

Akatombo, by naoko
amemiya of portland
taiko: unique feminine
expression in
moder...



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The Asian American theatre performance chosen for this essay is Akatombo, a rendering of Japanese Taiko developed by Naoko Amemiya of Portland. Akatombo is a piece of Taiko composition based on “ a famous Japanese folk song and showcases tight Taiko choreography, Japanese flute and singing” (Akatombo). Taiko involves “ repeatedly banging, slashing at and clacking an array of drums while pushing the body through sweeping, animated gestures. Drummers follow a predetermined beat, but the songs, mostly written by the group, allow for both physical and sonic improvisation” (Toto 4). Portland Taiko, which composed this piece, uses a few innovations that mark out the performance from traditional Taiko. One of the most notable of these differences is the presentation by female artists, where previously only male artists were allowed to perform. This innovation is not just unique to Portland Taiko but generally holds true with Asian American practice of the art. (Daily Herald 1). This essay will argue how this novel yet groundbreaking aspect of Asian American Taiko, namely the trend of women practitioners adapting and improvising the art form, produces a uniquely feminine expression.

Taiko is quite different in terms of its origin, purpose, and effect, compared to more popular musical forms such as rock ‘ n’ roll, jazz, etc. But what Asian American groups such as Portland Taiko have done is to bridge the East-West culture gap by adapting the throbbing drumbeats to the tastes of American audiences. Yet, they have retained the spiritual and cultural essence of this ancient Japanese art form to the maximum possible (Um 114). In the Akatombo piece, we see how histrionic percussion is blended skillfully with forceful chants and fierce melodies. (Album Notes) The

audience can feel the optimal combination of the spiritual and the melodic in the orchestration, not to forget the synchronized choreography on show. The elegant, methodic and drawn out visual movements of the two artists accentuate the feminine aspect of the performance.

As the official website of Portland Taiko proudly proclaims, artistic excellence and innovation are central to their vision of the art. Portland Taiko “inspires audiences, affirms Asian American pride, builds community and educates about our heritage and culture” (Akatombo). In the Akatombo performance video, the clip begins with a recitation of a Japanese folk hymn. Following this introduction, the focus shifts to the two female drummers, who together master five sizeable Taikos (Taiko in Japanese also literally translates to a “drum”). They begin a coordinated and synchronized display of visual and aural spectacle through slow rhythmic beats and deliberate drawn-out hand movements. The spacing of time is not constant as the beats approach and retract from the crescendo in two separate cycles.

The importance of including women into Taiko practice cannot be overstated, for it has key socio-cultural implications. For example, women who practice Taiko

“are discovering adeptness as natural as their beating hearts. On a personal level, the simple, elemental motion of striking a drum is a powerful antidote, a creative outlet, a healing tool, a workout for mind and body, a spiritual quest. On a broader cultural level, women with a penchant for percussion are insisting they no longer be relegated to spectator status, by creating drumming rituals which include them.” (Cummings 24)

Along with feminist overtones, the changing flow of tempo, interspersed by flute interludes (which were also rendered by a female artist in Akatombo) is devised to have philosophical connotations, representing the ups and downs of life. Periods of slow tempo during the performance particularly allow for such philosophical contemplations. Since Japanese folk music and culture are heavily influenced by the Buddhist heritage of the country, this intermingling of art and philosophy is almost inevitable. Indeed, Taiko drumming used to be an integral part of Japanese life even a few centuries ago. It is not an exaggeration, then, to say that the Akatombo (or for that matter most Taiko performances) leave the audience in a state of thoughtful reflection, if not a state of meditation. (Wong 36)

While the drums and the music produced by them are central to the performance, the sequence is rendered to appeal visually as well. Hence, choreography and musical composition play their respective roles in creating the spectacle. In the Akatombo performance video, we witness how the two women pound drums mounted on stilts while moving around them and each other in a complex choreographed dance.

“ The primal drumbeats soak the senses, and the visual intricacies only add to the experience. Musicians, their legs splayed widely for maximum dramatic impact, hold their sticks aloft like warriors with their weapons before striking their drums. Taiko, which means ‘ fat drum’ in Japanese, produces a loud but not painful sound that flows through the listener’s body like an audacious spring breeze. Taiko drums have been used for centuries in Japan for various purposes, from bolstering religious services to intimidating advancing armies” (Toto 4).

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The case of Naomi Guilbert offers insights into how and why women are embracing this ancient Japanese art form. Guilbert, whose mother is of Japanese descent, has gone on to create her own drum group. Called Fubuki Daiko (foo-boo-key dye-ko), the term literally translated as “ blizzard drums.” The term has a dual meaning: one describes the constant movement of the players; the other describes the blustery weather that is quite common in Japan. Guilbert was fascinated by Taiko drumming and was determined to learn it. Guilbert notes that she was drawn by “ the physical and soulful exhilaration of belting ancient barrels with the same force mustered by a welterweight boxer” (Cummings 24). Moreover, “ the learning process itself was a test of my feminist consciousness” (Guilbert, as quoted in Cummings 24). The feminist consciousness of Guilbert was awakened in another way too. Her teacher, though highly regarded for his skill, had the bad habit of hitting his students when they made mistakes. But Naomi Guilbert was not someone to take such treatment lightly: