Chapter 9

Changing Heart (Beats): From Japanese Identity and Nostalgia to Taiko for Citizens of the Earth

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Introduction: Journey into the Drumbeats of Identities

In the much proclaimed millennial year of 2000, a new form of exhibit in the contemporary globalizing world, the airport exhibit staged for the edification of travelers passing time between flight destinations, featured a series of photos and text about drumming traditions world-wide. This exhibit was entitled, “Journey into the Spirit of Percussion”. The opening photographic image showed two nearly naked taiko drummers from the group Kodō hitting a huge drum in a natural setting, with land meeting water meeting sky, as the world met a new day at the crack of dawn. The group Kodō rose to fame in Japan by renewing interest in drumming forms seen as strongly associated with Japanese identity, and with a Japanese spirit (seishin). Their rise to fame was also associated with the remote, highly localized place setting of Sado Island on which they trained. In the following decades, Kodō imaging and musical involvements would undergo a shift that would retain an emphasis on taiko as a traditional Japanese percussion form but would also recognize it as a statement of Japanese or partial Japanese (or even partial Asian) descent elsewhere in the world, and later as a music form available for all people in a growing globalization of cross-fertilizing musical influences, which Kodō itself began to promote. The highly localized venue of Sado Island became a site of globalization, and hybridization through the merging of music forms and experiences from throughout the world. I begin this chapter with three vignettes, spread over a twenty year period, that reflect my own journey into a knowledge about taiko and the taiko group Kodō. The vignettes also begin to reflect the shifting identity statements taiko has been used to express; Japanese identity within Japan, an Asian, mixed, or hybrid heritage identity outside Japan, and finally a more universal identity as human beings, or citizens of the earth.
Vignette #1: Tokyō, the Urban Core of Japan, 1983

I sit among several students at the Inter-University Center, a center for learning Japanese affiliated with North America’s Ivy League and Big Ten universities, and several important Japanese associations, at that time located in the fast-paced central district of Yotsuya, in Tokyo, Japan’s central commercial and intellectual core. In a country long conditioned to the concept of rank (e.g. Nakane, 1970; Martinez, 1990, 1992, 2004) Tokyō is frequently referred to as the ‘highest ranking’ place in Japan. This is shown in language by the use of ‘up’ to refer to movement toward Tokyō. Just as during the Roman empire all roads led to Rome, in Japan all directions lead ‘up’ to Tokyō, whether one is headed north, south, east, or west. We sit listening to what I would then have called ‘middle-age’ Japanese women (but who on reflection seem much younger to me now) explain to us about the taiko group Kodō. These are women from the College Woman’s Association of Japan, a group that regularly provides a scholarship for a female student at the center, and that sees to the ‘cultural enhancement’ of all (male and female) students. They have decided all the students should attend Kodō’s upcoming taiko concert being held in Tokyō. ‘Taiko’ basically means ‘large drums’. Kodō had already gained fame in Japan both for their drumming, and for their strict training and lifestyle. Their fame was also already associated with the remote island they had chosen to be their home base and training center, Sado Island (Sadogashima).

In the nostalgia-laden context of Japan in the early 1980s, Sado symbolized to many Japanese a setting “back in time” to a more pristine age, where and when people lived in a less technologically developed way. Magazine articles about Kodō showed scenes from their strict training regimen on Sado. Trainees rose with or before the sun, and ran for miles each day, spending further hours in intense physical endeavors, in addition to those spent in drumming practice, while otherwise living a very disciplined life, on a regimented diet. There were associations in the Japanese mind with ideals of disciplined training, education, self-development and denial. Such associations tended to coincide with ideas of a traditional Japanese spirit or *seishin*. The location, in a remote and highly localized place, added to this, as Japan was enmeshed in a ‘furusato’ or ‘home village’ boom that sought out remote rural areas and imaged these as representatives of the ‘real Japan’ (see Befu, 1992, 1983; Creighton, 2001, 1998, 1997a; Ivy, 1995, 1988; Kurita, 1983; Robertson, 1991, 1988, 1987). Such places and a sense of Japanese