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## **Introduction**

The number of Asian immigrants in the United States increased dramatically since the immigration law was reformed in 1965. This has not only increased the net Asian population, but diversified its ethnic makeup with new waves of immigrants, particularly from South and Southeast Asia, added onto the old layers of Asian populations in North America consisting predominantly of Chinese and Japanese. Reflecting the increasing diversity, an unprecedented number of Asian musical traditions are performed in Asian America, while new types of music based upon, or influenced by, such traditions are also being created in abundance. In contrast to new immigrant communities whose primary interest is to faithfully reproduce or revive music and dance as performed in their countries of origin, others, particularly the American-born descendants of earlier immigrants, opt for creating new music that will better reflect their lived experiences and musical backgrounds. The rapid influx of post-1965 immigrants made more evident the friction between new immigrants and the descendants of the earlier immigrants who were born in North America. The differing perspectives often engender friction between these two groups over the definition of tradition in music culture.

### **Public Forum, *Transcending Boundaries: Asian Musics in North America***

The present volume, *Transcending Boundaries: Asian Musics in North America*, is a report of the public forum of the same title, conducted at the National Museum of Ethnology on October 11, 1997.<sup>1</sup> The impetus for organizing the forum derived from a continuing dearth of information and interest in Japan regarding the performing arts culture of Asian America. While historians and anthropologists have long engaged in studies of the immigration history and social organization among Asians in North America, the notion that performing arts in Asian America are simply imitations,

therefore diluted versions, of "authentic" Asian traditions remain dominant, therefore preventing serious study on the subject.

The forum aimed to highlight the hitherto neglected creativity that energizes the Asian music culture in North America. The title of the forum is multivalent. When music is brought from Asia to North America, it transcends not only geographical boundaries but often also ethnic, religious, class, age and gender differences. The forum aimed to analyze the musical and social ramifications of such boundary crossings. The gong music played by Muslims in the Philippines has become a musical symbol of all Filipinos (who are mostly Christians) and even a symbol of struggle and resistance by Asians against Western domination both within and outside North America. What are the musical features that enable certain forms and genres to attain popularity across various boundaries? Cambodian court dance, once an emblem of aristocracy, has been democratized, and it is performed, appreciated and patronized in North America by Cambodians of all classes to maintain their cultural identity. What are the difficulties in transmitting performing arts when the context of teaching and learning drastically changes? Although *taiko* has its origin in Japan, its popularity has extended way beyond the Japanese community and it is becoming a major performing art form for all Asians in North America. What are the roles of performing arts in establishing or maintaining a sense of community within a multicultural society? The forum sought to discuss such imminent issues and problems with leading scholars and practitioners of the genre.

### **Panel Discussion**

The forum began with a keynote speech by Hiromi Lorraine Sakata, then professor of music at the University of Washington.<sup>2</sup> A full summary of her speech here will be redundant as an article based on the speech is included in this volume. It will suffice to mention that her speech provided the backdrop to the individual cases reported by other panelists, with an overview of the subject in its broadest historical context.

The keynote speech was followed by a panel discussion with Sakata and three other discussants. Usopay Cadar is a leading scholar of Maranao music as well as the artistic director of the Mindanao

Kulintang Ensemble. Cadar and Danongan Kalanduyan, another master musician from the Philippines, are largely responsible for the dissemination and current popularity of *kulintang* music (gong and drum music of the southern Philippines) in North America. Sam-Ang Sam is perhaps the most active researcher, performer, and promoter of Cambodian music and dance in North America. Apart from his academic writings, his activities include the promotion and dissemination of Cambodian performing arts through concert tours and the production of audiovisual materials for education. Kenny Endo, a third-generation Japanese American (*sansei*) from Los Angeles, is one of the most respected and influential *taiko* players in North America today. Leading *taiko* groups in Honolulu, Los Angeles and Tokyo, he frequently performs and teaches *taiko* in North America, Japan and elsewhere. Endo recently completed his master's thesis at the University of Hawaii, based on his experience of learning *taiko* in Japan.<sup>3</sup> These three panelists share a few common traits that were crucial when I selected participants to invite for the panel: they are all leading practitioners of the genre they specialize in; their activity in performance, promotion, and research are often of transnational and transcultural nature encompassing North America and Asia; their scholarly perspectives are shaped and continuously informed by their experiences as performers and cultural brokers.

The panel discussion revolved around three related issues: identity, transmission of tradition, and ethnic pride. Cadar traced the current popularity of *kulintang* music in North America to three main reasons. First, the establishment of a *kulintang* course at a prominent public educational institution (University of Washington) enabled musicians from the Philippines such as Cadar to stay (and eventually immigrate) in the US. Second, the *kulintang*, thought to have existed in wide areas of the Philippines prior to Spanish colonization, is serving as an artistic medium to forge a pan-Filipino identity bridging ethnic, religious, and linguistic differences that divide the Philippine society. Third, *kulintang* is an instrumental ensemble that is relatively easy even for those with limited musical experiences to learn in the early stage. Learning vocal music, for instance, can be threatening to beginners because it requires at least some understanding of language.

Lorraine Sakata highlighted the role of Buddhist churches in popularizing *taiko* music in its history in North America. They were social centers for the Japanese American communities, and organized

various activities to attract the youth. When young Japanese Americans became interested in *taiko* music, many Buddhist churches organized groups and encouraged them with both material and moral support. Many *taiko* groups continue to base their activities at Buddhist churches, culturally representing not only young Japanese Americans but the Japanese American community at large.

Following Sakata on *taiko* music, Kenny Endo emphasized that a deep understanding of drumming traditions in Japan is crucial in creating new *taiko* music in North America, illustrating his point with his own experience of learning music in Japan for ten years. He also believes that *taiko* drumming currently popular in North America depends so much on the visual impact deriving from tightly coordinated movements of *taiko* players that it is not necessarily interesting without it. Endo's desire to create *taiko* music that will enthrall listeners without the visual elements may well form a new trend.

Sam-Ang Sam stressed that the most urgent agenda in the Cambodian community in North America is to revive performing arts traditions which were severely attenuated due to the annihilation of intellectuals and performers during the Khmer Rouge period (1975-79). In contrast to *taiko* and *kulintang* which are appealing to the young with their fast tempo and dazzling virtuosity, the classical music and dance of Cambodia is slow in tempo and spiritual in content therefore making it difficult to attract youth who are more accustomed to Western popular music.

The panelists agreed on the importance of understanding and maintaining contact with the respective root traditions. Sakata illustrated the point with the case of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, a Qawwali singer from Pakistan who died prematurely in 1998. While Nusrat collaborated with musicians from other genres such as Peter Gabriel, and attained much success in the world music market, he was extremely criticized in Pakistan for combining Sufi (religious) singing and western popular (secular) music. Yet many young Pakistanis in North America became interested in Qawwali and Islamic religious culture through Nusrat's music, and Nusrat himself had that effect in mind when he ventured into cross-genre collaboration. Sakata believes that the Pakistani youth became interested in Nusrat's music because he and his music were deeply grounded in Qawwali tradition.

The relationship between Asian music and funding sources was discussed next. Sakata referred to the system of arts funding in governmental organizations such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and pointed to the common practice in which decisions are made with political considerations, not entirely based on artistic excellence or the importance to the community. The principle of the balanced representation of regions ('evening out') is one such example. Cadar traces the prevalence of political decisions to the lack of specialists of Asian music who are engaged in cultural policy, and calls for more active participation by ethnomusicologists in this sphere. Sam spoke of the problems on the part of the recipient of grants, and mentioned that performers active within the community are often incapable of 'selling' their talent to funding organizations. He believes that, while artistic excellence is a prerequisite for the successful procurement of grants, it is the researchers' responsibility to work closely with local performers, informing them of the mechanism of the funding system and assisting them to prepare competitive grant applications, especially in light of decreasing arts funding from government sources.

## **Report**

The forum was open to the public, not restricted to scholars and specialists. Reflecting the public nature of the forum, the articles in the present volume are written and edited for the general public, while they have a wealth of information useful for scholarly pursuit. I have asked the contributors to adopt a plain and succinct style of writing and to keep academic jargon to a minimum.

This report contains six articles on Asian American music. Four articles are by the participants of the forum. Sakata's contribution is a revised version of her keynote speech which provides an overview of the subject in its broad historical context and sets the tone for the entire volume. Cadar analyzes in his fluid style the trajectory of *kulintang* music as it has been adopted and adapted by young Filipino musicians in North America. Sam describes the Cambodian community's struggle to revive the performing arts, gravely annihilated during the Pol Pot regime, in their new homeland. My essay portrays the process by which young Japanese (and other

Asian) Americans have played *taiko* for the construction of their identity.

Consulting with the panelists of the forum, I have asked two scholars to contribute articles to broaden the scope of the report. Maria Seo's chronological survey of Korean music in North America contains a wealth of information and examples. Her descriptions are based on her experience as a musician and researcher for almost four decades. Phong Nguyen, a leading scholar and performer of Vietnamese music in the US, provides a concise summary of Vietnamese music in North America.

### **Acknowledgement**

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*Yoshitaka Terada*  
National Museum of Ethnology  
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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The forum was held in conjunction with a recital by the Mindanao Kulintang Ensemble, a US-based group specializing in the performance of Philippine gong and drum music, on the previous day (October 10) in the museum auditorium. It was titled “Kulintang: The Mindanao Sound that Crossed the Ocean.” The forum and the performance constituted a part of the museum’s yearlong celebration commemorating its 20th anniversary since its opening to the public in 1977.

<sup>2</sup> She is currently the associate dean of the School of the Arts and Architecture at University of California, Los Angeles.

<sup>3</sup> “Yodan Uchi: A Contemporary Composition for Taiko.” (MA Thesis, University of Hawaii, 1999)