

Asian Women Kick Ass: A Study of Gender Issues within Canadian Kumi-Daiko

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Eileen Kage (photo by Steven Lemay)

The pendulum has shifted for Japanese *Kumi-daiko* or *Wadaiko* (ensemble taiko drumming commonly referred to as *taiko*), from a site of hyper masculine musical performance, towards a reinterpretation along feminist values for female players. Japanese taiko (literally meaning ‘big drum’) has evolved from a male-dominated and -defined forum into a female-dominated performance art within North America. The emergence of kumi-daiko in Japan was primarily associated with masculine performances crystallized in images of lean muscular men in *fundoshi* (loincloth) furiously drumming on large taiko drums.

Gender issues in kumi-daiko have been acknowledged and discussed among members of the kumi-daiko scene in Canada and America (Tusler 2003). Mark Tusler¹ (2003) placed the ratio of women participating, as compared to men, at 4:1 in North American kumi-daiko (2003). The city of Vancouver, British Columbia, approximates this high ratio of female to male participants, although in other parts of Canada some groups show an equal number of male and female participants.

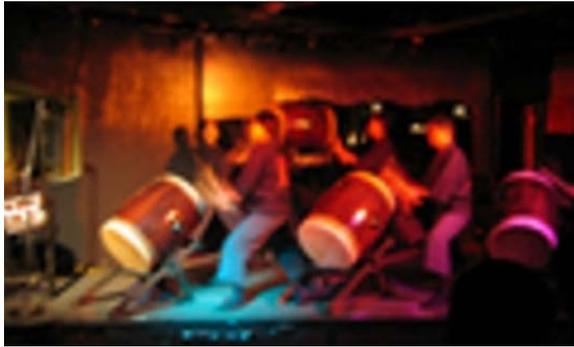
The development of this high density of female participants in Vancouver’s kumi-daiko will be discussed in a case study format, examining Canada’s first kumi-daiko ensemble, Katari Taiko, and the emergence of feminist stylized kumi-daiko. Focusing on the formative days of Katari Taiko is instrumental in highlighting the framework that has continued to foster the large numbers of women engaged in kumi-daiko within the local area, if not the greater area of western Canada. Early Katari Taiko members played an important role in disseminating kumi-daiko throughout Canada via their performances and presentation of taiko workshops.² The taiko workshops that Katari Taiko delivered across Canada, in addition to taiko instruction, offered models of kumi-daiko organizational structure and incorporated discussions of their group philosophy (Uyehara Hoffman: personal communication, 2005).

Factors that encourage female participants to taiko will be examined as well as the possible reasons for the lack of male participants. Central to taiko’s appeal for Asian women is the deconstruction of gender/racial stereotypes and the reconfiguration of gender constructs, and issues of gaining visibility, cultural representation, and self-empowerment. Not only are there a majority of women engaged in taiko in Canada, but there are also groups that have a membership restricted only to pan-Asian women, a uniquely Canadian feature. The presence of pan-Asian, all-women taiko groups allows them to align with feminist issues and creates a site for Asian feminist community building. The space of all-women ensembles encourages the participation of queer (lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered) membership.

Kumi-Daiko Background

Kumi-daiko’s development can be traced back to jazz drummer Daihachi Oguchi in 1951.³ Inspired by his jazz drumming background, Oguchi explored the interface between jazz drumming and traditional taiko drumming in a series of contemporary compositions (Alaszewka 2001). Oguchi’s performance of kumi-daiko with his highly influential and innovative ensemble *Osuwa Daiko* at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics brought kumi-daiko nationwide attention in Japan (Alaszewka 2001). The growing popularity of kumi-daiko was shared by

other groups around Japan, most notably Oedo Sukeroku Daiko, Za Ondekoza, and Kodo. While Oguchi is often credited as the father of kumi-daiko, Tokyo based Yushima Tenjin Sukeroku Daiko (founded in 1959) played an influential role in the kumi-daiko style that developed in America. Sukeroku Daiko performance style distinguishes them from other kumi-daiko groups of their era: incorporating a side stance with a focus on speed, fluidity, power, flashy solos and a strong sense of choreography. This is a contrast to the upright playing stance of the traditional form. A rift occurred among the members of Yushima Tenjin Sukeroku Daiko and a splinter group was formed, Oedo Sukeroku Daiko.⁴



Raging Asian Women

Za Ondekoza (demon drummers) was formed in 1969 by Den Tagayasu, who gathered a group of disenfranchised youths and retreated to the Japanese Island of Sado, abandoning Japan's modernized urban lifestyle in pursuit of Japanese traditional arts. Initially the aim was to establish a 'Craftsman University' where traditional Japanese crafts and folk arts could be taught in the context of a communal lifestyle. The formation of a kumi-daiko group was one of many projects initiated (Alaszewka 2001). Dedicated to taiko drumming as a way of life, they participated in daily rigorous training of drumming and marathon running. A division in Za Ondekoza led to a fragmentation, whereby a new group was formed in 1981, named Kodo. Kodo gained international fame in the 1980s while a new and revitalized Za Ondekoza⁵ re-emerged to prominence in the 1990s (Alaszewka 2001).

The kumi-daiko drumming in Japan of these aforementioned groups was essentially a performance art mapped out as a masculine territory. Athletic aesthetics and stamina-driven drumming styles were valued and epitomized in early Japanese kumi-daiko. Za Ondekoza⁶ was infamous for their running tours where they would literally run from one performance venue to another while on tour. They completed the 1975 Boston Marathon before performing upon stage, much to their renown.

The formation of American kumi-daiko groups heralds the entry of women into taiko drumming. While Japanese social conventions may have prevented Japanese women from participating in kumi-daiko, this was not the case in America. Seiichi Tanaka formed the first kumi-daiko group in America, San Francisco Taiko Dojo (SFTD), in 1968. Seiichi Tanaka is recognized as the father of American taiko and nurtured the formation of many taiko groups around America. The majority of taiko groups credit a stylistic debt to Oedo Sukeroku as interpreted by the San Francisco Taiko Dojo (Terada 2001). Kinnara Taiko of Los Angeles was formed in 1969 and became the first North American Buddhist taiko group. Masao Kodani, the minister of the Senshin Buddhist temple in 1969, founded Kinnara Taiko. Kinnara Taiko created a unique American hybrid of Japanese American Buddhist taiko that inspired the formation of other Buddhist-based kumi-daiko groups (Fromartz).

The growth of taiko in North America occurred in the late 1960s amidst an era that was politically charged in the aftermath of the civil rights movement. For many Japanese-American and Japanese-Canadian communities, the postwar climate in North America was focused on cultural recovery from the effects of internment in World War II. Kumi-daiko became an effective vehicle for bringing together Japanese descendants into their community. Japanese descendants could reclaim and embrace their cultural heritage and identity through the loud and powerful performance of taiko.

San Jose Taiko, founded in 1973, has directly inspired the formation of Canada's first kumi-daiko ensemble, Katari Taiko. San Jose Taiko had a membership that identified with the Asian-American movement and was engaged in the renewal of Japanese-American communities. Their political basis included a non-hierarchical model of collective organization. More importantly, they had a high number of women participants, which proved to be inspirational.



Raging Asian Women

The Vancouver Phenomenon



Practicing on a Vancouver Street (photo Eileen Kage)

An examination of kumi-daiko's gender issues in Canada begins in Vancouver with the establishment of Canada's first kumi-daiko ensemble – Katari Taiko. Katari Taiko was formed in 1979 by a large number of women. This set the stage for Vancouver's prominent female representation in kumi-daiko to create a self-perpetuating dominance of female taiko players.⁷ Pan-Asian women see others like themselves performing kumi-daiko on stage and gravitate towards the 'big drums.'

Early members of Katari Taiko, as well as seasoned taiko drummers, were approached for their opinions on the high numbers of female kumi-daiko players in Vancouver. Founding members of Katari Taiko concur that the performance by San Jose Taiko at the Powell Street Festival⁸ in 1979 was a pivotal point in the history and development of kumi-daiko in Vancouver. Linda Uyehara Hoffman, a founding member of Katari Taiko, describes her impressions of seeing women performing kumi-daiko (p.c., 2002):

We'd seen taiko [before seeing San Jose Taiko], but we'd seen Kodo, they were called Ondekoza, we had seen Ryujin Taiko that came to the first Powell Street Festival. Now Ondekoza was phenomenal. Ryujin was fun to watch, but they were all men and....you know a lot of us were women. We didn't look at them and think, 'Gee I'd like to do that.' But when San Jose Taiko came, they were like mixed men and women. The taiko they played was different. They looked like they were having fun. Not just, like, power drumming.⁹ It wasn't macho. It was powerful, but yet it had fluidity to it. They moved around a lot more and they looked like they were having fun. And that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to have fun and we wanted to be strong. It was an incredible attraction for all of the women who were working on the Powell Street Festival. It was a Japanese art form that wasn't subtle, that didn't require a million years of training, it was

accessible and it was loud and it called attention to yourselves. And it said, 'We're here!' And that's what we wanted. It was the perfect vehicle for those of us who were looking for ways to express our heritage in a performance. And for those people who had never performed, especially the women, it was a way to be a role model for other Asian women. It was a way to break the stereotype of submissive, passive Asian women OR the whorish, heart of gold, erotic, sexy Asian women. You know, because nobody is going to take you on, if you're standing up there swinging a stick, hitting the drum really loud. No one is going to say, 'Cutie pie', right? I mean it was perfect and as it turned out for most American taiko groups, it attracted women.

Mayumi Takasaki, a founding member of Katari Taiko, offers a cross-cultural perspective on her first encounter with kumi-daiko gained from her experience of living in Japan. During her time in Japan, she studied Japanese gender-specific art forms, which allowed her to compare traditional Japanese art forms to the contemporary performance of kumi-daiko (p.c., 2005):

Seeing San Jose play really was inspiring because they were like me. I was brought up in Steveston with a large number of Japanese people. I did *odori* (Japanese classical dance) and when I was in Japan, I did tea ceremony, *ikebana* (flower arrangement), *koto* (Japanese zither) and all those kind of things. But then I was a product of the late 60s and early 70s when the women's movement was happening. So coming back to that after Japan, being thrust into the whole rebirth of my community and then seeing this form, this musical form that had nothing to do with lovely dainty women and was so enthusiastic, fun, and joyful – it seemed like the thing to do. 'Yeah, let's form a taiko group, it looks like a lot of fun, you can do it with all of your friends.' And there were no set boundaries.

A great inspirational flame was kindled in many Asian-Canadian women who witnessed San Jose Taiko's performance in 1979. San Jose Taiko members mirrored certain personal aspects of future founding Katari Taiko members in several ways: many members were sansei's (third generation of Japanese descendants), engaged in Japanese community activism, inspired by the Asian-American movement taking place, and actively exploring facets of their Asian heritage (Takasaki, p.c., 2005).

Founding members of Katari Taiko had been exposed to kumi-daiko performances by Japanese groups and San Francisco Taiko Dojo (SFTD). These performances, distinguished by strength and athleticism, did not have the appeal that San Jose Taiko offered in musical style and group philosophy. Takasaki explains this circumstance (p.c., 2005):

Yeah, because San Jose's history is kind of like ours; it grew out of the Buddhist church with a bunch of friends, whereas SFTD is Tanaka's dojo. While Tanaka-sensei has said that more guys should play and his suggestion to Katari Taiko was, 'You must get more guys to play.' The style of taiko that he plays, and his group, is a high testosterone level of taiko, so obviously it is going to attract those kinds of guys. You would have to be a tough woman to think, 'I can play with those guys.' So a group develops a kind of a persona, you attract those kinds of people who feel that they would enjoy being a part of that group.

Takasaki attributes the large number of women in Katari Taiko's formative years to the fact that many members were volunteers at *Tonari Gumi*, the Japanese Community Volunteers Association. She comments that "traditionally more women do social services work than men, more women do volunteer work than men and work with seniors." (p.c., 2005) Uyehara Hoffman and Takasaki both indicate that many, if not all, early members of Katari Taiko were volunteers of the Powell Street Festival. Japanese-Canadian community rebuilding is an important factor during the era when Katari Taiko was formed, as well as the development of Asian-Canadian contemporary arts and identity. Katari Taiko, in essence, was an extension of the various community projects that Asian-Canadian political grassroots activists participated in during the late 1970s.

Another reason for the high female membership of Katari Taiko may be related to the fact that they functioned as a collective. The group engaged in left of center politics and operated by a collective organizational process based on a non-hierarchical model similar to that of San Jose Taiko. The collective nature of Katari Taiko resulted in lengthy group discussions, hence the name Katari Taiko, Japanese for 'talking drums'. Several taiko players interviewed mentioned that group discussions and processing might have discouraged men from participating.¹⁰ John Endo Greenaway, a founding member of Katari Taiko, explains this further (p.c., 2005):

You had to accept the way it operated, like a collective, which is not an exclusively female domain, but had more of a sense of 'we work together and we work out things by consensus.' There was not a lot of tolerance for pushing things through, which is a male stereotype. The whole energy... it felt... can't say female... there was a group-ness, the collective energy of working together. You have to have a certain mindset to be able to fit in with that.

One of the exciting features of the stylized kumi-daiko of San Jose Taiko and SFTD, both displaying a variation of the Sukeroku style, is the strong emphasis on choreography with fluid movement. Leslie Komori, a former Katari Taiko member, notes that this movement-based form of kumi-daiko may not be particularly appealing for men: "I think that taiko is like dance, taiko has a strong dance component and maybe men feel intimidated by that...that they would not feel comfortable moving in their bodies." (p.c., 2005)

In order to examine the gender question from another perspective, I flipped the question around and asked Endo Greenaway about the low numbers of Vancouver men participating in kumi-daiko. He replied that "for men there is some trepidation, almost like it's an all female world, and I think a lot of men might feel uncomfortable, especially for men who are used to being in an all male context like sports and teams. As a male in the group, you were not the majority." (p.c., 2005)

An enduring male member of Katari Taiko, Jan Woo, offers a slightly different perspective. Woo speculates that the alpha male personality type may not persevere for long in a female dominated kumi-daiko ensemble. Woo attributes his staying power in the group to his strong 'feminine side' (displayed by his love of shopping) as well as his love for performing. He adds that artistic men tend to fare well in the group. While in agreement with Endo Greenaway that many men may find it undesirable to deal with a large number of women within a group structure, he also points out that men's accessibility to sports may explain why men may not be attracted to performing kumi-daiko: "So I think it's way down on the list of things that a guy looks at (in terms of recreation). Then you have to deal with a lot of strong women, and not a lot of guys are actually willing to do that...It's not like you're the star quarterback surrounded by a lot of cheerleaders." (p.c., 2005)

Women do have access to team sports, but in a limited scope compared to the avenues that can lead to professional opportunities available to men. Eileen Kage, a former member of Katari Taiko, contributes to the sports versus taiko discussion, drawing attention to the fact that the dominant culture offers few opportunities for women to be physically and visibly powerful. In sports, men's participation provides an outlet for physical activity that is glorified in a team effort. Taiko attracts women who long for access to a potent medium that is a display of power in a public act of performance. (p.c., 2002)

Kumi-daiko's gradual infiltration by American and Canadian women was facilitated by the fact that it is a contemporary performance art (although rooted in Japanese traditional music), unrestrained by

gender-specific criteria. Kumi-daiko, as a site of musical performance, can meet the intersection of race and gender issues for female Asian participants. As Takasaki and Uyehara Hoffman mentioned, taiko allowed them to break stereotypes of Asian women (depicting them as passive and submissive) while engaging in an Asian performance art form that promoted visibility. Taiko, with its loud sonic power, was an ideal medium for Asian-Americans and Asian-Canadians to combat issues of invisibility. Dorinne Kondo (1995) highlights the dilemma of invisibility: “Like so many people on the margins, Asian-Americans are generally erased from realms of cultural representation...when we are depicted it is only to be stereotyped...a kind of symbolic violence that influences not only how we are treated by others, but also how we think of ourselves.” (49) Bonnie Soon, a performing member of Uzume Taiko (Canada’s first professional kumi-daiko ensemble based in Vancouver), who is a third generation Chinese-Canadian, describes taiko as a way for Asian women to be powerful and connect to an Asian heritage. (p.c., 2005)

I always admired the women that I saw who were taiko drummers and thought they had a lot of power and an ability to express, kind of a side that I knew was inside me, but never let it out. And it was a time that I was looking into being Asian because I spent my whole youth trying not to be Asian. That was the first time I studied something that had any connection to my Asian heritage. I never had a lot of Asian friends when I grew up – mostly Canadian girls. My whole Asian heritage side was not formed until I got really involved with the taiko community.

Smashing Stereotypes and Reconfiguring Gender Constructs

Probing the gender issue of Katari Taiko’s formative years brings to light a central feminist theme of challenging racial/gender stereotypes and of women’s self-empowerment. Tusler emphasizes how taiko is a site of self-redefinition, “...a forum for Asian-American women to invert and decenter the all-too-prevalent image of the quiet, submissive, home-centered Asian female by revising and reshaping taiko’s longstanding male-centered image...taiko has become a contradiction to that image” (2003: 119).

Pervasive gender stereotypes are deconstructed through the performance of kumi-daiko by Asian women. Through this metamorphosis, new images and identities are constructed. Susan McClary (1991) notes, “It is in the accordance with terms provided by language, ritual, or music that individuals are socialized: take on gender identities, learn proper

behaviors, structure their perception and even their experiences. But it is also within the arena of these discourses that alternative models of organizing the social world are submitted and negotiated.” (21)

Masumi Izumi (1998) views the performance of taiko as the antithesis of the stereotypical Asian woman’s behavior, redefining Asian women through the actions of the body. Izumi lists the performing aspects of taiko which challenge stereotypes: an open leg stance, the powerful beating of the taiko drum, screaming and yelling with mouths wide open (Japanese women typically cover their mouths in public), and sweating from physical exertion.

Deborah Wong¹¹ observes that, “Taiko speaks to a certain reconfiguration of the Asian-American woman’s body and to a claim made on sonic and social space.” Wong adds that part of the appeal of taiko “lies in its redefinition of the Asian-American women’s body and its dialogic relationship to ‘women’s work’ – i.e., the nimble fingers behind the clothing and computer industries.” (2000: 74) She contrasts the small-contained finger movements women perform in closed-off sweatshops to the large bold movements that women taiko players perform upon an open stage.

Tusler (2003) mentions that there are many ‘big’ aspects to playing kumi-daiko. Playing the ‘big’ drum with ‘big’ sticks, making ‘big’ bold movements and ‘big’ sounds, all combine to present a ‘big’ visual and sonic experience. Women can become larger than life through the performance of kumi-daiko. Taiko embodies the masculine, as much of the movements, basic forms, and wide grounding stance used in kumi-daiko, known as *kata* (forms), are borrowed from the martial arts (Tusler: 1995).



Raging Asian Women

Contrasting the ‘big’ aspects of kumi-daiko to the restrictive and contained movements of traditional *nihon buyo* (Japanese classical dance) might be helpful in understanding the appeal of taiko for women of Japanese descent. In my personal experience of studying *nihon buyo* as a child, the difficulty in learning the subtle and graceful feminine

style is epitomized by the tiny steps taken with toes slightly turned inwards (the masculine style has a wider stance with toes turned outwards). It is an expression of constraint, aided by the snug wrapping of the kimono around the body, with the *obi* (waist band) tightly wound around the waist. This is similar to the use of corsets for women of the Victorian era, and can be understood as a physical and symbolic act of binding and restraining women.

Tomie Hahn (2004) explains that in *nihon buyo*, a dancer can shift through multiple roles through a process of embodiment. The enactment of a character has a powerful effect, creating multiple identities. Through the embodiment of male characteristics in the performance context of *kumi-daiko*, women taiko drummers project an identity of strength and command.

Essential to taiko's appeal for most female taiko players is the concept of self-empowerment. Tiffany Tamaribuchi, founder of Sacramento Taiko Dan¹², explains that taiko represents physical power, visibility, strength, and openness - all elements that can be very enticing. For older women, there may be many appealing facets: "to be powerful in ways that they thought they could never be, to be physical without being violent, to share something of themselves, and to really express themselves." (p.c., 2002) Tamai Kobayashi, a former member of Wasabi Daiko, adds (p.c., 2005), "Like Kodo, they are very male-dominated, and for women to take up the drum is a very powerful, symbolic act of empowerment. And also, just for women to take the stage is quite a wonderful thing to see. It's very powerful to actually take up public space."

Self-empowerment has been a rallying cry for feminists throughout the past several decades. The word 'power' is inextricably linked with taiko and for women players the concept of self-empowerment is a fundamental aspect to taiko. Early members of Katari Taiko were involved in the struggle for women's rights in addition to their concerns around Asian-Canadian issues. As Takasaki points out, the civil rights movement was about minority rights and women's rights were under that umbrella, as well (p.c., 2005). However, feminist issues can be subsumed by other political issues to maintain group cohesion within a mixed-gender *kumi-daiko* ensemble. Komori, a founding member of Sawagi Taiko, highlights the difficulty of negotiating the intersections of race and gender issues within *kumi-daiko*. She refers to the fact that Katari Taiko had a brochure from the 1980s stating non-sexism as a group value. Komori interprets non-sexism as a passive stance rather than the proactive stance of feminism (p.c., Feb. 2005):

With any type of oppression, I think being proactive is very important. Structures are in place to perpetuate power imbalances. Without forces that are more proactive, power imbalances remain. I think race politics can subsume issues of gender. I think gender politics can subsume issues of race. It's a drag to have to face sexism with mixed-gender Asian-Canadian groups. It's a drag to have to face the racism of white feminist groups.

Komori also points out that the high numbers of women participating in *kumi-daiko* does not reflect women holding key positions of power within the group: "There's women participating and then there's women taking leadership roles. Even if there's a lot of women in the group, there can be still be very deep sexism that happens and continues to happen." (p.c., September 2005)

One of the key points that Leslie Komori and other members of Katari Taiko¹³ point out is the fact that despite the dominance of women in *kumi-daiko*, few were actually composing, a skill she perceives as indicative of taking leadership (p.c., October 3, 2005):

I define leadership as (creating) compositions. So Katari Taiko was a group that embraced non-sexism but not feminism. I think that stance might have allowed power imbalances based on gender to continue in the group. So I think the gender imbalances existed in Katari Taiko, especially in the area of composition. I'm not sure what the gender make up was but I would guess that it was about 4 women to 1 man. However, all the pieces were written by men. I think composing requires a person to take a leadership position.

Pan-Asian All-Women Kumi-Daiko Ensembles

Sexism in the broader context of popular music led to the development by feminists in the 1960s of an alternative music scene for women known as 'women's music' (Lont 1992) or 'women identified music' (Petersen 1987). Lont indicates that "Women's music dared to emphasize the experiences of women in a culture that ignored, devalued, or subsumed women's experience within males' experience." (245) Women-identified music can be defined as music that is derived from the unique experiences of women, highlighting strong, self-reliant, and self-actualizing images of women, and therefore is a political statement. (Petersen 1987) The issue of women's music connects to *kumi-daiko* in Canada by the development of exclusive Asian women's *kumi-daiko* ensembles established during the 90s. Canada's first Asian women's group was Sawagi Taiko of Vancouver in 1990. This was

followed by the formation of the Toronto based Raging Asian Women (RAW) in 1999. There are currently other informal women's kumi-daiko groups trying to establish themselves.¹⁴



Raging Asian Women

An outstanding feature of all-women's kumi-daiko groups is a foundation built upon a strong political agenda encompassing feminism. The demands of women's music festivals for all-women kumi-daiko groups served as a catalyst for the emergence of Sawagi Taiko, working within an Asian feminist framework.

Komori describes some of the issues that Katari Taiko faced, leading to the subsequent formation of Sawagi Taiko (p.c., October 3, 2005).

In 1989, the women of Katari Taiko were asked to play at the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival¹⁵ which at the time only admitted women and their sons under a certain age. There was a big debate whether Katari Taiko could take this gig. Many members, men and women included, felt that playing at a women-only gig discriminated against the men in the group. So not all the women decided to go. I can't remember the number. I think eight or nine women decided to go. In 1990, Michigan invited us back. However, this time members of Katari Taiko felt that the women of Katari Taiko should not be allowed to play because playing at a women-only event discriminated against the men in the group. They felt that individuals could choose to play at Michigan, however, they could not play pre-existing Katari Taiko repertoire. So the start of Sawagi did mark a shift in gender politics in taiko, moving from a group that was non-sexist to a group that was truly feminist, although I don't think Sawagi ever really decided it was a feminist group. But in retrospect, it was great that sexism prevented the women from Katari Taiko from returning in 1990, because Sawagi would have never formed and there would have been no imperative for a bunch of women to compose a bunch of pieces.



Sawagi Taiko (photo by Jon Elder)

Uyehara Hoffman's (a founding member of Sawagi Taiko) perspective illuminates further on this issue (p.c., 2005):

When Katari Taiko returned from that gig [the Michigan Womyn's music festival], one of the men expressed unhappiness with the fact that we had all gone off and excluded the men. I'm not quite sure why this didn't come up earlier because we'd discussed the thing. Some of the women didn't go because they didn't agree with it, but none of the men said anything. When we returned, we thought about it and at that time, we had two white people in the group who were both women. And if we were asked to do a gig that was for Asians only, Katari Taiko would have thought about that because we would have been excluding women, though we had no compunction at all about excluding the men which made us think about our attitude. So Katari Taiko decided that as a community group representing the Japanese-Canadian community, it should not take any gigs that excluded any members of that community. However, knowing that Michigan was going to ask the drummers to come back, a number of the women decided that we would form a separate group. And the understanding at that time in 1989 was that Sawagi would use none of Katari Taiko's songs, and that we would do women-only performances solely, so as not to set ourselves in competition with Katari Taiko.

Sawagi Taiko continued to perform at women's festivals throughout the 1990s when such women-only events were popular in the lesbian community. These included the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival, the National Women's Music Festival in Bloomington, Indiana, Wiminifest in Albuquerque, and Rhythmfest in Tuxedo, North Carolina. Sawagi Taiko has also supported a variety of organizations, such as International Women's Day, through their performances, and been allied with Asian gays and lesbians, AIDS, and First Nations groups.



Sawagi Taiko (photo by Kim Noriko Kobayashi)

Sawagi's web page states:

These performances allow us not only to support the political work of these organizations, but also to reach specific parts of our audience – Asian Pacific Islander and people of colour communities, the lesbian, gay and women's communities. We would like to play for people who would be inspired by our strong Asian feminist artistic expression and share our commitment to anti-oppression struggles.¹⁶

Formed in 1999, Raging Asian Women's (RAW) Taiko group is based in Toronto, Ontario and has a group philosophy similar to Sawagi Taiko, incorporating a focus on feminism. RAW has performed at numerous community, feminist and queer events such as (Gay) Pride Toronto, Take Back the Night Rally, Queer Women's Cabaret, Gay Asians of Toronto and Lesbian Cabaret¹⁷. RAW strives to be a role model as strong Asian women, having an anti-racist feminist ideology focused on "building community, being a voice for East Asians, and raising awareness around our histories and struggles that Asian people have had in the North American context." (p.c., 2005)

Komori, a former member of Sawagi Taiko, describes that participation within an all-women Pan-Asian ensemble created an opportunity for members to engage in a formidable performance medium that allowed them to express their shared histories and experiences (p.c., Feb. 2005):

I feel that some of the power is that we are coming from a similar history, so there is a power because we know what it is like to be silenced as Asian women and Asian people and to have this powerful medium to express ourselves that raises the energy up much more. So if you have a person coming from a different history, it just wouldn't be the same symbiotic energy coming together.

Asian women working in an exclusive context can learn from strong role models. As often happens in these emancipatory groups, a collective feminist

aesthetic develops that is an aesthetic appreciation for things which present women in a position of power (Ecker 1985). Some women who participate in these groups may not be politically inclined as feminists, but simply want to play taiko with other women. As a member of the group, they become exposed to the ideals of gender and cultural empowerment. Kage, a founding member of Sawagi Taiko, confirms that the numerous women's festivals at which Sawagi Taiko performed exposed group members to feminist ideas that might have otherwise been inaccessible to them (p.c., 2002).

Creative Expression in All-Women Kumi-Daiko Ensembles

Ellen Koskoff notes that in secluded all-female gatherings many social restrictions regarding musical performance are lifted. She explains that "this separation [from male society] serves the dual purpose of providing women a socially acceptable, if limited, forum for musical expression as well as an environment for the expression of gender identity" (1987: 9).

Female members involved in all-women's kumi-daiko are thereby afforded a space to develop and explore their creativity and self-expression. Komori comments upon the intimidation that many women taiko players experienced around composing and performing drum solos: "Soloing is another thing. Some women would never solo. Soloing is a technique that can be developed. A lot of solo is just ego and confidence. So that is a difference between mixed (gender) and women's groups." (p.c., Feb. 2005)

Lisa Mah, a founding member of Sawagi Taiko, finds taiko attractive as a useful way to explore self-expression and as a nontraditional outlet for her emotions. She points out that taiko enables her "to scream, shout, be loud and physical, hit drums really hard, jump around, and to explore different ways of being" from what she is accustomed, yet allows her to do something that represents herself as an Asian-Canadian. (p.c., 2002)

When Sawagi Taiko was formed, the women had less than a year to prepare a 45-minute set made up of entirely new compositions, a challenging feat unheard of within the realm of kumi-daiko (Komori Feb. 2005). One of the compositions that came out of Sawagi Taiko's compositional frenzy is "Nobori," (a piece that has brought tears to the eyes of many feminists), composed by Lisa Mah. The central concept of Nobori, which in Japanese means 'to rise,' pertains to domestic violence, and the message imbued within the composition is a plea for those women enduring abusive relationships to gather the

courage to leave. Mah describes the concepts of the different musical sections in “Nobori”:

The song does go from a calm (thinking about making life-altering changes in one’s life) to increased strength and courage (doing something to make the changes) and in the end, celebrating the change. On a personal level, I know what it takes to get out of an abusive situation and hope that anyone in a similar situation can build their inner strength to make changes (p.c., 2005).

Many female taiko drummers interviewed express their attraction to the movement and choreography in kumi-daiko. This is evident in the repertoire of RAW and Sawagi Taiko, both groups that have movement-based compositions which are accompanied by taiko drumming. The utilization of taiko and movement is a distinguishing feature of all-women kumi-daiko ensembles. RAW has two pieces that are dance centered, “Matsuri” and “Mountain Moving Day”. RAW’s “Mountain Moving Day” is choreographed by Suzanne Liska and guest artist Shelly Sawada, and reflects the strength of women warriors. Liska describes the performance of “Mountain Moving Day” (p.c., 2005):

Shelly and I collaborated with Prithi Narayan (playing the *veena*, an Indian classical instrument) and Gein Wong (spoken word artist), along with Amy Lin on the odaiko and Helen Luu on the shime. The musicians improvise with the dancers, accentuating the changing dynamics of the story. Shelly and I, along with Prithi’s coaching, developed the dance piece through contact improvisational movement. Through our exploration we created a myth about a woman warrior whose body and spirit had been divided. The piece begins with the two parts of herself, her animal tiger side and her mountain spirit side, separate, unable to unify.

Sawagi Taiko has performed some pieces that are entirely movement-based such as Lisa Mah’s “Wind”. The movements in “Wind” are based on the martial arts form of *wu shu* and project bold images of Asian women in motion. Another movement-based piece is “Beached Amoeba”, where members evolve from micro-organisms into taiko drummers (Kage p.c., 2005).

Peterson notes that women’s groups are radical and revolutionary by virtue of transmitting feminist-lesbian textual content. She reflects that feminist-lesbian texts describe “the expression of women’s oppression by men, the celebration of the beauty of women in their struggle to overcome this oppression, and the beauty of women loving women in a sexual relationship.” (1987: 206)



Raging Asian Women

Although kumi-daiko in general has little textual content, a landmark precedent was Katari Taiko’s use of feminist poetry in the composition “Mountain Moving Day”, which is based on a famous 1911 poem by a Japanese feminist woman, Akiko Yosano (Uyehara Hoffman, p.c., 2005).

Mountain Moving Day is coming
I say so, yet others doubt it
Only a while the mountain sleeps
In the past all mountains moved in fire
Yet, you may not believe it
Oh, man, this alone believe
All sleeping women, now awake, and move
All sleeping women, now awake, and move.¹⁸

Other textually based performances include Sawagi Taiko’s piece called “Bar Doors,” which incorporates poetry by Helen Koyama accompanied by drumming and performed in a theatrical format set in a lesbian context by having the main character portrayed as a butch woman. Sawagi Taiko’s repertoire includes Eileen Kage’s composition “Ja Sawago” (“Let’s Raise Hell”), that contains a rap play on kumi-daiko *kuchi-shoga*,¹⁹ referencing gender inversion in the text:

kaminoke nobashita otoko no ko (boys with long hair)
kan kan bozu no onna no ko (bald headed girls)

Feminist theatrics have been incorporated in Sawagi Taiko’s past performances. In addition to “Bar Doors,” they have staged a lesbian striptease interpretation of the mythological tale of the Japanese sun-goddess Amaterasu-no-omikami and the lesser goddess, Ame-no-Uzume-no-mikoto, much to the delight of their lesbian audience (Komori p.c., 2005).

Kumi-Daiko and Queer Issues

There is a notable affiliation with queer culture in Canadian kumi-daiko (Kobayashi 1994). The numerous queer events that RAW and Sawagi Taiko have performed supports this fact. The feminist basis of these ensembles attracts lesbian membership and provides a site for them to express queer identity. Wasabi Daiko was initially formed in 1984 as an inclusive group, but with membership changes developed into an exclusively pan-Asian ensemble and subsequently became an Asian 'gay, lesbian, and bisexual' group in 1992. Tamai Kobayashi discusses Wasabi Daiko's role in a queer context (p.c., 2005):

We didn't look like the traditional Asian stereotype. Like, we were visible—we were taking up public space, making sound, making noise and we were playing at venues where maybe you wouldn't have traditionally—these so-called 'not mainstream looking' women playing at. And if you followed us, we did have a huge following in the queer community.

Wasabi Daiko, during their queer era, performed at many events addressing queer issues such as Gay Pride. They communicated a strong political message of combating racism and homophobia. Kobayashi discusses the politically-charged atmosphere during her time in Wasabi Daiko: "Also, we have to think about what it was like back then [the 1990s]. It was after the fever pitch of identity politics. We were trying to do this queer pan-Asian collective and it was very difficult. It was a utopian idea." (p.c., 2005)

Kumi-daiko, as performed by feminists, attracts queer participants, although this fact may not be publicly proclaimed due to concerns of homophobia in the broader community. Komori attempts to discern the reasons why there are a significant number of Asian lesbians performing kumi-daiko:

I think that we have to step outside of what expectations are and I think that doing taiko is outside of what expectations are for Asian women, so I think there is a parallel there. It's a good butch thing to do—a good expression of butch-ness. Mind you, femmes play too. (p.c., Feb. 2005)

All-women kumi-daiko, with membership restricted to pan-Asians, is a unique aspect of Canadian kumi-daiko. In general terms, American kumi-daiko encompasses the philosophy of Seiichi Tanaka, who envisions kumi-daiko as inclusive with regard to race, gender, and age, and not the sole domain of Asians (Tusler 2003). Pan-Asian all-women kumi-daiko ensembles allow members to develop their creativity, experiment within the conventional kumi-

daiko format, and support various political and feminist agendas. As well, queer members enjoy a public space for expressing their sexual identities.

Conclusion

There is a Japanese mythological tale of *Amaterasu* and *Uzume* that is embraced by many kumi-daiko communities. Kumi-daiko drummers can trace taiko's origin to a mythological female figure, Uzume, goddess of mirth. In the tale of Amaterasu and Uzume, Amaterasu hid herself in a cave due to a prank that her brother had played upon her, setting the heavens into darkness. At the request of the gods, Uzume performed a comical and erotic dance, stomping her feet loudly and frenetically on an overturned wooden tub and drumming up a storm, much to the delight of all the gods who burst forth laughing. The commotion lured Amaterasu out of her cave and thus returned sunlight to the heavens.

This tale highlights the significance of Japanese women in the realm of entertainment as well as the power of their performances. Uzume's dance is considered to be the progenitor of Japanese music and choreography (Malm 1959). Kumi-daiko can lay claim to such divinely inspired performances as Uzume's stomping upon the wooden tub casts the goddess as the first taiko drummer. Japanese taiko drumming originates from female figures, yet women have not been associated with drumming until recently. The table has turned with the return of women to the 'big drum' and their place of public visibility within the performance art of kumi-daiko.

This examination of gender issues in Canadian kumi-daiko has outlined Katari Taiko's prominent female membership development and illustrated taiko's appeal for women. Asian women have deconstructed racial and gender stereotypes, and created positive role models. Through the performance of kumi-daiko, women have gained visibility while connecting to an Asian heritage, in a process of self-empowerment. Japanese-Canadian community rebuilding through taiko also plays a factor in the high number of women participants, as many women were engaged in community by their act of volunteering. The lengthy discussions and processing associated with collective organizations, integrated components of dance, and an environment dominated by strong women may have deterred men from joining or remaining with the group. Men's easy access and encouragement to participate in sport may also help to explain why taiko may not be as appealing to them.

Musical genres that are differentiated along gender lines reinforce a particular social order reflecting existing power relations. Transgressing

these boundaries works to subvert the dominant social order, reflecting the changes that are taking place with regard to growth in socio-economic power that women are experiencing. Lise Waxer, in *All-Women Salsa Bands in Cali*, points out that the rise of all-women salsa bands is reflective of these musicians' courage to challenge and reappropriate social conventions (2001).

The emergence of pan-Asian-all-women kumi-daiko ensembles has similarly challenged social conventions and contributed to Asian feminist community building. These exclusive female ensembles can create opportunities for self-development and self-expression, encouraging women to push the creative boundaries of taiko. An all-women ensemble provides a space for queer members to express their identities within a public forum. Kumi-daiko, as performed by women, heralds a renewal for the 'big drum,' placing it back on a grand stage to create contemporary figures of Asian women that kick ass.

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Notes

¹ Mark Tusler is an ethnomusicologist whose dissertation is a study of pedagogical aspects of performance-centered kumi-daiko, "Sounds and Sights of Power: Ensemble Taiko Drumming (kumi-daiko) Pedagogy in California and the Conceptualizations of Power" (2003), and covers the broad aspects of learning taiko within the structures of California kumi-daiko organizations.

² It is important to note that the province of Ontario has experienced its own distinctive kumi-daiko evolution, under the auspices of Japan's Osuwa Daiko. Katari Taiko has had a minor impact in Ontario, largely through the defunct ensemble Wasabi Daiko, which was founded by former members of Katari Taiko.

³ "Taiko Resource: Taiko Overview and History," in *The Rolling Thunder Taiko Resource* [Online], available: <http://www.ttaiko.com/resource/history.html>; accessed 15 July 2001.

⁴ See note 3.

⁵ Presently performing as Fuji no Yama Ondekoza, since their move to the city of Mt. Fuji in Shizuoka. Za Ondekoza web page [Online], available: <http://www.ondekoza.com/en/>; accessed 7 December 2005.

⁶ Za Ondekoza is based on the philosophy of *Sogakuron*, where running and music are one and a reflection of the drama and energy of life. Ondekoza's unparalleled running tour began in 1990 at Carnegie Hall in N.Y. and ended with a memorial concert at Carnegie Hall on Nov. 12, 1993. They had 355 performances and ran continuously for 1,071 days, completing 14,910 km. Za Ondekoza web page

[Online], available: <http://www.ondekoza.com/en/>; accessed 7 December 2005.

⁷ This point is repeated by Mark Tusler (2003), Mayumi Takasaki (2005), and John Endo Greenaway (2005).

⁸ Powell Street Festival is an annual Japanese-Canadian community festival of arts and culture that has been taking place since 1976 in Vancouver's historical 'Little Tokyo.'

⁹ Power drumming refers to a style of taiko drumming that is based on strength and stamina.

¹⁰ Kumi-daiko groups that engage in collective processing towards decision making have been cited as a deterrent for men's involvement (Mah, p.c., 2002, Woo, p.c., 2005, Endo Greenaway, p.c., 2005, Tamaribuchi, p.c., 2002, Komori, p.c., 2005)

¹¹ Deborah Wong's article, "Taiko and the Asian/American Body: Drums, Rising Sun, and the Question of Gender" covers the issue of gender and the Asian-American woman's body, discussing the complexities of how the body of taiko players is gendered and racialized.

¹² Tiffany Tamaribuchi is an internationally recognized taiko master within kumi-daiko. She studied with Seiichi Tanaka and performed with notable Japanese kumi-daiko ensembles. She founded Sacramento Taiko Dan, JO-Daiko (an all-women kumi-daiko ensemble) and Tozai Wadaiko (a professional kumi-daiko ensemble).

¹³ Lisa Mah, Eileen Kage, and John Endo Greenaway also mention this point in their interviews. Mah refers, "I had only been in the group for about a year and a half (1989) when I heard one of the female founding members (in a public interview) talk about why no women had composed anything in its nine year existence – even though most of the members were women. From my recollection, she said that the men had always taken the initiative to compose and that the women were a little intimidated to take on that role." (p.c., 2005)

¹⁴ Kiyoshi Nagata mentions an all-women group, Onna No Ko, an extension of one of his University of Toronto groups. The author participates in an Asian women's kumi-daiko practice group and assists with taiko workshops for female residents using the Vancouver Downtown Eastside Women's Centre.

¹⁵ Michigan Womyn's Music Festival is the largest women-only festival, started in 1976, attracting 8,000 women annually. Cynthia M. Lont, "Women's Music: No Longer a Small Private Party," in *Rockin' the Boat: Mass Music and Mass Movements*, ed. Reebee Garofalo (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992), 246.

¹⁶ Sawagi Taiko web page [Online], available at: <http://www.shinova.com/part/86-sawa/>; accessed 26 October, 2005.

¹⁷ RAW web page [Online], available at: <http://www.ragingasianwomen.ca>; accessed 28 October 2005.

¹⁸ CD, Katari Taiko, *Commotion*, "Mountain Moving Day," composed and produced by John Endo Greenaway.

¹⁹ Kumi-daiko is essentially based on an oral tradition. Kuchi-shoga is a system of solmization that functions as a mnemonic device in learning repertory. Tusler, "Sounds and Sights," 80.