

The Taiko Connection: Reclaiming History, Activating Equality

A Senior Project

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by

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*“I am able to talk about my history more when I am able to show you the beauty of it first.”*

*-- PJ Hirabayashi, 2018*

## **Introduction**

“Just remember, only three notes in taiko: *don, kara, tsuru*,” she told me. “I will start the beat. *Sore?*” And with those few words, I was off on my first taiko drumming lesson with the first artistic director of San Jose Taiko, PJ Hirabayashi. On a personal level, I have always been intrigued by taiko ever since I was a child from the numerous times I’ve witnessed its spectacular performance at Japanese festivals all around the Northern California Bay Area. Though I’ve held a cultural appreciation towards taiko, this is the first time it has been the focus of my academics as the central topic in my historical research. My study about taiko’s development involves two separate minorities: the burakumin in Japan and Japanese Americans in the United States, both of whom have faced political and social discrimination in their respective countries. Stemming from the Buraku Liberation Movement in Japan and the Asian American Civil Rights Movement in the US, both have launched taiko drumming groups as positive outlets of expression. To gain a deeper comprehension of each party’s relation to taiko, we must first look at the historiography of each.

Beginning with the historiography of the burakumin, there has been one primary argument for their historically segregated status. Most scholars agree that burakumin today are related to the outcastes of feudal Japan. This class was “emancipated” in 1871, but simple legislation did not eradicate discrimination built up over centuries. In 1965, the Buraku “problem” was defined by Japan’s Integration Measures Deliberation Council, a consultative

body of the Prime Minister's office, as arising “from the fact that a segment of the Japanese people has been kept under inferior conditions economically, socially, and culturally, due to status discrimination institutionalized at a certain stage of Japanese history.”<sup>1</sup> Timothy Amos, assistant professor in the Department of Japanese Studies at the National University of Singapore, in his book, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan*, recognizes that the history of burakumin tends to retain the same key points when recounted by both Japanese and Western scholars. The dominant themes in this field of study are that burakumin are a bounded community with a point of historical origin, buraku discrimination has existed in an external, structural form (legislation, practice) over a long period of time, and that buraku history has remained intact as a single entity from the premodern period to the present.<sup>2</sup> While Amos argues there needs to be a fundamental reconceptualization of this master narrative -- claiming it to be based on “empirically and conceptually questionable foundations” -- other researchers, like Flavia Cangia, believe it is necessary to shift questions from the more general and ahistorical “who are the burakumin” to “when, where, and how should we talk about the burakumin” in order to comprehend the major historical transformations of the issue.<sup>3</sup> I, too, will employ this narrower approach to understand the specifics of the burakumin’s contemporary societal position. By using local histories of buraku communities rather than national histories, buraku identity is more accurately captured through the burakumin’s own self-awareness and

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<sup>1</sup> Buraku Kaihō Kenkyūjo, *White Paper on Human Rights in Japan: From the Viewpoint of the Discriminated* (Osaka, Japan: Buraku Liberation Research Institute, 1984), 49.

<sup>2</sup> Timothy D. Amos, *Embodying Difference: The Making of Burakumin in Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Flavia Cangia, *Performing the Buraku: Narratives on Cultures and Everyday Life in Contemporary Japan* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2013), 17.

personal interpretations. Therefore, I will only reference sources that assert the conventional origins of the burakumin as background information to the modern buraku liberation campaigns. These movements, more than the historiography of burakus themselves are more relevant to my study of Japan's history of taiko and its contemporary scene.

In regards to the history of buraku liberation, my own views align with historians such as Ian Neary and Christopher Bondy. In Neary's book, *Political Protest and Social Control in Pre-War Japan: The Origins of Buraku Liberation*, he outlines two of the first buraku liberation organizations created: the Dai Nippon Doho Yuwa Kai (Greater Japan Fraternal Conciliation Society) in 1903, and the Zenkoku Suiheisha (National Levellers Society) in 1922. From here onwards, these associations will be referred to as the Yuwa and Suiheisha, respectively. Neary argues that a general undermining of belief systems and a growth of horizontal solidarity during the late Meiji and Taisho eras allowed burakumin to establish a political identity for themselves.<sup>4</sup> Worldwide influences like the Russian Revolution of 1917 and troubles at home such as the Rice Riots of 1918 demonstrated the capability of protests that took direct action. As a result, the Suiheisha fashioned a distinct, radical style to dealing with prejudice through kyudans, or public denunciation campaigns, while the more integrationist Yuwa worked with the Japanese government to solve the buraku problem with self-help projects.

Building on those principles, Bondy explains the sects of buraku liberation organizations that formed after World War II in his book, *Voice, Silence, and Self: Negotiations of Buraku Identity in Contemporary Japan*. The National Committee for Buraku Liberation created in 1946, and renamed the Buraku Liberation League in the 1980s, emerged as the heir of the Suiheisha.

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Neary, *Political Protest and Social Control in Pre-War Japan: The Origins of Buraku Liberation* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press International Inc., 1989), 50.

Others broke away to found the Zenkoku Dowa Kai, later branching out again in 1986 into the Jiyu Dowa Kai (Liberal Assimilation Association), which imitated the conservative Yuwa.

Clearly there has been a pattern in the historical clash of opinions about the best way to eliminate buraku discrimination, as the groups continue to differentiate over open engagement vs. non-confrontational tactics. Like Bondy, my objective for this project is to show the success of provocation over passive involvement in combating bigotry.

Unlike the one overarching narrative of the Buraku minority in Japan, the historiography of the 1970s Asian American Civil Rights Movement is, by nature, a topic that has been compiled from many types of sources. The movement itself was a manifestation of ideas from several racial minorities including Asian Americans, African Americans, and Latinx Americans, and is said to coincide with the demand for black liberation.<sup>5</sup> As a result, the Asian American experience in the United States is analogous for all Asian Americans to a degree, but scholars do make an effort to not generalize completely, especially in keeping immigration laws and post-WWII life distinct among Asian American groups.

In studying the Asian American Civil Rights Movement, my views align most closely with authors such as William Wei and Glenn Omatsu. Wei asserts that the Asian American Movement was a middle-class reform movement for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment in a culturally pluralist America, and was an outcome of the convergence between the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and the protests surrounding the

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<sup>5</sup> Glenn Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation: Asian American Activism from 1960s to the 1990s," in *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, ed. Thomas Chen and Jean Yu-Wen Shen Wu (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 299.

Vietnam War.<sup>6</sup> He argues that despite the absence of national leaders, the lack of a set of specific goals, the small number of participants, and the common assumption that US race relations involve mainly blacks and whites, the Asian American Movement can be called a social movement.<sup>7</sup> Omatsu expands on these basic concepts using the example of the San Francisco State College strike, which he says was not solely important for beginning the Asian American Movement, but for crystallizing several themes that would characterize Asian American struggles in the next decade, such as reclaiming a heritage of oppression, and forging a new vision for their communities.<sup>8</sup>

By applying the experiences of two persecuted Japanese-based groups, I argue that taiko drumming has been utilized as a means for social activism and cultural reclamation in both Japan and the United States, and that it is through this artistic connection between people that we can see parallels between discrimination and the process of developing self-identity across global lines. I see taiko as a link between prejudice and human rights challenges, combining history with ethnic studies, and politics with culture. My research seeks out the human side -- people's feelings of hardship and injustice -- to dig deeper into the historical context of their actions. My topic is not solely about taiko's relationship to the burakumin in Japan, nor is it about how American taiko groups began. Instead, I aim to describe how Japan's burakus work to vocalize their struggles and "take back" their sense of self through taiko, and how the purpose of taiko groups in America encompassed larger social and generational issues of the time.

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<sup>6</sup> William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 1.

<sup>7</sup> Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 4.

<sup>8</sup> Omatsu, "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation," 302.

This comparative study will be divided into five sections. The first will describe the history of burakumin inequity and liberation movements. The second will explore the development of taiko in Japan, emphasizing the burakumin's historic influence and their current cultural connection to the art. The third will consider the Japanese American experience in the United States from post-WWII up until the 1970s. The fourth will examine how the divergent generational attitudes of Japanese-Americans contributed to the creation of American taiko groups during the Asian American Civil Rights Movement. Lastly, I will analyze how positive self-identity for minorities can be uprooted from their ethnic traditions, and social activism for marginalized communities can be accomplished through cultural establishments. Above all, this paper is about how minorities are able to find a unique platform to get their voices heard in the face of an oppressive society. In order to learn how the nondominant group accomplishes this, we must first have a grasp on their history of inequality.

### **Understanding the Burakumin**

Burakumin history begins in the Tokugawa era (1603-1868) when the shogunate deliberately created an order based in discrimination by social class. The government divided social classes into four categories: warriors, farmers/peasants, artisans, and merchants, with outcastes at the bottom of the structure. The purpose of having a specific outcaste clan was to manipulate the anger and frustration felt towards this class setup by pitting peasants, the most exploited, against burakumin, the most despised.<sup>9</sup> The abhorrence for burakumin was solidified through the undesired occupations they held. Jobs such as butchering, leather tanning, running

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<sup>9</sup> "Discriminated-against Buraku and Civil Rights Protection," in *White Paper on Human Rights in Japan*, 51.

mortuary services, and anything else associated with dead bodies or animals were considered degrading, and social pressures forced those involved with such work to gather in the same villages.<sup>10</sup> It was not until the Emancipation Edict of 1871 at the start of the Meiji Restoration that legal discrimination against burakumin was abolished. The document was anticipated to be a step towards equality, however it drove the burakumin into an even poorer situation. Duties for tax payment and for military service were newly imposed upon them and they lost their monopoly on the occupations they were previously only allowed to work.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, the burakumin virtually stayed at the same social status, encountered the same prejudices, and were merely integrated into the new Emperor system of the Meiji period.<sup>12</sup> From Japan's progress into capitalism until recently, buraku settlements continued to be plagued by institutionalized discrimination that extended into several aspects of their living conditions. Statistics from the 1980s revealed that the number of households on government relief in burakus was about four times the national average due to inadequate pensions, unemployment or unstable employment, health problems, and lack of education.<sup>13</sup> This brief history highlights the characteristics of burakumin life that defined the master narrative about them, and knowing the origins of their condition enable us to see how this account has been used to shape their identity today.

An important element of establishing buraku identity has been using their experiences with discrimination to build liberation movements. As stated before, the first organizations to

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<sup>10</sup> George A. De Vos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma, *Japan's Invisible Race: Caste in Culture and Personality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 20.

<sup>11</sup> Juichi Suginoara, *The Status Discrimination in Japan: Introduction to Buraku Problem* (Kobe City: Hyogo Institute of Buraku Problem, 1982), 20.

<sup>12</sup> Suginoara, *The Status Discrimination in Japan*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> "Discriminated-against Buraku and Civil Rights Protection," in *White Paper on Human Rights in Japan*, 57.



fight against buraku injustice were the Suiheisha and Yuwa, and each took vastly different approaches to addressing the matters at hand. The Suiheisha directly challenged incidents of prejudice by publically confronting and denouncing the perpetrators until buraku leaders were satisfied with the person's remorse and apology.<sup>14</sup> These sessions attempted to change the public discourse surrounding burakumin by placing their affairs at the center of social interaction.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the Yuwa -- which was funded through local, prefectural, and national government agencies -- believed that discrimination occurred because there was something wrong with the burakumin themselves, and the organization encouraged burakumin to work harder to prove that they were as good as mainstream Japanese.<sup>16</sup> In dealing with buraku poverty, they argued that burakumin could not or would not take advantage of the opportunities that existed within Japanese society because of the attitudes they held.<sup>17</sup> These views sought to minimize open discussion, in essence, perpetuating the silence on buraku inequity. Even after these liberation movements died out during WWII, new ones were reinstated along these same principles, and still apply the same methods of challenging buraku discrimination today.

The Jiyu Dowa Kai (JDK) and the Buraku Liberation League (BLL) were the most prominent liberation factions established after WWII. Paralleling the Yuwa, which aimed to combat discrimination by trying to funnel money into improving the burakumin's living conditions, the JDK employed a quiet approach in its activities. Similar to the Suiheisha's

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self: Negotiations of Buraku Identity in Contemporary Japan* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 23.

<sup>15</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Neary, *Political Protest and Social Control in Pre-War Japan*, 71.

objectives, the BLL wanted to revamp Japan's entire social structure where the roots of discrimination laid. In recent years, both these styles can be seen in how the groups operate in local neighborhoods.

Nakata-cho is the buraku district of Kuromatsu city. A Suiheisha branch was installed in the mid-1920s, but post-WWII, a conservative presence took over and the JDK implemented community revitalization projects, such as sport competitions and cleaning campaigns, as their solution to eradicate the area's buraku discrimination. The JDK's 2014 policy statement declared that "If people were told that the differences between *Dowa* districts and others were minimal or non-existent, they would be more likely to recognize that discrimination has lessened."<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, views on discrimination had effectively changed, in their opinion, because "visible improvements in living conditions in *Dowa* districts have eliminated the old image of *Dowa* districts."<sup>19</sup> But these civic activities were not focused on buraku concerns as much as they were exercises to build pride in the community -- not pride for being a buraku district -- but for simply being a community. In embracing the idea of a unified community, the JDK urged for all people to be treated with respect and equality, without explicitly saying burakumin.<sup>20</sup> The JDK removed discussion specifically on buraku matters by reframing the dialogue into a talk about ordinary neighborhood improvements, instead of being about how the buraku's inadequate infrastructure and sanitation have always been disparate from the majority population, and are a consequence of discrimination. To disregard the connection between fixing up the area and the fact that the

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<sup>18</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 37.

<sup>19</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 37.

<sup>20</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 37.

area needs to be fixed because it has historically been a downtrodden buraku region, is to silence a crucial component of the burakumin identity. The JDK's assimilationist front ignored the real issues in hopes that the burakumin would eventually integrate themselves enough to disassociate their substandard situation as being caused specifically by systemic bias against them. In contrast, the BLL takes an active stance to constantly remind the public that buraku affairs are not a thing of the past, and still need to be resolved.

The BLL has been operating for almost 60 years in a small town named Takagawa. In 1978, it was made apparent to the community that a traditional buraku dance telling the story of the district's primary industry, fishing, was on the verge of extinction because the only people who knew how to perform it would soon be gone. In an attempt to save it, the young and old generation together decided there should be a new festival centered on the performance of this dance, and thus, the town's Festival of Liberation (a direct reference to the BLL), or *Kaiho no Matsuri* was born.<sup>21</sup> Unlike other areas of Japan, Takagawa did not have a summer dancing festival that honored one's ancestors, known as *obon*. So, the town welcomed *Kaiho no Matsuri* with its buraku cultural dance as a replacement, in effect, making it a community event that all residents, buraku and non-buraku alike, were excited to participate in. This was no typical celebration, however; most of the aspects of a traditional festival were blended with features related to buraku identity. For example, the lanterns that hung up as decorations and the happi coats participants wore all had symbols and slogans of the BLL, and the fans handed out to visitors advertised town events and highlighted the movement's goals.<sup>22</sup> Buraku affairs were

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<sup>21</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> Bondy, *Voice, Silence, and Self*, 47.

effectively inserted into mainstream Japanese culture to increase awareness and hopefully build solidarity for liberation. Regardless of their background, everyone is familiar with the spirit and fun of a summer festival, which constructs an environment that normalizes the openness of being burakumin and makes interacting with the public easier. Unlike the JDK, the BLL encourages people to “come out” with their burakumin status and supports the process by removing the shame that comes with the label. Rather than allowing government agencies to determine how they are defined, the burakumin of Takagawa molded their own identity by forging a space in the dominant society to promote a positive image of themselves. Burakumin have had their own rich heritage for centuries ready to be shared and celebrated, but local festivals are not the only medium by which to do so. The loud and proud buraku liberation movements have found another incredibly beneficial platform to spread their agenda: taiko.

### **Development of Taiko in Japan**

The main purpose of taiko drumming was originally as an instrumental accompaniment in the ancient music of the imperial court, known as *gagaku*, and in classical theater such as *noh* and *kabuki*. *Gagaku* had its origins in older court music from Korea and China, which was brought to Japan in the fifth century, and from India, which arrived in the seventh and eighth centuries.<sup>23</sup> The theater-dance music of *noh* emerged in rural villages in the fourteenth century, and was heavily influenced by the Zen Buddhist emphasis on “restraint and illusion.”<sup>24</sup> *Kabuki*, in turn, evolved to suit the tastes of merchants and urban dwellers, but still contained elements of

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<sup>23</sup> Shawn Morgan Bender, *Taiko Boom: Japanese Drumming in Place and Motion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 31.

<sup>24</sup> Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 32.

*noh* in its shows. All three, *gagaku*, *noh*, and *kabuki*, are classified together as *hogaku*, or “music of the homeland.”<sup>25</sup> Their strict regulations and training requirements distinguish them from taiko as a folk performing art derived from religious practices.<sup>26</sup> The post-WWII taiko boom that took place, however, cultivated a new style of drumming -- the ensemble -- that transformed how contemporary taiko is played today.

Taiko gained popularity among the average Japanese population for a handful of reasons at different periods of time and through diverse groups. In the 1950s, Osuwa Daiko, arguably the first ensemble taiko group, emerged out of the ferment of postwar reconstruction and expanding domestic tourism; in the 1960s Sukeroku Daiko arose in the midst of Tokyo’s thriving festival culture and burgeoning population; in the 1970s, Ondekoza flourished during the reappraisal of folk culture; and in the 1980s and 1990s, Kodo, which grew out of Ondekoza, absorbed the increasingly international outlook of Japan as it rose and fell as a global economic superpower.<sup>27</sup> But during all the excitement of advancing modern taiko, a major history was left behind: the correlation between taiko and the burakumin.

As previously mentioned, burakumin have historically been relegated to society’s “dirty” jobs affiliated with dead animals. Since taiko drum making requires the process of tanning raw hides, it has traditionally been a buraku profession, and manufacturers today are still located in burakus and self-identify as burakumin. One of the largest buraku districts in Tokyo, Kinogawa,

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<sup>25</sup> Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 34.

<sup>26</sup> Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 35.

<sup>27</sup> Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 49.

started its tanning industries in 1883 and is the highest producer of pig leather.<sup>28</sup> Throughout the years, the “smell and bad [...] feelings, pollution and natural injuries” remained the most defining characteristics of the region and its people.<sup>29</sup> The marginalization got so severe, that in 2003, Kinogawa Elementary School closed as a result of parents sending their children to schools outside the district to avoid being identified as burakumin -- a phenomenon also known as *ekkyo*.<sup>30</sup> One positive that came from this happening though, is that within the next year, the school was remodeled into Archives Kinogawa, a children’s museum for human rights education. Its displays taught about the tanning industry itself: from the tools and techniques used to the myriad of products composed of leather such as clothes, shoes, soaps, and especially taiko drums. One exhibit let students build their own taiko drum out of clay, leather, and thread to implement *monozukuri*, or craftsmanship. *Monozukuri* is the fundamental principle of Japanese manufacturing that reinforces the idea of “Japanese uniqueness” referring to the skills, spirit, and pride in the ability to create things.<sup>31</sup> The idea was applied in Kinogawa in order to “upgrade the leather tanning and crafting to the status of art” and redefine buraku industries to be regarded as “key industries of Japan.”<sup>32</sup> The assumption is that actively engaging with the construction of leather and taiko would diffuse bias against those who did such work. But while touring the museum and intimately acquainting oneself with the burakumin’s livelihood is invaluable, it is not representative of the entire scope of unfairness that has constituted the buraku plight.

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<sup>28</sup> Cangia, *Performing the Buraku*, 163.

<sup>29</sup> Cangia, *Performing the Buraku*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Cangia, *Performing the Buraku*, 166.

<sup>31</sup> Cangia, *Performing the Buraku*, 200.

<sup>32</sup> Cangia, *Performing the Buraku*, 200-201.

Producing taiko drums did not equate to playing taiko drums. Taiko's popularity took off to become a cultural symbol of Japan without giving due credit to the pioneers who had suffered the stigma and hard labor of the industry. The burakumin were essentially left out of enjoying the full production of taiko they had stimulated and others -- hundreds of ensembles -- had so enthusiastically embraced. The buraku of Naniwa ward in Osaka, for example, had a 300-year history of drum making, and became one of the best places to buy taiko drums across the world.<sup>33</sup> But when the founder of Zampa Ufujishi Daiko, an Okinawan taiko group, visited Naniwa to buy their high-quality drums and learn what authentic taiko was like, he was surprised to find out that the town had zero members who knew how to actually play the instrument.<sup>34</sup> The irony that a town known widely for its abundance of taiko manufacturers but had no competent taiko players sparked a desire within the young people of the community to create their own taiko group "with the purpose of revealing and overcoming all forms of discrimination" that had formerly held them back from the performance scene.<sup>35</sup> This group was Ikari Taiko.

Many drummers in Ikari had been personally discriminated against throughout their lives, in subtle and overt attacks. Remarks from childhood like "My parents said I can't play with you" and opinions in college expressing how "It would be awful to marry someone from a buraku" were commonplace, and answering honestly to the question "Where are you from?" almost always warranted the response "That's a rough neighborhood, isn't it?"<sup>36</sup> Hence, joining the

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<sup>33</sup> *Angry Drummers: a Taiko group from Naniwa, Osaka, Japan*, directed by Yoshitaka Terada, Suita Osaka: National Museum of Ethnology, 2010, DVD.

<sup>34</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>35</sup> Bender, *Taiko Boom*, 42.

<sup>36</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

ensemble held much significance for most members as the first safe space in which they could gain confidence in who they were. Some had never publicly “come out,” like Masanori Sumino, so when their friends discovered the truth, the reaction was negative. It was not until Sumino’s wedding day when invited members of the BLL chapter gave speeches that a high school friend of his realized he was a burakumin, and never talked to him again. After this incident Sumino saw that Ikari was “a chance to do my part in ridding the world of such discrimination.”<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, despite the presence of the BLL and because there were few courses about buraku issues offered in school, Ikari was the first group to really command the non-buraku majority to be the listeners and not the dictators of buraku discourse. Taiko thus became an avenue of empowerment in two ways: to assure burakumin of their integrity as human beings and to communicate to people that discrimination was just plain wrong.

With its debut performance in 1987, Ikari Taiko, backed by Naniwa’s BLL chapter, spearheaded the mobilization of burakumin playing taiko as a vehicle for promoting their social justice agenda. Every time before they took the stage, they introduced themselves as a taiko group from the buraku area of Naniwa, and talked briefly of their mission on defending human rights.<sup>38</sup> But it was not their talking that moved a once hostile audience -- it was their playing. Ikari’s talent in reaching the crowd by taking it through a range of emotions propelled them to fame and demonstrated taiko’s extraordinary skill in changing minds instantly. Upon numerous occurrences, parents regarding their son or daughter’s romantic relationship with a burakumin

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<sup>37</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>38</sup> *Angry Drummers*.



have permitted them to get married after watching just one performance by Ikari.<sup>39</sup> Impressed by their zeal and respect, people acknowledged their own underlying prejudices, and became more receptive to getting to know the burakumin and accepting them as equals.

Aside from winning over outsiders of the buraku, the Ikari players deeply affected their own company as well. By reappropriating taiko as a piece of buraku heritage, the ensemble has “lifted the spirits of the neighborhood” and made the entire leather product industry a source of pride.<sup>40</sup> Drum making was so scorned by the general public, but after Ikari began performing, taiko craftsmen could be proud of their jobs. It was the younger generation who could “get people interested in taiko and show them what a wonderful instrument it is.”<sup>41</sup> The elderly locals especially got attached to the group, congratulating them after every performance and thanking them, one woman going so far as to say “you give me a reason to live.”<sup>42</sup> For all the descendants of burakumin who had been living in this same town for centuries, facing longstanding discrimination and seeing nothing done about it, Ikari Taiko was their first prospect to uproot it. The older generation was most moved by how the members restored their people’s dignity, which empowered the whole buraku and enabled them to rebuild the connections to their culture and to each other as a united community. Further, Ikari inspired more buraku taiko groups from other BLL branches across Osaka to join the human rights movement. In 1999, it organized a concert, called *Koshiki Saikyo*, that consisted of eleven ensembles from different burakus in the

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<sup>39</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>40</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>41</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>42</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

prefecture. At first, there was competition between groups, so they did not get involved with each other, but this gig provided the impetus for them to work together; as a result, bonds between them strengthened and a sense of solidarity grew. As important as it was that taiko influenced non-burakumin to adjust their thinking, it was just as -- if not more -- crucial that it taught burakumin how to view themselves. With every cowhide treated in the factories and every bang on the drums, taiko was shown as a buraku tradition worthy of preservation and they as burakumin deserving of a spot in shaping their own legacy.

The physical nature of playing taiko also advanced how the organization's message was spread. Taiko is powerful through its energy, which makes its live performances very distinct from traditional drumming forms of *hogaku*. The dramatic arm movements, jumping, and shouting all strengthen the mood of a piece. Besides musical techniques -- modifying the pace, varying the strikes against the drum, adding special touches -- Ikari channels feelings from deep within to portray the precise situation of the burakumin in Naniwa. When asked what makes the group so good, one member named Seiji Nariyoshi, answered "our conviction."<sup>43</sup> Another player, Ryuji Tsutsumi, admitted "Like our group's name [ikari, which means anger], maybe I want to express my anger at discrimination."<sup>44</sup> Nariyoshi agreed, stating "We have inner conflicts and struggles, but taiko is a way to confront those struggles."<sup>45</sup>

In other words, taiko drumming has turned into a provocative and successful outlet to fully engage society into the burakumin frame of reference to address their degraded position.

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<sup>43</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>44</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

<sup>45</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

Similar to the aforementioned Festival of Liberation in Takagawa, taiko in Naniwa combined the question of what it means to be burakumin with what it means to be Japanese. Infusing the two identities through a cultural activity under one inclusive umbrella of Japanese-ness suggests that discrimination against the burakumin could disappear if their presence in society was seen as valuable as that of any other citizen. Ikari exemplified this theme by bringing to light the impact burakumin have had on taiko's larger contribution to Japanese culture. For an array of burakumin near and far to Naniwa, taiko became the centralizing component to empower their advocacy. Education is the first step for improving the burakumin's situation, particularly for children so there will be a long-lasting outcome. In putting on concerts for day care centers, Ikari leader, Nobuhiro Matsuura, explained "It's best to reach children at an early age, before they are actually exposed to discrimination."<sup>46</sup> Moreover, the Ikari players stand as role models for the youth. In the summer, they play on top of a portable shrine in honor of Naniwa's Shrine God Festival. For kids, it is a source of glory and excitement to be on the portable shrine during the festival's parade, and it encourages them to join taiko when they are older.

Taiko is a powerful platform for social activism because it is an expressive art; it is loud and warrants the attention of others. Having this creative outlet prevents the silence over discrimination that so often permeates cities, like Kuromatsu. Instead, burakumin can explain their discontent over the lack of reforms, or "let taiko do the talking" to compel dominant society to listen to their concerns and meet their demands for justice. Taiko represented a genuine connection to their ethnic culture and selfhood that ignited new confidence in the buraku liberation movement to insist that neither the government nor its citizens are doing enough to

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<sup>46</sup> *Angry Drummers*.

curb inequality in Japan. Interestingly, more than ten years prior, another minority ten thousand kilometers away in the United States also utilized taiko to deal with their lost identity and social crisis. People of Japanese ancestry held a precarious position among white Americans in which they realized the need to reconcile a historically false pretense of belonging.

### **The Japanese-American Experience 1945-1968**

Prior to the 1940s, most Japanese immigrants were farmers or fishermen along the western coast of the United States. A number of them congregated near Chinatowns but others lived amongst friendly white neighbors. They lived fairly successful lives until Executive Order 9066 was declared by President Franklin D. Roosevelt following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, that generated an alarmist, nativistic discourse against all Japanese Americans. World War II incarceration was the most powerful historical event in both building and breaking Japanese American identity. This experience embedded in US history greatly shaped how Japanese Americans viewed themselves, especially along generational lines. After the war, the actions of first generation (Issei) and particularly second generation (Nisei) Japanese Americans reflected a new, dynamic wave of assimilation. Harry Kitano, who was the Acting Director of the Asian American Studies Center at UCLA from 1971-72, explained how the drive for acceptance manifested in following the cues of the white majority: "To be successful, one had to exemplify the characteristics of being quiet and humble and [...] the maintenance of that kind of posture was very important in possibly getting an even greater proportion of the goods of society."<sup>47</sup>

Many Japanese Americans moved up economically after the war and Kitano's thoughts reflected

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<sup>47</sup> "An Interview with Harry Kitano," in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, ed. Amy Tachiki (Los Angeles: Regents of the University of California, 1971), 84.

the perceived need for material wealth. Accordingly, the Nisei raised their kids, the Sansei, with white middle class standards, but as the third generation came of age, confusion over growing up under “Americanization” settled in.

Some Sansei encountered blatant discrimination, like sixteen year old Lisa Nakashima, when a teacher told her, “You’re Japanese and you’re supposed to be clean and neat.”<sup>48</sup> Others remember times when they were not allowed in public spaces, like restaurants and swimming pools, or when service professions, like plumbers, would charge double the price for repairs compared to their white customers.<sup>49</sup> These instances of prejudice made it clear to Sansei that they were very different in some regard -- “not quite as white as the white society they wish[ed] to identify with” -- but did not shed any light on how.<sup>50</sup> One boy described his thought process: “I’m not black and I’m not white. They call me Japanese but [...] I’m an American in education, attitudes, and everything else.”<sup>51</sup> Kitano called this position the “middleman minority” in which Japanese, and Asian Americans in general, must figure out if they are to become integrated with the majority or align with the subordinated minorities.<sup>52</sup> These uncertainties motivated Sansei to study their heritage to discover where their disparities lied, similar to how the burakumin consciousness came to fruition. In doing so, the Sansei’s opinions began to conflict with the Nisei’s values. Though in the burakumin case there were not obvious inter-group generational

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<sup>48</sup> Craig Turner, “Asian Americans Seek Recognition,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 1973.

<sup>49</sup> Turner, “Asian Americans Seek Recognition.”

<sup>50</sup> “Autobiography of a Sansei Female,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 113.

<sup>51</sup> Craig Turner, “Young Asian-Americans Unite to Forge New Role in Society,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 1973.

<sup>52</sup> “An Interview with Harry Kitano,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 83.

conflicts, and despite the fact that burakumin were not their own separate race, they certainly underwent the same discrimination as outcasts relegated to the margins of society, much like the poorly treated Japanese Americans.

The Sansei's journey of self-exploration ranged from watching Japanese movies to trips to Asia, but learning about their background right at home was where the initial generational clash occurred. Typically, Nisei did not mention to their kids that WWII incarceration ever occurred because it was traumatic and humiliating, and most just wished to move on.<sup>53</sup> In asking their parents about incarceration, Sansei were appalled at the treatment of their parents, but were even more shocked that so few of them resisted it. They challenged the rationale behind the actions taken against the Japanese Americans that the Nisei had readily accepted. A number of them, like Ron Inoue, were angry that "they let the US government do this to them."<sup>54</sup> Others like thirty-six year old San Gabriel resident Dave Kumagai simply, "didn't understand why he [his father] gave up his land and his business."<sup>55</sup> But of course, to say the Sansei's reasoning was right was much easier to do after the fact. For those 120,000 Japanese Americans shipped off to the most desolate regions of the country to live in camps, to fight could have been deadly. In response to his son's persistent questioning, Dave Kumagai's father remarked "The hatred was incredible. They would have hanged us."<sup>56</sup> Rather than demonstrate defiance, the internees pursued *shikata ga nai*, a proverb meaning "it cannot be helped," to silently endure any and all

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<sup>53</sup> Takeyuki Tsuda, *Japanese American Ethnicity: In Search of Heritage and Homeland Across Generations* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 113.

<sup>54</sup> Tsuda, *Japanese American Ethnicity*, 114.

<sup>55</sup> Turner, "Young Asian-Americans Unite to Forge New Role in Society."

<sup>56</sup> Turner, "Young Asian-Americans Unite to Forge New Role in Society."

difficulties. Sansei disagreed in respect to the perceived goodness of complacency. Some, but not all, disclosed sentiments that if they were under the same circumstances, they would have fought back. In dissent, S.I. Hayakawa, a Canadian-born Nisei (who was therefore not interned), did not see any sense in the Japanese Americans fighting outnumbered as 120,000 people including small children against a total population of 150 million. Compared to the Sansei who felt “ashamed” that the Issei and Nisei did not cause any disturbance, Hayakawa was proud they “behaved themselves extraordinarily well” going to the camps.<sup>57</sup>

Regardless, the Issei and Nisei were the only ones who truly knew what mass incarceration was like. During the internment, they lived in barracks with little to no privacy, they were discouraged from speaking Japanese and following Eastern customs, and at one point, they were even drafted to defend the country that imprisoned them. These were all important factors that pressured the “compulsion to prove their Americanism” and to “work unobtrusively within the system” when they were released.<sup>58</sup> For Japanese Americans, assimilation was a necessity to survive and re-enter civil society after the war. They had to rebuild their lives from scratch, and planned to do so quietly. But in uncovering their families’ dark past of experiencing discrimination through one of the worst breaches of civil liberties, Sansei had identified a part of their history that was previously missing, and they wanted to talk about it. Unlike their parents, they saw the need to speak up over the unfairness and seek justice. This prompted them to get involved in something even bigger than themselves: the Asian American Civil Rights Movement.

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<sup>57</sup> “An Interview with S.I. Hayakawa,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Turner, “Young Asian-Americans Unite to Forge New Role in Society.”

In the late 1960s to early 1970s, college-aged Asian Americans across the US were inspired by the African American Civil Rights Movement to frame their own crusade against the racial injustice they faced. In working to attain legal rights for African Americans, Asian Americans came to recognize that the power dynamic in society was more than a black and white dichotomy -- it involved other people of color -- and that Asian Americans actually had much in common with the discrimination experiences of African Americans.<sup>59</sup> Asian American mobilization came in diverse ways: through lobbying for reforms in their ethnic communities, setting up Asian coalitions, and/or joining Third World strikes which pushed for Ethnic Studies departments at universities. Japanese Americans joined in all of these efforts, embracing the mantra of “Yellow Power” -- a term coined by activist Amy Uyematsu.

In a piece published in the activist newspaper, *Gidra*, Uyematsu addressed many details of the Asian American Movement: highlighting its motivation stemming from the problem of self-identity exacerbated by unresolved injustices -- for example, the Japanese American incarceration -- and criticizing the perpetuation of white racism by passive Asian Americans through accepting the silent, accommodating “model minority” stereotype.<sup>60</sup> On the other hand, Hayakawa, president of San Francisco State College (now SFSU) from 1969-73 and who shut down the 1969 student strike, was the spokesperson for conservatives who did not even see that Asian Americans had any real difficulties in society. He argued that the problems burdening third generation Japanese Americans were “fictitious” -- because they were the children of prosperous

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<sup>59</sup> Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 13.

<sup>60</sup> “The Emergence of Yellow Power in America,” in *Asian America: A Primary Source Reader*, ed. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 265.



families going to elite universities like USC and UCLA, they had “nothing to complain about.”<sup>61</sup> According to him, the Nisei didn’t have an identity dilemma because they were “too ambitious” with their focus on becoming “good nurseymen, good physicians, bankers, good photographers.”<sup>62</sup> They didn’t have time to worry about their Japanese ancestry because they were busy forging the relative affluence that their kids could enjoy. Hayakawa thought that the Nisei’s assimilation was most beneficial for them, but the Sansei backtracked that socio-economic progress when they “started whooping it up all over again about being Japanese.”<sup>63</sup>

The discrimination, conflict of interests for how Japanese Americans should act as a minority in the US, and the tactics to reconcile their inequalities all resembled the battle burakumin in Japan grappled with around roughly the same time. Both groups were challenged with the decision to achieve equality by trying to “pass” as members of dominant society, or by embracing their cultural distinctiveness. Albeit, it was easier for burakumin to blend in with the mainstream Japanese because there are no physical features that indicate being part of a buraku; and one could contest that since burakumin did not have the same opportunities for education and upward mobility as Japanese Americans, they were more discriminated against. Yet despite these small discrepancies, the circumstances each minority lived under called for larger society to address their historical grievances. Thus, both groups had two choices for how they wanted to occupy a space within the population: passively assimilate, or boldly confront those who were against them expressing their unique identity. In the Japanese Americans’ case, the Asian

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<sup>61</sup> “An Interview with S.I. Hayakawa,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 21.

<sup>62</sup> “An Interview with S.I. Hayakawa,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 22.

<sup>63</sup> “An Interview with S.I. Hayakawa,” in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, 22.

American Movement was an opening to reclaim a sense of ethnic pride. It revitalized the Sansei's racial consciousness and elicited a desire for their generation to get back in touch with their cultural roots. Mirroring the burakumin's endeavors, taiko emerged as a medium that empowered Japanese American identity and let their reflections on their experiences be heard.

### **Development of Taiko in the United States**

The first three American taiko groups to arise were all in California, the first being San Francisco Taiko Dojo founded by Seiichi Tanaka in 1968, Los Angeles Kinnara Taiko founded by Reverend Masao Kodani in 1969, and San Jose Taiko founded by Roy Hirabayashi in 1973. While the San Francisco Taiko Dojo was based mostly on the traditional style and ideals of the Japanese ensembles, and Kinnara Taiko was derived from Buddhist principles, San Jose Taiko was launched directly in response to the Asian American Movement. Hirabayashi was a Sansei born to Kibei parents -- Nisei born in the US, educated in Japan pre-WWII, and returned to the US who were also interned during the WWII years. He grew up in East Oakland in a predominately black community and attended San Jose State University to study engineering in 1969 at the peak of protests opposing the Vietnam War and supporting college Ethnic Studies programs. Being of draft age, he quickly dropped engineering and became interested in the antiwar cause and social movements happening around him. In an attempt to start an Asian American Studies program at SJSU, students tried to connect to the local Asian American communities themselves, the biggest nearby being Japantown. This is where Hirabayashi was asked by Reverend Hiroshi Hibiko of the San Jose Buddhist Temple to establish a taiko ensemble. For the reverend, the initial goal for the organization was to bring back young people to the

church, but Hirabayashi saw taiko as something much more: it could be a voice for Japanese Americans and could serve to bridge the gap between Japanese American culture and identity.

San Jose Taiko's first task in articulating the Japanese community's experiences was to combat negative stereotypes of Asian Americans. Similar to the burakumin who refuted the public's claims of their "dirtiness" in association with taiko drum making, Japanese Americans were determined to quash the beliefs that they were "non-assertive" and "uncreative."<sup>64</sup> Writing original music, banging drums, and yelling as one performs, is about as loud and provoking as one can get. Attracting attention was key to engaging with the masses, though the Sansei involved received pushback from the second generation. Like many Nisei, Hirabayashi's parents were not supportive; they did not understand why he spent so much time playing taiko and fostering the group when they thought his priorities should be to do well in school and attain a well-paying job so he wouldn't struggle financially like they did.<sup>65</sup> They questioned if taiko was even a legitimate occupation to live off of as not many had made a career out of it before. Besides these practical concerns, Nisei also feared for their children's safety. For those that lived through internment and faced terrible animosity for simply existing, they learned to be cautious about how others perceived them, for visibility equaled vulnerability.<sup>66</sup> To be politically engaged was uncareful, unwise, and bore the possibility of being social and political targets again.

Nevertheless, the generational clash over applying taiko as a tool for confrontation did not hinder the Sansei's passion for speaking out on the struggles of being a person of color as a

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<sup>64</sup> Yoshitaka Terada, "Shifting Identities of Taiko Music in North America," *Transcending Boundaries: Asian Musics in North America* (Osaka : National Museum of Ethnology, 2001), 41.

<sup>65</sup> Roy Hirabayashi, telephone interview by author, October 31, 2017.

<sup>66</sup> Roy Hirabayashi, telephone interview by author, October 31, 2017.

Japanese American. For the exact reasons that Nisei strived to fit in -- the worries about political oppression and violent anti-Asian backlash -- Sansei refused to tolerate these concessions. When San Jose Taiko performed, reactions were overwhelmingly positive because people saw their drumming as “exciting, inspiring, uplifting” and a “strong symbol against that [...] oppression.”<sup>67</sup> As one member of San Jose Taiko, Susan Hayase, summarized, “taiko is a visual and musical statement against assimilation.”<sup>68</sup> On a broader level, taiko was a component of the Asian American Movement that contributed to criticizing “those white chauvinists who promoted the cultural entertainment of western European aristocracy, such as opera and ballet, as the only ‘legitimate’ American forms.”<sup>69</sup> Taiko functioned as one of the earliest multicultural arts groups that not only enabled Japanese Americans to channel “higher esteem in multicultural American society” but paved the path over time for other minorities, such as African American and Latinx, to operate their own music and theater companies.<sup>70</sup> This effort to raise the respectability of a craft that was not produced by a white person was tantamount to the burakumin’s efforts to dignify their talents in the taiko drum making industry. This underappreciation of minority artists accentuates the institutionalized discrimination that may not be overtly dangerous, but is nonetheless harmful.

Furthermore, just as the burakumin in Ikari Taiko educated their audiences before every show, San Jose Taiko has taught about their history and what it means to be Japanese American

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<sup>67</sup> Susan Hayase, “Taiko,” *East Wind*, 4, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1985): 46.

<sup>68</sup> Hayase, “Taiko,” 47.

<sup>69</sup> Hayase, “Taiko,” 47.

<sup>70</sup> Hideyo Konagaya, “Taiko as Performance: Creating Japanese American Traditions,” *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*, 12 (2001): 106.

wherever they have traveled. In cities that are not racially diverse, there is often confusion about who they are, and people comment that “they speak English so well,” thinking they are from Japan.<sup>71</sup> When this happens, the group must clarify that they are third- and fourth-generation Japanese *Americans*, which leads them to discussing WWII internment. The conspicuous unawareness and microaggressions assuming foreignness of Asians in the US has been, and clearly still is, a prejudice that needs to be negated. In these cases, taiko illustrates the fluidity in identifying as both Japanese, culturally-wise, and American, nationality-wise. This understanding of a dual identity can be seen on a wider scale in how New York City’s Soh Daiko organization is managed. Although Soh Daiko was trained by Seiichi Tanaka of San Francisco Taiko Dojo in authentic musical techniques, the group was distinctively “un-Japanese” by rejecting the senpai-kouhai hierarchical system. Instead of requiring deference from junior members to senior members as a show of respect and rank, they emphasize equality and respect between all members by bowing in two lines facing each other and permitting anyone to become one of several rotating practice leaders.<sup>72</sup> This system was based on American ideals of equal opportunity and merit while still adhering to Japanese genres of the art itself.

The other aspect that taiko provided Japanese Americans was of an intrapersonal nature. Just like how Ikari Taiko was an avenue to honor buraku heritage, San Jose Taiko was a community activity in which the local Japanese neighborhood could explore their own roots. After growing up without Japanese customs and frequently around non-Japanese people, taiko for Sansei was a source of culture and significant belonging in a project that was authentically

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<sup>71</sup> Roy Hirabayashi, telephone interview by author, October 31, 2017.

<sup>72</sup> Paul Jong-Chul Yoon, “She’s Really Become Japanese Now!”: Taiko Drumming and Asian American Identifications,” *American Music* 19, no. 4 (2001): 423.

theirs -- something for Sansei, made by Sansei. But some people, like PJ Hirabayashi, have always believed that taiko was meant to be shared, and as more ensembles materialized in the US, taiko and its meaning eventually expanded to be classified as an Asian American cultural form.<sup>73</sup> Looking at the example of Soh Daiko again, in which nearly half of the members identified themselves as Korean American and Asian American, some of the players imagined themselves as cultural ambassadors to and for the Asian American community.<sup>74</sup> In this way, taiko provided a sense of ownership that had the ability to cross ethnic boundaries and relate experiences as a pan-Asian phenomenon. This is comparable to the effect Ikari had on other buraku taiko groups that shared the same mission to eliminate discrimination. American taiko organizations may have had various reasons for assembling, but could all unite under the basic need for acceptance as a minority in a white nation. Nonetheless, other groups put forth a lot of consideration into keeping alive American taiko's historical framework. San Jose Taiko especially holds a commitment to honoring the previous generations' struggles and preparing the future generations' outlook by taking trainees on a walking tour of Japantown where the historical development of the community and its relationship to the group's activities are illustrated. While the group does not deny entry on the basis of ethnicity, an understanding and full endorsement of the group's history and objectives are prerequisites for aspirants to join.<sup>75</sup> American taiko has touched individuals, generations, and other organizations in shaping the understanding of themselves as Japanese within the context of Asian Americans as a whole being

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<sup>73</sup> PJ Hirabayashi, telephone interview by author, March 20, 2018.

<sup>74</sup> Yoon, "She's Really Become Japanese Now!" 425.

<sup>75</sup> Terada, "Shifting Identities of Taiko Music in North America," 44.

free to identify as strong, self-determined, joyful, and expressive. Taiko's impact on Japanese community life was the first of several contemporary programs to provoke an analysis of Japanese American identity.

### **Self-Identity and Social Activism**

Taiko drumming is only one of the most recent cultural forms to support a collective Japanese American experience. Taiko follows the establishment of Japanese American basketball leagues from the 1930s and precedes programs like the Kakehashi Project and Nikkei Community Internship that began in 2014 and 2001, respectively. The Japanese American basketball leagues were initiated in both Northern and Southern California because Japanese Americans were often not allowed to participate in white-run athletic leagues. The Kakehashi Project is arranged by Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Japanese American Citizens League with the purpose of promoting a mutual trust and understanding among the people of Japan and the US, and a global understanding of Japan's economy, society, history, diverse culture, politics and foreign policy through a one week, paid trip to Japan.<sup>76</sup> Lastly, the Nikkei Community Internship (NCI) is an opportunity to participate in the nonprofit associations that sustain the Japanese American community in California's three Japantowns.

Today, the Japanese American basketball leagues teach about the history of discrimination against Japanese Americans that led to their creation, and how basketball was one of the unifying elements for young people in the WWII incarceration camps. While the Kakehashi Project gives off a strong sense of nationalism from the Japanese government, it is an

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<sup>76</sup> "About JAACL Kakehashi Program Overview," *JAACL Kakehashi Project*, accessed March 22, 2018, <https://kakehashi.jacl.org/about/>.

exclusive chance for Japanese Americans to come together and share their personal background while exploring their roots in Japan. With a visit to the Japanese Overseas Migration Museum, identity and what it means to be “Nikkei” within the worldwide Japanese diaspora is a main topic of discussion. Nikkei is a term with multiple definitions, but is used in the US to describe anyone in the Japanese community who has a genuine interest in its affairs, whether they are of Japanese descent or not. Moreover, the Kakehashi trip is composed of young adults with varying levels of familiarity and exposure to the Japanese American community, depending on where they are from in the US, which adds to the complexity of how we understand ourselves and each other. In NCI, through learning about Japantown history and working within the community, Japanese Americans find their role in preserving the past for generations to come. In fact, it was during my time in the 2017 San Jose NCI cohort that I met Roy and PJ Hirabayashi and learned about the origins of San Jose Taiko. All these outlets for Japanese American self expression in sports, the arts, and volunteering provide the platform for one to actively search for an understanding of their identity while partaking in community development. Like taiko groups, Japanese American programs are inclusive to all Asian Americans as a united space to collaborate on concerning social matters. For an entire race categorized as the “model minority” and often seen as apolitical, the Japanese American community, especially through the Japanese American Citizens League, has become a powerful advocate for Asian American social issues and an ally to all people of color.

Despite Japan being considered one of the most homogenous countries in the world, and the United States being one of the most diverse, discrimination persists in both. Prejudiced thinking from each country’s dominant class has restricted burakumin and Japanese Americans



from having an equal place in society, and the politics of respectability -- or the idea that people get ahead by assimilating -- controlled most public discourse on a solution that would help these minorities lead better lives. Even within each minority there were conservative voices like the Jiyu Dowa Kai and S.I. Hayakawa that essentially victim-blamed the burakumin and Japanese Americans for their unfavorable position. But in light of the growth of taiko drumming post-WWII in Japan and during the 1970s in the US, the burakumin and Japanese Americans turned the musical art into activism.

For both, taiko drumming served as a channel for recovering their respective culture. Taiko had been a traditional craft of the burakumin for hundreds of years, and when taiko migrated to the United States, it was something for third generation Japanese Americans to reconnect to their lost heritage. In reclaiming their respective identity proudly, each stood up for civil rights by using taiko to speak about the intolerance they had been shown historically, in systemic governmental measures, and through microaggressions in daily life. These separate movements parallel each other in their discrimination experiences and goals for their taiko organizations, and reveal that one's liberation from the stereotypes society assumes of them comes from within; the confidence people have in their own understanding of who they are and the connection they have to other members of their marginalized group is a critical support in fighting for equality. Taiko's aggressive playing style and the camaraderie the ensemble bestows on its members nurtures the community to propagate their beliefs while sticking together. Ultimately, both buraku and Japanese American taiko groups have been successful in spreading their message with evidence of change seen in the results of how they are treated as people. As

PJ Hirabayashi told me, taiko simply “erases borders and opens hearts.”<sup>77</sup> It holds the power to sway the audience to take a new, more compassionate perspective on who these minorities truly are as human beings, and facilitates more direct and honest communication as to why they must constantly exert the effort to be accepted into mainstream society.

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<sup>77</sup> PJ Hirabayashi, telephone interview by author, March 20, 2018.

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