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メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: 寺田, 吉孝 メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002098

Shifting Identities of *Taiko* Music

in North America

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Many Japanese communities in North America hold a *Bon* (or *O-bon*) festival every summer, when the spirit of the deceased is summoned to the world of the living for entertainment of dance and music.¹ At such festivals, one often encounters a group of energetic and smiling performers playing various types of drums in tightly choreographed movements. The roaring sound of drums resembles ‘rolling thunder’ and the joyous energy emanating from performers is captivating. The music they play is known as *taiko*, and approximately 150 groups are actively engaged in performing this music in North America today.² This paper aims to provide a brief overview of the development of *taiko* music and to analyze the relationship between *taiko* music and the construction of identity among Asians in North America.

Taiko is a Japanese term that refers in its broadest sense to drums in general. In order to distinguish them from those of foreign origin, Japanese drums are often referred to as *wadaiko*, literally meaning ‘Japanese drum’. Although the roots of *wadaiko* music may be traced to the drum and flute ensembles that accompanied Shinto rituals, agricultural rites, and *Bon* festivals in Japan for centuries, *wadaiko* has come to mean a new drumming style that developed after World War II out of the music played by such ensembles. North American *taiko* is based largely on this post-War *wadaiko* music, contrary to its ancient image.

Wadaiko music is distinguished from previous drumming traditions in Japan by a style of communal playing known as *kumidaiko*, involving a multiple number of drummers and a set of *taiko* drums in various shapes and sizes. The *kumidaiko* is said to have been invented in 1951 by Daihachi Oguchi who adopted the

arrangement of a Western trap set (Oguchi 1987:30). *Wadaiko* groups started performing at hot spring spas and hotels as tourist attractions in the mid-1950s. The performances of a few such groups at the 1964 Olympic Games in Tokyo and the 1970 World Exposition in Osaka placed *wadaiko* music in the national limelight. The appearance of *taiko* groups on TV programs further promoted their popularity (Takata 1995). Since around the mid-1970s, amateur *wadaiko* groups have been formed all over Japan in large numbers, motivated partially by an increasing sense of nostalgia over the loss of 'old Japan' in an age of rapid industrialization, and in part by the encouragement of rural municipalities to create tourist attractions.

***Wadaiko* Music in the New Soil**

The creation of *taiko* music in North America dates back to 1968 when the first group was established in San Francisco. Seiichi Tanaka, who had recently arrived from Japan, attended the Japanese American community festival (*Sakura Matsuri* or Cherry Blossom Festival) in San Francisco's Japan Town in 1967. He was so disappointed not to find drums at the festival that he decided to play one himself. He borrowed a drum from the Buddhist Church for practice and played it at the festival the following year, which attracted a great deal of attention from young Japanese Americans. This event subsequently led to the establishment of the San Francisco Taiko Dojo in 1968. Inspired by the public performance of his group, many young *sansei* (third-generation Japanese American) in the Bay Area began to study with Tanaka.³

Tanaka, who was equally interested in teaching martial arts, believed in strict discipline, and he imposed Spartan training on these *sansei*. Although many students dropped out of the group, others managed to persevere through the training and eventually formed their own groups in the 1970s onward. Having heard of his reputation, many *sansei* in other parts of the country invited Tanaka for workshops and residencies. Many influential *taiko* groups in North America today are led by his former students.⁴ For this reason, Tanaka is often referred to as the 'Father of North American Taiko' (Shikuma 2000).

As mentioned earlier, *taiko* music started in North America with the Japanese *wadaiko* music as its primary source. As the first *taiko* music teacher, Tanaka taught styles that he had learned from Japanese *wadaiko* groups, especially its two earliest exponents, Osuwa Daiko of Nagano Prefecture and Oedo Sukeroku Taiko of Tokyo.⁵ Through his teaching, their performance styles decisively influenced early *taiko* groups in North America.⁶ Tanaka also wrote compositions in the style of *wadaiko* music, and taught them to his students. Consequently, the great number of North American *taiko* groups perform a version of his compositions, particularly his best-known piece, *Matsuri* ('festival'), which serves as the common repertoire among *taiko* groups in North America.



Photo 1: Practice session of San Francisco Taiko Dojo (San Francisco, 1999; photo by Yoshitaka Terada).

The two internationally acclaimed Japanese *taiko* groups, Ondekoza and Kodo, also had a tremendous impact on North American *taiko* music. Ondekoza was established in 1969, and since

their first US tour in 1975, they have taught their compositions in workshops during North American tours. Many *sansei* were inspired by their performances to form their own *taiko* groups, which learned compositions directly from these two groups. One of Ondekoza's compositions, *Hachijo*, is performed by many *taiko* groups in North America. Kodo, which split from Ondekoza in 1981, has extensively toured in North America, and many North American *taiko* players have participated Kodo's annual music festival, Earth Celebration, at its headquarters on Sado Island in Japan.

Yet most North American *taiko* players believe that they have developed a style of their own, albeit recognizing its Japanese roots.⁷ They do not render Japanese compositions as they were taught, but frequently in their own arrangements, which gives them a unique individual character. Many *taiko* groups have also composed their own songs in addition to the pieces they have learned from Tanaka and Japanese groups. Their new compositions often reflect the experiences of Japanese Americans or the musical environment in which players grew up. *Kikori no Yume* ('Woodcutter's Dream') written by Ken Mochizuki of Seattle Taiko Group (1985), for example, showcases the Japanese American custom of mushroom picking which was a common family outing before the war.⁸ *A Ko'olau 'Au-Tradewinds* by Hawaii Matsuri Taiko is an outcome of inter-ethnic collaboration, and features the Hawaiian chant, *taiko*, Hawaiian *pahu* drum, and Tahitian *toere* drum, reflecting the multicultural diversity of Hawaii.⁹

***Taiko* as a Means to Combat Stereotypes**

Although Tanaka, who started the first US *taiko* group, was a new immigrant from Japan, it was mainly young *sansei* who were initially attracted to *taiko* music. Many of the *sansei* were raised at a time when memories of World War II were still vivid and the impulse for assimilation was the norm among the Japanese Americans (Kessler 1993:284; Takahashi 1997). Their *nisei* (second-generation) parents on the mainland had been shipped off to war-time relocation camps on the basis of their ethnicity rather than their citizenship or political creed, and came to believe that being Japanese (or having Japanese traits) signified nothing but risk. The fear of being taken away on the grounds of their ethnicity loomed

large in the Japanese American community. Therefore, many *sansei* were encouraged to fully assimilate into the mainstream white culture, and to refrain from learning Japanese language and traditional culture after the war. For most Japanese, the operative aphorism during that time was that “the nail that stands up the highest will get pounded the hardest.” Many *sansei* remember being told while growing up, to be quiet, not to stand out, to just work hard and not to complain. A *sansei taiko* player, Stan Shikuma, muses over his experience as a small boy of being told '*Yakamashii*' ('Too noisy') so many times that he believed it was his nickname (Seattle Kokon Taiko 1997).

Despite (and because of) their culturally deprived upbringing and resultant identity crisis, *sansei* were inspired by the civil rights movement of the 1960s and became increasingly aware of their ethnicity and its political implications. Many *sansei* began searching for their cultural roots by studying the history and culture of Japan as well as Japanese American experiences. As part of the larger social movement, young Asian Americans were looking for different ways to express themselves artistically *and* politically, and their interest in *taiko* music was part of their search for a cultural niche within the white hegemony. For this reason, many *taiko* players of early years were activists in social movements, fighting for social justice and welfare for Asian Americans. As Glenn Omatsu remarks, Asian American writers, artists, and musicians in the late 1960s were 'cultural workers' who saw their work as serving the people (1994:28).

The issue of Asian stereotypes was one of the most urgent agendas that Asian Americans had to tackle in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Wei 1993). They were searching for a means to eradicate the negative stereotypes and to free themselves from self-depreciation and self-denial deriving from such stereotypes. With its thunderous sounds and ample scope for artistic creativity, *taiko* music came to be regarded as an effective means to combat such lingering stereotypes about Asian Americans that they are quiet (non-assertive) and hard-working but uncreative. *Taiko* has served not only as a way to establish the bond with fellow Asian Americans from communal activity, but also as a means to change the society and to change themselves (cf. Mark Tang in Mura 1994:195).

Women and *Taiko*

One of the major characteristics of North American *taiko* music is the numerical dominance of female players, presenting one of the most tangible differences to *taiko* music in Japan where males continue to predominate.¹⁰ A rough estimate of the current *taiko* population indicates that more than two thirds of the North American *taiko* players are women. Women were attracted to *taiko* music from the beginning of its history in North America. PJ Hirabayashi, who along with her husband Roy Hirabayashi has led an influential *taiko* group (San Jose Taiko) since 1974, recalls her first encounter with *taiko* music.

“I saw *taiko* for the first time in 1970 or 1971. It was at a community function where there was a large gathering at a Buddhist church in San Francisco, and San Francisco Taiko Dojo was playing there. I remember being completely enraptured by seeing this magnificent power, a flow of beauty, movement, [and] sound. It really captivated me. Perhaps the one thing that really captured my interest was to see two women. It was a mother and a daughter, who were performing members of the company at that time. I just remembered thinking, that’s fantastic to see women play such a powerful activity, still be connected somehow to Japanese culture. Because all my familiarity with something traditional in cultural aspects were always more the sedate art forms such as the dance, the *ikebana* [flower arrangement], the tea ceremony, or it would be the reverse, martial arts.”¹¹

Stereotypes of Asian Americans have the most devastating ramifications for Asian women. They are often thought to be quiet and passive as well as submissive and mysterious (Matsui 1995:734; Tuan 1998:143). Such stereotypes trap many Asian women into negative self-images and inhibit them from voicing their opinions. For many such women, it was important to break those stereotypes by appearing strong and creative on the stage.¹² In addition, many female *taiko* players are painfully aware of the psychological disadvantage of not having positive female role models from their

own experiences, and they are conscious of their positions as role models for young Asian American girls.¹³

Although younger players place considerably less importance on this aspect of *taiko* playing, the titles of *taiko* CDs such as *Commotion* (1994, Katari Taiko), *Quiet No More* (1997, Seattle Kokon Taiko), *Making Waves* (2000, Portland Taiko) and composition titles such as *Ja Sawago* ('Let's Raise Hell', 1994) appear to testify its continuing relevance as a means to fight stereotypes for Asian Americans.

Sawagi ('Commotion') Taiko of Vancouver is a unique all women group that pushes this effort of breaking stereotypes through the performing arts one step further. They write and arrange most of their compositions, some of which have a story enacted in musical skits with vocal numbers sung by the members. Their membership is limited to Asian American women, and the group presents challenging performances frequently with strong feminist themes. They perform regularly for women's music festivals across North America, and enjoy an enthusiastic following among feminists.¹⁴



Photo 2: Sawagi Taiko performing at the Powell Street Festival sponsored by the Japanese Canadian community (Vancouver, British Columbia, 1996; photo by Yoshitaka Terada).

***Taiko* and the Japanese American Community**

Early *taiko* groups were formed mostly by young *sansei*, and even today the majority of *taiko* players are Japanese Americans. However, other Asian Americans as well as European and African Americans are increasingly interested in playing *taiko* music. Today, there are groups such as Odaiko New England that has a Chinese American leader, and Burlington Taiko whose members are all European Americans. Because early *taiko* groups defined their music as a Japanese American art form, the issue of membership was crucial when people other than Japanese and Japanese Americans wished to join the groups. The ethnic makeup of the group was considered fundamental to the group's identity and objectives, and a few groups limited their membership to Japanese Americans or to Asian Americans.

Some groups consider themselves an integral part of the Japanese American community in the sense that they sustain a firm and ongoing relationship with the community from which they were born. San Jose Taiko is probably the best-known group of that category, and Japanese Americans comprise about eighty per cent of its members. For groups like San Jose Taiko, however, the ethnic affiliation of members alone does not suffice. Roy Hirabayashi, co-leader of the group, emphasizes the importance of playing *taiko* "with a sense of community and supporting what's happening [in the community]." ¹⁵ As an attempt to perpetuate the important mission of the group in the incoming generations, San Jose Taiko also takes trainees on a walking tour of Japantown where the historical development of the community and its relationship to the group's activity are explained. While the group does not deny entry on the basis of ethnicity, an understanding and full endorsement of the group's history and objectives are prerequisites for aspirants to join the group.

Groups determined to be based in the Japanese American community are facing a serious challenge. The future of the Japanese American community concerns many community leaders because of the high percentage of marrying out. ¹⁶ Fearing the disintegration of the Japanese American community in the near future, some leaders have expressed their hope for *taiko* music's role in holding the community together. Responding to such widely held apprehensions, Stan Shikuma of Seattle Kokon Taiko stresses

the need for creating a new folklore for the Japanese American community based on their history and unique way of life, and believes that *taiko* music will play a significant role in that effort (Shikuma 1998).



Photo 3: San Jose Taiko performing at the Obon Festival in Japantown (San Jose, 1998; photo by Yoshitaka Terada).

Shifting Identity of *Taiko*

The involvement of other Asian Americans in *taiko* music began early in its history and a number of Asian Americans, particularly of Chinese and Filipino descent, are members of *taiko* groups at present. While some community-based *taiko* groups attempt to maintain the Japanese American identity by maintaining a numerical majority of its members, others have recently begun to

characterize *taiko* not simply as Japanese American but as an Asian American art form. Although acknowledging its Japanese and Japanese American roots, they see in *taiko* a potential for constructing a collective culture and seek to redefine *taiko* as a representative venue for a uniquely Asian American expression based on their shared history and experiences in North America as a cultural minority (cf. Wei 1993: 64-71).¹⁶

However, the term 'Asian American', and the consciousness thereof, did not exist until the late 1960s.¹⁷ Previously, Asians in the US were called Orientals or by the names of individual ethnic groups such as Japanese and Chinese. The category of Asian Americans emerged out of the social movements in the 1960s that protested against white domination and called for the solidarity of ethnic minorities. In this context, it hardly appears a mere coincident that the term Asian American and the first North American *taiko* group were both created in the same year of 1968.

Creating a Buddhist *Taiko* Tradition

About a year after Seiichi Tanaka started his group in San Francisco, *taiko* drumming with a completely different outlook and philosophy began in Los Angeles. Rev. Mas Kodani of the Senshin Buddhist Temple (Jodoshinshu sect) and his friend George Abe thought that *taiko* drums used only once a year for O-bon festival could be played more often for fun. They started a drumming component within a group affiliated with the temple that played *gagaku* and other music for its services and festivals. The group came to be known as Kinnara Taiko. Kodani regards playing *taiko* as a way of Buddhist practice to eradicate the ego, and the mentality to emphasize individual achievements, as seen in many other *taiko* groups.¹⁸ Their method of playing drums and repertoire are not based on those of any Japanese groups, and is uniquely its own. Having no models to follow, they first played *taiko* to the rhythm of Buddhist sutra (*Amidakyo*) as recited vocally. Their compositions are written collectively by the group, and the individual authorship of compositions is discouraged.¹⁹

While Buddhist groups form a separate stream in North American *taiko* music, Kinnara Taiko made a far-reaching contribution to the development of the genre by innovating a *taiko*

making method. One of the biggest hurdles that early *taiko* groups faced concerned the procurement of the instruments. The communal style of *taiko* music (*kumidaiko*) required a multiple number of drums, but the high cost of *taiko* drums produced in Japan was prohibitive for most *taiko* groups even to buy one. Many groups practiced by beating old tires, but they needed instruments for performances. By trial and error, the members of Kinnara Taiko managed to build *taiko* drums from wine barrels, and they slowly developed over time the technique of manufacturing drums good enough for performance. Kinnara Taiko members generously imparted their method of *taiko* making to others who wanted to start *taiko* groups. Without the dissemination of this knowledge, the current *taiko* boom would have been considerably curtailed.²¹



Photo 4: Johnny Mori of Kinnara Taiko (left) teaching drum making to other Japanese American youths (Ogden, Utah, 1976; photo courtesy of Kinnara Taiko)

National Taiko Conference and Networking

In 1997, the first national conference of *taiko* groups and players was organized in Los Angeles by the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) to help clarify the increasing confusion as to the identity and role of *taiko* music which were previously self-evident. Although a few festivals of *taiko* music had been held to showcase the performances of prominent groups, the conference was the first occasion for *taiko* groups across North America to gather, interact, perform and discuss wide ranging issues concerning this music. The organizers had initially expected about 200 participants, but much to their surprise and delight, the conference attracted more than 500 *taiko* players, indicating the enormous interest in and expectation toward the conference.²²

Apart from the formal concert featuring five *taiko* groups (*Taiko Jam*) and a few plenary sessions, the three-day conference included two different types of sessions: 1) workshops in which technical matters regarding playing and teaching methods (flute playing, etc.), instrument maintenance (how to prepare drum heads, etc.) and group management were taught, and 2) discussion seminars where various issues considered important to *taiko* music such as its history, identity, and authenticity were discussed (JACCC 1997).

The conference has at least two important implications. It was the first time that the majority of the individuals and groups actively involved in *taiko* music recognized the emergence of what might be termed the *taiko* community. For younger players in particular, the conference was an occasion to realize their part in a larger cultural movement beyond their own *taiko* group. The sense of community renders individual *taiko* players more conscious about their role as active participants in the growing nationwide cultural trend.

Secondly, the conference revealed a generation gap among *taiko* players in their perspectives of *taiko*'s history and its significance to Japanese and other Asians in North America. The backdrop for organizing the Taiko Conference was the desire on the part of senior *taiko* players to inform younger players of the history and significance of *taiko* music in the North American context, and also to properly acknowledge the contribution and achievements of early *taiko* players.²³ However, younger participants preferred

workshops to discussion sessions, making the gap of perception between different generations more evident than before.



Photo 5: An informal drumming session at the First National Taiko Conference (Los Angeles, 1997; photo by Yoshitaka Terada).

Young players in their teens and twenties tend to believe that they have not experienced the type of discrimination and prejudice that former generations suffered. 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, physical fitness, and/or individualized spiritual quest. While they find relevance in the fact that *taiko* music derives from Japan, their motives for playing *taiko* are more artistic than political or social, in sharp contrast to those held by early *taiko* players.

A major objective of the 1997 Taiko Conference was to form a national network of *taiko* groups. The organizers decided to hold the national conference every other year and the second national

conference was held in Los Angeles in 1999. The preparation for the 2001 conference is underway. They suggested that regional meetings of *taiko* groups be held in intervening years.²³ Network building has also been realized via the Internet for the past several years. At least twenty groups now have homepages, providing information regarding their objectives, history, and activities. *Taiko* enthusiasts are connected via the Internet on the Bay Area-based mailing list known as Rolling Thunder, which provides a venue for announcements, information exchange and debates.²⁴

***Taiko* and Mainstream Culture**

Although *taiko* was initially performed at the Japanese American community events, it began to appear at multicultural festivals across North America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The increasing visibility of *taiko* music created an image that it is a premier performing art form of Japanese North Americans. In the 1990s, *taiko* began to make its presence felt in the mainstream North American media and cultural spheres. An increasing number of non-Asian Americans are being exposed to this new art form by way of Hollywood movies, Las Vegas style revues, TV commercials, and even amusement parks. Trying to capitalize on the emerging potential of *taiko* music, a major instrument manufacturer, Remo, has begun to mass-produce synthetic *taiko* drums with competitive prices.

As *taiko* becomes more noticeable in the mainstream popular culture, an old problem of racial stereotyping may resurface. This is manifested most strikingly in the 1993 film *Rising Sun*, starring Sean Connery and Wesley Snipes, in which the San Francisco Taiko Dojo is featured in the opening scene. Images of the group's performance of *Tsunami* ('Tidal Wave'), its signature piece, are interspersed with steamy images of an affair between a white woman and a man who is unidentified but presumed to be Japanese, which leads to the woman's murder. Asian American activists severely criticized the film for its depiction of stereotypical Asian violence and eroticism and also for its blurring of Japanese and Japanese American cultures, and they held demonstrations against the showing of the film.²⁵ The irony of the depiction of *taiko* music and its players in this film is that the performing art Japanese

Americans took up as a means of fighting stereotypes came to be used in effect to reinforce them.²⁷

Diversification

Taiko drums have been used outside the context of *taiko* music. Hiroshima, the first Asian American rock band that signed with a major recording company, has a *taiko* player (Johnny Mori) as a regular member who, along with a *koto* (Japanese board zither) player, adds a unique 'Asian' sound to the group. Many recent groups of popular or experimental music have a *taiko* player, such as Asian Crisis, a multi Asian American jazz-based ensemble of Oakland, California, William Satake Blauvelt's Aono Jikken Ensemble, an experimental music group in Seattle, and RhythMix, a Bay Area-based group of musicians specializing in diverse drumming traditions which includes *taiko* player Janet Koike. Asian American jazz musicians such as Jon Jang, Anthony Brown, and Fred Ho have collaborated with *taiko* players at least since the 1980s. A few Asian Americans trained in western classical music such as Byron Au Yong have also incorporated *taiko* into their compositions. These groups and individuals attempt to find a new voice of Asian Americans.

Concluding Remarks

North American *taiko* has experienced considerable changes since its inception in 1968. *Taiko* functioned in its heyday as an artistic and political expression primarily of young Japanese Americans. They created a style that was distinct from the Japanese *wadaiko* music, from which they had initially acquired basic performance techniques and inspiration. While *taiko* music may continue to be characterized as a Japanese American art form, it has also transcended ethnic boundaries to involve other Asian Americans, who find in *taiko* a potential cultural space to create a collective Asian American identity and culture. Non-Asian Americans also participate in *taiko* music in increasing number, frequently triggered by their interest in aspects of 'Asian culture' that may connote physical fitness, spiritual growth and

communalism. Reflecting the diverse cultural backgrounds of its practitioners, *taiko* music has increasingly become multifarious in its performing styles, repertoire, motivations and meanings.

Asians in North America, who have been displaced both geographically and culturally, struggle to construct their identity in relation to their ancestral home, their diasporic community, and the dominant culture. In this paper, I have briefly sketched the relationship between the experience of displacement and the construction of identity in the case of *taiko* music in North America. The powerful sound of communal *taiko* drumming combined with the appearance of unmistakable strength and creativity in performance has been regarded as an effective means to eradicate stereotypes of Japanese and other Asian Americans. The dominant gaze that otherwise overwhelms the victims of stereotypes is challenged by the performance of *taiko* music. Through the process of producing such music, Asian Americans act on the derogatory images in mainstream culture, and at the same time transform themselves into individuals more resistant to the onslaught of such images. *Taiko* music also serves to enhance the sense of connection to their cultural heritage while creating a new culture that will better reflect their diasporic identity.

Notes

¹ The first recorded Bon Festival on the mainland was held in 1931 (Kodani 1999:9).

² Japanese immigration to North America began in earnest in the 1880s. While residing across North America, they are particularly concentrated in Hawaii and the West Coast states of California, Oregon, and Washington (USA), and British Columbia (Canada). In the US, Japanese Americans are currently the third largest Asian American group after the Chinese and Filipino Americans, with a population of about 870,000 which constitutes 12 percent of Asian Americans (1990).

³ Interview with Tanaka in San Francisco, 1999. Also see Otsuka (1997).

⁴ They include San Jose Taiko (San Jose, established in 1974), Soh Daiko (New York, 1979), Shasta Taiko (Mt. Shasta, 1985), Sacramento Taiko Dan (Sacramento, 1989), and Kenny Endo Taiko Ensemble (Honolulu, Los Angeles and Tokyo 1990) among others.

⁵ Oedo Sukeroku Taiko was formed in 1959 under the auspices of Yushima Tenjin Shrine in Tokyo. Osuwa Daiko was established by Daihach Oguchi in 1951.

⁶ Tanaka, a native of Tokyo, grew up in Nagano where he first saw Osuwa Daiko in 1956. Although he was not allowed to learn drumming at that time, he later studied with Daihachi Oguchi, its founder and director.

⁷ Roy Hirabayashi stresses this point as, “Some people from Japan may question whether or not it has truly grown in [the] Japanese perspective of what *taiko* is, from how it has been made in the US to how it has been played. But I feel strongly that we in North America have developed a form of our own.” (Interview in San Jose, 1999)

⁸ Seattle Kokon Taiko (*Quiet No More*, 1997), Band 3, *Kikori no Yume*.

⁹ Hawaii Matsuri Taiko (*Horizons*, 1997), Band 2, *A Ko‘olau ‘Au-Tradewinds*.

¹⁰ Though men remain predominant, participation by women in Japanese *wadaiko* groups appears to be increasing.

¹¹ Interview in San Jose, 1999.

¹² Linda Uyehara Hoffman, a founding member of Katari Taiko (Vancouver, BC) recalls the objectives of the group as: “We wanted to hit hard, we wanted to make lots of noise to show an image of women being loud and powerful. That was important for us. You have to understand [that], in that first group for Katari Taiko, most of them have never done anything in public before. For most of the people, it was very scary to get up on stage; the only thing that propelled them was their conviction that it was important. It was important for them as Asian women to get up there and be strong.” (Interview in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1999).

¹³ Bonnie Soon of Uzume Taiko describes her role as, “I drum because it fulfills a lot for me. I don’t approach it from a standpoint of what I represent to people who are watching me. [But] I do know that I represent a female Asian body that is strong that young girls like me may look at it,

and go ‘wow, she can do that, she can *kiai* [shout] she can even be really strong as guys.’ I want to do well for what I represent. I am aware of that, but if it wasn’t happening for me, I would not be doing it. I am grateful that I can this day of age be a woman, be an Asia woman and play *taiko* for the public, because I know it would not have been possible 100 years ago, maybe not even 40 years ago. So I know I am very lucky for doing what I am doing right now. If it makes the way more open for younger women, younger Asian people, I am very happy to be strong for them.” (Interview in Vancouver, British Columbia, 1999).

¹⁴ The women’s festival is often exclusively for women. It is designed to provide a place where women can express themselves freely without feeling intimidation from men. The best-known women’s festival is Michigan Women’s Festival where Sawagi Taiko frequently performed.

¹⁵ Interview with Roy Hirabayashi in San Jose, 1999.

¹⁶ Interview with Duane Ebata in Los Angeles, 1999.

¹⁷ The groups that explicitly characterize *taiko* as an Asian American art form include Portland Taiko (Portland, Oregon), Odaiko New England (Brookline, Massachusetts), and Katari Taiko (Vancouver, British Columbia) among others.

¹⁸ According to Murakami, the term Asian American was coined in 1968 by Yuji Ichioka. It was applied to the organization Asian American Political Alliance at the University of California at Berkeley (1997:18).

¹⁹ Kodani regards *taiko* playing “to understand how fundamentally and profoundly egocentric we are. We don’t know it, and knowing [through *taiko* playing] that somehow makes it better.” (Interview with Kodani in Los Angeles, 1999)

²⁰ See Asai (1985) for further information on Buddhist *taiko*.

²¹ Compared to early years, it is considerably easier today to acquire instruments or learn how to play. For those who wish to build instruments themselves, knowledge concerning drum making is easily available. Professional makers in California and Washington states produce high quality instruments for purchase. The best-known *taiko* maker in North America is Mark Miyoshi who lives in Mt. Shasta, California.

²² Duane Ebata’s opening speech at the conference (July 18, 1997).

²³ Interview with Duane Ebata in Los Angeles, 1999.

²⁴ In October, 2000, groups in the Northwest region held the Regional Taiko Gathering in Seattle, in which twenty-two groups from four states participated. Through such national and regional conferences, members of *taiko* groups in North America establish friendship, exchange information, and in the process realize that they are activists of the nation-wide cultural movement.

²⁵ Outside Japan, *taiko* groups are concentrated in North America at present. Yet the enthusiasm for *taiko* is spreading to other parts of the world. Young Japanese Brazilian formed a *taiko* group in Sao Paulo a few years ago, and it seems that there will be more in the near future. About ten *taiko* groups are based in Europe (England, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden). The establishment of these groups was triggered by the performance tours by the aforementioned Ondekoza and Kodo, which have also influenced North American groups. There is now even a group in Malaysia and Singapore. However, the groups in Europe and Southeast Asia have virtually no Japanese members, and their motives for playing music are mainly artistic. North American groups are nevertheless connected globally through the Internet with groups elsewhere.

²⁶ A detailed criticism of *Rising Sun* is advanced by Robert Lee (1999: 205-215) who nevertheless makes no mention of the use of *taiko* music and its effect in the film.

²⁷ While *Rising Sun* is the only film in which San Francisco Taiko Dojo appeared on the screen, the group has provided the soundtrack for two other well known Hollywood films: *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *The Right Stuff* (1983).

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