
DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT OF TAIKO IN THE UNITED STATES

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Figure 1: Members of San Francisco Taiko Dojo performing at the Japantown Peace Plaza.

The *taiko*, Japanese for drum, is variously spoken of as an instrument that was used in ancient Japan to drive pestilence away from planted fields or for encouraging troops engaged in battle. Village boundaries were said to be demarcated by the point at which one could no longer hear the taiko being played from the village's center. These statements, whether real or fable, offer important characterizations about the taiko that continue to resonate today. For one, by virtue of size, the taiko is a loud instrument. The average *nagado taiko*, as seen in Figure 1, is between eighteen and twenty-four inches in diameter and is struck with a pair of *bachi* (Japanese for any stick or plectrum used with a musical instrument) fifteen inches in length or greater. Playing taiko typically demands strength and rigorous training. The taiko, as an art form, is also closely associated with communities and the places they inhabit. The booming sound of the taiko has become a staple of Japanese and Asian American festivals, Japanese American Buddhist temples, and concerts halls across the United States. For many, taiko, as instrument and art form, has come to symbolize the Japanese and Asian American experience.

For all its ancient underpinnings, the art form of taiko has a relatively contemporary provenance and differs significantly from the traditional contexts of Japanese drumming. Taiko drums are

traditionally supporting instruments within an orchestra, giving rhythmic support to melodic instruments or singers. Taiko drums are also used to accompany dancing at *obon* (a commemoration of one's ancestors), but even so the taiko player is primarily there to support the dance and, as such, a part of the background. (It should be noted that many people who later joined taiko groups cited their exposure to taiko drumming at *obon* as the catalyst for their interest in taiko.) Drums are also used in Shinto and Buddhist rituals, but these contexts are not considered musical performance per se. In contrast, taiko as an art form diverges from traditional forms of Japanese drumming by making the taiko the focus of musical and artistic attention. The full name of the art form is *kumi daiko*, meaning "mass drumming," but it is often referred to as simply "taiko." The first taiko groups in Japan appeared in the late 1950s, while the first ones in the U.S. started in the late 1960s. In performance, *kumi daiko* troupes can have more than three dozen people on stage, or as few as four, and many times these groups play with only a single *fue* (transverse bamboo flute) or no melodic instruments at all. Besides *nagado taiko*, these groups use other drums like *uchiwa*, *shime daiko*, and *okedo taiko*.¹



Figure 2: Michelle Fujii of Øn Ensemble playing *uchiwa* (left) and a *shime daiko* (right)

Taiko in the United States has grown in popularity from just two groups in 1968 to over two hundred groups by 2005. Although taiko has had some exposure in film and on movie soundtracks, the growth of the art form has occurred largely outside the purview of media such as radio or television. At heart, taiko is rooted in community performances; many of those familiar with the art form say that they first experienced it either as a child when their parents took them to an *obon*, or completely by accident at an outdoor performance. At the same time, taiko has also been presented in concert venues such as New York's Carnegie Hall. While music is often considered privileged knowledge to be performed by specialists, drumming generally seems to be less affected by these ostensible restrictions.² In other words, people see taiko and

¹ *Uchiwa* are "fan drums" and consist of a skin stretched over and sewn on to a metal hoop. This hoop is attached to a handle. This is a membranophone with no resonating body. *Shime daiko*, or *shime*, are roughly 6 to 7 inches in height. The skins, one on either side of the drum body, are sewn on to metal rings and stretched over the body with rope. *Okedo* are similar to *shime*, but they are much larger, being as much as 60 inches long. The drum heads are also larger than those found on a *shime*, but they are also sewn on to metal hoops and pull tightly over the body with rope.

² John Blackman, *How Musical Is Musical?* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1973).

say to themselves, “I can do that,” and by and large, they can. Many groups now offer lessons so that people can take classes in taiko just as they might take a karate, pottery, or aerobics class. It is also possible to play in taiko groups from “cradle to grave”; there are youth groups with players as young as six, collegiate groups, and community-based groups with septuagenarian members. There is a new generation of performers who have played taiko since they were very young, and some of these drummers are at the forefront of innovations in the art form.

The purpose of this ethnographic case study is to present the historical and developmental aspects of taiko in the United States. Outlining the arts ecology surrounding taiko activities allows for a greater understanding of the musical expression within taiko performance and the social and cultural identity of its participants. This will lead to a grounded critique of the artistic production of a portion of the Japanese American and Asian American diasporic population. This report is divided into sections that deal with the history of the Japanese diaspora; present examples of taiko groups through brief overviews of the first three American groups as well as newer ones; explore the local, national, and global networks that affect the artistic development and systems of support for taiko groups across America; and detail concerns and recent developments in American taiko. Ultimately, there is no monolithic, static “taiko community,” but rather a network of taiko performers who are self-reflexively recontextualizing themselves and actively engaged in debates over the future of their art form.³

Historical Context of the Japanese Diaspora

Although taiko has extended into many different communities in the United States, it is important to recognize that its development in America is closely tied to the history, communities and experiences of Japanese Americans. This section briefly outlines the historical context of Japanese immigration to the United States, the difficulties this group confronts as an immigrant population, and recent trends within the Japanese American community.

The first government-sanctioned contract laborers from Japan left for Hawai’i in 1885 under the provisions of the Irwin Convention. Between 1885 and 1908, more than 159,000 Japanese laborers signed up to work on the farms and sugar plantations of Hawai’i. During that same time, roughly 55,000 workers went to California and the western United States also searching for work as laborers. The majority of these immigrants were farmers who were dispossessed of their land in Japan due to a new system of taxation during the Meiji Restoration. These workers were also attracted by the prospect of earning significantly higher wages in Hawai’i and the U.S. than they could in Japan.⁴

Between 1908 and 1924, Japanese migration trends shifted towards travel to the American

³ My use of “American” in this report follows the conceit of citizens of the United States in calling themselves “American” to the exclusion of Canadians or Central and South Americans. This research focuses primarily on U.S. (“American”) taiko groups, even though there are many taiko groups in Canada, as well as a large Japanese American population in South America. Dale Olsen, *The Chrysanthemum and the Song: Music, Memory, and Identity in the South American Japanese Diaspora* (University Press of Florida, 2004).

⁴ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991); and Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).

mainland; more than 120,000 Japanese arrived on the West Coast during this time. This was fueled in part by an increased demand for non-Chinese laborers due to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882, which precluded entry to the U.S. to all Chinese persons except merchants, students, and diplomats. Once the U.S. officially annexed the Kingdom of Hawai'i in 1900, Japanese workers were culled from Hawaiian plantations for work in California, Oregon, and Washington. Japanese immigration to America ended with the Immigration Act of 1924 which prevented admission to anyone ineligible for citizenship, including all persons from Asian countries. Roughly half of those who came from Japan to work in the U.S. ultimately returned to Japan.

Those Japanese who remained in the United States faced significant racial discrimination, not least of which was the internment of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. This internment was given presidential authority through Executive Order 9066, signed on February 19, 1942, just months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. For the next three to four years Japanese Americans were held in camps scattered across the United States which were run by either the Department of Justice/U.S Army or the War Relocation Authority (WRA). Many of the internees were *Nisei* (second generation) and thus American citizens by birthright. While all persons in the U.S. of Italian, German, and Japanese descent were labeled “enemy aliens,” and all were ordered to evacuate “prohibited zones” around the country, only Japanese Americans were ever forced to relocate *en masse* (this did not apply to most of the 150,000 Japanese Americans living in Hawai'i). Adding insult to injury, all detainees over 17 years of age were given a “loyalty” question and asked to declare their “unqualified allegiance” to the United States and to defend the country that had unconstitutionally imprisoned them.⁵

The Japanese Americans in these camps did not passively accept their situation. Some hoped to be proven as “true” Americans and fought in the U.S. military as members of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which became one of the most decorated units in U.S. military history. These soldiers saw their enlistment as a way to challenge negative stereotypes of Japanese Americans. Others took the opposite route and protested their treatment by renouncing their American citizenship. And still other Japanese Americans intentionally broke curfew and registration laws in order to bring suit against the government and to contest the constitutionality of what amounted to depriving American citizens of the right to due process.⁶ The Tule Lake camp in Northern California was the site of many protests and workers' strikes.⁷ Those who either refused to answer the “loyalty” question or answered negatively were clustered in Tule

⁵ The exact wording of the question, number 28 on the questionnaire, read, “Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?”

⁶ Two cases were heard before the U.S. Supreme Court: *Hirabayashi v. United States* and *Korematsu v. United States*. Both the *Hirabayashi* and *Korematsu* cases upheld the government's right to impose curfew during periods of “the gravest imminent danger to the public safety” and to exclude people of Japanese ancestry from residing on the West Coast due to “military necessity.”

⁷ For more on Tule Lake see Barbara Takei and Judy Tachibana, *Tule Lake Revisited* (T & T Press, 2001). *Tule Lake: A Novel* by Miyakawa is described on the cover as “the story of the those Japanese Americans who *refused to cooperate*” (emphasis in original). Edward T. Miyakawa, *Tule Lake: A Novel* (Victoria, B.C.: Trafford, 1979 [2002]).

Lake. In short, there was no single response from Japanese Americans to internment, but it is important to note that individuals did actively address what was happening rather than simply submitting.

The case that closed the camps was *Ex parte Mitsuye Endo*, which was decided on December 18, 1944. In this case, the Supreme Court argued that the War Relocation Authority (WRA) had exceeded its jurisdiction in detaining Mitsuye Endo, who they determined was a “concededly loyal” American citizen. This judgment had the effect of releasing her and all interned Japanese Americans. Anticipating this decision, the Department of War lifted the exclusion of Japanese Americans from the West Coast on December 17th, one day before the verdict. That same day, the WRA announced it would be closing the camps over the course of a year. Since the detainees had lost their homes and possessions, they had nowhere to go. Many headed to the states and cities they knew on the West Coast, but often faced hostility and difficulty finding employment. Some areas, such as San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Jose, were more receptive to those returning from the camps, and now hold the largest populations of Japanese Americans in the country. Those who were apprehensive of heading to the West Coast went elsewhere to cities such as Chicago, or moved to Denver and Salt Lake City where there had been pre-World War II Japanese American communities.

Before the announcement of the camp closures, it had been possible to exit a camp through an “indefinite leave clearance.” In order to receive this clearance, a person needed a job and a place to stay, which usually meant having a sponsor of some sort. The most significant sponsor for these detainees was Charles Seabrook (d. 2003) who, with his father and two brothers, developed a way to freeze vegetables.⁸ By 1946, nearly 2,500 Japanese Americans had moved to Seabrook, New Jersey to work and live on Mr. Seabrook’s farms. *Obon* is still observed today in the Seabrook Japanese American community and various taiko groups have been invited to perform.

In total, 54,127 Japanese Americans returned to the West Coast, while 52,798 moved to other areas of the United States; 4,724 internees returned to Japan, many of them from the Tule Lake camp. A few thousand stayed in the military after the war, and nearly the same number passed away in the camps. All the camps were closed by the end of 1945 except Tule Lake which remained open until March 20, 1946 as a detention center for those who had renounced their U.S. citizenship.⁹

As a result of their experiences in the internment camps and the racism they faced after leaving them, the *Nisei* generation has been described as one that tried to erase or obscure its “Japanese-ness.” On the one hand, this was true in some ways and was apparent, for example, in Buddhist temples that mimicked Christian churches by holding services on Sundays and by replacing congregational chanting with Christian hymn-like songs (a practice that had begun before the war). While their children, the *Sansei* (third generation), went to Japanese language schools on

⁸ The process of freezing vegetables for transport was refined for mass production with Clarence Birdseye in 1930.

⁹ Jeffrey Burton, Mary Farrell, Florence Lord, and Richard Lord, “Confinement and Ethnicity: An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites,” *Publications in Anthropology* 74 (Western Archeological and Conservation Center, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999), http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/anthropology74

Saturday, they were also active in ethnic-specific baseball and basketball leagues and other “all-American” activities. On the other hand, there were many *Nisei* who protested against the government and demanded reparations for what had been done to them. The redress movement began in the 1970s and was organized through groups such as the Japanese American Citizens League, the Seattle Evacuation Redress Committee, and the National Council for Redress/Reparations. Although the internment camps were closed at the end of the war, the executive order that created them remained in effect until 1976 when President Ford repealed the order. Later, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which authorized the payment of \$20,000 to each individual incarcerated in the camps. The act also created the \$50 million Civil Liberties Public Education Fund to generate research and educational programs about the internment, and to insure that it did not happen again.¹⁰ As with their response to the internment in the 1940s, Japanese Americans were not of one mind when it came to reparations: Some preferred to forget about the injustice while others chose to take political action.

The *Sansei* came of age in the 1960s and 1970s in a politically charged time when the structures of government and society were being challenged. It was a period in which questions of race, oppression, power, and identity were co-mingled, re-envisioned, and contested. There was a focus on grassroots organizing, social justice for disadvantaged populations, and fighting against hierarchical power structures in order to work towards more communal or truly democratic ones. These initiatives were viewed as antithetical to normative American social frameworks, and they grew out of a frustration and anger with U.S. policies in Asian nations like Vietnam and a disillusionment with government. On college campuses such as San Francisco State, Asian American, African American, Latino/a, and American Indian student groups banded together as the Third World Liberation Front to fight for an ethnic studies program, open admissions to the university, and an educational institution that served the surrounding community. From these activities came the first Ethnic Studies department in the nation. Similar movements took place in San Jose, New York, Denver, Los Angeles, and Honolulu, and in many cases, the *Sansei* were actively involved. Later, the *Sansei* were involved in the reparations movement, described above. This period was not only a time of growing Japanese American awareness. It also saw the formation of a larger Asian American movement that tied the experiences and cultures of Asian immigrants across distinct lines of ethnicity for political and cultural ends.

Not all students and community activists limited themselves to rallies and marches. Many found that art was also an effective tool for social change, and it was in this political climate that some of the first taiko groups started. Many of these early groups eschewed traditional Japanese hierarchical structures in favor of a more democratic approach, one that would philosophically resonate with their political beliefs and goals. In taiko they found a voice that was simultaneously musical, communal, cultural, and political. Taiko, for these performers, spoke of the Japanese American experience through art. I will discuss these early groups at greater length in the next section.

While most Japanese immigrants until 1924 had a background in farming, those who came after

¹⁰ Despite the creation of the multi-million dollar education fund, many believe that the injustice shown to Japanese Americans in the 1940s is reappearing in post-9/11 initiatives such as the U.S. Patriot Act. Some memorials for the Japanese internment make analogies between the treatment of Japanese American citizens then and the treatment of Arab American citizens today.

the Immigration Act of 1965 were primarily professionals. This change in U.S. immigration policy made it possible for those with technical and medical training to enter America in greater numbers. By 2000, of those identifying as “Japanese” in the U.S. Census, nearly 42% had received a Bachelor’s degree or other advanced degrees, just over 50% were employed in managerial or related positions, and their annual median household income was just over \$70,000.¹¹ The data for Japanese Americans outstrip the results for the general population by a large margin. The Japanese American community has produced many nationally and internationally recognized figures such as Kristi Yamaguchi (Olympic gold medalist), Francis Fukuyama (economist and historian), and Norman Y. Mineta (Secretary of Transportation for Presidents Clinton and G.W. Bush).

At the same time, Japanese Americans are subject to racial stereotypes that serve to exclude them from full acceptance into the American fabric. A national and public example of this occurred during the O.J. Simpson trial when then senator Alfonse D’Amato of New York mocked the presiding judge, Lance Ito. D’Amato referred to the judge as “Little Judge Ito” and imitated Ito’s voice by speaking English with a Japanese accent, even though Ito was born in the U.S. and does not speak with an accent. Through comments such these, Asian and Japanese Americans are positioned not as American, but as “other.” Many taiko groups make a point of trying to counter these stereotypes through performance and other forms of community involvement. This will be discussed below.

Unlike other Asian American groups, the Japanese American population is diminishing. From 1990 to 2000, the number of people identifying as “Japanese only” or “Japanese in combination with another race” decreased by 6%. Of Asian American groups in the 2000 census, the Japanese have the oldest population and the lowest number of people under the age of 18 years of age. Japanese Americans also have the highest percentage of exogamy of all Asian American groups with 26% claiming Japanese as one of two or more races making up their identity. Of course, the high rate of exogamy does not automatically imply the erasure of Japanese American identity since these numbers do not indicate how individuals choose to shape their ethnic identity. Among Asian American groups, the Japanese American population is the one least affected by a direct influx of new arrivals from Japan. The 2000 Census shows that 60.5% of Japanese Americans were born in the United States. This situation is unusual among Asian American groups since all other Asian ethnic groups in the U.S. have a significant number of immigrants coming from the homeland or elsewhere.¹²

Early Taiko Groups and Creating a Japanese American Instrument

The earliest example of *kumi daiko* appeared in Japan in 1951 through Daihachi Oguchi, who founded Osuwa Daiko. Oguchi, trained as a jazz drummer, introduced a style of textural

¹¹ Terrance J. Reeves and Claudette E. Bennett, *We the People: Asians in the United States. Census 2000 Special Reports* (U.S. Census brief number CENSR-17, December 2004).

¹² Ibid. See also: Edna L. Paisano, *We the Americans: Asians* (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census. Census brief number WE-3, September 1993); and U.S. Census Bureau, *The Asian Population: 2000* (Census brief number C2KBR/01-16, February 2002).

layering that continues to inform many Japanese and U.S. taiko groups' sonic arrangements. Typically, a large *odaiko* provided a pulse that grounded *ostinato* rhythms played on *shime daiko*. Players on *nagado taiko* were given simple rhythmic patterns of varying length that combined with the other parts to create a musically complex whole. Oguchi also combined taiko drums of various pitch to create a “drum set” for improvisation. Cutting through the sound of all these drums was the “canon” (*tetsu zutsu*), which is an instrument formed from three sections of pipe, each of a different diameter, welded together.¹³ Each section of pipe has a distinct pitch. The canon was struck with metal sticks creating a timbre that could be heard above the din of the drums, thereby making it an excellent instrument by which to direct the other players. In creating such an ensemble, Oguchi brought together taiko drums in a way that was unlike any existing traditional Japanese musical style. He established a multi-layered musical texture with a pitch range extending from low (*odaiko*) to high (canon). This layering gave his pieces a depth or dimensionality that would be lacking had he used only one kind of drum. Oguchi's style was marked both by simplicity (in the simple rhythms of each individual part) and complexity (in the precision with which each part is performed and in its combination with other parts). Osuwa Daiko has influenced the formation of many *kumi daiko* groups worldwide.



Figure 3: SFTD playing *yodan*

Another hugely influential group in both Japan and the U.S. was Oedo Sukeroku Taiko, founded in 1959, whose four original members were Yoshihisa Ishikura, Yutaka Ishizuka (stage name Saburo Mochizuki), Motoei Onozato (stage name Tosha Kiyonari), and Seido Kobayashi.¹⁴ The “Sukeroku style” is a combination of dance, martial arts, and traditional and festival drumming; it was choreography combined with drumming that set this group apart. They also developed the Sukeroku *dai*, a stand that positioned the taiko at a 45-degree angle to the ground. A signature composition of Sukeroku Taiko is *yodan uchi* (“Four Sides”) where one taiko is placed on an upright stand thereby holding the drum faces perpendicular to the ground. Two taiko drums on slant stands are placed on either side of the upright drum. A total of four drum surfaces are exposed and, with choreographed precision, drummers move between these drums while striking

¹³ Information on Osuwa Daiko history from David Leong at Rolling Thunder: <http://www.taiko.com/resource/history.html> and http://www.taiko-center.co.jp/english/history_of_taiko.html.

¹⁴ See the Oedo Sukeroku Taiko website, <http://www.oedosukerokutaiko.com/english-1.html>.

the various drum surfaces. The Sukeroku style is nearly ubiquitous among taiko groups in the United States and Japan. One half of the described *yodan* set-up can be seen in Figure 3. Other Japanese groups, such as Za Ondekoza (founded in 1969) and Kodo (started in 1981), have achieved international attention and were also influential in the formation of groups in the U.S. The emergence of troupes such as Osuwa Daiko, Sukeroku Taiko, Ondekoza, and Kodo marked the transformation of taiko from a festival or folk instrument to an art form performed on stage, although taiko continues to be played in both contexts.

Historically, there were several different ways in which taiko was disseminated in the United States. In some cases, touring taiko groups from Japan held workshops while in the U.S. and trained people in their style of playing. American taiko groups emerged from these workshops and these American groups typically maintain ties with the Japanese group that originally instructed them. Ondekoza and Osuwa Daiko are examples of Japanese groups that have established American taiko troupes. In other cases, Japanese and Asian Americans saw performances of Japanese taiko troupes and were inspired to start their own groups. In these instances, these individuals did not receive formal training from the touring groups (at least not initially) and sought assistance from taiko drummers in the United States. Related to this last example are those who experienced taiko while traveling or working in Japan and began playing taiko upon returning to the U.S.

Arguably, the most significant forces that shaped American taiko came not directly from Japan, but from California. The majority of American groups are in one way or another tied or indebted to the work of three groups: Kinnara Taiko in Los Angeles, San Jose Taiko (SJT), and the San Francisco Taiko Dojo (SFTD). In fact, many American taiko troupes have been influenced—knowingly or unconsciously—by all three of these organizations. Each of these taiko groups has a unique rationale for its existence and most other taiko groups can be broadly said to incorporate aspects of the examples these groups have put forth. The origin stories of SFTD and Kinnara Taiko have acquired near-mythological status in the North American taiko community, and I will begin with an introduction to these groups, moving later to SJT. Besides the groups, the creation of the wine-barrel taiko was an important development in the promotion of taiko in the U.S. and I will also discuss this instrument in this section.

The San Francisco Taiko Dojo



Figure 4: Seichi Tanaka

The San Francisco Taiko Dojo started out with just one person, Seichi Tanaka, who came to the U.S. in 1967 and attended the first San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival. Having grown up in Japan, Tanaka was accustomed to hearing taiko during festivals, but this sound was missing in San Francisco. He returned to Japan, began studying taiko (with Osuwa Daiko and Oedo Sukeroku among others), and in 1968 he performed at the second San Francisco Cherry Blossom Festival. This was the first performance for the SFTD. Tanaka originally came to America to teach martial arts, but he found that people in the U.S. were not interested in martial arts as an art, but rather as a technique for street fighting. In an interview, Tanaka noted that instead of teaching a fighting method, he hoped to create something positive “for the people,” and he believed that a focus on people and accessibility was something that taiko, more than other traditional Japanese art forms, could offer.¹⁵ He, as do many others, likens the rhythms of the taiko to the rhythms of the human heart and argues that this makes taiko a universal language. Tanaka’s students have gone on to form their own groups and Tanaka himself has directly influenced groups around the world through workshops and traveling to work with groups that have invited him.

The SFTD is run very much as “Tanaka’s school,” and in performances an SFTD representative introduces the group as “Seichi Tanaka and the San Francisco Taiko Dojo.” This arrangement differs from that of the groups started by members who came out of the Asian American movement (of which San Jose Taiko is an example, to be described below) wherein participation typically engenders a sense of shared or mutual ownership of the group. Tanaka’s official title in the group is artistic director, but his students and many others in the international taiko community call him *sensei* (teacher). In fact, Tanaka is the only person in the United States to be officially sanctioned as a taiko *sensei* by the Nippon Taiko Foundation. (The concern with the *sensei* designation and attempts to coordinate U.S. taiko activities with the Nippon Taiko Foundation will be discussed below.) Tanaka’s position in the group is reinforced at the start of each SFTD practice, which begins with the students lining up in hierarchical order, facing Tanaka, and bowing to him. The arrangement where the students bow to the *sensei* is rooted in traditional Japanese practices.

¹⁵ Seichi Tanaka, Interview, December 13, 2004.

Tanaka claims to have two sides to his personality that come out in his teaching, “Buddha” Tanaka and “Devil” Tanaka. In the past, the Devil seemed to have the upper hand. His older students recount how he would yell at them and throw *bachi* at the ones who made mistakes or were not paying attention. Leigh Sata, who has been with the group since 1986, recounted in an interview that Tanaka used to test prospective students to determine how serious they were. For Sata, one of these tests required him to run around the YMCA parking lot (at the time, the SFTD practiced in the “Y” basement) until he was told to stop; he ended up running for more than an hour and a half. He later discovered that Tanaka would occasionally peak through a window to see if Sata was still running. Because he had not stopped, Sata passed that test. When he was later invited to play with the group, he did not actually play a drum at all; rather, he stood in a corner with seventeen-inch-long *bachi* and played in the air. This continued for two months. When Sata was finally asked to join the others, he graduated to playing on a used car tire because at the time the taiko drums were saved for performances and during practice the members hit tires.¹⁶ Tanaka was obviously only interested in individuals willing to commit to the art, and those students who survived the rigors of training with Tanaka often wear their experiences like a badge of honor.

Practices remain a rigorous affair at the San Francisco Taiko Dojo. They begin with warm-up exercises, which consist of, depending on one’s age, 300 push-ups, 300 sit-ups, and running. Drills on the taiko emphasize one’s *kata* (form, or in this case, stance), power, and endurance. Every group has its own characteristic *kata* and the SFTD is more martial in their approach to the drum. The line from arm, through *bachi*, to drum is crisp and strong. This is in contrast to other groups, such as San Jose Taiko, which might be said to emphasize a more flowing, stylized line inspired by dance. Practices are physically taxing, although, as with aikido or judo, finesse and leverage are just as essential as outright strength. Tanaka composed *Renshu* as a drill made up of different patterns, each emphasizing basic taiko-playing skills. Many of the groups I spoke with stated that this was the first piece they learned and that it is still used during practices. For some, it was also the first piece they performed on stage. Most American taiko groups begin practice with warm-up exercises and most end with the players dripping with sweat.

By Tanaka’s own reckoning, his Buddha personality is more prevalent these days. Seeing Tanaka interact with the students in his SFTD Rising Stars youth group, he seems firm, but nurturing and avuncular as well. He also states that parents do not like seeing their children hit with thrown *bachi*, which necessitated a modification to his pedagogical tactics. There is also a recognition on Tanaka’s part that even if most people, whether adult or youth, are not committed enough to wait two months to play on an old tire, they can still get something out of learning taiko. Lessons are taught using practice wine-barrel drums (more on these drums below). Sata, who now occasionally teaches at the dojo, believes that allowing students to play on drums, rather than “air drumming” as he had to do for months, helps to sustain students’ interest in playing. At the same time, Sata argues that Tanaka’s old training methods created a reverence for the drum that is not matched by today’s students.¹⁷

A little over a decade ago Tanaka moved out of San Francisco’s Japantown and into a larger

¹⁶ Leigh Sata, Interview, December 10, 2004.

¹⁷ Ibid.

warehouse space. Among other things, this new space allows him to offer classes to the public. Previously, if an individual wanted to play with the SFTD, the only option was to become part of the performing ensemble and commit to the demands of the performance schedule and training. By offering classes, people now have the choice to approach taiko as a recreational activity, which is to say that they can simply pay for and attend classes with Tanaka without committing to a full performance schedule. Students can advance through beginner, advanced beginner, intermediate, and advanced intermediate levels. Unlike a karate belt system, there are no formal tests or special fees determining one's advancement within the school. Tanaka alone makes these decisions by watching people and observing their progress. He also determines who will join the performing group, a decision which is based as much on a student's dedication as on skill.

Recently, the SFTD became organized as a 501(c)(3) entity; before it was run as a sole proprietorship. Funding for the group comes primarily from fees for classes, payment for performances, and the sale of merchandise such as t-shirts and video recordings. Tanaka's son, Ryuma, now handles the business side of the Taiko Dojo while Tanaka himself is the sole artistic director for the group. Corporate performances are a major source of funding and these opportunities are arranged through a booking agent. For local events, organizers will typically ask Tanaka or his son personally if the group could perform at the Cherry Blossom Festival, New Year's celebrations, or other such events. Often the group will perform at these events at no charge or for a nominal fee.

One of Tanaka's ambitions is to make taiko a common part of the American lexicon, akin to what has happened to other Japanese transplants like "karate" or "sushi." This impulse has affected the kinds of performances the SFTD undertakes. In essence, the group will play for any occasion or any venue from a shopping mall, to a corporate office party, on movie soundtracks, and at festivals in San Francisco's Japantown; basically, the SFTD will play in any context that will promote taiko in a positive light.¹⁸

The ambition to give taiko wider recognition also influenced Tanaka's decision to make taiko available to all, regardless of gender or ethnicity. In terms of gender, his decision represents a departure from Japanese thinking which is less accepting of the idea of female taiko players. Nonetheless, the involvement of women in American taiko has arguably changed Japanese taiko such that more and more women are deciding to play taiko in Japan. Tanaka was awarded the NEA National Heritage Fellowship in 2001, and he believes that this award is proof that some of his efforts in the promotion of taiko are bearing fruit. Tanaka recognizes that the growing popularity of taiko is a double-edged sword because with greater recognition comes more groups and the potential for a negative impact on the quality of taiko performance, or so Tanaka contends. (This topic will be addressed in detail in a subsequent section.)

¹⁸ Tanaka found himself in a difficult position during the filming of *Rising Sun* (1993). Tanaka agreed to the project initially because he believed it would expose more people to the art of taiko, a goal that corresponds with his own hopes for taiko. He had also worked with director Philip Kaufman previously on the movie *The Right Stuff* (1983) and had positive experiences. However, when Tanaka found out that the taiko scenes in *Rising Sun* were to be interspersed with sex/murder scenes he objected and walked off the set. He later finished the shoot, but had mixed feelings about the final product.

Musically, the San Francisco Taiko Dojo uses more traditional Japanese rhythms. This means that most pieces are in duple meter and there is very little syncopation. The group's signature piece, *Tsunami*, allows individual members to write their own solos to be played on the *odaiko* (large taiko). Solos are one area where Tanaka allows his students to have greater artistic freedom. In terms of style and showmanship, Tanaka's training in martial arts shows through in his emphasis on the release and control of power through the body. He emphasizes that a taiko player's *kata* draws power from the ground, through the feet, into the body, and is ultimately released at the end of one's *bachi*. For Tanaka, the body—how one positions one's self vis-à-vis the drum and the earth—is integral in creating a good sound when playing taiko.

Kinnara Taiko

Kinnara Taiko formed in the late 1960s in the Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles. Although founded at roughly the same time as the SFTD, there was initially no direct link between the two groups. Kinnara, a Sanskrit term meaning “supernatural being of music,” was begun by Rev. Kodani as a temple group with the intention of involving temple members in activities such as chanting which, at the time, was uncommon for Japanese Americans in the Jodo Shinshu Buddhist sect. One day after playing the taiko for a festival at the temple, Rev. Kodani and George Abe decided to just keep on playing. After hours of jamming, and with calloused and blistered hands, they agreed that playing the taiko should not be reserved only for festival occasions and that they should play more often. Others joined in and Kinnara Taiko was formed. For Rev. Kodani, taiko playing is just another aspect of temple life on par with any of the other activities at the temple. He stated that the camaraderie that taiko engenders is of greater value than its playing or performance per se. Their brand of “Buddhist Taiko” spread from Kinnara to other Japanese American communities through the network of Japanese American Buddhist temples.

In many cases, groups that started in Buddhist temples overlap with groups that were started by individuals who were active in the Asian American movement. However, Buddhist philosophy, at least as described by Rev. Kodani, offers yet another nuance to the creative impulse to play taiko. Kodani argues that taiko is useful primarily as a means for confronting the ego. In essence, one's arrogance becomes a possession that not only leads to suffering (the Buddha's second noble truth), but, through the imposition of one's desires or ego on others, results in the fracture of community. Taiko playing brings a person to this realization through performance as self-satisfaction with one's talent eventually threatens to disrupt the communal nature of a group's dynamics. In the confrontation with ego, it is hoped that the destructive nature of this possession will be recognized and released. Kodani describes it this way:

Well here, the reason you play taiko is the same reason of any group here [at the temple]: to encounter your own ego. And that's the whole purpose of it. The better you get, the worse you get. Because being impressive takes over. If you're not so good, you just play with fear and trembling. And that's what we want, we want that quality of fear and trembling and playing. The better you are, the more problem you are. You end up like a successful rock band, and it splits and splits and splits infinitely, over ego problems. [Then people start saying things like,]

‘You’re not good enough. We need to get somebody better.’ [Kinnara’s] base has always been, if you’re saying that, *you’re* the problem, not the person who can’t play that well. In that sense, in the temple context, the better you get, the more challenge it is for you in terms of your own ego.¹⁹

In this sense, making Kinnara work as a group—that is to say, as a collective or family—takes precedence over creating a technically flawless or flashy stage product. The purpose of performance, then, is to encounter one’s arrogance, pride, or desire to impress, and the group is a forum in which one figures out how to cope with those emotions. Kodani argues that the group does not exist to promote taiko per se, and it would be acceptable if taiko disappeared from temple life because that would mean it was replaced with a more useful or fruitful activity for the members. In other words, taiko performance is not an end in itself. It is a means of approaching enlightenment, however minuscule, and therefore has greater existential purposes.

Kinnara is a family and support network first, and a performing taiko troupe second, according to Kodani. This is not to say that they are bad performers; some of the key figures in contemporary American taiko, such as Johnny Mori, Kevin Higa, and Bryan Yamami, are members of Kinnara. Rather, the point is that the idea of becoming a highly skilled, technically superior taiko troupe is not the central goal of the Kinnara.

There is no formal audition process for membership, and a person need not be a member of the Senshin Temple to play with Kinnara. The only requirements for membership are a willingness to come to practices, an ability to get along with others in the group, and the readiness to help clean up after practices. There are no dues for membership. Kinnara gives a small offering to the Senshin temple and receives donations from temple members and others. The group performs at temple functions, and at community events throughout the Los Angeles area and across the nation. They have performed at local festivals as well as on stage.

Kinnara practice sessions are loosely run. The practice space is in a social hall at the Senshin Buddhist temple and they have an agreement with the surrounding neighbors not to play past a certain hour. As people gather in the social hall, greetings and comments about the week’s activities are exchanged. Eventually, drums are pulled out and members slowly start getting together to work on pieces or finalize compositional arrangements for an upcoming concert.²⁰ Push-ups and running are not part of the Kinnara training vocabulary. Rev. Kodani laughs as he tells me that as he has gotten older, he plays the drum while sitting in a chair. Members of Kinnara often say, “you get out what you put in,” meaning that an individual must decide what he or she hopes to gain through involvement with the group. Teaching newcomers usually involves putting the new arrival on a drum and having him or her play along. No sheet music is handed out and relatively little instruction is given. This pedagogical method derives not from laziness, but rather from a belief in “learning by doing” as opposed to instruction mediated through musical notation.

¹⁹ Rev. Mas Kodani, Interview, November 29, 2004.

²⁰ Actually, during the one practice I attended, only two people were playing taiko in preparation for a small appearance at a neighborhood store that weekend. The rest of us were stuffing, labeling, and stamping envelopes for Kodo Arts Sphere America (KASA) because one of Kinnara’s members is the program director for KASA.

Kinnara's organizational structure is also diffuse, and no single person occupies the position of *sensei*. In part this arose because when Kinnara started all the members were learning taiko together; but there were other philosophical reasons for foregoing a *sensei*. Kodani distinguishes Kinnara from other groups such as the San Francisco Taiko Dojo by arguing that Kinnara's structure is based in communal, agricultural life—recall that nearly all early Japanese immigrants to the United States had a background in farming—whereas the situation at SFTD is rooted in a *samurai* arrangement of social hierarchies. Group responsibilities in Kinnara are equally distributed among all members; the different tasks are rotated so that everyone has a sense of what it takes to make the group work. For example, when the group travels, the responsibilities for lodging, transportation, equipment, food, and concert arrangements are shared among all the members. The next time the group travels somewhere, the members are given different tasks from the ones they had previously.

Regarding compositions, all members of Kinnara are encouraged to compose pieces for the group. No single person in the group is designated as the composer for Kinnara. When a composer introduces musical ideas or a composition to the group, these ideas are usually subject to revision by the other members, who take the opportunity to make suggestions for alterations or additions. In this way, even compositions become group projects.

Pieces at Kinnara are taught with *shoga* (mnemonic devices) and not written down on paper. Most American taiko groups, including the SFTD, use *shoga* when teaching pieces. In this Japanese oral tradition, larger pieces are presented one small section at a time. The terms used in taiko *shoga* are onomatopoeic. Two examples are *don* (pronounced dŏn) which is, in a sense, a basic hit on the drum face, and *ka* which refers to a hit on the edge of the drum body. Nearly any American taiko player would have some idea of what to do if presented with the information “don, don, ka” because *shoga* are widely used.²¹ Taiko *shoga* do not precisely indicate time. For instance, “don” can represent anything from a whole note to a quarter note. For this reason, even if a song is represented on paper with *shoga*, it cannot be properly transmitted unless someone who knows the rhythm and tempo of the song is there to teach it. The lack of more precise notation also means that groups must derive other means of archiving songs such as video or audio recordings of performances and practices. In a more positive light, *shoga* emphasizes human interaction since pieces cannot be fully transmitted or shared without the presence of another person.

Kodani, George Abe, and other members of the group are often asked to give workshops and to help start groups in other temples or community centers. Instruction at these workshops is given just as it is during Kinnara practice: learning by doing. When asked to do workshop or help start new groups, members of Kinnara are often asked to teach pieces. However, instead of teaching specific songs, Kinnara members choose to teach the basics of taiko playing so that those attending the workshop can learn to create their own music. Kinnara is uninterested in creating “satellite” groups that play their pieces, and is not overly concerned with their legacy. While they have no problem with other groups playing Kinnara's songs (i.e., this is not a question of

²¹ In those cases where *shoga* are written down, volume may be indicated with capital letters; “don, Don, DON” would indicate a crescendo with each hit.

copyright), they believe that each group needs to find its own musical identity. In this way, taiko is seen as an art form to be shared and is something that facilitates friendships and camaraderie.

The differences in philosophies between Kinnara and SFTD once led to tension between the groups. At one point, the SFTD traveled to Los Angeles to perform and Tanaka hoped to see a Kinnara practice while he was there. Johnny Mori (who was both a member of Kinnara and had played with Tanaka) described the practice this way:

[Kinnara has] kids playing with adults. So this one kid comes in, he was ten years old, came in with a skateboard, has a baseball cap on, and chewing gum. So he comes in, kind of hanging out. [And we start playing a piece.] Well he's still sitting there with this baseball cap, has one foot on the skateboard, and he's playing [a taiko], he's chewing gum, and blowing bubbles.²²

Tanaka was not pleased with what he witnessed at the Kinnara practice, and, in fact, he was prompted to ask the members of Kinnara not call themselves a “taiko” group because, in his opinion, what Kinnara was doing had nothing to do with Japanese taiko. He believed they were just a group of Japanese Americans hitting drums, with no context or connection to Japanese traditions. Ultimately, Kinnara ignored Tanaka's request and continued playing. Kodani explains the group's decision:

We were expected [by Tanaka] to tow this line. And we said, ‘no, we're not going to.’ And the reason we're not going to is that [what we do at Kinnara] is our tradition. It's not Japanese. It's Japanese American. It has no equivalent in Japan...[Taiko] is not a traditional form, not even in Japan. Here, it grew out of a natural history of performance at temples.²³

The “natural history of performance” that Kodani is referring to is the tradition of singing, dancing, and poetry recitation that went on during *horaku*, the celebrations that follow major temple services. In Japanese American Buddhist churches, the *horaku* were nearly nonexistent after Pearl Harbor because temple congregants were afraid of appearing “too Japanese.” However, with the *Sansei* these traditions reemerged, and Kodani argues that playing taiko sprang organically from this re-emergence.

Although the tension between Kinnara and SFTD was never specifically addressed by any of the parties involved, it eventually dissipated (and perhaps Tanaka decided against pursuing it). Tanaka now openly acknowledges Kinnara's important role in the establishment of American taiko. In a way, Kinnara's existence was a recognition of taiko's innovative nature. Although possible, it was not necessary to “go back to” Japan because a unique American taiko was being created, one that spoke to the Japanese American experience.

More than three hundred people have gone through Kinnara, and members of the group have helped to start many other taiko troupes around the country. Although the philosophies of

²² Johnny Mori, Interview, November 29, 2004.

²³ Kodani interview.

Kinnara and SFTD differ significantly, both organizations have been hugely influential forces in shaping the direction and development of American taiko.

San Jose Taiko

Founded in 1973, San Jose Taiko (SJT) was the third American group in the nation. Unlike the two groups that came before it, SJT from the beginning was intimately linked with the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and specifically attempted to create an Asian American art form through taiko. Patti Jo (“PJ”) Hirabayashi, the current artistic director for SJT, states:

In the 1970s, of course, when we first started, [Roy and I] were both very much involved in Asian American studies back at San Jose State University... When Roy was one of the first three founding members of San Jose Taiko the underlying premise was to say that [taiko] was an Asian American art form. Largely by virtue that there were other Asians, other than JAs, in the group that were lending a lot of creative juices as far as the world music influences ... But also to scratch out that it was JA-specific. That we were trying to really encompass it to be a pan-Asian... we really wanted to concentrate on creating a voice for ourselves, to explore what that voice was.²⁴

The members of SJT were cognizant of being something other than a traditional taiko group, even though they had some training from Tanaka. Some practitioners, both in America and Japan, merely dismissed the group as inauthentic. Others recognized that SJT was laying the groundwork for a re-imagination of the art form as tied to the struggles of the Asian American movement.

One pivotal aspect of this re-imagination is in musical composition. Rather than rely solely on traditional Japanese rhythms, SJT infuses taiko with the sounds that they grew up with: jazz, rock, soul, and other popular music forms. One of their signature pieces, *Gendai Ni Ikiru*, is based on a jazz swing beat and incorporates much more syncopation than is typically heard in traditional Japanese or taiko music. In an example of how American taiko influences Japanese taiko, Roy Hirabayashi argues that Japanese groups which now incorporate a world rhythm type of sound in their compositions were influenced by hearing and seeing San Jose Taiko in concert. Of course, this did not mean that SJT eschewed all traditional pieces. At outdoor community events they still play versions of *matsuri* that they learned from Tanaka.

The desire to create an Asian or Japanese American art form also affects membership. Although anyone, regardless of ethnicity or gender, is allowed to try out for the group (and many non-Asians have become performers in the group), those who become members must recognize that SJT’s mission is closely tied to the ideals of the Asian American movement. The structure of SJT was influenced by the political experiences of its founding members. The 1960s and 1970s gave birth to a countercultural movement that sought, among other things, to alter the dominant

²⁴ PJ and Roy Hirabayashi, Interview, December 7, 2004.

structures of power in favor of more truly democratic reality. These ideals informed SJT, as PJ describes:

I think what was also very important at that time, in the early 70s, was that we were always looking for changing the paradigm of community, and social consciousness too. We didn't want to create an organization that was top-down. We really wanted to create something that was very much emblematic of self-sufficiency and self-determination and also one that was very collective in character.²⁵

In terms of the group, this meant a move away from centralized power and towards a distribution of responsibility and creating a sense of ownership among members of the group. Early members of SJT were also influenced by what they believed was the communal organization of the members of Ondekoza.²⁶ Like the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, SJT has bowing rituals at the end of practice. However, unlike SFTD, the members of San Jose Taiko bow in a circle and they do not sit in any predetermined order or hierarchy. Hence, when they bow, everyone bows to each other rather than to a single group leader.

The method of working on compositions also bears the marks of this political philosophy (and is similar to that of Kinnara). During the practice that I attended, the group was working through a composition written by one of the members. The composer was allotted a certain amount of time in which to lead the group through parts of his piece. After introducing new ideas to the group, he solicited feedback and suggestions for alterations or improvements. The process was collaborative and other members were encouraged to speak up concerning what parts did or did not work.

SJT practices are highly structured and each aspect of the rehearsal schedule is broken down into half hour or forty-five-minute blocks. All those entering or exiting the building are asked to bow in deference to the practice space, and people must remove their shoes before stepping onto the practice mats. Practices always start with exercises that include push-ups, sit-ups, stretching, and running, which all take place inside the rehearsal area. Following this, the equipment is set up and the *shime daiko* must be tied.²⁷ They then work on drills and compositions as described above.

As with many taiko groups, membership in San Jose Taiko is determined through auditions. People who audition for the group come from the group's public workshops or are simply curious and want to try out. Unlike San Francisco Taiko, SJT does not offer regular adult classes, although they do have a program for youth, ages eight through seventeen. Since they do not have classes, anyone trying out for the group would be required to perform with the group.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ As it turned out, Ondekoza was actually structured around a single leader, Tagayasu Den, although at the level of the performers, who later broke off to form Kodo, there was a more democratic organizational structure.

²⁷ The skins of the *shime daiko* drum heads are sewn on to metal rings. These skins are pulled taut over the body of the instrument with rope. At the end of every SJT practice, they untie the *shime* and allow the skins to relax, but of course this necessitates retying the *shime* at the start of every practice.

The probationary period before full membership is one year. Many other taiko groups have a probationary period, but the length differs by group.



Figure 5: Tying *shime* at SJT practice

SJT is organized as a 501(c)(3) entity and receives national, state, and local grants. Grants make up about forty percent of SJT's operating budget. They are also financially supported by workshop fees, touring, ticket sales from their annual concert in April, and classes for the Junior Taiko Program, which has 80 students. They have also recently started "Fun Sessions," which are general lessons open to the public as a recreational class. This not only generates income for the group, but also creates the opportunity for attracting volunteers or future performing members.

A connection with community-building efforts is a priority for SJT, and this involves performances, outreach, and other decisions the group makes. The group connects with Japanese American community activities by participating in festivals like *obon* and Day of Remembrance events.²⁸ Roy and PJ Hirabayahi have made concerted efforts to connect with the revitalization efforts in San Jose's Japantown. The group had originally practiced in the basement of the Buddhist temple in Japantown. They have since moved out of the temple and now occupy buildings that have historic significance for San Jose's Japanese American community. Their offices, for instance, are in a building that once served as a hospital for Japanese Americans. The SJT practice hall, which is close to their offices, is also historically significant because it was once a performing arts center/movie theater/reception hall for the San Jose Japanese American community. By using these buildings, SJT connects with the Japanese American community's past and helps to sustain its existence into the future. Roy and PJ are also active on Japantown business councils.

²⁸ The Day of Remembrance occurs annually in cities across the nation on February 19th, the day that F. D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which allowed for the internment of Japanese Americans. This event started in 1978 in Seattle at the Puyallup Fairgrounds. The original flyers for the event frighteningly mimicked the 1942 notices to Japanese Americans and read: "Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry." Recently, Day of Remembrance events have emphasized the need for vigilance against allowing internment or similar illegal treatment of any group, referring specifically to the treatment of Arab Americans since 9/11/01.

The group also works with the city of San Jose and the school systems. The most obvious aspect of this is the group's name. By touring across America and around the world, San Jose Taiko acts as an ambassador for the city of San Jose. They also perform at local events like the San Jose Halloween festivities. Annually, SJT does more than three dozen school outreach programs where they conduct forty-five-minute assemblies for schools in San Jose and the Bay Area. This program emphasizes the need for arts education and is an opportunity to present something about Japanese American culture to schoolchildren.

SJT was not only influenced by seeing Japanese taiko groups, they have in turn influenced the course of taiko in Japan. SJT has worked closely with Ondekoza, Kodo, Seido Kobayashi of Oedo Sukeroku, and Daihachi Oguchi of Osuwa Taiko, and they were able to tour Japan in 1986. Early on, Japanese taiko players who saw American taiko players noted that Americans groups seem really happy when they play. This joyfulness when playing is grounded in festival playing and a celebration of ethnic identity. While early Japanese groups were grave and sober in performance, Americans were exuberant and smiling. Roy believes that this attitude had an affect on Japanese groups.

I know there's some major groups, like Kodo and Ondekoza...they definitely changed in sound and look and the whole demeanor of their stage presence, and that's because they saw what was going on with taiko here in the United States...[Now] they're smiling on stage, when they were so stoic and just power before...I think we had helped to bring that into a [new] direction.²⁹

Rather than a one-way flow of influence coming from Japan, this example shows how Japanese and American players influenced each other.

Unlike early taiko in Japan where there were very few female participants, Japanese and Asian American women have been active performers and organizers of taiko from the start. In fact, a greater percentage of U.S. taiko players are women. Many Asian and Japanese American women state that playing taiko is empowering and that performing taiko helps to counter stereotypes of the submissive or fragile Asian female. PJ Hirabayashi proposes that one reason for differences in stage presence between Japanese and U.S. groups, as Roy noted above, is the involvement of women in American taiko:

Whereas our orientation of what was coming from Japan was like, "that's power drumming." From a woman's standpoint, even from a San Jose Taiko standpoint, taiko doesn't have to be power driven. We're looking for ways to expand it so that it's not really all power. That it can also be lyrical. For myself, I'm trying to find ways to incorporate more movement. It doesn't have to be just that visceral drumming on the drum. Finding ways to move and dance.³⁰

As artistic director, PJ tries to infuse much more movement and choreography into the group's pieces in order to create a distinctively "San Jose Taiko" style.

²⁹ Hirabayashi interview.

³⁰ Ibid.

The three groups presented above are not important simply because they were formed first. Rather, they have offered three templates for the promotion and organization of taiko groups that have been copied by groups around the world. Moreover, members of each group were willing to share their experiences with others who were equally excited by taiko and wanted to start their own groups. A willingness to share information, techniques, resources, instruments, and compositions is one of the defining characteristics of American taiko.

It is difficult to gauge which of these three models is most prevalent. Every group has a leader of some kind; either someone called *sensei* or at least someone who acts as a spokesperson or representative for the group. Moreover, it is likely that even groups structured democratically have informal hierarchies of players recognized by other members as “better” or “more talented,” and these individuals may naturally come to occupy positions of authority within a democratic configuration. A few groups have experienced shifts where they have moved from being a loosely-knit community group into a group with a single leader. Sometimes a small cadre of individuals will decide to push the group in a certain direction and thereby drive the other members to achieve a level of excellence. In other cases, the opposite has happened when someone forms a group hoping to create a “world-class” performing troupe, but ends up with a group that chooses to focus on aspects other than drumming skills. All of these models are successful in their own way and have their place in the larger taiko community.

Creating a Japanese American Instrument

Possibly the single most crucial element in taiko’s expansion in the U.S. was the ability for individuals to make their own drum relatively inexpensively. Much of the technology for this process was developed originally by Kinnara, in order to be able to provide drums for all the people who wanted to play. Initially, members of Kinnara attached the skin to the drum body by having one person pull the skin taut with plyers and having another person nail the skin to the body. As might be expected, it was very difficult to get the skins tight and these drums were thought to have muddy timbre. Later a system involving platforms and car jacks was developed. One platform is a grid made up of six two-by-fours with the ends of the two-by-fours protruding. The grid is placed on the ground and four or more car jacks are placed on top of it. The other platform must be a flat, thick surface such as sheet plywood. This is placed atop the car jacks and the drum body is put on this upper platform. After centering the soaked hide over the drum body, the skin is connected to the lower platform with rope. When the car jacks are raised, the skin is stretched because it is attached to the two-by-four grid of the lower platform, which is not moving. This technological advancement was perfected as other groups tried their hand at building drums and then shared their experiences with others. In many ways, the wine-barrel taiko—built as a community project, with instructions freely shared from group to group—is symbolic of the ingenuity and communal atmosphere that characterized many of the early U.S. taiko groups.³¹

³¹ Pictures of the skinning process and instructions on drum building can be seen at the following websites: http://www.geocities.com/ucrtaiko/making_of_taiko.html; http://users.lmi.net/taikousa/diy_gallery.html; and <http://www.jour.unr.edu/goldbaum/studentWork/F04/kondo/build.html>. Information on drum building materials can be found at <http://www.taiko.com/resource/makingtaiko.html>.

Traditionally, Japanese taiko are handcrafted from a single piece of hollowed out zelkova (or *keyaki*) wood. Asano Taiko Company (established in 1609) and Miyamoto Unosuke Shoten (established in 1861) are two of the oldest and most respected taiko builders in Japan. Because individual taiko from these companies can cost thousands of dollars, very few American groups have the resources to purchase these instruments. Conversely, a single wine-barrel taiko can be built for a few hundred dollars. However, by and large, the two instruments do not sound the same and there are many reasons for this difference. Early wine-barrel drum bodies could not withstand the extreme pressure necessary to match the pitch of a Japanese taiko. Some builders left the barrel's metal rings on what became the drum-body in order to maintain structural integrity, but others found this aesthetically distasteful and had to glue or somehow join individual staves together. Although glue was adequate to hold the barrel together, the bodies were still prone to collapse under pressure, and groups consequently had to stop stretching the skin at a certain (lower) tension level. Naturally, this resulted in taiko drums that were lower pitched and had a "boomy" or "thuddy" timbre when compared with their Japanese counterparts. Another factor was that the skins available in the United States were not cut specifically with drum making in mind. Hide thickness varied and sometimes they would tear or wear out quickly, consequently limiting the tension that could be placed on the drum heads during stretching. Drum-builder Mark Miyoshi argues that most people lack the technical knowledge necessary to properly pull skins, information which is a closely guarded secret among most Japanese drum builders. It is also entirely possible that drummers in the U.S. have become accustomed to this timbre and pitch and have replicated it in their own drums, even after advances in taiko-body reinforcement have been introduced.³²

Regardless of the sound compared to Japanese drums, the American wine-barrel taiko was a cost-effective alternative to Japanese instruments and allowed groups to get started. U.S. taiko players took pride in their drums. San Jose Taiko believed that the wine-barrel taiko was such a key icon of Asian American taiko that when the group was invited to perform in Japan they insisted that they be allowed to bring their own, hand made drums.

Collegiate Groups and Small Ensembles

San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Kinnara, and San Jose Taiko represent structural and philosophical models that other groups have emulated, sometimes taking elements from each of these groups and combining them in new ways. These three groups collectively represent the historical foundations of taiko. However, other models have emerged that have also influenced the taiko landscape. Two examples are college-based groups and small ensembles. Close examination of these developments reveals the concurrent—though not necessarily consequent—emergence of new conceptions of Asian American identity, which can be seen either as divergent from or an evolution of previous views on Asian American ethnicity.

³² Russel Baba, Jeanne Mercer, and Mark Miyoshi, Interview, December 12, 2004.

Collegiate Groups

The formation of UCLA Kyodo Daiko in 1990 heralded a new era in American taiko. Collegiate groups exposed even larger audiences to taiko through campus performances. Moreover, the emergence of collegiate groups forged a bridge between youth taiko groups and community-based groups, making it possible to play taiko throughout one's life.

There are basically two kinds of collegiate groups: those with departmental or faculty sponsorship, and those without. Groups such as Senryu Taiko (at the University of California, Riverside) and Stanford Taiko have the support of the music department at their respective universities. This support gives the groups access to free practice rooms and storage spaces as well as class credits for participation in taiko. Both Stanford Taiko and Senryu Taiko take advantage of funding available to student groups for travel, supplies, and other expenses. Faculty advisors also assist in securing this funding for student taiko groups. Stanford University continues to offer a sophomore seminar entitled "Perspectives in North American Taiko," which grew out of the class that initially catalyzed the creation of Stanford Taiko. At the same time, departmental sponsorship places demands on these groups to achieve a certain level of artistic excellence and to perform at certain events. The situation for non-sponsored groups is quite a different story. Before departmental sponsorship, UCLA Kyodo, for instance, had to practice in parking lots and members took the drums home with them for storage. However, after receiving sponsorship from the Asian American Studies department they were allotted a large dance-studio space in the UCLA Wooden Center.

At Stanford, the existence of departmental expertise in taiko performance benefits young taiko players hoping to attend the university. Stanford's Fine Arts and Athletics departments are given an equal percentage of the entering class for which they may recruit. Consequently, a prospective student can use their taiko playing experience to bolster their application, even if he or she is not concentrating in music. Steve Sano (Associate Professor of Music and Director of Choral Studies) and Linda Uyechi (Lecturer), both of whom are faculty advisors for Stanford Taiko, keep a close eye on taiko youth groups in order to find academically accomplished players who might be interested in attending Stanford. Shoji Kameda, who will be introduced in greater detail below, was one such recruit.

One difference between collegiate and community-based groups is the pace at which collegiate groups must work. At the start of every new academic calendar year, a collegiate group loses its veteran players and gains a new crop of members. The group leadership must quickly pass on the standard repertoire because the newest members have to be ready to perform, sometimes in a matter of weeks. In comparison, some community-based groups have trainee periods that can last up to a year. Collegiate groups have limited time to work on anything new, although they do produce new compositions. For Stanford Taiko, this means teaching six core pieces, and introducing and learning nine to ten new compositions for their annual concert. Also due to the high turn-over rate, it is possible that people with only one or two years of playing experience are thrust into positions of responsibility such as artistic director, practice leader, or composer. The time available for all this work is further compressed by vacations and finals, when practices are canceled or shortened.

College taiko groups are gaining in popularity. While these groups once took everyone interested in joining, they now hold auditions and have to turn away greater numbers each year because demand is so high. At Stanford Taiko, between forty to seventy people try out for four to eight available slots. Between sixty to eighty people try out for UCLA Kyodo, but only ten are accepted. Taiko is so popular on the UCLA campus that there are three different taiko groups: Kyodo Taiko, Yukai Taiko (currently composed of those who did not make it into Kyodo), and a recreational class led by a former student of Tanaka's.



Figure 6: UCLA Kyodo practice

Collegiate groups usually have a democratically-elected leadership. Senryu at U.C. Riverside is somewhat unusual among collegiate groups in that Rev. Tom Kurai comes in to teach the group. Practices on campus are just as rigorous as any other American taiko group. Many groups start their sessions with exercise. The first UCLA Kyodo practice I visited started out with a warm-up game of football.

As might be expected, the community for which collegiate taiko groups play most frequently, but not exclusively, is on campus. This includes performances at orientation, in dormitories, for student and university events, at a group's annual campus concert, and in collaboration with other student groups. Collegiate groups also perform off campus for schools and at Japanese and Asian American community events in Los Angeles or San Francisco such as Nisei Week. Occasionally, these off-campus performances pay honorariums that help to cover travel and other expenses. Groups such as UCLA and Stanford are now well-known enough that they receive more performance requests than they can fulfill. Stanford has been invited to play at the 2005 Taiko Jam, part of the North American Taiko Conference, which signals that collegiate taiko is truly coming into its own.

Collegiate taiko groups have national conferences outside of the North American Taiko Conference. In fact, they held their first gathering in May 1995, two years before the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) held the North American Taiko Conference. The first collegiate conference had performances and workshops with Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer from Mt. Shasta and Kenny Endo (these individuals will be introduced in the next section). Collegiate gatherings continue through the present.

Interestingly, the three collegiate groups I spoke with had no direct affiliation with Asian American or Japanese American student or other university groups. UCLA Kyodo had once been a part of the Nippon Students Association, but this is no longer a formal relationship. Stanford Taiko has been invited to join Stanford University Nikkei, but they chose instead to remain an independent student arts organization. Although members of Senryu Taiko, at University of California, Riverside, belong to other student clubs, the group itself is not directly affiliated with any of these clubs.

A palpable difference between members of college groups today and those who started taiko groups in the 1970s is the attitude towards issues of identity. While taiko was once positioned as a vehicle for ethnic pride and political protest and agency, those I interviewed in college groups saw taiko as a more generally cultural activity. In the following excerpt, I push the question of identity and taiko playing to members of UCLA Kyodo. Note how their responses lean more towards a relativistic multiculturalism rather than the discourses of identity politics.

Paul Yoon: I asked before why each of you were interested in taiko and none of you mentioned anything about Japanese American identity, and I'm curious if it doesn't play some role in your decision to play taiko.

Christine Kimura: My brothers got started [in taiko] because...my mom was interested in taiko and she wanted my brothers just to try it. And I liked it because it gave me a sense of my culture and I learned a lot about my culture and Japanese festivals, holidays, and stuff like that from playing taiko.

Daisuke Arai: The main reason why I did taiko was I just thought it was cool. It looked cool. But then after meeting certain people through taiko, I guess my whole emphasis on more about my culture or heritage became a little bit stronger...I guess maybe, for me, it strengthened my identity as Japanese American or just Japanese in general.

PY: Sara, how about questions of Asian American identity, do you feel that [taiko] is an outlet for that?

Sara Jintapracha: I don't really think of it in terms of being Asian.

PY: What do you think of it as?

SJ: [In taiko] we use beats that don't generate from Japan. It's a fusion of modernism and a lot of different influences that each of us have and each of us bring to taiko. So I don't really think of it as a primarily Asian activity. I mean, it is Japanese. . .but I never think of it as like "this is an Asian American thing" or "this is a Japanese thing."³³

³³ Christine Kimura, Daisuki Arai, and Sara Jintapracha, Interview, December 5, 2004.

It is not entirely certain what these comments signal about future developments in American taiko. While these statements are not representative of an entire generation, they echo much of what I heard from students at the University of California, Riverside. Along these lines, Stanford Taiko consciously distances itself from political causes or Asian American student groups. This decision came about during the 1994-1995 academic year when some members took a taiko to an on-campus political rally. At the time, debates within the group finally resulted in the decision to make the group's focus musical/aesthetical rather than political. Yoko Okano, a current member of Stanford Taiko, states that a shift in the ethnic constitution of the group away from high numbers of Japanese Americans also contributed to this change.³⁴

Michelle Fujii is a former member of UCLA Kyodo and currently a member of Øn Ensemble and TAIKOPROJECT. She feels that her approach to identity politics is different than it was for Asian Americans growing up in the 1970s. She sums it up this way:

I got to reap a lot of the benefits that were established for me from the previous generation. And it's not like I have to prove myself... We [Asian Americans] just want to be who we are. Which is Asian American, which is going to Japan, which is a lot of different experiences, interacting with different cultures, and we don't need to shout that out to the world. I feel like this might be a different approach to Asian American music and I'm hoping that this new generation of Asian Americans might explore it in that way.³⁵

Fujii argues that past battles for recognition and equality have achieved a modicum of success and this can be built upon. Simultaneously, she sees that there is room for something new, a "different approach to Asian-American music" that steers clear of necessarily having to "shout that out to the world." Similarly, collegiate groups have benefited from the work of existing taiko groups. For instance, UCLA Kyodo was founded by Mark Honda, who was a member of San Jose Taiko, and the sophomore seminar that was the genesis of Stanford Taiko was originally taught by Susan Hayase, also a former member of SJT. Players who grew up playing taiko in youth programs (Zendeko, SFTD Rising Stars) or in Buddhist temples (Kinnara) populate and sustain college groups. At the same time, these players will undoubtedly change the constitution of the taiko community as they start their own groups, as Zack Semke and Ann Ishimaru did after graduating from Stanford, and explore new artistic paths for taiko, as is the case with the members of Øn Ensemble and TAIKOPROJECT, most of whom were active in collegiate taiko groups.

Small Ensembles

Alongside the development of *kumi daiko* are smaller taiko ensembles that are distinguished less by their size and more by their engagement with musically challenging or conceptual pieces. Small taiko ensembles were pioneered by people like Russel Baba and Kenny Endo, both of whom worked on combining jazz forms with taiko. Other examples of small taiko ensembles

³⁴ Stanford Taiko (Steve Sano, Linda Uyechi, and Yoko Okano), Interview, December 8, 2004.

³⁵ Michelle Fujii, Interview, 2005.

include Uzume Taiko from Vancouver, British Columbia, Somei Yoshino, TAIKOPROJECT, and Øn Ensemble³⁶ Typically, the pieces these ensembles perform are rhythmically more challenging and adventurous than those pieces found in most *kumi daiko* groups. These performers also frequently collaborate with artists from other genres, although such collaborations are not exclusive to ensembles since a number of *kumi daiko* groups have collaborated with other artists. It is also the case that some larger groups have complex pieces that are played by a select number of performers, thereby creating an “ensemble-like” situation within the group. One example is a composition by Sandy Ikeda of Soh Daiko (a New York City taiko group) called *Degrees of Freedom*, which switches between multiple, odd meter signatures and incorporates difficult sticking techniques played across three separate drums. The piece is not a regular part of Soh Daiko’s repertoire and is only brought out when the requisite talent exists in the group to perform it successfully. Most taiko groups do not focus on songs with the musical complexity found in ensembles and this is one measure by which “groups” differ from “ensembles.”

Kokoro is Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer’s ensemble that combines taiko with other instruments, such as saxophone and *fue* (transverse flute), both played by Baba. Occasionally, their son, Masato, also plays *fue*. Compositions are rooted in the improvisatory techniques Baba learned as a jazz performer/composer and the taiko skills Mercer acquired while playing with Tanaka (both were members of SFTD). Occasionally Shoji Kameda (who grew up next door to the Babas) and Michelle Fujii join them on stage. Russel Baba emphasizes personal expression through taiko improvisation, which he identifies as an essential element of jazz performance. These are the same principles that Baba and Mercer emphasized when teaching taiko to Masato and Shoji as they were growing up.

Kenny Endo’s early musical training began on a drum kit and he focused on jazz and fusion genres. His experience with jazz informed the creation of the Kenny Endo Taiko Ensemble, which fuses “traditional Japanese drumming techniques, world musical rhythms, and western jazz percussion styles” to create a contemporary taiko sound. Although Endo is the *sensei* of the Taiko Center of the Pacific, his primary focus is on composition and the creative work he does through the ensemble. He seeks out collaborative works with different musicians and artists in order to expand his own compositional viewpoint and fuel his artistic growth. Ultimately, he wants to be recognized as a musician first and a taiko player second. Endo states, “I don’t want to play because they want a *taiko* group, I want to play because they want to hear my music.” Endo elaborated that he did not want to be pigeonholed into generic labels such as “Japanese,” “folk,” or “ethnic,” but would rather be recognized as simply an “artist.”³⁷

I include TAIKOPROJECT (TP) in this section partly because they use contemporary music composition techniques in their performance, but also because of the conceptual nature of their show. TP was conceived by Bryan Yamami as a combination of his love of taiko and his experiences as a stage performer with theater companies such as hereandnow and East West

³⁶ Unfortunately, because this report focuses on taiko in the United States, I will not discuss Uzume Taiko. Also, a representative of Somei Yoshino stated that the group was not interested in participating in the research for this report.

³⁷ Kenny Endo, Interview, February 4, 2005.

Players. The eight members of TP, all in their twenties, are part of the next generation of taiko players, some of whom have been playing taiko since they were six. TP is something of a temporary “pick-up” team where each player also belongs to other taiko groups. Between the eight members, TP has affiliations with San Francisco Taiko Dojo, San Jose Taiko, Kinnara, Øn Ensemble, Kenny Endo, Shasta Taiko, Portland Taiko, and Tsunami Taiko. These individuals get together to rehearse TP shows, but remain active in other groups. TP member Michelle Fujii states that this setup is an extension of what has already been taking place in southern California where individuals, who are eager to play taiko more than once or twice a week, commit to multiple groups. Belonging to multiple groups was once an unusual, even taboo, practice that is now becoming common in areas with a high concentration of taiko groups.

The conceptual aspect of TAIKOPROJECT’s performance is evident in their piece *Pioneers*, a mini-retrospective of American taiko. *Pioneers* is made up of sub-sections that introduce the audience to Kinnara, San Francisco Taiko Dojo, and San Jose Taiko. At the start of each sub-section, a member of TP presents a monologue about her or his time with the group. These monologues touch on group history as well as personal experiences with that group, and try to convey a sense of American taiko’s roots as well as the flavor of what it was like to study with Tanaka or Rev. Kodani or Roy and PJ Hirabayashi. This is followed by a performance by TP members of a representative piece from the group being highlighted. *Pioneers* is self-reflexive and geared for the theatrical stage rather than the outdoor festival gathering. Conceptual performances of this nature are rare among taiko groups.

Not all of TAIKOPROJECT’s works are like *Pioneers*. *Fog Dream Neon’d* marries computer music with taiko. In this piece, the amplified signal via microphones from two taiko drums is processed by an off-stage computer that triggers the creation of various ambient sonic textures to accompany the on-stage performers. Another piece, *Behind the Odaiko*, takes a humorous look at the odaiko solo, which has been popularized by Za Ondekoza and Kodo. The odaiko solo, as Ondekoza and Kodo perform it, is approached with deep reverence and is often praised for its “zen-like” simplicity. The lone drummer, standing before an enormous, five-foot diameter taiko, wears nothing but a *fundoshi* (a Japanese loincloth) and is accompanied only by an *atarigane* (handheld brass gong) or *chappa* (small cymbals). In *Behind the Odaiko*, Yamami, following these stylistic cues, appears on stage alone with an enormous odaiko and wearing only a *fundoshi*, but his intention is to demystify some of the perceptions surrounding odaiko solos. Texts are projected on stage to the right of the drummer, some informative, for example, “‘O-daiko’ in Japanese translates as ‘Great drum,’” and others more lighthearted, for instance, “In ancient Japan, villagers would encourage the O-daiko drummer by stuffing money into his *fundoshi*. Just kidding.” Other than *Omiyage*, described below, none of TP’s pieces conform stylistically to traditional or typical *kumi daiko* pieces.



Figure 7: Shoji Kameda (right) during Øn Ensemble performance

Moving to a different group, both Shoji Kameda and Masato Baba have studied and performed with Kenny Endo, and both learned taiko from Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer from an early age. Not surprisingly, considering their mentors, these two created an ensemble that favors non-traditional (i.e., non-*kumi daiko* style) taiko works that highlight improvisation and more nuanced compositional textures. Baba and Kameda, along with Kris Bergstrom, started Øn Ensemble in 2001. Michelle Fujii joined shortly after to make the group a quartet. All four members of the group have studied Japanese art forms such as dance, *shamisen*, *fue*, and taiko in Japan.³⁸ Musical works range from subtle pieces that explore the interaction between dancer/drummer and taiko as instrument, to jazz/rock inspired pieces with a guitarist, jazz drummer, taiko, and *koto* (multi-stringed, plucked zither) playing in a kind of jam session. Other works have incorporated Tuvan overtone (“throat”) singing or turntable scratching. Here, Kameda describes his compositional motivations:

Composing standard taiko songs is something that comes very easily for me. I’ve been around it a long time...that’s where a lot of my training is. I feel like it’s legitimate to create this standard taiko stuff...This other music [for Øn Ensemble] is also legitimate, this other blending, and incorporating electric guitar, or drum kit, or turntable, or anything. That is also legitimate because it’s speaking to my influences as an artist, and in that way it’s legitimate.³⁹

Kameda makes a case for the avant garde aspects of Øn Ensemble’s compositions by evoking the discourses of authenticity. Obviously, this is not an essentializing authenticity that locates “real” taiko music in Japanese practices or tradition. Rather, these compositions are authentic because they spring from the artist’s experiences, which is to say they are “true” to an artist’s identity or identities.

³⁸ The shamisen (also, “shamisen”) is a chordophone with three strings. The instrument’s neck is very skinny, quite long relative to the size of the resonating body, and fretless. The shamisen’s resonating body is a hollow, square frame that is covered with a hide, usually cat hide, on two sides. Atop one skin is a bridge held down by the three strings. The strings are plucked with a large *bachi*, or plectrum, which is fan-shaped at one end.

³⁹ Shoji Kameda, Interview, 2005.

Some of the artists outlined in this section envision taiko as transcending its ethnic origins, and I argue that in the process they re-imagine the definition of an American identity. Michelle Fujii, for example, hopes that taiko will eventually become like jazz, by which she means “how [jazz started] as an ethnic music scene and from there it just continued to elevate into its own category, which is gender-less and also ethnicity-less. You know where it’s roots come from, but everyone can do jazz.”⁴⁰ For Fujii, jazz is representative of an art form that is no longer seen as ethnic art, but as simply *art*, unmarked and unqualified. Its roots in the African American community and struggle are recognized, but it is also played and celebrated by many different peoples around the world. What she does not mention, is that jazz is in the process of establishing a cultural capital on par with Western art music (by which I mean the musics of Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Wagner, and others). In this way, jazz is the musical equivalent of a Horatio Alger story, and it has become, for some, a template for taiko’s future success. I argue that pushing for the development of taiko in this direction engages with the question of what it means to be American and what American identity is. In the hope to re-imagine taiko not as ethnic music, but as simply music (or perhaps American music) these artists insert the Asian American voice into the fabric of American culture. Through music, then, this younger generation of taiko players question and expand the public discourses on race and ethnicity, belonging and exclusion.

Local, National, and Global Networks for Taiko

Local Networks

One of the greatest challenges facing a taiko group is finding practice space. Even one taiko is simply too loud to be played just anywhere. Finding a building in a warehouse district is often the best solution because it is far from residential areas, but even then, depending on others working in the adjacent buildings, soundproofing is sometimes necessary. Of course, renting these spaces and making them soundproof is expensive and groups do not always have the necessary capital, especially those just starting out.

Japanese American Buddhist temples are a tremendous resource for taiko groups because they have space that can be used for practice as well as storage. More importantly, many temples are excited by the idea of hosting a taiko group because it is a fun, community-building activity that can involve temple members of all ages and bring new people to the temple. San Jose Taiko, for example, started in the San Jose Buddhist church, which is just down the street from their current offices. Another example is Soh Daiko which started in New York City in 1979. The impetus for this group came when a youth group from the New York Buddhist Church saw taiko performed at an Eastern Young Buddhist League convention in Chicago. The youth from the New York church decided to start a taiko group with help from church adult advisors Mo Funai, Jim Moran, and Alan and Merle Okada. Shortly thereafter, people who were active in the Asian American movement on the East Coast also joined the group. Alan and Merle are still active

⁴⁰ Fujii interview.

with the group today, and Soh Daiko continues to be based in the Buddhist church even though, as of this writing, only a handful of Soh Daiko's members belong to the church.

The Buddhist temple has also been an excellent resource for Bryan Yamami. Yamami was reintroduced to taiko when he became a member of the Senshin Buddhist Temple while attending USC.⁴¹ He is also active in the organization of the North American Taiko Conference, which will be detailed below. In 2002, Yamami was approached by the Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo about forming a group through their temple. He ended up starting two groups: Bombu Taiko, which is a community-based group, and Kitsune Taiko, which is a children's group. Teaching at the temple also gave him a place to store his then recently-acquired drums from Asano, which he uses with the temple-based groups as well as in his work with TAIKOPROJECT. Even though most Bombu and Kitsune members do not go to the temple, Yamami states that the Higashi Temple members enjoy being able to host a taiko group. In general, groups based in or connected with Buddhist temples will play at temple events.

Some groups have used Japanese American community centers when available; of the groups I interviewed only Kishin Daiko had such an arrangement. Japanese American Christian churches have also played a role in hosting taiko groups. Chikara Daiko in Los Angeles and Sacramento Taiko Dan have used or continue to use Christian churches for practice and storage. Overall, Japanese American Buddhist temples/churches have played a much more active role in American taiko's development than any other institution.

Local Japanese American and Asian American communities have also been a tremendous resource for groups. As noted above, interest in taiko came from those actively involved with community organization. Taiko groups maintain these ties by performing at events such as temple *obon*, *Sakura Matsuri* festivals, Nisei Week, Day of Remembrance, heritage festivals, and the Tofu Festival in Los Angeles. Since many of these events are open to the general public, they are also opportunities to introduce greater numbers of people to taiko and to spark an interest that may lead them to buy tickets for taiko performances or to join a taiko group.

Only a small percentage of drummers make a living playing taiko, which means that the majority of taiko performers in this country have full-time employment outside of taiko. An unintended consequence of this are the local resources and networks that contribute to sustaining taiko groups. Taiko groups' often diverse membership can help to attract grant funding and corporate sponsorship, especially when the members have the requisite skills and contacts. In the 1980s, director, actor, photographer, and writer Gisela Getty was a member of San Francisco Taiko Dojo, and she helped produce their first concerts at U.C. Berkeley's Zellerbach Hall. In 2003, the parents of a Stanford Taiko member made it possible for the group to travel across Thailand on a fully sponsored, fully scheduled tour of the country. One former member of Soh Daiko became the stage director for Central Park's Summer Stage, and made it possible for the group to perform there. Group members are often also active in Asian American community organizations and will arrange for their group to perform at related events. Through the

⁴¹ I say "reintroduced" because Bryan played taiko for a time with San Jose Taiko as a member of their youth program.

opportunity to perform on prestigious and popular stages such as Zellerbach and Summer Stage, these groups expose a greater number of people to taiko and are thereby able to create new audiences for the art form.

Another local support network available to taiko groups is composed of the other groups in the area. For example, since 1998 the eight groups in the Seattle, Washington area have been meeting regularly and are currently in the process of forming an umbrella organization called Regional Taiko Groups of Seattle. These Seattle groups assist one another in many different ways. When one group is unable to accept an invitation to perform, the opportunity is passed on to another group to give them a chance for exposure. Also, in those cases where a group cannot marshal enough performers from their own membership to fill a request—for instance, if they are asked to perform on a weekday afternoon when most players are working—members from various groups will come together to form one large “pick-up” group for the show. Ensembles in the Seattle area also jointly host master drummers from Japan to hold workshops for all the Seattle area groups. Furthermore, in conjunction with groups from British Columbia and the Pacific Northwest, the groups in Seattle have hosted a regional Taiko conference. It is through actions such as these that taiko has flourished in the Pacific Northwest.

On the other end of the spectrum from Seattle is the situation of a single taiko group in an area with a small or nonexistent Japanese or Asian American presence. Such an example can be found in Mt. Shasta, California, where Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer now live. They moved to Mt. Shasta in 1983 to find a quieter environment in which to raise their son, Masato. Mt. Shasta is more than 270 miles north of San Francisco. At the time, there were about seven Japanese Americans in the area, including Mark Miyoshi and the Kamedas, whose son Shoji formed Øn Ensemble with Masato. The situation in Mt. Shasta is unique because of the taiko expertise concentrated there. Russel and Jeanne were some of Tanaka’s earliest students, and Jeanne performed with SFTD for ten years. Russel is also a jazz flutist and saxophonist and he brings his skills in improvisation to taiko playing. Mark Miyoshi is arguably the preeminent taiko builder in the United States. Despite the wealth of talent, there was no audience for taiko in Mt. Shasta in the early 1980s. Over time, Russel and Jeanne built a base of interest for taiko by performing and teaching classes, for which they received local arts grants. They have also received California state grants for educational programming and touring. By 2005, Russel and Jeanne have transformed Mt. Shasta into an outpost where taiko is known and appreciated. These outposts are important because they represent taiko-friendly pockets around the country where other taiko groups can book a show and expect a knowledgeable and congenial audience.

Another example of a taiko group in relative isolation is Odaiko Sonora of Tucson, Arizona, founded in 2002. This group was started by Rome Hamner and Karen Falkenstrom, neither of whom are Japanese American (Falkenstrom is half-Korean). Hamner’s interest in taiko stems from her exposure to the art form during her childhood when her father was stationed in Okinawa. She saw taiko again in 1997 while teaching English in Japan and after returning to the U.S., she began playing with Stanley Morgan in the Tucson area. When Morgan was no longer able to play, Hamner and Falkenstrom formed Odaiko Sonora. Falkenstrom’s interest came from seeing Kodo in 1992. Both women work in the nonprofit sector and with this knowledge they have procured grants from local and state arts agencies, and have applied to the Arizona Diamondback’s charitable arm for children’s programming. With this funding, supplemented

with their own money, they have formed taiko classes with sixteen students and an active performing group, and they have built many drums. In order to receive training, Hamner and Falkenstrom have traveled to Utah, Hawai'i, and several times to California for workshops and the Taiko Conferences. They have also invited instructors to Tucson to give workshops. Through business and personal ties, Odaiko Sonora is connected with Japanese and Asian American organizations in Tucson, and they are often asked to perform at related events. The group performs all over Tucson and the surrounding area. In just three years, Hamner and Falkenstrom have gone a long way to establishing Tucson as a taiko-friendly zone.

Other taiko groups are situated somewhere between isolation, i.e., no or few Japanese Americans, and inundation, i.e., Los Angeles, San Francisco, or San Jose, in terms of the Asian American population. Portland Taiko (PT) is one such example, although they are more isolated than not. While a student at Stanford University, Ann Ishimaru took a course on taiko and the redress movement; based on that experience she co-founded Stanford Taiko in 1992. In 1994, Ann left California for Oregon and co-founded Portland Taiko with Zack Semke. Their mission statement read: "Through artistic excellence and innovation in taiko, we inspire audiences, affirm Asian American pride, build community, and educate about our heritage and culture." In an interview, Ann expounded on the aspects of the mission statement concerning Asian American identity for both Asians and non-Asians alike:

The message that we send in terms of being an Asian American group is very empowering to the Asian American audience. But also [it] is a strong statement of the diversity within the Asian American community...especially in Oregon, [where] people see an Asian face and they assume that everyone is Chinese...So part of what we're doing too is educating people about the diversity within the Asian American community.⁴²

In order to establish an Asian American audience, Portland Taiko actively connects with many arts and non-arts related Asian American organizations. For instance, they worked on a project with Asian Pacific Lesbians and Gays (APLG). During this project, members of the APLG formed small groups that worked on skits focusing on the issue of coming out to their parents. These skits were used as raw materials for taiko compositions that were presented to the APLG in draft form. After feedback from the APLG, members of PT rewrote the pieces for public performance. According to Ishimaru, collaborations such as these connect PT with people who may not be drummers, but who are nevertheless "part of our community in the creative process." In this way, PT develops connections with other Asian American groups in the Portland area.

Portland Taiko connects with the general public through initiatives such as school programs, the "Team Giant" volunteer group, open rehearsals, and community workshops where participants learn taiko basics and a few songs. PT also offers children and adult classes. The group has an annual performance season and sells subscriptions to a full array of concerts and events for the year. The 2005 season includes collaborations with the NEA National Heritage Fellow and Ghanaian drummer, Obo Addy, including "Composer Spotlight" sessions. The "Composer Spotlight" is a forum for composers and performers to talk about their inspirations and the

⁴² Ann Ishimaru, Interview (telephone), February 1, 2005.

compositional process. It is another opportunity for the public to learn more about PT and other artists with whom they collaborate. Collaborating with non-taiko/non-Asian American artists is also an opportunity to expand PT's audience base by raising awareness of taiko among those who might never have considered paying to see taiko. In this way, PT connects with a wider audience and presents the diversity of the Asian American community to local Portland residents.

National Networks

Buddhist temples are both a local and national resource. Many individuals were introduced to taiko through performances that San Jose Taiko, Johnny Mori (of Kinnara), and other groups did with the Young Buddhist Association and other Buddhist organizations. In the 1970s, Kinnara traveled to Buddhist temples across the nation and introduced taiko to people as a temple-based activity. Through these activities they passed on information about taiko building, songs, and drills. Recall that Soh Daiko was formed by New York Buddhist Church members who saw taiko at a Chicago Buddhist youth gathering. Those Chicago groups were no doubt themselves influenced by California-based groups. The importance of the Buddhist temple network cannot be overstated.

Increased ethnic awareness or involvement with aspects of the Asian American movement often were factors for those who were or became taiko players. As with the founders of San Jose Taiko and Portland Taiko, many involved with taiko noted how political activism, ethnic identity, and a love of music came together in taiko. Russel Baba of Shasta Taiko stated:

I was born right after...World War II, [and] it was very unpopular to be Japanese. My experiences being a youngster, even three years old, being called a 'Jap'...had some influence. So, I needed a self-esteem boost, and at that time we were looking at political things and that was a part of the Asian movement, Black movement, et cetera. So, I was searching for some identity in the music situation with being Asian...and I saw [taiko]...[Previously] I never heard Japanese being loud because the situation after the war [was such that] everybody was quiet and didn't want to push things or be too loud...so when I saw the drumming, and they were so big, moving the body, and things like that, it really got me.⁴³

Another example of the connection between growing ethnic awareness and taiko playing is Johnny Mori, who is a member of Kinnara and was one of the co-founders of the Amerasia Bookstore in Los Angeles, the first bookstore devoted to literature for, by, and about Asian Americans. Finally, in the mid-1970s, Mark Miyoshi's work with Educational Opportunity Programs for minorities sent him, among other places, to California where he had the opportunity to see taiko. Upon returning home to Colorado, he helped form Denver Taiko, which started in 1976 and was the fourth taiko group in the U.S. These are just a few examples of the close link between the Asian American movement and early taiko activities in America.

⁴³ Baba, et al. interview.

Another kind of network that exists within the taiko community is formed around local taiko groups that assist other groups on tour by providing logistical support and accommodations (which may simply mean offering a sofa or living-room floor to sleep on). For instance, the members of Soh Daiko have always hosted taiko groups that come through New York City. This may entail hosting a workshop, helping make concert arrangements, or going out to dinner after a show. Such generosity has allowed Soh Daiko to stay connected with groups from across the U.S. and Japan. The same amicable behavior is replicated by most groups around the country and it is a way to build bridges between groups, trade songs and ideas, and forge friendships. Taiko-friendly outposts, noted above, are nodes within this network.

The internet is another way that people interested in taiko can find information and share their thoughts. Of course, the very nature of the internet eludes boundaries of state and nation, and so this technology could fit equally well under “global networks.” Sites such as <www.taiko.com> (a.k.a. “Rolling Thunder”) and <www.taikoinfo.org> provide an overview of taiko history, the dates and events of the Taiko Conference, instructions on taiko building or purchasing, practice drills, community announcements, taiko courses being offered, and other information concerning taiko. Rolling Thunder has forums where individuals can post or respond to taiko-related questions or topics, and there is also a listing of contact information for taiko groups.

The networks listed here exist primarily through the generosity of individuals who have reached out to other groups or have taken the time to set up a website. However, this is not the only way national networks have formed within the taiko community. There are two large organizations that must be recognized as having a significant, national impact on U.S. taiko: The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center and the Japanese American National Museum, both in Los Angeles.

The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) is a crucial resource for the North American taiko community. It has hosted the North American Taiko Conference in 1997, 1999, 2001, and 2005.²¹ The Taiko Conference has been a key forum for face-to-face discussions on taiko history, future trends in the art form, funding sources, instruction, drum building, stage craft, creating school curricula, physical training, and many other topics. Workshops are held throughout the conference weekend thereby allowing people from around the country to study under skilled taiko drummers from the U.S. and Japan. The conference also offers the opportunity to meet with Japanese drum builders, performers, and clothing and equipment suppliers who might be on hand. Saturday night of the conference is reserved for the Taiko Jam, a concert which features several of North America’s best troupes and allows people to experience many different styles without having to travel across the continent. The conference is also an occasion where issues of concern for the taiko community are openly debated through roundtable discussions or in hallway talks between friends. The JACCC is philosophically and physically well-suited to hosting the conference because it is located in the heart of Los Angeles’ Japanese American community, has the space to hold workshops, and its Aratani/Japan America Theater is well suited for the Taiko Jam concert. Difficulties with the JACCC hosting future conferences will be discussed in the conclusion of this report.

²¹ The 2003 North American Taiko Conference was held in Sacramento, California at California State University.

In the same way that Buddhist temples were—and to a degree remain—crucial to building a national network early in American taiko’s history, the North American Taiko Conference is a vital resource for forging and maintaining ties between taiko groups and players across the nation. One example of this came after the first conference when Duane Ebata, then managing director of the JACCC, suggested that groups hold regional conferences to meet those years that the national conference did not. The gatherings in the Pacific Northwest are a direct result of Ebata’s suggestion. As noted earlier, for groups such as Odaiko Sonora, with limited access to taiko resources, the taiko conference concentrates a wealth of opportunities for finding teachers, hearing other groups, learning new drumming techniques, and buying supplies. What once took weeks, e.g., constant phone calls to Japan looking for uniforms, or years, e.g., the time it took for drum-building technology to travel from California to New York, now takes place over one weekend because of the taiko conference.

The Japanese American National Museum (JANM) is an emerging resource for North American taiko. It will open an exhibit on taiko in the summer of 2005. This exhibit historically contextualizes American taiko activity and emphasizes the importance of documenting taiko’s history and preserving its material culture. The curator of this project is Sojin Kim. She and her staff have collected, transcribed, and archived a tremendous number of interviews with taiko performers, organizers, and composers from all over the United States. As a museum that maintains a permanent collection, JANM has the appropriate infrastructure, resources, staffing, and facilities to become a repository for material culture, oral histories, and other media related to taiko. In this way, the museum will be an invaluable resource for future students, scholars, and researchers investigating the history and transformation of American taiko.

Networks on a national scale were key to communicating information about taiko, e.g., where to buy uniforms, how to make drums, how to play, and were essential to promoting and developing American taiko. These networks remain active, a fact to which I can personally attest. While conducting research for this report, I was often told, “You should speak with ___” and it seemed as though each person had every other taiko player’s phone number or e-mail address at their fingertips. When I told Roy and PJ Hirabayashi that I had attended a Kinnara practice just a few days before, they knew exactly what I had done there because of e-mails they received from friends at Kinnara. When I told people that I was once a member of Soh Daiko, nearly everyone knew that the group was experiencing trouble with their practice space. There seems to be only two degrees of separation in the American taiko community. Technologies such as e-mail and the internet, institutions such as JACCC and Buddhist temples, and a history of openness and sharing all contribute to this level of intimacy.

Global Networks

Many taiko groups I spoke with have some kind of connection to Japan. These connections range from associations with Japanese taiko builders to buying uniforms and costumes and touring and performing in Japan. Increasingly, a number of taiko performers and groups are traveling to Japan to study.

Among taiko players, Kenny Endo was the first Japanese American to receive intensive instruction in Japan. Endo's early musical interests were in jazz drumming, and he became interested in taiko as he became increasingly political. He had an interest in creating an Asian American art form or musical language, but questioned the idea that Asian American music meant using a non-Asian genre, such as jazz, that only happened to be played by Americans of Asian descent. He states:

I was quite involved, in the 70s, in the Asian American movement and anti-war movement. And when Asian Americans [did] what is called "Asian American music" or "Asian American art" often I felt that the "Asian" element was missing and that it was simply people who had an ethnic background as Asian, but they were playing jazz or soul music or whatever...And when I saw taiko for the first time I said, 'Well, that's it.' It was something that I could relate to artistically, but was also a part of my roots and also a thing [where] I saw great potential for supplying that "Asian" in "Asian American" art.⁴⁴

Endo studied in Japan for more than ten years and was the first non-Japanese national to receive a *natori* (stage name) in *hogaku hayashi* (Japanese classical drumming). A *natori* is a kind of official recognition of artistic excellence, and, not surprisingly, it is very difficult to attain. For Endo, studying in Japan was more than an exploration of ethnic roots. In the same way a jazz musician might move to New York City to soak up the atmosphere and scene, Endo tells his students that they should go to Japan, especially Tokyo, to experience all the innovative developments in taiko performance. A new generation of players is following in Kenny Endo's footsteps and traveling to Japan to study taiko and other Japanese art forms. For example, the four member of the *Øn Ensemble*, all of whom are in their twenties and two of whom, Masato Baba and Shoji Kameda, played in Endo's ensemble, have studied or are studying in Japan for extended periods of time.

Most American taiko performers have not trained in Japan as intensively as Kenny Endo. Rather than living in Japan for months at a time, most groups travel there for a few weeks and take lessons from various troupes and teachers. Other groups have close associations with Japanese arts groups. San Jose Taiko, for example, has worked with Warabiza, a performing arts group in Japan that focuses on folk arts and dance. In the past, it was harder for groups to travel to Japan, and in the 1980s Endo was their connection to Japan. He sent them *happi* coats (used as uniforms during shows), instruments, and kept them connected to Japanese groups and drum builders.

Not all American taiko musicians believe that it is necessary to study in Japan. Tanaka, for one, argues that there are plenty of excellent teachers in the United States. Others are actively trying to create a voice for American taiko. Bryan Yamami, for example, argues for the creation of an American taiko art that makes no excuses for being uniquely and distinctly American:

I saw the pride that the Japanese community had for Kodo, and I felt like maybe my job is to create, or to help build, that sense of an American taiko identity [and

⁴⁴ Endo interview.

to have people say], ‘Wow...that’s totally American taiko,’ and it’s not apologizing for not being Japanese, but just being something that people can really feel that pride of being American.⁴⁵

For these reasons, Yamami decided against training with Kodo and concentrated on building taiko groups in the U.S. This is not to say that Yamami is completely disassociated with things Japanese. As noted above, the groups he is involved with use Asano drums rather than wine-barrel taiko drums. In fact, Yamami is similar to Endo in that they both strive to create an art form that is both Asian and American.

When questioned about the constitution or characteristics of American taiko versus Japanese taiko, most interviewees are hard-pressed to offer specific musical details. The timbral differences of wine-barrel taiko drums and traditional Japanese taiko, as noted above, are sometimes mentioned. There is no single stylistic element that characterizes all American groups—or Japanese groups for that matter. While San Jose Taiko’s incorporation of non-traditional beats with taiko drumming was innovative in the 1970s, this is increasingly widespread in both the U.S. and Japan. For Yamami, American taiko is distinguished less through sonic traits, and more by the communities it created—and continues to create—locally and nationally, in Buddhist temples, in Japantowns, and among Asian American groups. In an interview, he noted that people involved with taiko in Japan tell him that Japanese groups do not share the level of camaraderie seen among American groups, and that it was unlikely that an event such as the North American Taiko Conference would happen in Japan.

The global taiko network does not center entirely in Japan’s influence on American groups. As mentioned above in the discussion of San Jose Taiko, Japanese groups have been influenced by taiko performances they have seen in the U.S. Roy and PJ Hirabayashi noted the impact on Kodo and Ondekoza of seeing American groups with female performers, of hearing the combination of taiko with jazz and Latin rhythms, and of seeing the joy with which Americans play taiko. Additionally, American taiko groups have influenced other groups around the world. A former student of SJT, for instance, started a group in England and is currently attempting to create a taiko federation in the U.K.

Concerns and Developments in American Taiko

This section outlines points of concern among American taiko performers. Many of these topics, such as instruction, development, and copyright, are the subject of recent or current debates at the national Taiko Conference and other formal and informal gatherings. The portion on funding and financial resources is more descriptive, although, naturally, funding is a major consideration for group survival.

⁴⁵ Bryan Yamami, Interview, December 2, 2004.

The Authority to Teach

One difficulty in starting a group is finding a teacher or *sensei*. In the United States, there is no mechanism in place to facilitate the training and identification of taiko *sensei* just as there is no sanctioning body overseeing American taiko activities. Hence there are no prescribed examinations to evaluate one's credentials and no standards by which to determine whether or not someone is a qualified taiko *sensei*. To be clear, most people I interviewed prefer this situation and argue that a sanctioning body, such as the Nippon Taiko Foundation, would impose rules and regulations that would stifle the organic growth of the art form. How, then, is taiko taught in the United States?

The absence of a sanctioning body does not equal an absence of recognized authorities in taiko. Such persons are far and few between, but their influence is spread widely through teaching classes and workshops. Tanaka, for instance, has traveled across America to teach groups, and individuals trained in San Francisco Taiko Dojo go off to start groups elsewhere. Groups that have been directly influenced by Tanaka in turn influence other groups, and through this his imprint can be found in some fashion on many U.S. troupes. The ubiquity of his *Renshu* drill/composition attests to the extent of his reach. People like Tanaka are recognized as *sensei* for the instruction and accolades they received in Japan, as well as their generosity in sharing knowledge with others. Kenny Endo is similarly recognized, though he is slightly uncomfortable being called *sensei* outside of the dojo. Tiffany Tamaribuchi is becoming well-known as a taiko teacher and composer.⁴⁶ A number of individuals from long-standing groups, for example, SJT, Soh Daiko, Shasta Taiko, Portland Taiko, and Kinnara, have also influenced the creation of other taiko groups, though none of them would call themselves *sensei*. The authority these individuals and groups obtain is not built on certificates or awards, but rather on others' experiences with them in workshops or through a recognition of their artistry on stage. In such cases, authority to teach is given because there is an acknowledgment of an artist's excellence that comes through experience.

Obviously, these few, nationally-recognized drummers cannot lead the more than two hundred groups in the U.S. By necessity, groups must find a structure that is suitable to their needs. Some groups are organized under a single leader who may be referred to as *sensei* within the context of the group, but is not necessarily recognized as such outside of the group. One example is Burlington Taiko (BT), which was formed by Stuart Paton in 1986. Paton was a student of Tanaka's; he also spent many years growing up in Japan and so feels an affinity with aspects of Japanese culture. BT is strictly hierarchical with Paton as the *sensei*. Authority to teach and lead is therefore assumed in the structure of the group and given, if tacitly, by anyone agreeing to join BT. Odaiko New England (ONE) also has a single leader, Elaine Fong, and a structure similar to Burlington Taiko. When Fong founded ONE in 1994 her intention was to have a democratic and consensus-oriented structure, partly because this is what she knew from her experiences with Soh Daiko, where she played for several years, and San Jose Taiko, where she was General Manager for one year. However, soon after the group started, Fong realized that the absence of clear lines of authority and responsibility hindered ONE's development. She

⁴⁶ Tamaribuchi started taiko instruction under Tanaka, and continued her studies in Japan. In 1993 she was invited to perform with Ondekoza, which she did for three years. She is the founder of Sacramento Taiko Dan, and also leads two other groups from afar.

offered to step in as the leader and to take primary artistic and organizational control of the group, and the members basically voted her in. Although Fong makes the final decision in group matters, she seeks input from other members and tries to reach consensus on all her choices. Authority is given to Fong more or less democratically, although she remains the head of the organization. In both these cases, these individuals are also the most experienced drummers in their respective groups.

A number of groups have arrived at different solutions in part because they had no “authorized” *sensei* in the area. One example of this is Kinnara. As noted above, Rev. Kodani states that when Kinnara started all the members were new to taiko, so it made sense that no single person became the leader. He also argues that it went against the temple’s Buddhist philosophy to have a single leader. Individuals may lead drills or take the lead when teaching new songs, but they are less a group with a leader, and more a group of people working together towards a common goal.

Other groups are democratically organized and individuals are elected to positions of leadership, including teaching. Soh Daiko is one such group. The practice committee assigns practice leaders for month-long rotations. These positions are reevaluated annually. The fact that the practice leader switches monthly results in no single person dominating the practice sessions. Why someone is elected to teach the group differs from case to case, but it is likely that it is some combination of skill, teaching ability, leadership, and creativity. For Soh Daiko and similarly-organized groups, authority to teach is granted through election. San Jose Taiko is similarly democratically run. As noted above, Roy and PJ Hirabayshi state that SJT structure came out of their political and social activism and they emphasize the sense of ownership and self-determination. Hence, authority to teach, to organize, and to lead in SJT is granted through election.

Funding and Financial Support

Taiko groups and ensembles fund their activities through a combination of performance fees, lesson and workshop fees, external donations, and, if necessary, member dues and contributions. Those organized as a 501(c)(3) entities also receive local, state, and national grants. To a small extent, the sale of merchandise (t-shirts, CDs, DVDs) also helps to support groups. The fee for performances ranges anywhere from nothing or a small honorarium for community-based events to thousands of dollars for corporate shows. Workshop and lesson fees for students extend from a few dollars for grant-supported instruction, to hundreds of dollars for a month of classes or a large workshop. For community-based and collegiate groups, members are generally volunteers and do not receive a salary or payment for performing. Teaching, drum-building, maintenance, organizing, and promotion are all done by members of the group with no monetary compensation. Many groups also have teams of outside volunteers to help with organizational and other matters. Naturally, having a volunteer-based workforce offsets certain group expenditures. In such cases, whatever money comes in goes towards group expenditures (transportation, lodging, practice space, instrument maintenance) or into savings for future costs.

The payment situation differs for groups that tour more extensively, with some groups devising systems by which its performing members receive a small amount of money for teaching and performing. Some groups are arranged such that each member is responsible for paying a specified amount of money into the group's account every year. Performing members are credited a percentage of the performance fee and that goes towards fulfilling their "debt" to the group. If a member exceeds the required financial responsibility to the group, the surplus might be reimbursed. In other situations, performers are given a fixed percentage of the performance fee. Also, in some cases, members who teach public classes may be paid. Instructors at the SFTD receive a small stipend for each lesson they lead. In some sense, groups that tour or perform extensively are "professional," but this term requires definition. I define professional as "performing at a high skill level" or "making a living" from some activity, or both. Many taiko groups perform, or strive to perform, at a professional level, but very few people make their entire living from playing taiko. Even groups as established as San Jose Taiko or San Francisco Taiko have a full-time staff of only three or four people each.

Many groups have obtained nonprofit, 501(c)(3) status. Groups such as Portland Taiko, Odaiko New England, and Odaiko Sonora, to name a few, are fortunate because their founders were involved with nonprofit work and had experience with grant writing. Other groups are organized under a Buddhist temple and use the temple's nonprofit status to receive grants. Nonprofit taiko groups universally complain that funding resources are drying up or they are overlooked for funding. For example, Russel Baba and Jeanne Mercer had received arts grants to teach classes in Mt. Shasta, California, and so charged minimally for these classes. As these grants decreased or disappeared, they were forced to increase the price of their classes and to step up their efforts in locating more students just to break even financially. California groups all complain of diminished state resources for arts production. Another difficulty faced by taiko groups is a lack of recognition from funders who often do not understand the artistic developments in taiko and its importance to the Asian American community. Roy and PJ Hirabayashi feel that SFTD is often overlooked by funders who have difficulty understanding the group's identity as neither fully "traditional" nor fully "modern." Furthermore, taiko is not perceived as possessing the cultural capital of ballet troupes or Western orchestras, for instance, and taiko groups are ignored or given only limited funding in comparison to Western art troupes.

Several groups are involved with school programs. While this is a source of funding, most participate in school assemblies in order to teach children something about the complexity of Asian Americans. Johnny Mori, for example, argues that even in a state as diverse as California there are children who assume that every Asian person knows Bruce Lee or speaks Chinese. A major reason he performs at school assemblies is to reveal the diversity of both Asian Americans as a group, as well as the true multicultural constitution of this country.⁴⁷ This is similar to Ann Ishimaru's comments on Portland Taiko's mission, and PT does many school shows annually.

Taiko lessons, as such, are a relatively new development. Typically, it was the case that to learn to play meant joining a group and performing, which represents a significant commitment. Many groups have recognized that there are many who want to learn, but may not be able to commit to regular performances. Consequently, they have started offering classes, which are

⁴⁷ Mori interview.

also beneficial as a source of revue. A group with aspirations to acquire its own practice space, buy Japanese-made taiko drums, or tour can offset a percentage of these expenses through offering lessons and workshops to the public. For example, Bryan Yamami pays for his Asano drums through the lessons he gives at the Higashi Temple. Potentially, offering lessons also allows groups to find new performing members, and so serves as a recruitment tool.

Copyright and Ownership

During the 1999 North American Taiko Conference, a letter from Seido Kobayashi, of Sukeroku Taiko, was read to the gathered U.S. taiko community. It stated that anyone performing Sukeroku compositions or using the Sukeroku *dai* (their taiko stand) without permission was infringing upon the copyrights and patents of Oedo Sukeroku, and were asked to stop doing so. Since the Sukeroku style was nearly ubiquitous in the United States, this announcement was a major cause for concern. The Sukeroku style gained widespread acceptance through the work of people such as Tanaka. Tanaka had learned Sukeroku pieces directly from the group and he had passed it on to the members of San Francisco Taiko Dojo and taught the style to countless others through workshops and lessons.

Depending on who is asked, Kobayashi's letter was in actuality rooted in concerns over aesthetics (there were many Japanese and American groups playing Sukeroku pieces and doing it with varying degrees of artistry), greed (Kobayashi stipulates that those wishing to play Sukeroku pieces should pay a fee), narcissism (the idea that Kobayashi wanted to own this piece or style for himself), or a combination of all three.

The concern over copyright started in Japan, where many groups who had not studied with Sukeroku nevertheless used the Sukeroku style. Kobayashi's gaze turned to the United States when he heard from a California-based group that was making a taiko video for sale through Black Belt Magazine. A representative of the group asked for permission to play *yodanuchi* and was denied. The piece was removed from the final production, but the damage was done. Kobayashi asked all U.S. groups to stop playing Sukeroku pieces, even if it was not for profit-making ventures. Up until this point (and still today), it was not uncommon for American groups to play other composers' or groups' pieces in concert. The tacit understanding was that as long as credit was given, there was no wrongdoing. Groups typically attributed a composition's authorship in program notes or during short descriptions of the music and art form made to the audience between songs. In general, groups are now even more vigilant about attributing pieces and making sure that their audiences and members know the history of each composition they play, which is perhaps one positive impact of the whole ordeal.

Some of the stipulations of the Kobayashi letter were that anyone playing Sukeroku pieces must get permission from, train with, and pay fees to Sukeroku. The four original members are not in agreement concerning this matter. None of the individuals I interviewed have sought permission specifically as a result of the events of 1999, nor have they paid any fees, and no legal action has been taken against any American taiko group. It is important to keep in mind that the Sukeroku

situation is also a sign of the times. MP3 file sharing through the internet was a major legal issue in the late 1990s, with record companies filing suit against Napster on December 6, 1999.⁴⁸

For many groups, Seido Kobayashi's letter brought into relief the tension between the spirit of sharing that characterized the North American taiko community and the desire to rein in certain elements of taiko's expansion. While most felt that it was too much to ask groups to stop playing this ubiquitous style, many also agreed that it was wrong for one group to profit from another's composition. In many ways, this controversy signaled taiko's perhaps inevitable coming of age as a market commodity, and for many people this was new territory. Except for a few individuals making a living playing taiko, it remained a side activity for most. For better or worse, the stakes changed with the involvement of profit. Of course, profits in this case were comparatively small, bringing into question other factors shaping people's opinions. Considerations of respect were, no doubt, of equal or greater importance. Many people believed that the group hoping to put the Sukeroku piece on video was essentially taking the piece without permission, and this was likely more distasteful than anything having to do with money.

Despite the objections that people had over the use of the Sukeroku piece, no one formally reprimanded any member of the American group that made the Black Belt video, and no one I spoke with felt it was anyone's place to do so. By and large, their hope was that similar situations could be avoided through discussions about ownership or respect at events such as the Taiko Conference. The success of this solution remains to be seen.

In response to the overall social and legal climate and because of the Sukeroku controversy, TAIKOPROJECT offered their composition *Omiyage*, the name of which refers to the Japanese system of giving gifts.⁴⁹ *Omiyage* was conceived as a free domain piece available for anybody to play. The TP DVD, *(re)generation* (2004), includes bonus materials with instructions on how to play the various parts of *Omiyage*, and they also teach the song to others in workshops while on tour. This piece fights to preserve the way that music has been and continues to be shared within the American taiko community. Concerning the rationale for the piece, Shoji Kameda, the composer, opines:

[*Omiyage* is] meant to be a way that we give back to the taiko community. So the idea was that every place that we go to tour we have a workshop with a local taiko group and we would teach this song, and we would give this song to whatever taiko group was there with no strings attached. Meaning that they could take this song, they could change it, they could play it, they could do whatever it is they want with it, with only one condition. And the condition is that you cannot put more controls over it, you have to give it away in the same spirit that it was given

⁴⁸ Napster was an internet-based program that allowed for free "file-sharing" of MP3-encoded music files. MP3 is a data-compression algorithm for sound that is popular because sonic fidelity remains good even at relatively high compression ratios such as 6:1 (six times smaller than original). The small size of MP3 files makes them convenient for transmission over the internet. In 2003, Napster reinvented itself as a pay-per-song download service.

⁴⁹ *Omiyage* was conceived by Bryan Yamami as a piece addressing copyright issues that were part of the social climate at the time. However, Shoji Kameda composed the piece and his focus was as much on the Sukeroku controversy as anything else. Therefore, when it comes to compositional intent, *Omiyage* is of two minds (personal communication with Yamami and Kameda).

to you. You can't demand that somebody seek your permission to play this song, you have to just share it with those around you and I think that's one of the legacies of the pioneers of North American taiko. They set this space of a sharing and open community, one based on just the passion of playing taiko and wanting to share that with others. Of course, as anything develops, there become successful groups, powerful groups, and people who want to extend their spheres of influence. I think that comes with the territory as the art form grows. We wanted to make sure that this tradition of sharing and openness and generosity continues in our generation.⁵⁰

Kameda's comments work on many different levels. Of course, they are directly related to issues of copyright and the free exchange of information. He is also concerned with what he sees as the legacy of American taiko, one which centers on ideas of sharing and openness. Finally, the idea that "you cannot put more controls over it, you have to give it away in the same spirit that it was given to you" is philosophically resonant with open-source computer code adherents using Linux and similar operating systems. Such systems are held up as alternatives to Microsoft's monopoly. Interestingly, the TP DVD does not contain the familiar FBI warning against duplication. Kameda combines attention to American taiko's history with contemporary, technological concerns. As with many issues, there is no unified voice with which the taiko community speaks concerning copyright.

Expansion and Concerns over Expansion

It is clear from this research that taiko is historically rooted in the Japanese American community, and that most of the major figures in the taiko community are Japanese Americans. However, as taiko increases in popularity, a greater number of non-Japanese and non-Asian Americans are becoming involved with taiko. There are many reasons for the rise in interest in taiko. In the 1980s and 1990s, Japanese groups such as Kodo arrived on the concert tour scene at the same time that world music or world beat was becoming increasingly popular globally. Apart from social trends, the interest in taiko is often explained in musical, or even physical, terms. The sheer volume of the taiko, along with the drummers' choreographed moves, makes it a viscerally attractive art form. Several people have told me that they were so overwhelmed the first time they saw taiko in concert, they cried. Moreover, many taiko players compare drumming in general, and taiko specifically, to the human heartbeat. The name Kodo, for example, means both "children of the drum" and also "heartbeat." The Kodo website offers further elaboration: "The sound of the great taiko is said to resemble a mother's heartbeat as felt in the womb, and it is no myth that babies are often lulled asleep by its thunderous vibrations."⁵¹ For this reason, taiko is said to be universal and, perhaps as evidence of this, new groups have formed far away from historically Japanese American communities in places like Vermont and Texas.

⁵⁰ Cast audio commentary track for *Omiyage* on the DVD *(re)generation* (2004).

⁵¹ See <http://www.kodo.or.jp>

In this way, taiko is Janus-faced: it is culturally-specific—a voice for Japanese and *Sansei* Japanese American identity—while also universal and appealing to a wide audience. These two sides present benefits and difficulties for proponents of American taiko. On the positive side, the seemingly universal attraction of taiko potentially means larger audiences, a stronger pool of performers, and the recognition of funding agencies. At the same time, those in the taiko community today believe that popularity also presents the potential for a loss of artistry and a detachment from community.

As noted above, one of Tanaka's goals for taiko is to make it a common part of the American consciousness. When asked if there are drawbacks to such popularity, he states that he worries about the quality of the art form as it spreads. His concern is that a person with little or no training might see taiko in concert or on the internet, buy a CD, make or buy some taiko drums, and call him or herself a taiko teacher. Tanaka argues that if such a person had few or no connections to Japanese or Japanese American taiko playing, he or she would dilute the art form by removing it from its roots in *obon* celebrations and traditional Japanese drumming practices. In his mind, this situation would be equivalent to someone teaching himself or herself violin without teachers or knowledge of some repertoire of violin performance. Such a situation, more than likely, would create bad violin players. Tanaka argues that similar occurrences have taken place in martial arts training where people simply read books and open a school with little or no formal training, and he wants to avoid this situation in taiko. This problem is related to the concern over the authority to teach in that there is no unified sanctioning body determining an individual's worthiness to start a taiko group.

In an attempt to address some of these anxieties, Tanaka is attempting to link American taiko groups with the Nippon Taiko Foundation in Japan, established in 1997. Tanaka is the only American or Japanese American taiko artist recognized by the Taiko Foundation as a taiko *sensei*. He believes that an alliance with the Japanese organization will benefit American groups by bringing Japanese drummers here to teach, having American groups go to Japan to perform, and by providing all taiko players with knowledge about the history and traditions of the art form. In essence, Tanaka wants to establish a centralized resource center to provide the American taiko community with definitive and authoritative information about taiko and other Japanese arts. His belief is that through a taiko federation, the artistry of all American taiko performers will increase.

Despite the problems with the decentralized nature of the taiko community, many people are wary of creating a taiko federation for a number of reasons. Many are concerned that the organization would police groups through the codification of instruction and technique. They are also worried about having too much Japanese involvement since Japanese members or authorities would not be invested in or knowledgeable about American taiko's development and issues. Many argue that the existence of the Taiko Conference eliminates the need to create a taiko federation or a similar organizing body. For them, the conference acts as a venue where ideas are exchanged and debated, which is precisely what they think a taiko federation would do. As with many concerns in the U.S. taiko community, there is no unanimity on this matter.

Like Tanaka, Roy and PJ Hirabayashi are worried that taiko's increasing popularity may result in a dilution of the practice. And though they are also concerned with the dilution of artistry, their

worries center more on the way that taiko is becoming disconnected from community-building efforts. PJ describes her concerns here:

Paul Yoon: Is taiko today an Asian American art form?

PJ Hirabayashi: I don't know. Hearing the question, and what's going through my head right now is, 'no, I don't see that.' I don't see it because the speed in which taiko is growing, it's going in all directions, and often times there's no real common base for where it comes from or the context of where taiko comes from is not really clearly understood...[taiko has] really [branched] out into many directions where there are many groups that exist that have no Asians, or have no idea what it is that they're doing except that they want to beat that drum, and there's no philosophy or, I will say, art form, you know, a practicing discipline.

P: Do you think that's lamentable, or inevitable, or what do you think of that situation?

PJ: I agree with both of those words [laughs]. Yes. If we lose sight of where it is that it came from or for the communities that it originally was the voice for...I think that's lamentable. The inevitable is, yes, as what I said, is the speed in which, how it grows and how taiko is just so popular. People coming back from Japan [from the JET program], a lot of non-Asians who go to Japan and might have experienced taiko in these very small communities want to maintain those memories and start something over here, but it's in a completely different connection.⁵²

Both Roy and PJ believe that one possible benefit of creating a kind of U.S. taiko federation would be the ability to share information about taiko's roots in the Asian American movement with new groups just starting out. However, they are wary of Tanaka's proposal for such a federation because it is, in their opinion, biased too much towards policing taiko groups and directing their growth through standardization.

Related to the concerns voiced by Roy and PJ Hirabayashi, Alan Okada of Soh Daiko is wary of the trend he sees among younger players of approaching taiko as more of a musical endeavor without a cultural understanding. He questions whether American taiko persists as taiko (as opposed to a generic percussion ensemble) when the element of Japanese, Japanese American, or Asian American culture and heritage is removed. Okada also sees this as a troubling trend among younger Asian Americans in general. Speaking on Soh Daiko's involvement with the annual Asian Pacific American Heritage Festival in New York City, Alan states:

[Soh Daiko has] played at the Asian American festival every year for almost 20 years. . . we viewed it as our community and an important part of our community.

⁵² Hirabayashi interview. The Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program began in 1987. This program links university graduates with contracting organizations in Japan such as schools and local government offices. The purpose is to effect cultural exchange and offer opportunities for language education. By 2004, over 40,000 people worldwide have participated in JET.

And in the early years [the participants were] mostly the Chinatown Health Clinic, the Japanese American Community Service, and all of these social and human services organizations that were made up of people who were involved in the movement or who had some commitment to a broader community of Asian Americans. Now, there's a whole new generation of young people [organizing the festival] who have Asian professional and social organizations. So anyway, a bunch of volunteers came in, they organized the program, and we weren't invited to play that year. And every one of the performers [for that year] essentially was [an] Asian or Asian American doing western musical forms like rap or hip-hop, rock and roll, jazz, and there were no traditional musical forms presented. And so here you are with an Asian *heritage* festival with no traditional music or dance at all because these young people didn't think about it, or didn't like it, or didn't care... These people have no sense of heritage. Their sense of Asian American art is Asian Americans doing other people's art. And so that was pretty depressing. So my fear is that even among Asian Americans, let alone non-Asians who are taking up taiko, there are going to be people who want to do their own thing and who will not value anything that's traditional.⁵³

Okada's statement is related to Kenny Endo's narrative regarding studying taiko in Japan in order to emphasize the "Asian" part of "Asian American" art. As with Tanaka, Okada is distressed that taiko will become watered down through greater exposure. Part of Okada's concern is with artistic skill, but he is also worried that "there is [the] potential for people starting taiko groups that [are] completely disconnected from any history or culture."

Looking at younger taiko performers, there is no clear-cut response to the fears expressed above. On the one hand, groups such as the TAIKOPROJECT evoke the spirit of their drumming mentors. This is evident in the thinking behind *Omiyage* and *Pioneers*, as described above. Many of the group's members have studied music or dance in Japan and have traveled there frequently. In this way, TP acknowledges taiko's past as well as its connections to Japan. On the other hand, Shoji Kameda, TP member and composer, believes that taiko must extend beyond the boundaries of being an ethnic art form. He states:

There's a different set of challenges for taiko to break out of its "ethnic" label. But I would like to see it grow in that way. For it to develop as an art form it does need to move outside of the Japanese American and Asian American community and I think that's already starting to happen... I feel like, the history of North American taiko is always going to be rooted in the Asian American movement, and it's always going to have its roots in the Japanese American and the Asian American community. But it doesn't mean it has to stay there. That's something that's always going to be there and you can't separate the art form from that history. But at the same time, for it to grow, for it to move forward, it needs to expand out of that community... and if people play without an understanding of that history, that's also ok with me.⁵⁴

⁵³ Alan Okada, Interview (telephone), February 8, 2005.

⁵⁴ Kameda interview.

Connection to taiko's social and musical history is important for Kameda, but he does not believe that his interests need to be every taiko player's interests. In essence, sharing and growth are as or more significant than considerations of community, history, or skill. For Kameda, these are the principles that taiko was founded on, and he believes that the taiko community cannot reject these principles simply because they have developed in unpredictable ways. He continues:

If you want [taiko] to be this bigger thing, if you want it to really grow, to really become a part of a greater North American culture, or you want it to resonate with more people, there's no way you're going to control that. There's no way you're going to make everybody sit down and read up on their minority history. That's just unreasonable. We can do what we can to encourage that, and I think that's very important. But to me, you can't give something with strings attached. You can't say, 'Please love this art form. Please be a part of this, but do it in this way.' I feel like you have to let go in a certain way.⁵⁵

In short, there is no simple answer to the concern over how expansion is occurring in the American taiko art form. In fact, there is no agreement on whether this really is a point of concern. What is clear is that these issues arise in this historical moment because of taiko's increased popularity across the United States. Broadly put, the views quoted above are concerned with authenticity. Tanaka, for one, considers the connection between contemporary taiko practices with past practices in the U.S. and Japan. In essence, this is a deliberation over "true" or "real" taiko, determined in part by one's mastery of existing taiko styles. Even collaborative or avant garde taiko compositions would be judged by the performers' knowledge of a taiko repertoire or with the incorporation of traditional rhythms in new contexts. This is primarily a musical or artistic consideration. The other reflections on authenticity concern the "true spirit" informing taiko, focusing on community ties and heritage. Authenticity, then, is determined by the performer's philosophical intention, one which promotes Asian American community building and pride. All of these considerations deeply inform the debates on current American taiko practices.

Conclusion

To speak of a singular taiko community is a necessary fiction of convenience. More accurately, there are separate taiko groups and ensembles that are bound to one another by their love of playing a Japanese/Japanese American instrument. At times, these groups unite to speak with a single voice on aesthetics, tradition, authenticity, representation, and ethnicity. At other times, they are fractured along the same lines. It is important to recognize that each taiko group has unique goals and desires. Some strive to perform on world-class stages, while others feel that their role is to bring vitality to local Asian American and Japanese American community efforts. Some seek to be "traditional," others work to be "modern." Some conceive of their group as a voice for Asian Americans, others have no Asian or Asian American members and so have other motivations. These impulses are equally important. The strength of the art form is its

⁵⁵ Ibid.

malleability: taiko is welcome at small, local, outdoor festivals as well as Carnegie Hall; it is a symbol of ethnic pride while simultaneously being a universally appealing art form; it is necessarily connected to Japan and Japanese Americans, but also positioned as a voice for a new generation who are fighting for a re-imagination of what it means to be American.

After more than thirty-five years of taiko playing in the United States, taiko as an art form has grown more popular than most would have predicted. At the same time, there are numerous concerns that demand attention if taiko's future is to be assured. In what follows, some of these considerations relevant to taiko at a national level or to individual taiko groups are laid out, covering practices space, nationwide organizing, archiving, succession, creating school programs, and funding artistic development.

Practice Space

Finding a suitable practice space can be a matter of survival for taiko groups, and the difficulty of locating space is compounded by the sheer volume of the drum. Some solve this dilemma through associations with temples, churches, and community centers, many of which actively seek associations with taiko groups. For groups such as the San Francisco Taiko Dojo or San Jose Taiko, the move to a larger practice space has allowed them to grow, offer lessons, and, for SJT, physically reconnect with the Japanese American community. For others, owning their own building is undesirable or financially impossible. Kenny Endo, for instance, conducts lessons through a community college precisely in order not to be beholden to a mortgage and to concentrate on his music. Acquiring rehearsal space may be the defining logistical factor in getting a new group started. If a group is not affiliated with a community-based center, the cost of renting can be prohibitive.

Practice space can also be a factor for established groups. Recently, Soh Daiko has run into problems with their practice space at the New York Buddhist church. Although there were long-standing agreements with tenants in the surrounding buildings, new neighbors have complained about the noise and have forced the group to limit their playing time significantly. There are really only two solutions being entertained at the time of this writing: build a soundproof wall or find a practice space outside the Buddhist Church. Either solution costs tremendous amounts of money. The idea of moving out of the church is unappealing because it is an inexpensive place to practice, but it is also important to bear in mind that a move outside of Manhattan, for instance to another borough or even New Jersey, would inevitably alter group membership and connections. Some members might not be able to attend practice because of distance, and moving out of the church might disconnect the group from certain Asian American or Japanese American communities and community organizing. Of course, it is possible for positive results to come of the move, but the fact remains that the outcome is uncertain. The disadvantage with building a wall is not only the cost, which some companies have estimated at tens of thousands of dollars. It is also that a concrete structure thick enough to muffle the sound of taiko drums would significantly decrease the practice area, and the basement where Soh Daiko rehearses is already quite small.

Soh Daiko's members are currently considering ways to raise funds to build a wall, but this

means accepting performances they would otherwise have declined. Historically, Soh Daiko has been able to choose exactly which shows they want to play because, lacking full-time staff and having relatively little overhead, they had less need to generate income. The performances they typically chose were events in which members had a vested interest, and frequently this resulted in the group playing Asian American and community-based functions. In the past, lucrative offers for corporate shows were declined either because no one in the group was interested or because members felt morally or politically conflicted about the company requesting the show. Building the wall would mean more shows, despite less rehearsal time because of new practice restrictions, greater time commitment from members, and accepting shows that are not immediately compelling to members. Just as moving from the church carries with it unpredictable consequences, this new fund-raising imperative could change the group in problematic ways. In short, the need to secure practice space is a huge concern for taiko groups.

Nationwide Organizing

The taiko community, in all its diversity, has become increasingly self-reflexive, in part due to events such as the North American Taiko Conference. All of the issues and concerns outlined in this study have been or are being addressed through formal and informal discussions and debates at the conference. The impact the conference has had in building local and national infrastructure to support groups is invaluable and must continue. However, the future of the conference is uncertain primarily because the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center can no longer sponsor it due to their own financial troubles. Focusing financial resources on existing support structures and institutions, such as the JACCC and JANM, is one way to help sustain taiko activity in the United States.

Archiving

The taiko community is fortunate because most of its influential figures remain active in the art form. Naturally, this will not always be the case. It is imperative that groups document their histories and compositions before both are lost forever. It is to be hoped that the 2005 exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum will impress upon taiko groups the need to preserve their histories. Preservation will entail gathering oral histories of group members and their motivations for forming the group, as well as information on the group's organizational structure and organizational transformation. Also, since taiko does not have a standardized, written notation, and because most players cannot read Western musical notation, some other means of documenting compositions must be found. Certainly audio recording is one possibility, as is video recording. Video also has the benefit of capturing the choreography associated with each piece. Groups will need to learn archival technologies and techniques, and start to think about the preservation and proper storage of these recordings and documents.

Succession

While archiving focuses on a group's past, succession looks to its future. A number of groups

are lead by a single charismatic leader or a small group of two or three leaders. “Leader” in this case does not necessarily refer to *sensei*, although it can, but rather the idea that this individual is the key element around which the group coheres. Seiichi Tanaka is one example. When he finally decides to stop playing, or can no longer play, what will happen to the San Francisco Taiko Dojo? To date, there is no clear line of succession. Tanaka is, in every respect, the leader of the group; when he goes, who will take over? Even community-based groups face this dilemma. Groups such as Portland Taiko, Odaiko New England, and San Jose Taiko have addressed or are addressing this issue partly out of their respective leaders’ own desires to assure the group’s future, and partly at the behest of their boards of directors (PT, ONE, and SJT are all nonprofit). The external pressure from a board of directors is one way to ensure that groups think about their future leadership, but, of course, not every group is willing to organize as a 501(c)(3) entity. In the absence of the internal attention to the question of succession, a number of groups face an uncertain future.

Related to questions of succession is a concern over member retention. Ann Ishimaru states that in the taiko community there is a large gap in experience between those who have been playing taiko for ten or more years and those who have been at it for two years or less, and very few people in between. Developing long-term interest in taiko—so that people continue playing and growing in a group for five, ten, fifteen years—requires a focus on artistic development, connecting collegiate groups with community-based groups, and educating audiences, members, presenters, and funders about the artistry and evolution of American taiko. Of equal importance is the development of youth programs, in both private and public schools, that introduce children from a young age to music generally, and taiko specifically. Groups and artists such as Portland Taiko, Kenny Endo, and SJT have addressed these concerns with artist fellowships and similar programs. Most groups, however, do not have the resources or expertise to develop and promote such initiatives, upon which the future of taiko in the U.S. depends in good measure.

Creating Education Programs

As noted above, many groups do outreach in school systems. They believe both in the need to have arts in public education and to expose children to the diversity of the Asian American community. Funding is needed for groups that want to develop or expand existing school curricula as well as for supporting groups in creating new programs.

Artistic Development

Taiko groups such as Øn Ensemble must contend with audiences and funders who view them askance because they do not fit into existing categories of either authentic folk music or classical Western art music. Even San Jose Taiko faces these types of barriers. As with contemporary musical forms such as jazz and hip hop, taiko is evolving. This evolution sometimes harkens to Japan, sometimes to computer music, and sometimes to Latin rhythms. It is imperative that a broader understanding of taiko is available, one that does not rely on static stereotypes of ethnic music making, and one that recognizes the vitality of a living art form such as taiko.

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