

Inventories

The Material Culture of Taiko

The whole world goes into this drum.

—MARK MIYOSHI, JAPANESE AMERICAN TAIKO MAKER, *MAKING AMERICAN TAIKO*

I understand blackness as always already performed.

—MONICA L. MILLER, *SLAVES TO FASHION: BLACK DANDYISM AND THE STYLING OF BLACK DIASPORIC IDENTITY*

WHAT'S IN MY BAG

Let me show you what's in my taiko bag. The canvas tote I use to carry all my taiko paraphernalia just gave out after over a decade of use. It's red and has the distinctive TCLA logo silk-screened on one side (see figure 5, the author's Taiko Center of Los Angeles bag, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Luckily, my mother had bought one just like it from my teacher and was kind enough to let me have hers. She didn't play taiko but was a faithful audience member and supporter.

This chapter is not a taiko primer. I know what the early chapters of an ethnography are supposed to do: the genre dictates that the scene should be set, maps provided, and the histories defined.¹ This chapter will not give a tidy overview of, well, anything about taiko. This book will not begin with times past, summaries, or taxonomies. I begin instead with the things closest to me: the things I need to play and the attitudes toward them that I have learned from my friends and teachers. You *will* learn what's in my taiko bag: this is an inventory.² My bag is always full of what I'll need, plus a lot of detritus from rehearsals and past events. The main thing it contains is my bachi bag, a cloth bag full of drumsticks. Various teachers and local Japanese American craftspersons make bachi bags, but my mother made mine, from cotton cloth with the distinctive Japanese indigo wave pattern; it has a drawstring top and is very simple, but I love it.

THINGS

The material culture of taiko is rich and varied, and taiko players sensuously involve themselves in the material realities of drums, drumsticks, and clothing. They also spend a lot of time thinking and talking about the material things that are part of performance. Drums are, of course, central, but drumsticks are personal, since the drums are often owned by the teacher, whereas bachi are your own. Clothing is both communal and idiosyncratic: performance costumes are the result of agreement and often identical for the whole group,³ whereas rehearsal clothing is individual but considered. In short, the artifacts surrounding taiko say a lot about the players' attitudes, beliefs, social aesthetics, poetics, and conflicts.

The world of physical objects outlines complex interactions between people, environment, and sociality. Physical objects construct and reflect values and aesthetics. Given the deeply physical performance praxis of taiko, its material culture is deep and well developed. The lives of material objects are fundamental to taiko practice, and human-object interactions are sites of generative meaning. The "things" that taiko players wear, brandish, strike, caress, wash, fold, and repair don't acquire meaning as much as dialogically instantiate meaning in both human bodies and the objects themselves. Object-subject relations aren't thing-human in taiko. As Bill Brown (2001, 4) argues, "The thing really names less an object than a particular subject-object relation." Some phenomenologists even suggest that objects have agency.⁴ Barbara Bolt (2013, 4–5) notes that the new humanistic materialism in the arts is both a corrective to the modernist interest in the formalism of any medium and a challenge to the turn-of-the-millennium assumption that art is only discursive, constructed through language. At the end of the last century, ethnomusicologists rendered painstaking taxonomic schemes around the physicality of musical instruments, and this study, which they named organology, was in many ways a gesture of radical scientific relativism, leveling the field to make all musics worthy of serious attention.⁵ The museum haunts twenty-first-century ethnomusicologists: its compendium of things is omnipresent. Although we spend most of our time with instruments animated by living bodies, we are uneasily aware of our instinctive trained impulse to describe and categorize the thing: *It's a directly struck barrel-shaped membranophone from category 211.222.1 in the Hornbostel-Sachs [1961] taxonomy, though it could also be categorized as 211.322, since it has two usable membranes.* Still, the twenty-first-century museum is a space in which objects are openly regarded as fraught interfaces between different histories,⁶ and that drum is a dialogic animation of all its histories. The ethnomusicological object is overloaded with meaning. I reject its overdetermined transformation into an organological thing; no, I struggle with it. The humanistic turn toward the new materialism has opened a more porous understanding of things, along with a move away from the empirical objectification of objects and the assumption that the materiality of the world simply represents resources to

be extracted for human use. The late capitalist assignment of value through networks of difference and need reveals how and why objects—including, especially, those regarded as laded with culture—move around in space and between different practitioners. For instance, given the exorbitant market value of traditional craft objects from Japan, locally made, wine-barrel *chudaiko* were first a necessity in North America but are now perhaps on the verge of being edged out through the strategic infiltration of Asano's gorgeous Japanese-made taiko.

The objects themselves, and the shadowy, shifting relationship between the rustic North American drum and the objet d'art Japanese drum, speak to a rich and troubling history of nations, bodies, global capitalism, and self-determination. Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (2010, 5) writes, "Asian American culture always bears the traces of its material conditions. But for me, that materiality must be a central site of analysis, rather than simply a context for understanding the cultural text." Following her lead, we can see that the North American drum has an iterative relationship to the Japanese drum, but not vice versa. For North American taiko players, Japanese objects and the use of Japanese-language terminology are always indications of a deep need for cultural authenticity and affiliation. Taiko players' relationships to Japanese objects are often intimate and deeply meaningful. The anthropologist Takeyuki Tsuda (2016, 225–49) argues that taiko offers a "performative authenticity" (248) to Japanese Americans that addresses violent historical discontinuities. We fetishize Japanese objects as a way to address the gaps between past and present.

My bag contains these things: a bachi bag with seven pairs of bachi; a *kane* in a small Japanese cloth bag; and a mesh bag stuffed full of first-aid tape, several barrettes, a small LCD flashlight for reading directions in the dark wings of a stage, my *tekko* (wristbands), business cards for the TCLA, foam earplugs for rehearsal, four *hachimaki* (headbands) made of, respectively, black, gold, blue, and red rope, and a bunch of business cards from people met during gigs. I didn't realize that I had so many bags within my bag. Have I absorbed the Japanese and Japanese American inclination toward wrapping things up?

The *kane* is a small bronze handheld gong. It looks like an ashtray or small saucer. It is more properly called an *atarigane* and is used to keep time because its sound cuts through the roar of even a large group of drummers. It is usually held in the left hand and is struck by a special bachi that has a small piece of deer horn at the end. Deer horn is hard enough to create a loud, clear, percussive sound but also soft enough so that it doesn't dent the *kane*. I don't often get to use my *kane*, since a lead musician usually does the honors (usually Rev. Tom, our teacher). After studying taiko for about five years, I started to offer workshops here and there for nonmusicians, and I realized that a *kane* is an essential means for cutting through the sonic chaos created by beginners. I bought mine at Miyamoto Taiko in Tokyo—it's the middle size, about four inches in diameter—and a little drawstring bag for it a few blocks away, in one of the arts and crafts shops for tourists that line Nakamise

Street, the lane that leads to the main gate of Sensoji, the famous Buddhist temple in Asakusa, in the old-town area of Shitamachi in Tokyo. The bag is a lovely little artifact of traditionality. It is in the “traditional” style carried by Japanese women before World War II but is made of a synthetic version of the knit cloth called *chirimen* and is an object meant to be bought by domestic or foreign tourists in search of traditional crafts. Each drawstring ends in a knot and a five-yen Japanese coin, meant to evoke the past. The bag is simultaneously traditional and orientalist, referencing certain ideas of Japaneseness. I had seen such bags several years before on a previous trip to Tokyo and knew one would be perfect for a kane.

My sakura-pattern hachimaki—a length of cotton printed in a classic red-and-white cherry-blossom pattern, already twisted into a headband—is always at the bottom of the bag, since I wear it a lot. A half-empty plastic water bottle is also down at the bottom. About twenty pieces of paper are stuffed in among everything else, including dog-eared charts from past performances, scribbled directions to past gigs, several old copies of *Rafu Shimpo* (the bilingual Japanese American Los Angeles newspaper) containing announcements about our performances, and advertisements from Marukai (a Japanese supermarket with several stores in greater Los Angeles). It’s a mess. I know I should clean it out and archive things, but I rarely get around to it.

Lest you think my bag is unusual, let’s see what Beverly Murata has in hers. Beverly is a longtime member of the TCLA and my good friend. On August 26, 2007, after a weekend of performances in California’s Central Coast, Rev. Tom was driving his van back to Los Angeles, and I was squeezed into the back seat along with another TCLA member and a lot of drums. We were settled in for a long trip, so it was a good time to ask Beverly to show me the contents of her bag. Some of my best conversations with taiko colleagues took place in this van, on the way home from one gig or another.

Take a look at the ten-minute video 4, Beverly Murata showing the contents of her gear bag, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>. Rev. Tom is in the driver’s seat, taking us south on the 101 toward home. It is still early in our four-hour drive. Sunlit hills roll by. I am in the back seat, and Beverly is in the front passenger seat. I ask her to show me everything in her bag, so she starts at the top and works her way down, showing me these items in this order: a Habitat for Humanity baseball cap; a black TCLA tank top, which she had worn earlier in the day for our performances; her long black “taiko pants”; an over-the-counter instant cold pack for sore muscles; a pair of dark blue *tabi* (shoes); a pair of dark blue tekko in a plastic Ziploc bag; two twisted rope hachimaki, one gold and one blue and gold; one hachimaki made from a sakura-pattern *tenugui* (thin cotton towel), already twisted and tied, ready to be slung around the neck; a folded red cotton tenugui with the TCLA logo on it; a copy of the notation for our signature piece “Okedo-mai,” folded up into a square; several pieces of sandpaper in a Ziploc bag, for smoothing down bachi; a pair of earplugs in a plastic bag; a stretchy knee brace; a pair of tabi ankle socks

with little red fish on them, bought in a Tokyo gift shop; a roll of first-aid tape, also bought in Japan, with adhesive on one side, much better than Band-Aids for blisters; a hairbrush; about eight TCLA business cards (Rev. Tom offers a thumbs-up at this point in the footage); a billfold with Satori Daiko business cards with her name on them, made the year before by fellow Satori member Harriet for each of us when we were preparing to go to Japan on a study tour; a small cosmetic bag with a purse mirror, Kleenex, elasticized hair ties, and a barrette; her black cotton bachi bag, with the TCLA logo and a carrying handle, as well as a big bright pink “B” taped on it (so she could easily find it in the dark of the wings during stage performances) and a pink plastic luggage name tag around the handle, attached after she once left her bachi bag behind after a performance; six pairs of bachi inside the bag, including a pair of *shime* bachi from Japan, several pairs of *chudaiko* bachi of different weights, and a pair of *okedo* bachi (wider at the base and thinner at the striking end), each with a little “B” written on the flat end with a Sharpie to easily identify them as hers; and finally, down at the bottom, a wad of empty supermarket shopping bags, just in case, and a folded-up piece of paper with directions to our performance the day before at the John Anson Ford Theatre. She also has a bottle of water in an outside pocket. I ask her what equipment she has left at home, and she says other costumes, more bachi, a hot-air comb, and “a metronome that I don’t use!” She says she has taken several things out of the bag and left them at home for this trip: a small portable tape recorder for practices, useful when learning or creating new pieces; a whole folder of notated pieces; and the Satori dues book, where she keeps track of each member’s quarterly dues.

Taiko players bring everything but the kitchen sink. We aim to be ready for anything and everything. We are ready for the pain (blisters, sore muscles) and ready for all the different drums in different pieces necessitating different drumsticks. We are ready for the heaps of drumsticks all jumbled together at the side of the stage, left there as we run from the end of one piece to the beginning of the next. We have an anxious determination to be ready for anything, which demands both flexibility and thorough, exhaustive preparation. There’s always a “right” way to do things, and you need to prepare for that. You’re going to need a lot of stuff in order to be ready. As Ruth Behar (2013, 4) writes, “Traveling heavy with my doubts and worries” is how we roll. We travel heavy both literally—look at Beverly’s bag!—and affectively. Traveling heavy makes it possible to leap into the air at the right moment with the right bachi.

Bachi are a taiko player’s most prized possessions. They come in many sizes and shapes, and serious players usually have many pairs. Bachi don’t last forever: they get beat up (literally) and they break after some years of use. I always carry seven pairs with me and have another six pairs at home. I just looked back at an old journal entry about the bachi I was carrying with me then and realized how my arsenal has changed:

FROM MY JOURNAL, JUNE 8, 2003

I look over my bachi during a break in the dress rehearsal. I have so many now that they don't all fit in my bachi bag, so I keep the ones that I use only rarely in another bag—my odaiko bachi in particular, which are very large and still quite clean and undinged because I rarely play odaiko.

I have three pairs of chudaiko bachi, one pair of shime bachi, and two pairs of okedo bachi. I just got the second pair of okedo bachi because my original pair (about two years old now) are suddenly dinged to the point that the surface of the wood is splitting and chipping and could damage a drumhead. It occurs to me that I've never used them on okedo: rather, I use them for pieces when I'm moving between chudaiko and shime, e.g., in "Nightfight" and "Lion." My two heavier pairs of chudaiko bachi are impressive but give me blisters within minutes of continuous playing . . . which leaves me embarrassed and humbled, determined to use them more and thus to get used to their heft and their power. But in fact I never do. I keep returning to my earlier pair, which are from the Miyamoto studio. The gold lettering of the studio is part of what I like about them; I also love their slim denseness. But again, they've suddenly become grubby and are starting to split along their deeper dings. I compare them to my Miyamoto shime bachi. Same problem. I look closely and think about doing some serious sanding. That would take off the surface dirt and smooth out the dings, but would I be able to address the deeper dents that are leading to the splitting? I hate the idea of leaving this pair of chudaiko bachi behind. This was my third pair: The first—pine—I was proud to leave behind, as it marked a moment of advancement. The second pair—oak—pleased me—its whiteness, its weight. But moving on to the Miyamoto pair felt like a graduation, and I'm not ready to leave that moment. But that's laziness, because it's also an avoidance of the blisters that my other pairs will leave, reminding me that I'm not yet strong enough, not yet playing as much as I should.

I use my Miyamoto chudaiko bachi all the time. (See figure 6, the author's Miyamoto bachi, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.) Miyamoto is one of the two major Japanese taiko manufacturers. I have been to Miyamoto's main showroom, in Tokyo's Asakusa neighborhood (they also have branch stores), four times now, and I always plan that visit for months because they carry at least fifty kinds of bachi. One of the walls is covered with little cubbyholes, each stacked high with bachi. There are bachi the size of baseball bats, and there are bachi that are thin and delicate. I would guess that they are made from about ten different kinds of wood. A little scale is placed beside the wall of bachi—the kind you might use to weigh letters for the post office—so you can make sure the ones you choose are exactly the same weight. You can spend a lot of time weighing bachi until you have exactly the right two: same weight, same color. Some but not all the bachi have the gold Miyamoto kanji on them. My shime bachi are so marked, and I love them.

AN INVENTORY OF THE TAIKO OWNED BY
REV. TOM KURAI

I don't own any taiko, though a few of my taiko mates do. Beverly, Harriet, and Harriet's daughter, Taylor, each bought their own okedo-daiko in 2003 when we were in Japan together: we have a signature piece that we play on okedo, so it was worth it to them. An okedo has a strap that goes over your right shoulder so you can move around while playing it, and our piece "Okedo-mai," written by a former Satori member, is very upbeat and has marvelous choreography in which we keep changing formation. It's a crowd pleaser. Harriet has a few other taiko at home for practice, I think, and so do several other Satori members: Ray has at least a chudaiko and a shime at home, and Judi has a shime. But none of us has more than several drums, and certainly not enough to do a performance of any scale. In most North American taiko groups, the taiko are owned either communally or by the teacher, so we are quite typical.

Rev. Tom owned all the Satori taiko, and he accumulated an astonishing array of equipment. He had two vehicles (a Ford van and a Honda minivan) to cart taiko around, and I often rolled around greater Los Angeles with him on the way to a gig, sometimes several in a single day. The taiko were all stored at Sozenji Buddhist Temple in Montebello, California, on the edge of East L.A. (See figure 7, taiko in the storeroom at Sozenji Buddhist Temple, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.)

This temple was formerly a Christian church and was bought in 1976 by a group of Zen Buddhists who had parted ways with Zenshuji Soto Mission, a Buddhist temple in L.A.'s Little Tokyo. Zenshuji was founded in 1922 and was the first Soto Zen temple in the US. Rev. Tom's father, Shuyu Kurai, was the first priest in charge of Sozenji when the group left Zenshuji in 1971, and Rev. Tom succeeded him; he was ordained by his father in 1980, took over as Sozenji's resident priest in 1986 after his father died, and was formally named its abbot in 2001. The exterior of the temple looks like the church it was, and the interior features a main hall full of pews and a small raised stage at the front that holds the altar, a glorious sight, full of gold screens and lanterns. We held our rehearsals in a relatively small area at the back of the hall, behind the pews.

When you enter the temple from the parking lot, you are in a short hallway that leads to the main hall. Four small rooms with closed doors line this hallway. Rev. Tom's office and a general storeroom were two of these, and the other two were taiko storerooms, heaped high with equipment. A small hallway on the other side of one taiko storeroom became a spillover storage area. In 2002, Rev. Tom owned the following:

- 2 thirty-four-inch-diameter odaiko
- 3 twenty-eight-inch-diameter odaiko
- 7 fifteen-gallon chudaiko
- 10 thirty-gallon chudaiko

- 4 hira-daiko
- 5 shime-daiko
- 9 okedo-daiko
- 3 Thai odaiko
- 4 Thai chudaiko
- 10 uchiwa-daiko
- 1 hanging flat gong
- 1 bag of assorted noisemakers, including *naruko* (wooden festival clappers), *binsasara* (traditional Japanese clappers made of approximately seventy-five small pieces of wood strung together on a cotton cord and sounded by snapping them in a wavelike motion), and rattles

As noted, some of the chudaiko were from Thailand: they were manufactured as drums for use in Theravada Buddhist temples but were very similar to the drums used in Japanese Buddhist temples . . . which are very similar to the chudaiko and odaiko used in kumi-daiko. Some of the small (fifteen-gallon) chudaiko were made by Stanley Morgan, a White American taiko teacher.⁷ A few of the shime were bought in Japan, though one was American made and had heavy iron bolts rather than the traditional ropes holding the heads to the body. The uchiwa, single-headed frame drums called fan drums, were arranged in sets of three on two stands for a few pieces, mostly for special effects; they were Japanese made, but the stands were made in the US, and their decorative ribbons were designed and attached by a former Satori member.

This list doesn't include Rev. Tom's stands, of which he had more than one for each drum. Many were made by Stan Moyer, Harriet's husband and Taylor's father. Stan didn't play taiko but lent his craftsmanship to our group. He installed wheels on older stands (to facilitate easy onstage movement) and designed strikingly simple and elegant stands for various taiko as Rev. Tom added them to his collection. Some of the stands were used for only the most important stage performances, such as two massive ones for odaiko that were heavy and time consuming to set up and break down but were beautiful, could support our very largest odaiko, and were rock solid.

Chudaiko can be played on two kinds of stands. There are actually far more than that, but the two most standard in North America are the flat stand (*beta*) and the slant stand (Sukeroku style). Each requires a different stance (*kata*) and bodily technique. We mostly used slant stands until a taiko controversy in 1999—to which I will turn in a moment—led Rev. Tom to put them aside and instead use beta stands. I had studied taiko for just two years at that point and had played only on slant stands: my entire kinesthetic sense of taiko was based on those stands and that *kata*. Left foot forward, left knee bent, left thigh parallel to the floor, right leg back and straight, right foot at a 90 degree angle to the left foot, arms scissoring across the body along a diagonal plane, right hand leading with an overhand strike,

left hand following with a backhand strike, torso upright, head turned to the left toward the drumhead, rear end tucked in, abdomen (hara) tight and engaged, the entire body flexible. I had spent two years working on the complexities of this kata. Fundamentally asymmetrical, it felt strange, unnatural, off balance, and awkward for a very long time. It made me aware of every part of my body. No sooner did I feel I had gotten one part of my body under control than I would realize that some other part had slipped out of place. The slant stand placed the body into a certain kata. The stand created the kata; the stand dictated the kata; the stand forced the body into a stress position; the stand tortured me; the stand created new strengths in different parts of my body; the stand deserted me. In 1999, many North American taiko players learned that it wasn't just "a" kind of stand but was created by and emblematic of one taiko ensemble, Oedo Sukeroku Daiko, the first professional kumi-daiko group in Japan. At the North American Taiko Conference that year, the artistic director of Sukeroku had a letter read aloud (by Tanaka-sensei) to the assembled participants in which he asserted copyright ownership and asked that North American groups pay royalties or stop using the stand. The stand wasn't a kind of generalized traditional culture: it was created and unique. It was art and it was owned.⁸

Within a month, Rev. Tom put the slant stands away and had us play on beta stands instead. The upright beta stands require a kata so much more symmetrical that it seemed ludicrously easy: the right and left arms both strike in the same way, overhand on a vertical axis. Rev. Tom commissioned more beta stands. We played on the same chudaiko as before but were brought into a new bodily relationship with them through the beta stands. The slant stands were quietly stacked up in a hallway storage bin. As the years went on, our group and many others gradually reintroduced slant stands into our practice. I don't know whether anyone paid royalties to Oedo Sukeroku Daiko as requested. The slant stand controversy made it clear that taiko culture was actively made rather than infinitely up for grabs and open to all. The material realities of slant stands changed our bodies and our relationship to Japanese performers. Japan was not only authoritative but was watching and correcting us. It forced a difficult conversation about respect, authority, ownership, and community that led to the creation of explicitly open-source repertoire by younger-generation performers, as I discuss in chapter 3.

Harriet and Shirley, another Satori member, designed and sewed bags for most of the taiko. Since the drums were constantly hauled around—in and out of vehicles, on and off stage—they needed protection. Shirley's bags were black polyester canvas with the TCLA logo silk-screened on them; they had straps on the sides and elastic around the top rims and round, flat tops with Velcro fasteners. Harriet designed clever bags for several okedo featuring zippers and slots where the okedo strap comes out to become a carrying strap. She also designed and sewed an amazing set of octopus-like bags for Stan's odaiko stand parts, which had crossbars that could easily get misplaced. In short, a lot of homespun effort went into all the

equipment that surrounded and supported the taiko. Some types of these items could have been bought from various Japanese or American taiko makers, but they would have been expensive and might not even have fit our particular taiko, since there are no prescribed volumes or diameters for American taiko.

Setting up for rehearsal or packing the van for a performance was a group activity. Take a look at video 5, Satori Daiko members packing the van for a performance at the John Anson Ford Theatre in Los Angeles, August 22, 2007, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>. Notice how almost everyone participates: what appears to be chaotic is quite organized. We had all performed many, many times and were familiar with the routine. Someone—Harriet or Rev. Tom—had created a list of the equipment we would need for this performance. We knew it was best to haul the equipment into a big pile, double-check that it was all there, and only then start carrying it out to the van. Getting it all to fit was another matter, and Rev. Tom was often inside the van organizing things as we handed equipment to him. The result was an impressive three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle of equipment, sometimes stacked to the ceiling. I am inside the van lifting and pulling on odaiko stands as Rev. Tom pushes them from outside. Somehow it all fits, though the van is literally full to the ceiling.

After he closes the van's doors, he jokingly refers to the "ritual" of packing the van, and in fact that evening, like every practice and performance, ends with a ritual (see video 6, closing circle, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Even though the night is getting late, notice that almost no one leaves until the van is packed and Rev. Tom has called out "Circle!" and we all stand in a circle. He says, "Otsukaresama deshita," and we respond "Otsukaresama deshita" in unison—thank you for working together, good job, take care, good-bye—and bow.

We knew this equipment in so many ways. We had a profoundly tactile relationship with it. Certainly, we knew its characteristics through playing the taiko—we knew which drums had become dull and nonresponsive because they had been played for so long, and we knew which okedo were uncomfortably heavy and which were wonderfully light, and we knew which stands were so short that you had to maintain a superlow kata if you wanted to look right, and we knew which shime had holes in them from heavy use. We also knew what it was like to carry a heavy chudaiko a long way, for instance for a reception gig at the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles that involved trudging down endless halls or for the infamous gigs at the L.A. County Fair, where the distances grew in the telling, through what seemed like miles of crowds. We knew how to balance odaiko stands on our shoulders and then walk so they didn't bang us in the legs. We knew how to sling an okedo or chudaiko in its bag over the shoulder and then pick up as many stands as we could manage. We knew how to stack as many as three odaiko or chudaiko on a little dolly and wheel the tower of taiko down a hallway, one person pushing and another alongside to steer and keep the drums on the cart whenever we bumped over thresholds or electrical cords. We were familiar with the little

aches and bruises on our bodies the next day, which were the evidence that we knew these drums in more ways than one.

MADE IN THE US?

The material culture of taiko is in constant movement between North America and Japan. Objects from Japan such as bachi, clothing, and above all taiko are prized in deep ways. But it is precisely the taiko themselves that are often insanely expensive by North American standards and thus beyond the reach of many North American taiko groups. A few performing groups are sponsored by the leading Japanese taiko makers—Asano Taiko donates taiko to TAIKOPROJECT and On Ensemble, for instance—but most North American groups make their own drums or buy them from North American taiko makers. The North American craft of taiko manufacture has become a distinct tradition and often creates group bonding through the hours spent sanding, soaking, stretching, and gluing the wine barrels and cowhides that become taiko.

Japanese and North American drum-making techniques are interrelated rather than utterly distinct, but North American taiko making became a craft tradition unto itself in the early 1970s. The key difference is that Japanese taiko are made from a single piece of wood: a section of tree trunk laboriously hollowed out. Large taiko like odaiko are thus made from very large and old trees. Miyamoto and Asano are famous for buying spectacularly large, old trees and seasoning the wood until it can be transformed into stunningly large odaiko. Such taiko are expensive, due to the accumulation of cost that begins with the purchase of carefully chosen logs and their transport from anywhere in Japan or beyond to the taiko factory. Very few North American taiko makers have attempted this kind of work. Beginning in the 1970s, most used old wine barrels, and a long and now standardized process of disassembling, reassembling, and refinishing the barrels is well documented. Soaking cowhide and then stretching it over the reinforced rims of the barrel follows another set of established techniques.

The documentary *Making American Taiko* (Kim, Boch, and Miyagawa 2005) offers a particularly rich picture of early taiko making in the US. In it, the Kinnara Taiko members Rev. Mas, Johnny Mori, and George Abe describe their practical need to make their own taiko, given Japanese drum prices; they were thus the first North American group to make their own taiko. Tanaka-sensei says that he didn't know you *could* make your own taiko and that he learned the techniques from Kinnara. That is, as a Japanese immigrant, he regarded taiko making as a craft known only by a specialized few. He doesn't say so in the documentary, but taiko making was originally the purview of the Buraku, the caste still considered unclean by some Japanese because of their professions as butchers and leatherworkers; they face considerable discrimination in Japan even today. As Alan Gamlen (2003) points out, Japanese taiko players have long been admired, but the Buraku taiko

makers have remained shadowy background figures. In the 1980s, politicized Buraku reframed social discrimination against them as a human rights issue, and in 1987 a group of young Buraku formed a taiko group—unthinkable in traditional Japan—that they named Ikari (anger).⁹ Taiko are thus embedded in horrendous histories of discrimination; they are products of the structurally abject; they have been transformed into art objects and luxury goods. North American taiko makers have recast taiko as treasured material repositories of cultural knowledge, but it bears asking, What knowledge? Whose knowledge? Why do so few North American taiko players talk about the Buraku as central to what we do?

As Abe succinctly puts it in *Making American Taiko*, a group of taiko players deciding to make their own taiko “wouldn’t happen in Japan,” for all these reasons and more. Throughout the 1970s, North American taiko groups went through a long process of experimenting with and exchanging taiko-making techniques. PJ Hirabayashi, the codirector of San Jose Taiko, said “We knew we couldn’t be ‘authentic,’” but this freed them in certain ways. Looking back to the 1970s, the Japanese American taiko maker Mark Miyoshi said that “everyone in the country at that time was making drums,” but as Mori, who also played taiko in the interethnic fusion band Hiroshima, put it, “Mark took it to another level,” by going to Japan and studying drum making. His beautiful handiwork is considered some of the very best in North America.¹⁰ Rather than use wine barrels, Miyoshi now carves his own staves with meticulous care and exactness. Victor Fukuhara, another taiko maker and a member of Kokoro Taiko in Long Beach, California, is more categorical in describing his own work, saying, “We don’t make it at all traditional—we make it [the] American way.” In fact, some Japanese taiko players now come to the US to learn from American taiko makers because the craft is so closely guarded in Japan.

The members of Stanford Taiko, the first collegiate taiko group (formed in 1991), undertook an intensive effort in 2003 to make their own taiko, traveling to learn the process from the Hawaiian ensemble Zenshin Daiko. They then posted an impressively detailed manual to Stanford Taiko’s website.¹¹ One of the first things Senryu Taiko at the University of California, Riverside, did when it formed in 1998 was to make two odaiko, which are still in use more than twenty years later. In other words, some collegiate groups have chosen to participate in the tradition of drum making even though the 1970s are long past and there are now easier ways to obtain drums. Stanford Taiko’s remarkable manual says nothing about *why* the club members were driven to learn how to make their own taiko; in fact, its website dates the genesis of the club to the first taiko made by its founding members, in 1992.¹² Implicitly, the manual’s authors seem to carry forward beliefs from early North American taiko groups (some twenty years before them) that making taiko enacts respect, creates group bonding, offers tactile access to the tradition, and earns a group the right to play taiko.

Despite the emphasis on taiko making in North America, the prestige of Japanese objects there is undeniable. I have absorbed these values. I could buy wooden

dowels at Home Depot and easily make my own bachi, but I am fiercely attached to my Miyamoto bachi. My pleasure in handling them is both sensuous and romanticized. These bachi have a wonderful, dense heft and are perfectly balanced, but my pleasure in them goes beyond their performance as drumsticks and into the realm of heritage production. I am not Japanese American but in certain ways am moved by roots values as much as any North American taiko player. In significant ways, however, I reject the roots trope that drives so much North American taiko. The Japanese origin of taiko and the contemporary circuit of exchange between Japanese and North American taiko players are both undeniable. I am more than a little keen to see taiko reframed as a transnational genre rather than a simple heritage industry, and even keener to see it acknowledged as a distinctively Asian American form at precisely this moment when more and more non-Asian Americans participate with each passing year.

The material culture of taiko plays out all possible binary relationships that art objects maintain and trouble. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2001) argues, the dynamic dichotomies of gift/commodity, alienable/inalienable, art/artifact, and art/commodity are constantly at work when material culture is assigned value. These dynamics shape taiko players' attitudes toward their objects. Until recently, for instance, very few North American taiko groups owned a (spectacularly expensive) Japanese-made taiko: these gorgeous drums are doubly constructed as commodities, first through postwar Japanese economies of craftsmanship and the elevation of traditional objects to art/craft/prestige items, and then again through a Japanese American valorization of such items as heritage objects. When Japanese taiko manufacturers bestow their products on North American performers who have carefully cultivated their ties to these companies, the gift of such prized and expensive craftwork elevates the standing of the group and the performers lucky enough to own these prestige objects.

CLOTHING MAKES THE TAIKO PLAYER

The clothing worn by taiko players in rehearsal and in performance is central to the material culture of North American taiko. In chapter 5 I return to the sartorial imagination and consider how clothing charts powerful new ways to perform gender through ethnicity. Ethnomusicologists and dance scholars have paid surprisingly little theoretical attention to clothing. Clothing is one of the single most public forms of performative identity construction and a central physical means through which taiko bodies speak. It is also a chosen platform for how the body is spatially constructed and then able to do its work.

Taiko groups make considered decisions about their performance clothing. Most choose to have their performers dress identically, though some distinguish between men's and women's clothing. Some call these garments *costumes* and others *uniforms*. The vast majority draw from Japanese festival clothing styles, though

some only emulate those styles rather than reproduce them. These garments thus create a dynamic tension between Japanese and Asian American identity, both for those wearing them and for audiences. The clothes seem to make statements about the ethnic and racial identity of the people wearing them, even if they sometimes set up visual contradictions (when the person in the clothes doesn't phenotypically code as Asian). Dorinne Kondo's (1997, 56) thoughts on Japanese high fashion could just as well describe North American taiko costumes. She reflects that the Japanese fashion industry in the 1990s was transnational in reach and "simultaneously rife with essentializing gestures that refabricate[d] national boundaries." Similarly, Thuy Linh Nguyen Tu (2010, 131) argues that Asian American fashion designers "fit awkwardly into the economy of Asian chic" because the very discursivity of "Asianness" makes them complicit in that economy's long life if they deploy its symbols. (The "Mandarin" or "Chinese" collar and the "Nehru" jacket are examples of how Asian clothing styles have become "mere" style, or Asian chic.) Likewise, transpacific taiko costuming is often self-consciously traditional while embedded in the circulation of Asian chic: its signifiers of Japaneseness activate proliferating cultural associations and are often tweaked into chicness by North American groups—by wearing mass-produced athletic tops over traditional wrapped cotton leggings (*kyahan*) and tabi, for instance. Taiko costumes are wildly diverse in style yet in fact often based on a combination of actual matsuri clothing and matsuri-inspired styles, sometimes made by skilled members of North American taiko groups. Matsuri styles—or ideas about matsuri styles—have become transnational through taiko, among other means. Japanese heritage clothing has a tense relationship with Asian chic.

In 2003, Rev. Tom owned the following costume items for TCLA performers:

- 30 sets of traditional *matsuri-gi* (festival costumes), consisting of *koi-kuchi* (colorful "koi mouth" half-sleeve shirts—so called because of their koi-mouth-like sleeve openings), aprons (*hara-gake*, literally "stomach coverings"), *jika-tabi* (footwear with heavy-duty rubber soles), tekko, and hachimaki
- 30 TCLA logo *happi* coats, in three colors
- 11 TCLA logo *happi* coats, red with black trim
- 18 custom-made vests and hachimaki for Japan tour
- 20 custom-made T-shirts for Japan tour
- 40 sports T-shirts, in two styles
- 10 designer (individual) T-shirts with jeans for the Hidano Concert at the Aratani Theatre

Almost all North American taiko groups use head and foot gear that are distinctively Japanese. Hachimaki are made from a long rectangular piece of cloth (usually cotton) that is folded and/or twisted and then tied around the head. Some groups use specific kinds of knots and dictate whether the knot appears at the front, back, or side of the head. The tabi worn by most taiko players are two-toed

cotton shoes with rubber soles. They fit very closely and look like mittens, with the big toe separated from the rest. Tabi have no heel or arch support and thus place the wearer solidly in contact with the ground. They are surprisingly comfortable. I feel strong in my tabi: I feel connected to the earth and ready to jump around and play. I am on my second pair. Both were dark indigo (the color chosen for my group by Rev. Tom). I bought my first pair directly from Rev. Tom when he outfitted Satori Daiko in 1999, and they lasted about eight years before the seams on the big toe and heel started to give out. In Riverside, a local Korean shoe repairman stitched them closed but warned me that they would last only a while longer, so when Satori visited Japan in 2006, I bought another pair, identical, at the festival clothing shop near Sensoji temple. On that same trip, Beverly and I went to a Japanese hardware store and bought gardeners' jika-tabi in the same indigo color but with rubber soles that extend up over the tops of the toes so they're very strong. But I've scarcely worn them. I actually feel a bit heavy-footed in them, in a way that seems contradictory to taiko. If I ever need to play on a rainy day, though, they'll be perfect.

In performance, Satori members also wear a Japanese-made apron (*hara-gake*) traditionally worn by craftsmen, likewise in indigo. It covers the chest and abdomen, stopping midthigh, and its straps crisscross the back. It has a wonderful deep pocket that extends from the waist all the way down, and I rely on it for all sorts of things: I stick my *bachi* in it between pieces when I need to move a taiko, and I keep my cheat sheet listing the program order there when we perform long concerts. If I have to emcee, I put my watch in there, so I can keep an eye on the time.

Wearing these articles of Japanese clothing creates an ellipsis between Japanese and Issei identities. Of course, non-Asian American audiences don't see this and simply perceive the clothing as quaintly or colorfully Japanese. But the articles of Japanese clothing most commonly worn by taiko groups are workers' or laborers' clothes which speak in two ways at once. They are still worn by the Japanese in the nostalgic and self-consciously authentic contexts of contemporary festivals where tradition is showcased and maintained, but they were also worn by the many Issei who were farmworkers. Barbara Kawakami's (1993) wonderful study of Issei plantation workers' clothing in pre-World War II Hawai'i documents the kinds of garments that immigrants brought from Japan and adapted for the hard work in the sugarcane fields. Seen in this context, the indigo tabi, *hara-gake*, and *tekko* worn by taiko players reclaim their functional origins: these garments once protected Issei men and women from the sharp stalks of sugarcane, just as they now serve practical functions for North American taiko players. *Kyahan*, heavy cotton leggings, were once a simple, sturdy, functional form of trousers designed for individual fit by wrapping and tying, and are now worn by some taiko groups (though not many, because synthetic leggings are ubiquitous in North America thanks to athletics). In significant ways, North American taiko players dress for the *work* of taiko and thereby reembody histories of immigrant labor. We do not

wear silk kimonos. We do not look like geisha, nor like we are about to conduct a tea ceremony. Only a few taiko groups wear clothing associated with samurai, such as *momohiki*, the broad pantaloons that create a powerful expanded silhouette. Most taiko players are dressed for industrious working-class movement and sweat. The clothing we wear evokes not generic Japaneseness but rather specific histories of class and manual labor. We return to the rural working class, the class embodied by the Issei—but most taiko players view the clothing style as Japanese rather than the working-class first-generation immigrant.

Most North American taiko groups wear stretchy black pants, easily available from everywhere and anywhere, from Nike to Kmart to Lululemon. What we wear on our legs is often categorically neither Japanese made nor Japanese derived. Many taiko groups allow their members to choose (and purchase) their own stretchy black pants within certain parameters (length, tightness or looseness, etc.). The ubiquity of black stretch pants and leggings, whether meant for running or for yoga, speaks to a historical juncture when the First World has refabricated leisure athleticism, and elasticized mass-market exercise clothing made in the Third World and marked up to First World prices is thus abundantly available. What we wear on our legs connects us to this sphere and all its problems. The athletic body is marked for class, race, and, to a great extent, gender: expensive brands like Lululemon and Athleta are primarily directed toward upper-class White women, with concomitant pricing.¹³ We render ourselves ready to move at a certain cost, literally and figuratively.

The *happi* coat—a loose cotton jacket with wide sleeves, worn open over the rest of your clothing—is another matter. It is an item of Japanese festival clothing, of course, but in North America it is literally a blank canvas for color and branding, and for Japanese American communality. Most temples design their own *happi* coats, sometimes with a crest or logo, and in *bon-odori* circles the coats of temple members dancing together can create visual blocks of sameness in the big circle of variety. Many taiko groups also create their own *happi* coat design. The *happi* coat is about public presence: virtually no one I know wears one during rehearsal, let alone in daily life. It's a sartorial symbol of connection and performativity, and an axis between Japanese and Japanese American identity. I miss wearing the TCLA *happi* coat: since I stopped performing in 2009, I dance at Obon *happi*-less, showing all too clearly my lack of connection, my lack of affiliation and a home. I'm far from the only dancer in a *happi* coat-less state—actually, the majority of dancers aren't part of temple contingents—so I must remind myself that it's my own longing for community, and occasional self-consciousness over having left a longtime home, that is really what these reflections on *happi* coats reveal.

Last but by no means least, T-shirts are centrally important to North American taiko culture. Although they are obviously inexpensive, easily personalized, and comfortable, their place in the performance of the taiko body is deeper than that. Certainly, the T-shirt has a long history as work clothing, but since at least the

1960s it has been a canvas for identity work.¹⁴ The taiko community has taken this to extraordinary lengths. Every group not only has “a” T-shirt but often makes special tees to mark occasions. Groups create logos not least to feature them on T-shirts, and during the 2000s such logos were often in a graphic design style that I regard as *Sansei*, drawn from Japanese icons and crest styles or deploying kanji in deliberately contemporary fonts or calligraphic styles. Taiko T-shirts are an iterative part of the DIY ethos that defines North American taiko generally (e.g., groups make their own taiko, design and sew their own costumes, and write many of their own pieces). They are unique to each group or event, and their value is directly tied to that uniqueness (see figure 8, wall of taiko groups’ T-shirts, *Big Drum* exhibit installation, Japanese American National Museum, Los Angeles, 2005, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). Contemplating someone else’s taiko T-shirt with envy shows that you feel you missed out on something. Few taiko players would wear a T-shirt bearing the name of another group unless some kind of explicit connection were at play. No rules dictate this: it’s simply a matter of identification, with a whiff of etiquette—even though many groups sell their T-shirts as an informal kind of publicity and a way to fund-raise. As the anthropologist Brent Adam Luvaas (2012, 22) writes, the DIY ethos is inevitably “both of and against capitalism”: it pushes idealistically and even rebelliously against the mass market of things and experiences even as it is shaped by them. These T-shirts are so easily and inexpensively designed and ordered thanks to sweatshops and factories elsewhere, whether in the Third World or in Los Angeles.

My final inventory for this chapter is my personal collection of taiko T-shirts—a fitting way to reflect on the sedimented global aesthetics of North American taiko. The T-shirt—any T-shirt—is already deeply embedded in global clothing manufacturing economies (Rivoli 2005). I have fourteen T-shirts, though I thought I had more; for some time I resisted acquiring more, though now, in the spirit of full-on folkloric collection, I regret that. I have found that other taiko players take similar pleasure in their taiko T-shirt collections. Emma Hyeon Jin Valentine posted a photo to Facebook on August 29, 2018, with the note “I don’t think I’ve ever nerded out 😊 this much about folding clothes . . . but . . . my drawer of taiko shirts is beautiful!!!” (see figure 9, Emma Valentine’s taiko T-shirts, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>.) She lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, is a member of *Enō Daiko* (formerly *Mu Daiko*), and works at *TaikoArts Midwest*, so her T-shirts reflect her circles.

My T-shirts are also from the groups with which I spent the most time, especially the *TCLA* and *Satori Daiko* (see video 7, stop-action of the author’s T-shirt collection, at <http://wonglouderandfaster.com>). I have three black *TCLA* T-shirts. One is faded from fifteen years of washing but is my favorite because it feels good (soft and broken in) and *I* feel good in it—I feel like the taiko player I was at the height of my abilities. Wearing it transforms by sense of my own body. The second one is identical but unfaded. I gave it to my father, and he wore it for a year or two

before he died in 2000, at which point my mother gave it back to me. Somehow I don't wear it as much as the other one, so it's still nearly pristine. The third was my mother's, and she shortened it, so it fits the best of the three. My black TCLA tank top was for performances, and it's never occurred to me to wear it informally, even though I haven't performed since 2009. My single generic Satori Daiko T-shirt was created for one of our trips to Japan, though it doesn't say so; my other Satori tee says "Japan Tour 2006" below the group's name and the TCLA logo. Last but by no means least, I have a black TCLA T-shirt labeled "Hollywood Bowl June 2011," from the night we opened for Yoko Ono and the Yellow Magic Orchestra.

I have three T-shirts from my year with Triangle Taiko in Raleigh, North Carolina. Two of them I've worn to death; the third I'll probably never wear, because each member of the group signed it with a permanent marker at my going-away party before I returned home to Southern California. I would hate for their names to fade. My sojourn with them more than a decade ago was brief, but I wear those T-shirts proudly and fondly: I wear my connection to them. I wear my gratitude that they took me in when I was far from home. The rest of my T-shirts are a hodgepodge, but each reflects a personal connection to an event or group. I have an On Ensemble "Foundation Team" T-shirt because I contributed to one of their fundraisers. I attended the East Coast Taiko Conference at Wesleyan University in 2012 and came home with a striking T-shirt (incorrectly labeled "Eastern Taiko Conference"). Brenda Joy Lem gave me a beautiful T-shirt from her group, Inner Truth Taiko Dojo in Toronto. My *Big Drum* T-shirt commemorates that historic exhibit at the Japanese American National Museum in 2005–6. I have two T-shirts from intercollegiate taiko groups. One is Stanford Taiko's T-shirt commemorating their annual concert in 2006. I think I bought it when I was at Stanford for the 2011 North American Taiko Conference and the shirt was marked down to almost nothing, but I've actually never worn it—it feels disloyal to UCR's Senryu Taiko. I treasure my Senryu T-shirt. It's faded and has two bleach spots right in front, but I wear it often. It marks a coming-of-age moment for Senryu, when they first hosted the Intercollegiate Taiko Invitational (the twelfth annual iteration)—a very significant arrival, because until then only the older, established collegiate groups (Jodaiko, Stanford, and Kyodo Taiko at UCLA) had hosted it. Just looking at it makes me feel proud and oddly competitive in the ways that come with the collegiate territory. Finally, I like my T-shirt commemorating the 2011 NATC at Stanford but have worn it perhaps once. That weird bear on the back probably means more to Stanford University folks than it does to me.

My T-shirts were made in Honduras, Mexico, and El Salvador; I acquired them in California, North Carolina, and Connecticut, and I have worn them in many places. They are part of a widely dispersed set of shared practices that are well established in the North American taiko scene. Like all inexpensive, mass-produced T-shirts, they reflect unmarked ideas about sameness (they are ungendered and come in three or four basic sizes; I don't reach for the ones that hug my rear

in irritating ways because they're too long). Each has been carefully made special through color and printed design. Each reflects certain values about taiko as a local activity. T-shirts offer vivid evidence that the North American taiko community is dynamic, creative, and flourishing. As Lynn Neal (2014, 203) writes, "I suggest we entertain the notion that the T-shirt functions as *the clothing of democracy*." T-shirts allow any taiko group to assert its difference from other groups while its members display their shared identity. The T-shirt is an essential blank page on which to write belonging and difference.

WHAT, WHERE, AND WHY THINGS MATTER

The material culture of North American taiko is profoundly directed toward the making of new selves in environments already about difference, often—but not always—in direct interplay with Japan as the authentic elsewhere. Monica L. Miller (2009, 5) has written about African American "stylin," the exuberant aesthetics of black men costuming themselves to create new selves that were not slaves and not abject; she argues that the "black dandy" strategically played/plays with adornment in ways that unseated "normative categories of identity," sometimes radically, while those stylish men were also vulnerable to the "politics of consumption and consumerism."¹⁵ In North American taiko communities, the prevalence of DIY values conceals the extent to which our material culture is embedded in First and Third World production and consumption. In the twenty-first century, taiko players generate and recirculate fetishized heritage objects in endlessly dynamic and creative ways. The strong aesthetics of instruments and costuming and an insistence on a certain visual intelligibility make taiko profoundly physical. Its thingness plays out across an Asian Pacific unembarrassed about its late capitalist flows of goods and styles. Miller suggests that the "self-fashioning" of the Black dandy simultaneously creates new, experimental bodies and new fashion (221). In contrast, taiko players work very hard to conceal their experiments. Our materialities are spectacularized as traditional and authentic. Our pleasure in the "specific unspecificity" (Brown 2001, 3) of Japanese stylin' is doggedly unthoughtful in some ways, but those materialities are also an exuberant showcase for how thingness and globalized movement are interconstitutive. Who made your drums? A Japanese craftsman, a US undergraduate, a Japanese American woodworker, or a Buraku artisan whose name is lost to time? The cosmopolitan reach of artisanal commodity creation is impressive; the resulting taiko are sometimes gorgeous, sometimes rustic, and always considered. What are you wearing? Who made it? What does it feel like when you grip the ground with your tabi and feel your happi coat swing loose as you shout a *akegoe* and leap?

Transition

She Dances on a Taiko

It began with a woman dancing, exposing herself, laughing and making others laugh. She's clever—a problem solver. She's not young and beautiful. The other woman is young, beautiful, and important, and she's hiding in a cave; she's pouting or despondent or terrified, depending on who's telling the story. The world is in peril without her: Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, who despaired and cast the world into darkness by hiding in a cave.

All the other deities gathered outside the cave and begged Amaterasu to come out, but she wouldn't.¹ The old woman Uzume had an idea: she began to tell jokes and stories. The other deities sat down to listen, their attention now focused on her rather than on the despondent sun goddess. At the center of the circle, Uzume climbed on top of a washtub and began to sing and dance. As she danced, she beat out rhythms on the tub with her feet, and as her song became increasingly ribald, she opened her gown, flapped her wrinkled breasts at the crowd, and pulled her kimono hem high, flashing her privates, laughing and singing. The deities roared with laughter. She was good. She was bawdy and scatological, and she was both very funny and the object of her own joke—an old woman exposing her wizened body even while using that body to save the day.

And it worked. Amaterasu realized that no one was paying any attention to her, heard the gales of laughter, and started to wonder what all the commotion was about. What was she missing? She peeked out of the cave, and a beam of sunlight shot into the crowd. *Come join us!* Uzume called, swinging her breasts and dancing faster. Amaterasu slipped out of the cave and light burst into the world, filling the sky and shining over the gathered deities. Wily Uzume: the crafty old woman had saved the day, and the world.

North American taiko players know this as our origin myth. The birth of taiko! Some groups create little skits retelling the story; Rev. Tom often recounted it when emceeding, filling time between pieces. Taiko players almost always call this

“The Legend of Amaterasu,” but to me it’s clearly about Uzume. She’s the one who danced on the taiko and saved everyone. But she’s old and inappropriate, while Amaterasu is beautiful and needed.

All the deities in this story are kami, the Shinto spirits who fill the natural world. Amaterasu is one of the primary kami, whereas Uzume is a much lesser kami, of laughter and mirth. In certain accounts, Uzume’s dance was the very first kagura, one of the powerful ritual dances still performed at Shinto temples.² In some accounts, Amaterasu’s brother the storm god destroyed her loom and killed one of her handmaidens, so she was frightened and traumatized when she fled to the cave. The various versions of the story suggest a web of values around female power, which generated both taiko and kagura.

Taiko was the brainstorm of an old woman. It wasn’t played loudly or powerfully then. She sounded the washtub with her feet and exposed her body as an object of bawdy ridicule. Like clowns everywhere, she knew how to flip expectations, utter the unspeakable, and activate that second of shocked comprehension when you think *Did she just—?* and then collapse into laughter. Clowns speak truth to power and get away with it because they’re so damn funny. Uzume knew exactly what she was doing.

The first taiko performance was a solo comedic dance meant to trick the powerful. An old woman saved the world.