

# TAIKO DRUMS



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SHODAN THESIS

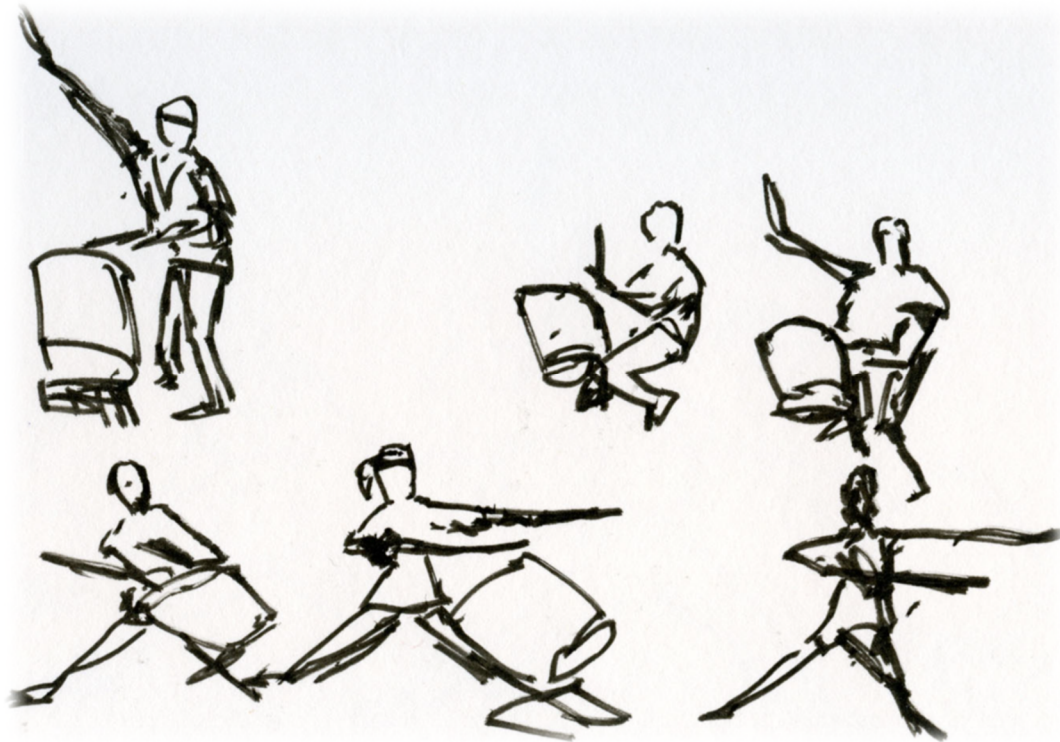
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## Introduction

My fascination with music started during my elementary school years when I wanted to learn how to play the trumpet; unfortunately, that never happened. Nevertheless, several years later I was introduced to the piano and took lessons for three years. Piano is a percussive instrument and perhaps it was that early introduction to piano that gave me a curiosity to learn how to play other world percussion instruments while in college and thereafter. Learning how to play new percussion instruments and learning different world rhythms has always captivated my attention and led me to become curious about Taiko drums and their history.

The word “Taiko” means drum in Japanese. Taiko drums are part of Japanese culture and have been incorporated into their music, theater, religious ceremonies, and even warfare. In the next few pages, I will discuss the history of Taiko drums and their evolution into modern Japanese society along with the different types and styles of Taiko drums. Additionally, I will describe how to play the Taiko drums along with the techniques used for the different styles. And finally, their cultural significance and their impact on contemporary culture.

*“Life is about rhythm. We vibrate, our hearts are pumping blood, we are a rhythm machine, that’s what we are.” -Mickey Hart*

## History

Taiko drums have mythological origins in Japanese folklore; nevertheless, historical records indicate that they were used in ancient Japan over 2,000 years ago. It is believed that the Taiko drum appeared in Japan sometime during the 5th and 6th centuries from nearby Asian countries, India, China, and Korea. According to archeological and other research, ancient people in the Jomon era already used drums for the purpose of communication and religious rituals, however, their percussion instruments may have been different from what we see today. The oldest Japanese constitution, created in 702, established a special department for imperial court music which included different types of Taiko drums. This tradition is still observed today and is considered a cultural treasure.

Moving forward to the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when Japan's Samurai class rose to power, it sparked a new cultural movement and a surge of original Japanese art forms free from influences from China and Korea. Some of these art forms included Noh and Kabuki theatre, which became popular in the Muromachi era and during the Edo period. In addition, Nagauta music became popular. Taiko played a significant role in these art forms, with new shapes and sizes of drums emerging to complement the music. Even though Western music dominates modern Japan, Taiko drumming techniques have been passed down through generations to influence today's Japanese society and culture.

Taiko drums have remained a mainstay in religious ceremonies and local festivals. It is common to find Taiko drums in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Regarded as sacred since ancient times, the drum was thought to drive away evil spirits and pests harmful to crops. People in ancient times felt a connection to their religious beliefs in the deep rumble of the drum sounds. On special occasions, people authorized by the priest would play these drums during the sanctification of their ceremonies. This exemplifies a few ways that Taiko drums played a key role in Japanese religion.

Used in the battlefields of ancient Japan, Taiko drums played different functions during warfare and a crucial role in military strategy. Not only were they used as background music, but also as a critical tool for commanders to serve multiple purposes such as rallying the troops, command communication (such as advance or retreat), and providing a marching tempo. Their use could boost morale amongst their own army or strike fear in their enemy. The 2024 TV series, *Shogun*, highlights the uses of the Taiko drum as a way to help rowers keep the beat on Japanese ships.

The 1950s marked another significant period in the history of Taiko. Ensemble Taiko, also called “Kumi-Daiko” came about thanks to Daihachi Oguchi, a jazz drummer and the founder of the Japanese percussion group Osuwa Daiko. History accounts that Oguchi stumbled upon a piece of ancient Taiko music written in a forgotten notation system. After extensive research, he found an elderly man who could decipher the music. Oguchi found the music to be simple. Craving for something more complex and inspired by a Western drum set, Oguchi decided to form a group where each player

focused on a different Taiko drum. A high-pitched shime-daiko kept the beat like a snare drum, while a booming nagado-daiko added deep accents like a bass drum. This innovative approach, practically creating a giant drum set with multiple players, revolutionized Taiko music forever. Following Oguchi's creation, other groups were formed where Taiko drumming styles were changed and played with their own styles and choreographies. Za Ondekosa became the first Japanese group to spread Taiko music globally. Today, Kodo who came about after Ondekoza's split, is perhaps the most famous Taiko group worldwide.

With the modernization of Japan, Taiko has in many ways become a relic. However, some suggest that Japan has experienced a cultural renaissance of sorts and the native art of Taiko drumming has become popular once more. Presently, all school children in Japan learn Taiko, and events now commonly feature Taiko drummers.

## Types and Styles of Taiko Drums

Taiko drums encompass all types of Japanese drums. However, Taiko drums have evolved over time into different shapes, sizes, and even different materials used for their construction. The tone and pitch of some of them may be adjusted via a roping system. These drums are called shime-daiko. Others, like the byo uchi daiko drums, have nailed heads and are fixed. These different types of drums have been around throughout history, however, a couple of them are worth mentioning. These are the nagado-daiko and the tsuzumi.

The nagado-daiko, also known as wadaiko, is the most famous type of Taiko. The drums have a barrel shape and use leather skin on both ends of the drums. The drums vary in size with a small drum called the ko-daiko at 30 cm, and a larger size drum called the o-daiko at 180 cm in diameter. Similar to a Western drum set, where the drums are hit with sticks, heavy wooden sticks known as bachi are used to beat the Taiko drum. These are wider and longer than a regular drumstick. These types of drums are commonly seen at village festivals.



A different type of Taiko drum is the tsuzumi. These have an hourglass shape and are very different from the wadaiko drums. Similar to wadaiko, these come in different sizes, but they are smaller, which makes them easy to carry. Like an African djembe, the player can strap the drum to their body using straps or belts, allowing them to play while moving. Similar to the wadaiko drums, the tsuzumi use heads on both sides but in contrast, the drums can be tightened using a rope system.



There are two main ways Taiko drumming can be practiced. The traditional style of Taiko, similar to karate, has a single teacher leading students through a hierarchy of lessons and instruction. In this style, the focus is on the individual drummer and their connection to the Taiko itself. They use their drumsticks (bachi) and their own inner energy to create the sound. A newer style, called Buddhist Taiko, or kumi-daiko, is all about teamwork. Unlike the traditional Taiko style, a group of players work together to create harmony with their drums and each other. This style is especially popular in temple settings and religious communities. The two styles mark the opposite ends of the Taiko spectrum. Most groups lean towards one or the other, depending on their personal experience and presiding leadership.

## Techniques

Playing Taiko, as in many percussive instruments from Africa, requires a combination of physical strength, stamina, and skill. The Taiko players use a variety of techniques, including hitting the drum with a stick (bachi), striking the head of the drum with their hands, and using their bodies to create different tones and sounds. The drumsticks used in Taiko come in different sizes producing different tones and sounds depending on the type of music being played. Different Taiko drumming styles exist each with their own unique rhythms and techniques.

Below are some of the most generic techniques used in all styles of Japanese drumming. As in karate, your stance is very important, standing with bent knees and feet out in a horse stance position provides stability to the drumming. Keeping your



shoulders relaxed and palms facing each other provides a good hand position for hitting the drums. The goal is to hit the drum in the same location, each time, even with a fast tempo pattern. The stick position will vary depending on the type of rhythm that is being played. Some patterns may play some of the notes on the drumhead while the rest of the notes are on the rim of the drum. Some pieces may be played using sheet music, however, the traditional way was passed down from generation to generation orally. Techniques used for Taiko are similar to drumming techniques used in other cultures or parts of the world. A number of YouTube videos provide a basic understanding of different techniques that are used for Taiko.

#### Taiko Basic Techniques Video

*[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1XyFVIGM-I&ab\\_channel=ASANOTAIKOU.S](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L1XyFVIGM-I&ab_channel=ASANOTAIKOU.S)*

## Cultural Significance and Modern Taiko

In the 1970s and 1980s, Japan saw a thunderous revival of Taiko drumming. It all started in the 1960s with groups like Osuwa Daiko and the electrifying Taiko performance at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. This made the Japanese people realize that their traditional cultural treasures were fading away. Local governments sprang into action, forming a number of community groups to preserve these traditions. The government invested a large amount of money in the 1980s to support these efforts. This resulted in a jaw-dropping 4,000 Taiko groups drumming their way across Japan. But the revival wasn't just about these community groups. Schools, which had been all about Western classical music for ages, finally started incorporating traditional

Japanese instruments like Taiko into their curriculum thanks to a big education shakeup in 2002. With the younger generation learning these powerful rhythms, Taiko music is sure to continue in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Za Ondekoza and Kodo weren't just Japanese percussion groups, they were sparks that ignited a Taiko firestorm. Their worldwide tours inspired a surge of Taiko groups in Japan and beyond, especially in North America where there are now around 1,000 groups. The boom has reached Europe, Australia, and South America.



Some people are drawn to the beauty of this Japanese art form due to its connection to Japanese culture. Others are blown away by the power and unique sound of the Taiko. But the real magic of Taiko is its simplicity. You hit it with a stick, and it makes a sound. It does not matter your age, gender, or nationality, everyone can enjoy the pure, honest response of the drum. There are even Taiko groups with deaf

members. They feel the vibrations from other players and enjoy every bit of Taiko drumming.

For centuries, Taiko has been Japan's heartbeat, a rhythm that pulses through its soul. Now, it's becoming a global language, bringing people together. The possibilities are endless, just like the invention of kumi-daiko in such a short time. Taiko is a tradition that is fresh. As the 21<sup>st</sup> century unfolds, Taiko music continues to evolve.

## Taiko Drumming in the United States

Taiko drums first arrived in the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by Japanese immigrants. Back then, these deep, booming instruments weren't just for show. Played in temples and festivals as Miya-Daiko, sacred drums, they were a way for these newcomers to hold onto their heritage in a new land. Activities like Bon Odori, a summer dance, honoring ancestors, became cherished traditions, and Taiko drumming was a vital part of the festivities. Records show Taiko was already a fixture in Hawaii's Bon Odori by 1910, and the Kanazawa Kenjinkai, a Japanese immigrant group from Kanazawa, brought it to San Francisco in the 1930s.

Then came World War II, when the Japanese attack on the US shattered the lives of these immigrants. Branded as "enemy aliens," they were forced into internment camps. After the war, the desire to fit in became paramount. Japanese Americans strove to assimilate, and in the process, much of their culture, including their language, faded for the next generation. Taiko drumming, once a vibrant part of their identity, fell silent for a time.

But the 1960s brought a powerful shift. The Civil Rights Movement ignited a search for identity among many groups, and Japanese Americans were no exception. Taiko drumming became a way to reclaim their heritage and express their unique identity. Pioneering groups like the San Francisco Taiko Dojo, founded in 1968 by Seiichi Tanaka, a student of the legendary Osuwa Daiko, emerged. Tanaka's group, the first to introduce the electrifying kumi-daiko style to North America, inspired countless others. Following closely behind was Kinnara Taiko, established in 1969 by Reverend Masao Kodani of the Senshin Buddhist Temple. Unlike San Francisco Taiko Dojo, Kinnara Taiko focused on Buddhist temple events, becoming a cornerstone of Japanese American Buddhist Taiko with performances steeped in spiritual reverence.

San Jose Taiko joined the movement in 1973, also with Buddhist roots. Founded by a friend of Reverend Kodani, the group was largely made up of Sansei, the third generation of Japanese Americans. They felt a strong pull to reconnect with their grandparent's culture, and Taiko drumming became a powerful tool for them to express their unique Japanese American identity. Through their dedication, Taiko transcended its traditional role and became a powerful symbol of Japanese American culture.



Present day, there are groups throughout the nation who perform and continue the deep traditions of Taiko drumming. The Orlando Taiko Dojo is a music group in Orlando that actively performs at events all throughout Central Florida. Their drumming techniques and skills were featured by people of all ages during our dojo's 35<sup>th</sup> year Christmas Demo celebration in 2021.

## Conclusion

Taiko drumming has journeyed from ancient rituals to vibrant performances, evolving alongside Japanese history. Once a tool for communication, warfare, and religious ceremonies, Taiko has transcended its traditional roles. Today, it serves as a powerful symbol of cultural heritage, not just in Japan, but around the world.

The creation of kumi-daiko in the 1950s marked a turning point, introducing a collaborative approach that ignited a global Taiko phenomenon. This newfound style, along with the dedication of groups like Za Ondekoza and Kodo, sparked a cultural revival in Japan and inspired the formation of countless groups internationally.

The universality of Taiko's appeal lies in its simplicity. It transcends age, gender, and nationality, uniting people through the power of rhythm. Anyone, young or old, can pick up a pair of Bachi sticks and feel the earth vibrate with the hitting of the Taiko. It's a primal language, a shared experience that transcends spoken words. As the 21st century unfolds, Taiko drumming will undoubtedly keep evolving, carrying its rich history and cultural significance into the future.

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