

Taiko in Japanese History

The exact history of the Japanese Taiko remains shrouded in speculation, although some educated guesses are possible. The oldest physical evidence of taiko in Japan is a haniwa clay figure of a drummer that dates from the sixth or seventh century. However, since the first instruments in any society tend to be percussion instruments, it would not be out of the question for taiko (as we know them today) to have been used in Japan for well over 2000 years.

Japanese taiko as we know them today bear strong resemblance to Chinese and Korean instruments, which were probably introduced in the waves of Korean and Chinese cultural influence from 300-900 AD. It has been speculated that the predecessor of the tsuzumi style of taiko may have come from as far away as India, and have come to Japan along with Buddhism. However, the waves of cultural influence stopped for the most part around the year 900, and development from that point can basically be attributed to native Japanese craftsmen. Taiko, although continuing to bear similarities to Chinese and Korean drums, have evolved into unique Japanese instruments.

Reputedly, one of the first uses of taiko was as a battlefield instrument; used to intimidate and scare the enemy – a use to which drums have been put in many cultures. Taiko were definitely used in battle to issue commands and coordinate movements by the 1500s; the taiko being the only instrument that could be heard across the entire battlefield.

According to picture scrolls and painted screens of the time, one soldier would carry the taiko lashed to a backpack-like frame, while two other soldiers would beat the taiko on each side. Both nagado and okedo style taiko were used in this capacity. A war taiko used by Shingen Takeda, a famous warrior of the era, still exists and is preserved by the drumming group Osuwa-daiko. It is remarkable for the three large holes cut in the side of the nagado style taiko which served to increase the volume of the drum.

In addition to the martial aspect, taiko have always been used in the most refined cultural setting as well. Gagaku music was introduced to Japan in the Nara period (697-794) along with Buddhism, and was quickly adopted as the Imperial court music. Gagaku is the oldest continually played court music in the world and it is still being performed. The taiko used for Gagaku (kakko, san-no-tsuzumi, dadaiko, tsuri-daiko, ninai-daiko, ikko, furitsuzumi, kaiko) are some of the most elegant and beautifully decorated of all Japanese instruments.

The rumbling power of the taiko has also long been associated with the gods and has been appropriated by the religions of Japan. According to Daihachi Oguchi of Osuwa-daiko, about four thousand years ago, in the Jomon period, taiko was used to signal various activities in the village. Simple taiko beats would be used to signal that the hunters were setting out or to signal that a storm was coming and that the villagers needed to bring in the fish or fruits they had drying. It was used in village Shinto rites to offer up prayers to the Gods. In addition the village festivals such as harvest festivals were celebrated with the sound of drumming. As this belief developed, only the holy men were allowed to beat the taiko and as the Shinto and Buddhist religions developed in Japan, this custom remained. One consequence of this association of taiko with religion was that taiko were played only on special occasions and only by men who were granted special permission by the priests. All through this time, taiko were played singly or in certain instances in pairs. Taiko ensembles were only developed much later.

Taiko has continued to find a place in religious ceremonies both Buddhist and Shinto and it is extremely common to find taiko in both temples and shrines. In fact, the Nichiren sect is credited with creating the uchiwa style taiko which is used in an aid in chanting. Some Buddhist sects use taiko to represent the voice of Buddha. Taiko is an integral part of the Bon Odori street dancing parties that are part of summer festivities throughout Japan and which are based on Buddhist rites. Taiko is now a vibrant performance art participated in by both men and women. The rich body of traditional taiko rhythms are a never-ending source of inspiration for modern players.