

# Taiko as Performance: Creating Japanese American Traditions

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## INTRODUCTION

The acoustics, rhythms, and visual symbols of taiko illuminate the culturally specific values and beliefs of Japanese Americans, mirroring their ties to Japanese traditions but transcending ethnic boundaries as well. Taiko has prevailed as the most powerful mode of folk expression among Japanese Americans since the late 1960s, surviving acculturation of the ethnic community into American society. Sansei, the third generation Japanese Americans, discovered new meanings in this form of the Japanese folk tradition and have transformed it into an effective medium of self-expression.

The significance of this new folk tradition highlights its performance perspective. Taiko, performed before an audience, carries cultural, historical, and social messages from Japanese Americans to their own community and also to the larger society. Sansei performers began to perform taiko because they found it calls attention to and involves self-conscious manipulation of the formal features of the communicative system.<sup>1</sup> Taiko mediates the inner struggles and dilemmas of individual sansei performers through the reflexivity of its performance. Presented in public, the emerging American taiko tradition has also matured into

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a cultural performance, and functions as a means for the Japanese American community to claim higher esteem in multicultural American society. This progress is related to the influence of public folklore, whose discourse has encouraged “the representation and application of folk traditions in new contours and contexts.”<sup>3</sup>

In accordance with the enlarging scope of the *taiko* movement, *taiko* performers have further multiplied the expressive dimensions of *taiko* in diverse ways and have called attention to the concern that the *taiko* community needs to reevaluate the basis of *taiko* tradition and its authenticity. How has *taiko* developed into the “most prominent performance context” within the community?<sup>4</sup> What has it communicated to American society, and what has shaped the foundation of American *taiko* traditions? In this article I will discuss various aspects of the process by which *taiko* has evolved into the most prominent cultural performance of the community. For the purpose of analysis, I will focus on two influential *taiko* groups, San Francisco Taiko Dojo and Kinnara, and the role of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) as a principal cultural institution in the Japanese American community. By locating these organizations in the socio-historical context of the Japanese American community, as well as in the larger context of American society since the late 1960s, I will examine the significance of folk tradition as communication and ethnic presentation.

#### THE *TAIKO* MOVEMENT IN AMERICA

*Taiko* as a group performance emerged within the social changes and background of folklore revivalism, the Asian American movement, and a Japanese economic takeover in the Japanese American community during the 1960s and 1970s. In the volatile social climate of that time, a Japanese youth named Seiichi Tanaka left Japan for America and founded the first American *taiko* group in 1968 in San Francisco.<sup>5</sup> Tanaka’s commitment to *taiko* mirrored the counter-culture movement among youth both in Japan and the United States where students and activists used folk expressions as vehicles to convey their social and political messages. The forceful performing style Tanaka exercised in his group, San Francisco Taiko Dojo, incorporating the disciplines and movements of martial arts, depicted the empowerment of youth and ethnic minorities. Framed within the social context, particularly within a distinctively

Japanese or Japanese American event like the Cherry Blossom Festival, the *taiko* performances with their dynamic visual images stirred Japanese American audiences. They evoked memories and emotions that drew them back to their ancestral past.

American *taiko* originated in San Francisco, a symbolically important hub of youth radical movements during the sixties and seventies, and its significance for sansei began to grow within the context of their rising Asian American activism as they struggled with the racism of American society. They tried to find ways to reconsider the past experiences of issei, first-generation, and nisei, second-generation Japanese Americans, and current social realities. Sansei questioned the silence of their grandparents and parents toward American society, despite their having been unjustifiably incarcerated in concentration camps during World War II. Sansei also questioned their own conformity as “model minorities” and unwillingness to fight against racial prejudice as strongly as African Americans.<sup>6</sup> As they dealt with the challenge of modern social problems, these grandchildren of immigrants turned to their heritage for inspiration. By engaging with the past, sansei performers made a commitment to the search for their ethnic identity using Japanese traditions as a foundation.

In pre-modern Japanese villages, *taiko* served to enliven spirits, conquer fears and protect community boundaries against evil spirits, and the acoustic volume of drums helped to assert the community’s power and influence.<sup>7</sup> Retrieved from the Japanese past, the folk tradition of *taiko* transcended time and space and complemented the cultural and political endeavors of sansei. In *taiko* performance, which was compatible with their struggles within American society and with their questioning of their own self-image, sansei encoded subversive messages to the dominant society. The resonance of the drumming worked as a metaphor for breaking out of silence and releasing long-suppressed voices of anger. Sansei physically acted out their resistance against inequality and injustice in American society and against their own passivity and weakness through actions such as whirling sticks over their heads, shouting, jumping, turning, and pounding on *taiko*.

The reflexivity of the performance allowed the performer to act as himself or herself, and at the same time to look at the performance from the perspective of the acting self. By attaching more musically and visually Japanese symbols to performances, they asserted themselves more

clearly in American society. By accepting Japanese traditions, sansei performers saw their ethnicity becoming visible to white Americans. This process spurred sansei *taiko* performers to a new threshold of self-acceptance and self-confidence. However, the new consciousness emerged not by cherishing nostalgic visions of the past, but coping with present interactions with modern Japanese, who began to arrive in the United States as their economy developed, and were quite different from the image of Japanese that issei maintained from the past.

Strengthened economic ties between the Japanese American community and Japanese business have boosted the *taiko* movement since the late 1960s.<sup>8</sup> The growth of Japan's postwar economy and trade with the United States spurred Japanese corporations to establish branches in the Japanese American community, which invited frequent encounters with Japanese. They constituted a new group of Japanese in the community and, apart from businessmen, those who remained in the United States like Tanaka were to be known as *shin-issei*, the new first-generation Japanese immigrants.<sup>9</sup> Ranging from Japanese nationals and *shin-issei* to *yonsei*, fourth-generation Japanese Americans, Japanese American society became less homogeneous and embraced more stratified segments. Each group shared the same ethnic and cultural roots and felt emotional kinship with one another, but at the same time each comprehended their ethnic pride largely or slightly differently from the others. Close interactions among them produced community power, but also tension and conflict.

Little Tokyo in Los Angeles typified the new structure of the Japanese American community, where Japanese organizations were establishing their business enterprises and investing for the revitalization of the community. The economic impact of Japan was clearly illustrated in the 1960s in the Nisei Week Festival in Little Tokyo, which is the largest and oldest cultural manifestation of the Japanese American community. Prior to the postwar Japanese arrival, historian Lon Yuki Kurashige writes in his study of the Festival, *nisei* had promoted white American appearances in the festival so that it could look patriotic to the United States.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, in the 1960s the parade turned into what he calls "a showcase for Japanese culture and businesses," with floats advertising Japanese corporations and *mikoshi*, portable Shinto shrines. Regardless of some community leaders' concern for the "big influx of the Japanese from Japan," in 1975 the festival officially came to be called "Nisei Week

'Japanese' Festival."<sup>11</sup> Some members of the community viewed Japan's involvement critically, but others saw it positively and openly exhibited their ties to Japanese traditions, which they had previously tried to deny in the face of racial prejudice.

*Taiko* responded to the need to mediate the disparity within the community. In the midst of the overpowering presence of the Japanese economy, the Festival incorporated *taiko*, performed by Tanaka's San Francisco group, into its parade in 1971. When the community called for an ethnic hallmark that could work as a marker of shared identity, *taiko* performances met the need. The spectacle of *taiko* dramatized the cultural event and functioned to unite Japanese Americans and the Japanese. Kango Kunitsugu, a nisei member of the Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association, favorably described the excitement of the first *taiko* entry: "As the perspiring drummers pounded furiously away, spectators felt an answering thrill run down their backs. This was what the Japanese festival was all about. It was an exhilarating moment."<sup>12</sup> His comment suggests that through this emotional experience Japanese Americans united their community and also reestablished ties with the Japanese. *Taiko* within the particular Festival frame communicated non-verbal messages effectively to enhance ethnic ties within the community.

Tanaka's powerful performance of *taiko* as a Japanese symbol in the Nisei Week parade nevertheless depicted the weight of the Japanese newcomers within the Japanese American community and also the ethnic pride of Japan-born Tanaka. Likewise through his ensuing visible presence as a *taiko* drummer in other community events and concerts, his efforts propelled the diffusion of *taiko* throughout North America. Among the earliest groups formed were Kinnara Taiko, begun in 1969 in Los Angeles, Denver Taiko in 1976, Los Angeles Matsuri Taiko in 1977, Midwestern Buddhist Temple Taiko Group in 1977 in Chicago, and Soh Daiko in 1979 in New York.<sup>13</sup> Thus Tanaka has been designated "Grand Master" among American *taiko* performers, and has established his legendary status in the growing *taiko* community.<sup>14</sup>

#### BUDDHIST TAIKO

The development of *taiko* was consolidated by the Japanese American Buddhist community, which centered in a temple as a spiritual and cultural ground. Following Tanaka's group, sansei formed numerous

*taiko* groups in Buddhist temples throughout the 1970s and this enabled *taiko* to take root in the foundation of the Japanese American community.

The incorporation of *taiko* into two folk traditions in the temple was an important factor to support the movement. *Taiko* had been used as a musical instrument to accompany folk dance at the Bon festival, a celebration of ancestors in the summer, which had created an opportunity to tighten community ties as well as affirm ancestral roots in the prewar Japanese immigrant enclave.<sup>15</sup> Replacing this marginal function, group performance of *taiko* took the spotlight at the festival in the late 1960s and thereafter. With the vibrant sounds and rhythms of the new *taiko* style and the staging effects of the performance, *taiko* became a prominent feature of the Bon festival. It revitalized community gatherings and strengthened the collective Japanese American consciousness by attracting back those who had dispersed in the suburbs in the postwar years, especially young members.<sup>16</sup>

The other tradition that incorporated *taiko* was the Buddhist performing arts of *horaku*, which was dharma entertainment used as an effective means to teach Buddhist ideas.<sup>17</sup> Susan Asai, ethnomusicologist, explains that *horaku* was brought into the community by issei and practiced in Buddhist temples in the 1920s and 1930s. It included dances, songs, and comic plays along with classical Japanese musical instruments such as *shamisen* (long-necked plucked lute), *koto* (long board zither), and *shakuhachi* (end-blown bamboo flute). Such explicit art forms could not survive American anti-Japanese sentiments and antagonism, and almost disappeared by the end of World War II. Asai claims that the decline of *horaku* occurred in the Americanization of Japanese Buddhism, as the younger generations replaced the sounds and rhythms from ancient Japan with singing, skits, and short plays. But a revival of *horaku* began in the late 1960s with the introduction of *taiko* as a performing art, whereas this form of Buddhist *taiko* in the United States does not exist in the Buddhist temples of Japan.<sup>18</sup>

I view Kinnara Taiko as a group that asserts distinctively Japanese American values based on Buddhist beliefs and teachings, and in this sense differs from the Japan-oriented group of Tanaka.<sup>19</sup> At the rise of the Asian American movement, Kinnara Taiko was formed in 1969 by a group of sansei members in the Senshin Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles. Kinnara established a unique style of *taiko*, attributing its ori-

gin to the prewar tradition of *horaku*, and indicated its faith in Buddhism by using the Sanskrit word “Kinnara,” celestial beings, for their group name. Bryan Yamami, a yonsei member, says that in contrast to the master-student hierarchic relationship and the strict discipline of mind and body typically exercised by Japanese *taiko* groups, Kinnara has no master and no rules among its members.<sup>20</sup> This belief in freedom of participation and innovation is a source of potential conflict with Japanese traditional interpretations of *taiko*. Members of Kinnara do not define *taiko* as a solely Japanese tradition, and attempt to depart from it in order to define their own *taiko*.

True to their identification with *horaku*, Kinnara performances includes dances, such as the Lion Dance, and comic interludes, along with a variety of percussion instruments such as shell horns and bells.<sup>21</sup> The group emphasizes their multicultural identification with Buddhism, Japan, America, and other neighbors: the temple is not in a Japanese American enclave, but in what has become an African American and Latino neighborhood in Los Angeles, as Japanese Americans moved to the suburbs. Likewise the Japanese American Buddhist community offers a space that transcends national boundaries between America and Japan. Buddhist *taiko* forms a basis from which the performer contemplates Japanese traditions in the light of Buddhist teaching and seeks self-images that fulfill them, self-images that are neither solely Japanese nor American symbols but coordinate well with a multiethnic environment.

These Buddhist *taiko* groups formed by sansei, comprising a large part of the *taiko* community, thus pose new meanings for the Japanese tradition of *taiko*. The increase of *taiko* groups has also fostered competitiveness among performers and the skillful and artistic refinement of *taiko* as a performing art. Meanwhile growing social concern and political support for multiculturalism in the 1970s and thereafter have brought *taiko* performers to a wider range of audiences in the United States. As *taiko* performance expresses the inner voices of young Japanese Americans, it gains opportunities to be formally presented at public arenas and thus lets them reach out to the larger society. It has developed into a confident cultural statement communicating Japanese American traditions and history on a national stage.

## TAIKO AT THE NATIONAL MALL

Heightened public awareness of the pluralistic and multicultural outlook of American society has elevated *taiko* into a prominent performing art that encapsulates Japanese American messages. Since the early 1970s, cultural programs in the United States have endorsed ethnic diversity rather than enforced assimilation to white American society.<sup>22</sup> National, state, and community festivals and exhibitions have called attention to ethnic and traditional folk performances and demonstrations of folk crafts and arts. This positive appreciation of cultural diversity has given marginal ethnic communities an opportunity to have a voice in defining American culture.

An important step forward in this progress occurred in 1983 when *taiko* performance made its debut at the Festival of American Folklife, which had been produced annually since 1967 in Washington, D.C. by the Smithsonian Institution. *Taiko* was represented by a Japanese American community from New Jersey in that year's New Jersey Program, and a Buddhist *taiko* group from New York, Soh Daiko, perhaps because of proximity to Washington, D.C., demonstrated *taiko* at a workshop.<sup>23</sup> Japanese Americans further enlarged the magnitude of their presentation in the 1986 Japan Program with the institutional participation of the Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC) from Los Angeles. *Taiko*, performed by members of the Buddhist *taiko* group Kinnara, comprised a marked feature of their exhibit.<sup>24</sup> The program, as part of the "Old Ways in the New World Program," was intended to juxtapose immigrant folk traditions in the United States with those of their countries of origin. The Buddhist *taiko* groups signified the emergent folk tradition of young Japanese Americans and thus most clearly indicated the distance between Japanese American perceptions of ethnicity and those of Japanese nationals. A focal point of the Japanese troupe was a rice-planting performance by a cultural preservation group from Hiroshima, a Japanese presentation oriented toward the past and stressing the importance of rice as a national symbol.<sup>25</sup> Distinct from the Japanese presentation, Buddhist *taiko* exhibited the contemporary and future oriented aspect of the emerging Japanese American tradition, taking pride in representing an American community officially at the National Mall in the nation's capital. *Taiko* now embodies part of American culture, and no longer belongs only to Japan.



Public recognition at national events has allowed Japanese American traditions and communities to gain a more respected and prominent position in American culture and society. Cultural policies of the nation promoted the preservation and representation of ethnic folk traditions by implementing the Folk Arts Program in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) in 1974, the American Folklife Preservation Act in 1976, and the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in 1976.<sup>26</sup> Grants from public funds offered diverse communities a path to participation in a public event. Daniel Sheehy, director of the Folk Arts Program, points out, "According to statistics from the NEA, based on data from nonprofit performing arts presenters, both the total number and the overall percentage of performances thought of as 'ethnic dance' or 'traditional arts' in the 1986–87 season nearly doubled from those of the 1982–83 season."<sup>27</sup> In regard to the presentation of Japanese performing arts in the United States, Kyoko Yoshida, performing arts specialist, writes that the NEA constitutes one of the four principal sources of financial support, along with The Agency for Cultural Affairs of Japan, The Japan Foundation, and Japan-United States Friendship Commission.<sup>28</sup>

The JACCC has taken a leading role in organizing and presenting Japanese and Japanese American cultural events as they did at the 1986 Japan Program in Washington, D.C. The Center, which was established in 1980 in Little Tokyo, Los Angeles, reflects the postwar economic success of Japanese Americans and strong financial backing from Japanese organizations. Possessing a theater, Japanese garden, and a plaza in their facility compound, the organization has the capacity to sponsor exhibitions, festivals, and concerts, and therefore their support has been a great advantage to the *taiko* community nationwide.<sup>29</sup>

The JACCC performing arts program effectively introduced Japanese *taiko* to American audiences because, as Yoshida explains, it significantly increased the number of Japanese performing arts performances on the west coast, especially of folk arts, including the introduction of the Osuwa drums, Okinawa dance, and various *kagura* to California. They also invited professional *taiko* groups from Japan increasingly through the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>30</sup> Their attention to *taiko* served especially as a way of replacing images of such past-oriented Japanese cultural presentations as *kabuki*, *noh*, *kyogen*, *bunraku*, and *bugaku*, which have dominated the American view. Popular Japanese groups like Osuwa Daiko, Kodo, and Ondekoza frequently toured major cities in the United States and stimulated fascination and excitement in American audiences.

The performing arts program at the JACCC during the 1980s, for instance, included the Kodo concerts in the adjacent theater in 1982, 1984, 1985, 1987, and 1989.<sup>31</sup>

The JACCC program also organized shows by American *taiko* groups, like San Francisco Taiko Dojo and Los Angeles Matsuri Taiko, and sponsored the first Los Angeles *Taiko* Festival in 1983.<sup>32</sup> Public programming had been instrumental in the institutionalization of *taiko* as a performing art in Japanese American festivals and community events such as traditional Japanese holidays and American celebrations.<sup>33</sup> The Japanese American National Museum (JANM) in Little Tokyo has arranged *taiko* classes in its public program and made it a way to “tell the story of the Japanese American community,” the mission the museum has valued since its establishment in 1992. *Taiko*’s important contribution to this mission was signified at the 1999 opening ceremony of the museum’s New Pavilion, a monument to the empowerment and success of the community.<sup>34</sup> The spectacle, performed by one hundred drummers simultaneously, proclaimed the ethnic pride of Japanese Americans more loudly than ever in American society. By the end of the 1990s, the number of *taiko* groups reached as many as a hundred throughout North America. Performers now needed a vision of their current location and future direction within the large configuration of *taiko* groups, and the JACCC met this need with the *Taiko* Conference, a monumental stage where American *taiko* performers could evaluate their progress.

#### THE *TAIKO* CONFERENCE

Staging the *Taiko* Conference symbolized the JACCC’s assumption of the role of public folklorists. As exemplified by the Festival of American Folklife, public folklorists support ethnic or minority folk traditions in getting fair recognition in society and also in negotiating different ideas within stratified communities.<sup>35</sup> In the Japanese American community this role has been played primarily by the public programming of the JACCC and the JANM. They provide *taiko* performers and groups with opportunities to participate in constructing images of American *taiko* traditions by presenting themselves to the public. The organizations take the initiative to raise funds to administer and coordinate a festival, exhibition, and concert. As cultural leaders in the community, they are in a position to mediate tension and conflict among the

competing attitudes and interests of group leaders, contributors, sponsors, and organizers themselves.

So as “to bring together all the various *taiko* groups” throughout Los Angeles, *Taiko* Gathering was started by the JACCC in 1994 as an annual show within the Nisei Week Japanese Festival.<sup>36</sup> It also aimed for the groups “to meet and exchange ideas with other groups” and “to give the public a chance to sample *taiko* in a free performance for the community.”<sup>37</sup> Managing director of the performing arts programs Duane Ebata had further expanded the idea of bringing *taiko* performers together and promoted a larger-scale conference that could invite *taiko* performers from throughout the United States and Canada to Little Tokyo. The project, which materialized in 1979 and 1999, consisted of workshops, discussions, demonstrations, and a “*Taiko* Jam” concert, and also set up the Summer *Taiko* Institute.<sup>38</sup> The first *Taiko* Conference in 1997, in which over four hundred *taiko* performers from throughout North America participated, was the culmination of the proliferation of *taiko* and the mature state of American *taiko* from the previous three decades. The three-day-long event was a pivotal moment for participants to review the past, examine the present, and explore the future of *taiko* in North America.

The conference encompassed historical, artistic, Buddhist, and organizational themes that define the *taiko* community. As one conference goal was “to begin to document the history of North American *taiko*,” the conference presented a framework within which leaders and performers became aware that they had participated, and were participating at the moment, in the process of shaping a tradition. The JANM also promoted the idea of history-making by presenting workshops on “Introduction to Oral History” and “Preserving and Archiving for the Future.” Thirty years of the *taiko* movement had built a tradition of American *taiko* and consolidating images of a past could demonstrate the cultural validity of *taiko* performance. This was articulated in the theme of the 1999 Opening Session, which was to “explore the development of *Taiko* from a cultural icon and traditional instrument into a respected performing art form.”<sup>39</sup> The leaders and performers looked back on their own experiences and reinterpreted the meaning of those experiences through participation in workshops and discussion.

The most dramatic presentation, the “*Taiko* Jam” concert, projected a whole picture of the process in which the *taiko* community had been engaging in the creation of traditions. The 1997 concert featured six

groups from across North America: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, New York, Honolulu, and Vancouver. About nine hundred people gathered at the Japan American Theater and videos were filmed for a larger audience. Because of his honored status as Grand Master, Tanaka's performance particularly was a climax of the historic concert. A local newspaper described how he "closed out the three-hour-long show with a thundering finale that featured a marathon solo by two fundoshi (loincloth)-clad male drummers pounding away on the *odaiko* (large drum)."40 This performance by Tanaka, whose image is that of "founder" or "father" of American *taiko*, communicated a dramatic narrative of the growth of *taiko* from its early roots.

#### YONSEI AND DIVERSE EXPRESSIONS

The conference was a quest for a unified *taiko* community, and yet the other side of it was the increasing diversity through the 1980s and 1990s in the age of performers, the affiliation of groups, and the function of *taiko*. A thriving force has come from yonsei, the fourth generation of Japanese Americans, whose ages range from pre-teen through early twenties. The birth of children's *taiko* groups has promised the continuity of the folk tradition. It reflects their sansei parents' hope that their children acquire self-respect and confidence through learning their cultural heritage through *taiko*. Following in sansei performers' footsteps, yonsei children often belong to temple-affiliated Buddhist *taiko* groups such as Zenshuji Zendeko in Los Angeles formed in 1986 and Koyasan Spirit of Children *Taiko* Group in Sacramento formed in 1993.<sup>41</sup> Some yonsei begin *taiko* in a class or workshop that community centers have set up in their cultural programs. San Fernando Valley Mugen Taiko, for example, started as a children's group at the San Fernando Japanese-American Community Center in 1989. Because of the influence of her sansei father who played *taiko*, Erin Kimie Sato joined the group at the age of ten and despite her initial unwillingness, *taiko* has turned into an indispensable part of her life over twelve years. Now in her early twenties, she compares her firm commitment to the group to a family relationship and also mentions her consciousness of a collective image, saying, "I like people watching us. They really appreciate us."<sup>42</sup>

The perpetuation of *taiko* among yonsei has brought hope and vitality to the Japanese American community. As the tradition of Japanese

American *taiko* is passed down, yonsei inherit the values and experiences of earlier generations. *Taiko* performed by children in a historically monumental context epitomizes the inheritance of Japanese American history. The 1991 theme of the Day of Remembrance in Los Angeles was “The Camps and Redress: Educating Future Generations,” and yonsei’s performance at its opening ceremony answered the community’s expectation that the Japanese American past continue to be communicated to future generations.<sup>43</sup> The day commemorates the anniversary of the 1942 enactment of Executive Order 9066, the order that authorized the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast, and thus yonsei voiced sorrow and anger for their grandparents and great grandparents.

For yonsei, who have taken on more of America’s cultural values than earlier generations, *taiko* stands out as a physically energetic yet accessible art form among other Japanese cultural traditions such as tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and calligraphy, many of which value silence.<sup>44</sup> As Erin Kimie Sato indicated, the yonsei developed an interest of their own in *taiko* and chose *taiko* to look for their own meanings in contexts, different from those of their parents and community as they mature to adolescence. Brent and Adam Toda started *taiko* in the children’s group, but each has continued it for they have recognized it as a necessary self-expression. Because of his artistic talent, Brent values the aesthetic potential of *taiko*, and lets it sound his other voice and his inner self musically.<sup>45</sup>

Yonsei have also formed a *taiko* group independently in their own domain, at university campuses. At the University of California at Los Angeles, Kyodo Taiko was founded in 1990 under the Nikkei Student Union. The name Kyodo, to which the group gives two meanings, “family” and “loud children,” is suggestive of their concern for the past and continuity.<sup>46</sup> Its first major performance was “a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Japanese American internment in 1992, which paid tribute to the 175 UCLA students who were interned.”<sup>47</sup> *Taiko* has also been offered in the university curriculum, as in the case of Stanford University. Stanford started its *taiko* course in 1992 as part of a special program on political and social issues: “The class contextualized the art of *taiko* by discussing its link to the Japanese American experience.”<sup>48</sup>

*Taiko* has reached new establishments, expanding from Buddhist temples into community centers and university campuses, and has further

acquired other functions in society. *Taiko* has broadened from its dominant association with Japanese American contexts into other social frames beyond the ethnic community. Public folklore has been influential in the application of folk traditions to social problems on the presumption that they speak to human needs and anxieties. While the *taiko* class of JANM's public programming has invited the participation of beginners from a wider range of society, the instructor, Reverend Tom Kurai of Sozenji Buddhist Temple in Montebello, emphasizes the educational and applied functions of *taiko* for those who need them. Also, as a leader of the Taiko Center of Los Angeles as well as a workshop artist with the Los Angeles Music Center Education Division, Kurai demonstrates *taiko* in public and private schools, in workshops at community libraries, and in therapy classes at hospitals and special schools.<sup>49</sup> Because of its therapeutic and healing functions especially, doctors, therapists, teachers, and corporate employees have adopted *taiko* as a way for patients and students to cope with their problems. In these new social frames, *taiko* loses its meaning as an ethnic symbol of Japanese heritage and instead emerges as a medium for transcultural, as well as transnational, human expressions. In tandem with new social interest in the universal functions of *taiko*, the formation of an on-line *taiko* network, Rolling Thunder, has diffused information on *taiko* without limitations.<sup>50</sup> With the movement of *taiko* to broader social categories, how do Japanese American performers define *taiko* traditions? This involves the question of the presentational form of *taiko*, which relates to the ethnic identity of a Japanese American *taiko* performer.

#### AMERICAN *TAIKO* TRADITIONS

The professionalization of performers has worked to counter the diversification of *taiko*. Influential performers and groups can lead the American *taiko* community and project their interpretation of American *taiko*. Japanese professional groups have long affected the presentational mode of *taiko* performance in terms of aesthetics, techniques, and stage settings through their frequent tours across the United States. Likewise some long-established American groups, typically Tanaka's San Francisco Taiko Dojo, have exceeded others in their professional expertise and publicity.

Tanaka has shaped a model of American *taiko* tradition, which he has

maintained by reaffirming his ties to Japanese roots in his performances and rhetoric. Stressing his three decades of experience in the United States, he has placed the authenticity of the Japanese style at the highest level within the *taiko* community. The rhetoric of the publicity for his 30th-year anniversary concert refers to three Japanese *taiko* schools with the oldest traditions: Osuwa (or Suwa) Taiko, Sukeroku Taiko, and Gojinjo Taiko, paying tribute to Osuwa Taiko as recognized by “the Japanese government” as a “National Cultural Treasure.” Its emphatic tone proclaimed his roots in Japanese *taiko* traditions: “Tanaka was the first outsider to be accepted as an apprentice with Grand Master Daihachi Oguchi of the Suwa *Taiko*. Tanaka has mastered all the Suwa *Taiko* arts. Additionally, he has received the highest degree of diploma for the teaching (of) Suwa *Taiko*.”<sup>51</sup>

I read this validation of Tanaka’s status by his association with an authentic school of Japanese *taiko* as his reaction against the multi-layered meanings and functions of *taiko* within the American *taiko* community. He affirms that having roots in Japanese *taiko* should be the criterion that distinguishes “real” or “genuine” *taiko*. The validity of his authenticity, however, has been kept intact through his professional manipulations, including the dramatization of his legendary image as the founder, which has been canonized widely through media such as anniversary booklets, newspapers, and magazines.<sup>52</sup>

Sensitivity to the concept of authenticity also resounds in on-line discussion on copyright issues in the late 1990s. John Ko of Soh Daiko mentions two spheres of opinions in the copyright debate within the *taiko* community. One is “the old school or Asian mode which preaches acknowledgement of sources, teachers, influences, etc. and the process of learning from and receiving permission from those who created the styles and pieces.” The other is “the new world American or Western mode which preaches ‘innovation,’ artistic freedom, and departure from the first mode.”<sup>53</sup> The concern for copyright shows performers’ aesthetic viewpoints regarding the traditionality of *taiko*. Circumscribing the performer’s freedom to present *taiko* with the use of copyright, the former view intends to renounce the popularization of *taiko* in order to preserve the purity of its tradition and enforce *taiko* as an art form. It is a defense against the latter groups who allow unlimited forms of *taiko* expression that obscure the validity of traditionality.

The authentication of *taiko* involves creating ethnic boundaries



through Japanese symbols. This process also calls into question the ethnic identification of the performer, which can be illustrated in shin-issei Tanaka's insistence that he uses genuine *taiko* created by master craftsmen in Japan. In his performance on stage, the origin and age of the drums counts most and he obtains *taiko* from an authorized Japanese manufacturer. Japanese-made *taiko* validate his performances because "the spirit of the tree from which the wood came from and the spirit imparted by the performers through the years help produce the unique sound" of their *taiko*.<sup>54</sup>

His claim to Japanese roots parallels his identification with Japan, where he was born, despite his thirty-year life as a shin-issei. The opposite view to Tanaka's is typified by sansei artist Johnny Mori, a member of Kinnara Taiko, in his play "Sansei," in which he recollects his endeavor to learn *taiko*-making from different *taiko* drummers in America. "What I do is go down to a place outside of L.A., San Pedro, to this old Italian person. I go down to his wine barrel shop. I pick out a real nice looking barrel—an oak barrel. Sometimes I get French oak wine barrels which are real nice. You look at the barrel and try to imagine, to see it on the stage—will it look right? With me? If so, it's the one I want. I want one that's kind of oldish, one that has a kind of yellowish tint to it."<sup>55</sup> The wine-barrel drum reflects his multicultural vision of ethnic identity and belief in the genuineness of the American-born performer's experiences.

From Mori's perspective, diversity does not hamper *taiko* expressions, but rather nourishes them. Diversity has sustained the vitality and advancement of America-born performers, yielding the development of mass production of *taiko* by American manufacturers in recent years. American-made *taiko* have outnumbered Japanese-made *taiko* and proliferated among performers. Thus the *Taiko* Conference set up a workshop called "North American *Taiko*-Making," in which a local *taiko*-maker demonstrated a "distinctly North American style of *taiko* built from wine barrels."<sup>56</sup> Here we can see American performers' ambition to redefine American *taiko*, independent from Japanese *taiko*, based on the history of Japanese American communities. Mori's attachment to his handmade drum, which "look[s] right" with him, reflects the fact that American performers have created a "real" or "authentic" American *taiko* tradition out of their own experiences and environments.



## CONCLUSION

Young Japanese Americans found the folk tradition of *taiko* to be a usable medium not only to convey implicit messages that challenge the racial injustice of American society, but also to explore their identity. In multicultural America, where ethnicity has outweighed other determinants of self-identification, the inherent link *taiko* seemed to offer to their ancestral past helped them to conceive and indicate their ethnic roots.

The public presentation of their ethnic traditions, however, has involved financial deals with event organizers and sponsors, and the cultural policy of national and local governments. Communication through *taiko* to the larger American society has also generated a diversification of *taiko* expressions and functions. This process has called for mediation and organization by public folklorists. As a cultural performance that represents the Japanese American community, the presentational form of *taiko*, which manifests the performer's perceptions of his or her own ethnicity, has to be negotiated among individuals and groups.<sup>57</sup> What allows *taiko* performance to represent Japanese American traditions is that it has its authenticity, which the community recognize in the light of the collective images, or memories, of the past.

Japan-born Tanaka has expressed his ethnicity through the disciplined *taiko* style, based on his visions of the past in hierarchical Japanese society. Away from the geographical basis that supports collective visions of the Japanese past, however, he has to make a continuous effort to maintain his authenticity through the manipulation of traditional Japanese symbols.<sup>58</sup> Through the search for ethnic identity, sansei have uncovered the history of their community, which issei and nisei had buried. The recognition of having their own past has given them a foundation, which can verify the authenticity of their traditions. While Tanaka's *taiko* still symbolically unites the diversifying American *taiko* community in a powerful way, America-born performers now more consciously engage themselves in making the history of American *taiko*. Indeed the latter have chosen their own directions as they established a distinctively Japanese American tradition of Buddhist *taiko* in the community where they were born.

The growing diversity of the *taiko* community has constantly posed the question of the representation of ethnicity to Japanese American performers and thus has produced dynamic forces that drive the *taiko*

movement in America. The interplay of these forces together and their continued interaction in the future will shape a sense of Japanese American tradition.

### NOTES

Materials and information on which this account is based include interviews and observations that I carried out mainly in Los Angeles in October, 1999 and March, 2000. I am particularly indebted to Karen Toda and Erin Kimie Sato for their warmest support.

<sup>1</sup> James P. Leary and Richard March, "Dutchman Bands: Genre, Ethnicity, and Pluralism in the Upper Midwest," in *Creative Ethnicity: Symbols and Strategies of Contemporary Ethnic Life*, eds. Stephen Stern and John Allan Cicala (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1991), 22–43.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 46–47. The performance approach, or the contextual approach, regards folklore as artistic communication and interprets folklore by locating it within the contexts.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer, "Introduction," in *Public Folklore*, eds. Robert Baron and Nicholas R. Spitzer (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Bauman, *Folklore, Cultural Performances, and Popular Entertainments*, 40.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Fromartz, "Anything But Quiet," *Natural History* 107, no.2 (1998): 44–48.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Uyematsu, "The Emergence of Yellow Power in America," in *Roots: Asian American Reader*, ed. Amy Tachiki, et al. (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971), 9–13; Lon Yuki Kurashige, "Made in Little Tokyo: Politics of Ethnic Identity and Festival in Southern California 1934–1994" (Ph.D dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1994), 169–92.

<sup>7</sup> Misumi Haruo, "*Minzoku geino no rekishiteki tenkai* [The Historical Development of Folk Performance]" in *Nihon minzoku bunka taikai: Enja to kankyaku* [Japanese Folk Culture: Performer and Audience] (Tokyo: Shogakukan, 1995), 114–26.

<sup>8</sup> Kurashige, "Made in Little Tokyo," 160.

<sup>9</sup> They came to the United States in postwar years. Although they were broadly termed shin-issei, their ethnic identity varies to a large extent and expatriates may not identify themselves as such.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 167, 150.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* 237.

<sup>12</sup> Kango Kunitsugu, "Drums of the Festivals," in *1978 Nisei Week* (booklet, 1978):18–19.

<sup>13</sup> The Japanese American Cultural and Community Center (JACCC), *The 1999 Taiko Conference* (program booklet, 1999): 29–62.

<sup>14</sup> Takeshi Nakayama, "The New Heartbeat of Japanese America," *The Rafu Shimpo*, 21 July 1997, 1.

<sup>15</sup> Masao Kodani, "Bon Odori Music," in Japanese American Cultural and Community Center, *A Gathering of Joy: Obon Music and Dance: Traditions in the U.S.* (Los Angeles: JACCC, 1993), 11–17; Ted Tetsuo Akahori, interview by author, Los Angeles, Ca., 24 March 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Asai, "Horaku: A Buddhist Tradition of Performing Arts and the Development of Taiko Drumming in the United States," *Selected Titles in Ethnomusicology* 6 (1985): 163–72.

- <sup>17</sup> Kinnara, *Kinnara Kara: 2543* (concert booklet, 1999).
- <sup>18</sup> Asai, "Horaku," 163–66.
- <sup>19</sup> Fromartz, "Anything But Quiet," 46.
- <sup>20</sup> Bryan Yamami, interview by author, Los Angeles, Ca., 18 March, 2000.
- <sup>21</sup> Kinnara, *Kinnara Kara: 2543*.
- <sup>22</sup> Angus Kress Gillespie, "Festival," in *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 249–51.
- <sup>23</sup> Smithsonian Institution National Park Service, *1983 Festival of American Folklife*, (program booklet, 1983).
- <sup>24</sup> Smithsonian Institution National Park Service, *1986 Festival of American Folklife* (program booklet, 1986).
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> Baron and Spitzer, "Introduction," 5.
- <sup>27</sup> Daniel Sheehy, "Crossover Dreams: The Folklorist and the Folk Arrival," in *Public Folklore* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992), 227.
- <sup>28</sup> Kyoko Yoshida, "Perspectives on Japanese Performing Arts Presentations in the United States: 1982–1992" (Master thesis, Brooklyn College, 1993), 52.
- <sup>29</sup> The JACCC, *Where Cultures Come Together: 10th Anniversary Commemorative Book, 1980–1990*, (1990), 1.
- <sup>30</sup> Yoshida, "Perspectives," 12.
- <sup>31</sup> The JACCC, *Where Cultures Come Together*, 30–49.
- <sup>32</sup> Lewis Segal, "Taiko Festival in Little Tokyo," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 Jul. 1983, sec. 6.
- <sup>33</sup> Examples are New Year Celebration, Children's Day, Bon Festival, Los Angeles Marathon, the Fourth of July Picnic and commercial events as well as high school and university concerts, commercial festivals at shopping centers, and personal ceremonies like weddings and other rites of passage.
- <sup>34</sup> The Japanese American National Museum, (pamphlet); "Taiko Center News," *Taiko Center of Los Angeles* (newsletter, January–April 1999): 1.
- <sup>35</sup> Archie Green, "Public Folklore's Name: A Partisan's Notes," in *Public Folklore*, 49–63.
- <sup>36</sup> "Taiko Gathering at JACCC Plaza to Precede Parade," *The Rafu Shimpo*, 7 August 1995.
- <sup>37</sup> Nakayama Takeshi, "The New Heartbeat of Japanese America," *The Rafu Shimpo*, 21 July 1997, p.1.
- <sup>38</sup> Duane Ebata, "Four Hundred Taiko Drummers Descend on Little Tokyo," *Tozai Times*, 153, no.13 (1997), 10.
- <sup>39</sup> The JACCC, *The 1999 Taiko Conference*, 7.
- <sup>40</sup> Nakayama, "The New Heartbeat of Japanese America," 1.
- <sup>41</sup> The JACCC, *The 1999 Taiko Conference*, 29–62.
- <sup>42</sup> Erin Kimie Sato, interview by the author, San Fernando Valley, Ca., 18 March, 2000.
- <sup>43</sup> "Relocation Researcher to Speak at Day of Remembrance Feb. 17," *The Rafu Shimpo*, 19 February 1991.
- <sup>44</sup> Tom Kurai, interview by the author, Los Angeles, Ca., 21 March, 2000.
- <sup>45</sup> Brent Toda, interview by the author, Los Angeles, Ca., 24 March, 2000; Adam Toda, interview by author, San Fernando Valley, Ca., 18 March, 2000.
- <sup>46</sup> For "family," they may refer to the word *kyodo*, which means association or kinship, and for "loud children, they probably combine two separate Chinese characters "kyo(shout)" and "do(child)" together.
- <sup>47</sup> The JACCC, *The 1999 Taiko Conference*, 44.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Kurai, interview.

<sup>50</sup> Rolling Thunder: The *Taiko* Resource. [<http://www.taiko.com/rollingthunder.html>]

<sup>51</sup> San Francisco *Taiko* Dojo, *The International Taiko Festival: Celebrating 30 Years of Taiko in America* (program booklet, 1998): 10–18.

<sup>52</sup> Gail S. Tagashira, “Local Groups Share *Taiko* Drum Heritage,” *Los Angeles Times*, 3 Feb. 1989, part 4, 32; Etsuo Hongo, interview by author, Los Angeles, Ca., 22 March, 2000.

<sup>53</sup> John Ko, “Drumming Up A Storm,” *Dialogue* (Fall 1999): 31–33.

<sup>54</sup> Tagashira, “Local Groups Share *Taiko* Drum Heritage,” 32; San Francisco *Taiko* Dojo, (leaflet).

<sup>55</sup> “*Taiko*,” *Gidra 1970–1990: The 20th Anniversary Edition* (1990): 60.

<sup>56</sup> The JACCC, *The 1999 Taiko Conference* (program booklet, 1999): 13.

<sup>57</sup> The distinction between the traditional and the non-traditional, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states, emerges as “the relations of power which are constantly punctuating and dividing the domains of culture into its preferred and its residual categories.” See Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 76; and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Mistaken Dichotomies,” in *Public Folklore*, 76.

<sup>58</sup> Stern and Cicala, eds., *Creative Ethnicity*, 1.