” yielded extremely wide results. Some performers created

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<sup>64</sup> Paton.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Masaye Nakagawa, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Guestionnaire", Jan. 15 2006.

<sup>67</sup> I emailed surveys to contacts listed for all taiko groups in the US, Canada, Australia, and the UK on the Discover Nikkei website taiko database in January 2006. See *Taiko Database*, [Online] (Discover Nikkei, March 17 2006, accessed March 17 2006); available from <http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/resources/taiko/taikoGroups.php?&from=70>.

People from professional, community, collegiate, and Buddhist taiko groups responded to my survey, and some of these people I emailed back after reading their responses, asking further questions.

boundaries in both instruments and music that defined a comparatively narrow conception of taiko, which depended on “the instruments themselves,” “the style of performance,” “musico-philosophical concepts such as ‘ma’ and ‘jyo-ha-kyu’<sup>68</sup>,” and “elements of movement and dance.”<sup>69</sup> Others classified taiko by its country of origin as “Japanese ensemble drumming,”<sup>70</sup> or by elements of its choreography as “a form of drumming involving that entire body and played from the centre of the body.”<sup>71</sup> Most agree that drums should not play accompaniment to other instruments, but instead “the rhythms carried by one or more Taiko [drums] should be the central construct of the piece,” though, “purely afro-caribbean rhythms played on taiko [drums] is not Taiko.”<sup>72</sup> Many taiko players took a more philosophical approach to the question, calling taiko “a way of playing in my mind—a respect for drums and others, a certain traditional past, group playing and movement,”<sup>73</sup> and “a music to express your own heart.”<sup>74</sup> These debates have raised the question of taiko’s definition, exposing vulnerability in this still new art form. As taiko players do not agree on what makes a performance “taiko,” uncontrolled innovation presents a real danger to the cohesion of this performance art.

Arthur Takemoto expresses his concern over the loss of standard forms and the breakdown of a unified idea of taiko. Takemoto writes of conflicts arising in Buddhist taiko groups as some members “wanted to become performance oriented. This often resulted in losing the meaning behind Buddhist Taiko...disharmony and eventual

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<sup>68</sup> *Ma* is the space between notes. *Johakyū*, invoked in taiko less often than *ma*, refers to the convention of opening-middle-climax of many Japanese performance arts.

<sup>69</sup> Ian Cleworth, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Feb. 22 2006.

<sup>70</sup> Rome Hamner, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Jan. 19 2006.

<sup>71</sup> *Sawagi Taiko (English)*, (accessed).

<sup>72</sup> Murray Writtle, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Jan. 16 2006.

<sup>73</sup> Ron Iversen, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Jan. 20 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Seicho Asahi, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Jan. 24 2006.

dissolution.”<sup>75</sup> Takemoto refers to the breakup of particular groups, but other writers have warned against too much change in taiko by threatening the breakup of taiko, itself.

Many taiko groups both in and out of Japan share various performance standards, but for the most part, these standards arise directly from the stage techniques that groups have developed and retained to entertain their audiences. Only recently have certain groups and individuals begun to call for greater uniformity in taiko, citing the danger of so many different taiko players teaching such widely different styles of performance.

“Anyone can bang a drum, but that is not really taiko,”<sup>76</sup> Heidi Varian states, suggesting that some groups that might call themselves taiko actually do not belong in this category.

Varian expresses the “mixed feelings” of the taiko community about the rapid recent increase in the number of North American taiko groups in this context:

On the one hand, increased exposure has brought exciting new global awareness of the traditional art and the assurance that taiko will continue to develop into the future. But the accompanying excitement has also encouraged many inexperienced practitioners to begin giving instruction in the art of taiko before they are ready. Not only can this cause harm to the curious beginner, with many schools and no standardized method of instruction, but this is dangerous ground to tread upon.<sup>77</sup>

The “harm” and “danger” to which Varian refers have grown as the expanding roster of new taiko groups have experimented with musical styles that blur the definitions of taiko, threatening the legitimacy that the taiko movement’s earlier generation constructed.

The fears of Varian and others derive from the desire to maintain the cohesion of taiko as a musical genre. With no mutually agreed-upon definition for taiko, different groups can call very different kinds of performances “taiko,” complicating the audience’s view of the genre as a whole and decreasing the common ground shared by taiko players.

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<sup>75</sup> Takemoto, *Buddhist Taiko*(accessed).

<sup>76</sup> Varian, 16.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Also, as particular groups seek to trademark or otherwise control the transmission of certain styles and songs, taiko groups will diverge from each other to the point where the label of “taiko” becomes meaningless. Instead of a community of taiko groups, this trend of personal innovation of taiko styles might result in a scattered collection of individual drumming groups, each guarding its own secrets of style in the interests of competition.

Just as some factions of the taiko community believe that too little regulation will destroy taiko as a coherent performance art, however, others worry that too many restrictions will deprive taiko players of their ability to innovate. To taiko players, especially professionals who base their income off of their signature styles, restrictions separating “correct” from “incorrect” taiko represent potential limitations on their art and their livelihood. In order to attract audiences in a competitive environment, professional groups distinguish themselves from each other stylistically, and their ability to do so depends upon the amount of individual interpretation that taiko allows.

Groups that depend upon audience fees must also innovate in order to keep taiko entertaining as the context of performances and audiences change. The “natural selection” of innovation depends upon taiko’s ability to change, and if change ceases, taiko will stagnate and eventually lose its meaning as the tastes of the public change. “Groups that are open to change will thrive,”<sup>78</sup> Taikoproject director Bryan Yamami declares, and although the history of noh demonstrates that a static art form can survive under the patronage of the elite as an expression of their education, few taiko players wish to see this development. Even Varian states that “experimentation in the proper

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<sup>78</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 15.

context is encouraged—and is the only way any art form can grow,”<sup>79</sup> and most members of the taiko community resist standardization.

In their undergraduate research paper on taiko, Chelsey Ruth and Phillip Tanedo present an alternative to either extreme standardization or innovation in development of a taiko community. Ruth and Tanedo trace this ability to remain both innovative and cohesive to the interplay between the different kinds of groups that make up the taiko community.<sup>80</sup> If any one group of taiko players could assume propriety over the entire art form, innovation in style and philosophy might cease, but competition between professional groups has prevented standardization. At the same time, community groups preserve songs that the professional groups abandon and keep taiko accessible, developing their own performances based upon the tastes of their local audience. Ruth and Tanedo state that “the feasibility of professional touring groups is contingent [on] the existence of a strong baseline taiko community,” while professional groups provide the incentive for people to enter community groups. “They make it possible for future generations of musicians to dream not only of becoming concert violinists or cellists but also professional *kumidaiko* players.”<sup>81</sup> While the differing needs of professional and community groups could create the tension that tears taiko apart as an art form, the conception that both types of taiko belong to a single community has created a space for stability between the two extremes of innovation and standardization.

The development of the taiko community has, for example, balanced restriction and transmission of musical style with a shared system of usage rules. Taiko players distribute some songs freely, and develop variations on a repertoire of shared music that preserve

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<sup>79</sup> Varian, 95.

<sup>80</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 7.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

both the unique style particular groups and the connection between one group and the rest of the community. To preserve the interests of professional groups, however, this system of etiquette also recognizes the right to grant or deny performance rights for the songs they create. Professional groups will disseminate knowledge to their potential competition with the assumption that other groups will not perform certain these pieces without their creators' permission. This control over access differs little in intention from the failed Sukeroku suit, but taiko players accept the implementation of these informal rules of dissemination because they recognize a group of "public access" songs. Players from different groups can still compare their versions of "Matsuri" or "Yodan Uchi" and feel as if they belong to the same community. This community forms the basis of an emerging definition for taiko, allowing some players to answer the question "is this still taiko?" affirmatively no matter the context. As English taiko player Jacob Perry stated in his survey, "A taiko piece played on non-taiko drums is still taiko in the same way that a Bach cello suite arranged for marimba is still Bach!"<sup>82</sup>

Because too much innovation will result in uncoordinated performances and competition that could damage their revenues, professional groups strive transmit their styles from one player to another in the same group, while limiting the spread of these styles outside the group that created them. At the same time, however, groups attempt to create signature styles around themselves to enable to compete with other groups. Taiko players therefore seek to create enough common ground to make their music into a coherent genre without harming their ability to innovate. This shared music binds different groups together in a common lineage, a body of music they can pass on to the next generation.

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<sup>82</sup> Jacob Perry, E-mail, "Re: Taiko Questionnaire", Jan. 19 2006.

### **Born into Taiko: The Formation of a Self-Defined Art**

While many taiko players have worried that taiko will lose all connection to its older forms, the synthesis of “modern traditional” taiko has created a system that preserves taiko’s past without restricting innovation. New taiko players continue to express a respect for tradition, such Ryan Taguri, who states in Ruth and Tanedo’s paper that “the word taiko has meaning; it has tradition.”<sup>83</sup> The “tradition” taiko players like Taguri seek to preserve, however, has separated from Japan and come to gather around taiko itself.

Taiko players now in their twenties form the first generation in America with the opportunity to grow up playing taiko. As they have matured, some of these people have founded their own groups or become directors of existing groups, assuming increasing control over the direction of taiko’s development. Taiko still maintains the eclectic body of rhythm and choreography that the first taiko players introduced from their previous training. As these people retire, however, their replacements will come from within the taiko community. Those who have practiced taiko since childhood will possess an advantage over those who spent their youth practicing other art forms, reducing the inclusion of musical forms from outside taiko as the primary avocations of the taiko players. When one must study for a lifetime to become a professional taiko player, in-depth study of other art forms becomes rare, and the next generation of professional taiko players will find themselves spending more time in the study of taiko’s own body of music.

Although older performers have viewed taiko as a new context in which to practice their original training in other arts, the new generation possesses no background

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<sup>83</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 11.

outside of taiko and therefore innovates in a fundamentally different way. For these new taiko players, legitimate innovation in taiko can derive only from a deep background in the standards of the art form. Increasingly, professional taiko players mimic the actions of Seiichi Tanaka, Kenny Endo, and others who go to Japan to study taiko, a practice that serves both to increase their technical skill and to establish the authority that allows them to innovate without challenge. Kenny Endo, one of the most respected taiko players in North America, stresses the importance of this period of training: “The idea behind that is if you have no foundation, no basics, and you start creating something new from there, it’s going to lack authenticity as well as quality.”<sup>84</sup> Endo studied in Japan with the two most influential groups on American taiko, Osuwa Daiko and Oedo Sukeroku Taiko,<sup>85</sup> but also engaged in formal training in the field of “homeland-music accompaniment” (*hōgaku hayashi*).<sup>86</sup> His formal certification (*natori*)<sup>87</sup> as a legitimate practitioner and teacher of this classical Japanese music gives Endo authority within the taiko community.

Shawn Bender spent some time with Kodō observing the group’s apprentice program in 2001<sup>88</sup> and noted a similar practice in the stress in their training placed upon Japanese arts such as Shinto ritual dances (*kyōgen*), shamisen, and apparently unrelated practices such as Tea Ceremony. Although the students cannot master these skills during their training with Kodō, the group invites specialists in established Japanese arts to teach at Sado in the hopes that, in Bender’s words, “some measure of these ‘traditions’ might

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<sup>84</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 227.

<sup>85</sup> Endo was a professional member of Oedo Sukeroku Taiko in 1982

<sup>86</sup> Endo.

<sup>87</sup> Literally a “name-taking,” a concept that combines the roles of a stage name and a Ph.D. in a particular performance art. In his interview, Endo said he had studied with the Mochi Zuki School for about seven years before receiving his *natori*.

<sup>88</sup> “What Is Taiko,” *The Kodō Beat*, Winter 2001.

‘stick to their bodies’ (*mi ni tsuku*) and be expressed during stage performance.”<sup>89</sup> This justification implies that all Japanese arts tap into a common ethos that, given training, players will adopt in taiko performances. In fact, Kodō members have used ritual dances and music from other art forms in their performances to great effect, hearkening back to Zeami encouragement of a similar wide grounding in his students of *sarugaku*.<sup>90</sup> Not only do these older forms add to the performers’ pool of influences and enrich their music,<sup>91</sup> the legitimacy they impart allows Endo and Kodō to experiment without losing the respect of the rest of the taiko community.

Mayase Nakagawa demonstrates the derivation of this potential censure, speaking of “many of the newer folks who have no base in taiko are basically just playing drums on taiko...it is not necessarily a bad thing, but when one is playing in such a manner, without knowing, then it is not good.”<sup>92</sup> Without a background in taiko, in other words, one does not have the authority to innovate. Recognized mastery of tradition allows people Kenny Endo and groups like Kodō to violate norms without fear of censure as un-“authentic.” This concept, what Endo calls “Tradition as a Basis for Innovation,”<sup>93</sup> has enabled the taiko community to find a middle path between stagnation and chaotic dissolution.

As some establish their authority over taiko and their legitimacy as musicians by citing their expertise in other Japanese arts, other taiko players have begun to find increasing artistic merit within taiko, not as part of a larger body of Japanese folk music

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<sup>89</sup> Bender, "Of Roots and Race," 207.

<sup>90</sup> Zeami and Poorter, 95.

<sup>91</sup> Endo uses Kabuki sound effects, classical vocalizations (*kakegoe*) and influences from Edo festival accompaniment (*Edo bayashi*) in his performances.

<sup>92</sup> Nakagawa, "Re: Taiko Guestionnaire".

<sup>93</sup> Wong, *Speak It Louder*, 226.

or a symbol for a particular social movement, but as a self-contained art form. Stan Shikuma, for example, states that “taiko is a tradition in and of itself. Like ikebana or kendo, taiko carries its own aesthetic and inherent beauty.”<sup>94</sup> Kimberly Powell also mentions meaning assigned “to specific movements involved in the overall visual aesthetic of *taiko*,”<sup>95</sup> hinting at the construction of a symbolic vocabulary within taiko that might eventually grow to parallel the complicated internal references that denote meaning in noh performances.

Taiko players’ self-identification as part of the taiko community has begun to replace ethnicity as a means to create common ground between groups. “In these new social frames,” Konagaya notes in his article on American taiko, “*taiko* loses its meaning as an ethnic symbol of Japanese heritage and instead emerges as a medium for trans-cultural, as well as trans-generational, human expression.”<sup>96</sup> New taiko players have forged identification with taiko, considering themselves part of the taiko community just as earlier taiko players saw themselves as part of the Japanese-American community, as Terada notes: “even for those who recognize the historical role that *taiko* music played in eradicating Asian stereotypes, the primary reason for playing *taiko* is the satisfaction of creating music together.”<sup>97</sup> On Ensemble co-founder Shoji Kameda expresses this change in taiko most succinctly: “In my generation, instead of trying to bring taiko into a new identity, taiko has been a part of our identity formation from the beginning.”<sup>98</sup> As new taiko players have begun to transform their art into a self-contained genre of music, they

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<sup>94</sup> Shikuma, "Taiko as Folklore".

<sup>95</sup> Powell, "Apprenticeship of Embodied Knowledge," 187.

<sup>96</sup> Konagaya, "Taiko as Performance," 118.

<sup>97</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities in Taiko Music," 42.

<sup>98</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, "Yonsei Taiko", 13.

have countered the weakening of the ethnic identification that fueled the initial taiko by identifying with the community in which they grew up.

The social movements that encouraged the early growth of taiko have begun to give way to an appreciation of taiko as music. While people once considered the percussion used in various Japanese performance arts to belong to different musical categories, some taiko players now subsume all of these forms within taiko. “Taiko is used in Kabuki, Noh, Bunraku, Kagura, etc., etc. . . .the taiko used for them is still taiko.”<sup>99</sup> The important consideration in a taiko performance does not concern the accurate portrayal of ancient musical forms or the furthering of a social movement, but the enjoyment of the audience and the satisfaction in the performer. Kenny Endo, for example, speaks well of the development of taiko into a musical genre independent from ethnic or religious identification.

“Take an instrument like a piano. Although it started up in Europe and was mainly used in classical music, it branched out and now you can see it used in folk music, you see it used in jazz, and it’s not just Europeans that are playing this. It’s people all over the world. That’s the way I see taiko, it’s just expanding and it’s becoming more accessible to many people and to other cultures, and I think that’s a good thing.”<sup>100</sup>

While some taiko players believe this shift toward music rather than social message undermines taiko’s basic mission others have embraced this change.

Even as taiko loses its meaning as a part of a larger ethnic or racial community, those “born into taiko” have begun to view this music as the nucleus of a new community. Ruth and Tanedo discuss the developments in taiko driven by the new generation of taiko players, those children “born into taiko” who “could grow up with taiko mentors from an

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<sup>99</sup> Nakagawa, "Re: Taiko Guestionnaire".

<sup>100</sup> Endo.

early age.”<sup>101</sup> As one of these experienced players, Kenny Endo, director of the Taiko Center of the Pacific, can see how the new generation of taiko players regard their performances: “People my age, especially in this country, we were *exposed* to taiko, but we didn’t start playing taiko until our teens or twenties. So I think you’re seeing second and third generations of people, so it’s gradually becoming a tradition.”<sup>102</sup> Instead of looking to other Japanese art forms of a source of “tradition,” therefore, new taiko players base their guidelines of style off the performances of earlier taiko players.

Elaine Fong, director of Odaiko New England, mentions the worry among some in the taiko community that new taiko pieces “don’t sound like taiko songs,” but believes that “what is wonderful about American taiko is the diversity of underlying philosophy of groups. Some groups are more squarely tradition and some are super super avant guard and everyone else in the middle.”<sup>103</sup> The Los Angeles group Taikoproject, for example, founded by Bryan Yamami, a student of San Jose Taiko’s youth program in 1985, has created a “distinctive blend of hip-hop, experimental electronic feedback, storytelling, and use of multimedia.”<sup>104</sup> Another group, Portland Taiko, has included Chinese songs played on violin in their performances, while UCLA’s Kyodo Taiko has experimented with tap-dancing.<sup>105</sup>

Taiko balances between its players’ conflicting desires to both expand its boundaries and set them more rigidly in place. Although audiences tend to enjoy novelty, and many taiko players derive pleasure from innovation, some have warned against the results of too much deviation from taiko’s existing forms. If groups deviate too far from

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<sup>101</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 6.

<sup>102</sup> Endo.

<sup>103</sup> Fong.

<sup>104</sup> Ruth and Tanedo, “Yonsei Taiko”, 10.

<sup>105</sup> Thalheimer, “Jazzing up Tradition.”

each other, they can lose their common identity as taiko groups, dissolving the taiko community. Furthermore, if one generation of taiko players innovates with no fidelity to musical styles transmitted from the past, taiko will lose temporal as well as social cohesion, and might go extinct. In the same way, of the many forms of *sarugaku* in the sixteenth century, the only forms that currently survive are the ones that transmitted their styles with strict adherence to established forms.

As the new generation of taiko players grows up within the taiko community and identify themselves as “taiko players,” rather than members of particular racial and ethnic groups, the tension created by conflicting images within taiko has decreased. The ability of taiko players to identify themselves as members of a discrete community also allows them to define their own symbols within taiko, no longer restricted by the necessity to use other, older performance forms as a means of legitimation. Now, as the previous generation of taiko performers passes the standards they created to their students, taiko continues to follow the pattern set by noh and other performance arts during their professionalization. As the current moderators of taiko’s development, people born before taiko had become widespread give way to the first generation of taiko players with the opportunity to practice this art from childhood, the future shape of taiko begins to emerge.

# Conclusion

## AND A SOUND COMES OUT

The tension between those who wish to expand taiko's boundaries and those who wish to codify them suspends this music in a state of constant re-evaluation, caught in a series of opposing forces. Though taiko began as an effort to revive old Japanese "folk performances," audiences can appreciate performances because of their inclusion of modern, non-Japanese musical elements. Taiko players draw audiences by representing taiko as an ancient Asian art, though they themselves enjoy taiko for its novelty and its rejection of stereotypes. Although many taiko groups in Japan and America formed with the purpose of celebrating the cultural heritage of Japan, the same groups must distance themselves from other Japanese arts to avoid accusations of stealing other peoples' music. As taiko players attempt to define the legitimacy of their own practices, they must also establish their own authority as musicians by citing their expertise in established Japanese music. Although taiko's originators experimented heavily with the fusion and modification of many influences, these same artists now proclaim the necessity of fidelity to established forms. The shape these conflicts take is unique to taiko, but the tension between old and new acts upon taiko as it does upon many performance arts.

From the moment of its origin, taiko has followed a pattern visible in many forms of art. Since the creators of a new art form cannot have practiced that art before they invented it, they depend upon their previous training in other fields to inform their styles. As more people take up the art, their own backgrounds add new elements to the growing genre. When the generation shift occurs and more experienced taiko players begin to

train students of their own, those trained in the art from their childhood have no outside background from which to draw novelty, but instead refine the styles of their teachers to produce works of technical mastery. They judge the merits of their new work through comparison to the work of the art's originators and in this way turn the innovations of the first practitioners into a rubric of standards. These standards delineate boundaries around the art, allowing performers to label their own work by a set of criteria and exclude similar work that does not fit those criteria. In this way, taiko formed from experimentation with fusion between jazz and Shinto ritual percussion, grew as dancers, martial artists, and other musicians added their own experiences to the taiko repertoire, and now has begun to standardize as taiko players seek to establish their music as an independent genre, governed by its own internal rules.

Taiko has grown under the patronage of many groups, who have used it for many purposes, exerting influence on one side or the other of the tension between tradition and innovation. Taiko sprang from a movement to preserve Japanese folk arts, and many taiko players today celebrate the music as a connection to a pre-modern musical aesthetic. Taiko players train themselves in a wide range of "traditional" Japanese arts to establish their authority as practitioners of Japanese music. They use funding from government and non-profit organizations in Japan and America to further education about traditional arts, and the rhetoric they direct at private supporters often emphasizes taiko's ancient roots. Taiko players, however, often distance themselves from these images of Japan, seeking to avoid stereotypes and accusations of appropriating other musical forms. Also, while patrons appreciate taiko's references to these older performance arts, its worth of

taiko as entertainment and its ability to captivate a wide audience base, depends upon its novelty. Taiko exists in the balance between old and new.

Taiko players strive to maintain this balance as the social justifications that surround discussions of this art form give way to an appreciation of taiko as music. For most performers, the important consideration in a taiko performance does not concern the accurate portrayal of ancient musical forms or the furthering of a social movement, but the enjoyment of the audience and the satisfaction of the performer. In the words of Elaine Fong, “It’s world music, it’s Japanese drums, and who doesn’t like drums?”<sup>1</sup>

All questions of legitimacy and authority eventually conclude with a statement similar to Fong’s, because the enjoyment of audience and performer still rests at the heart of the music. The visual impact of the drummers’ movements, the rhythms they create, and the feel of the drum under their bachi form the foundation of taiko. As expressed by Japan’s Taiko Center website, “you just strike it with sticks, a sound comes out.”<sup>2</sup> Taiko has changed immensely as the innovators and codifiers have exerted their forces on its development, but to focus only on their points of dissention presents a false picture of the music. People play taiko because they enjoy it, and taiko will continue to thrive under the care of all of those who beat the drums and make sound come out.

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<sup>1</sup>Fong.

<sup>2</sup> *The History of Taiko*, (accessed).

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