

# the KODŌ beat

# 鼓童

## Kodo's Roots

by **Atsushi Sugano**, *Administrative Director of the Kodo Cultural Foundation.*

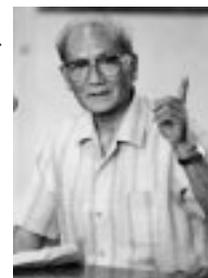
During the Muromachi period in the Omi area of Japan there was a saying, *'Taiko watakushi ni utsu bekarazu'* (It is forbidden to play the taiko for one's own ends). Such was the appreciation during this war-riven period of the power of the taiko to fire people up. The taiko was not a solo, performing instrument however. Since ancient days its use was confined to ceremonies in temples or shrines, and when on stage in *Noh*, *Kabuki*, or *Kagura* as accompaniment to dancing or singing. Its history as a solo instrument as we know it now - or as part of *kumidaiko* (massed drums) like those that appear in the over 15,000 taiko groups in Japan and over 110 in North America - goes back only 50 years.

After World War II returning vet and jazz drummer Daihachi Oguchi from Osuwa in Nagano found some old taiko music in a storehouse and set up a 'drum kit' of taiko to play it. Soon after in Tokyo, *Sukeroku Daiko* began to appear on stage too. Taiko appearances in the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and the 1970 Osaka World's Fair further contributed to its new popularity. A vast infusion of money into the countryside by the national government in an effort to put the brakes on the alarming exodus of people to the cities fueled the boom too. Much of this development money went towards the founding of local taiko groups.

2001 is Kodo's 20th anniversary. Ondekoza's start in 1971 makes 30 years, or one generation since the

group's inception. However our roots reach back to the '50's when the depopulation of Sado island was particularly alarming. Mr. Masahiko Homma, a Sado historian and high school social studies teacher, was concerned that no one would be left to succeed the rich traditional culture of *Noh*, *Bunya Puppetry* etc. for which Sado is justifiably famous.

This was a time when much of Japan had turned its back on its past and saw all things American as the path to security and prosperity. Mr. Homma observed that crafts-people usually play an important role in the local performing arts, so the loss of one



Masahiko Homma  
photo: Susumu Yoshida

is apt to lead to the loss of the other. He began to teach traditional culture in the high school.

At the same time Tageyasu Den (Kozo Tajiri) a university activist, was heavily influenced by a book by pioneering ethnologist Tsuneichi Miyamoto, encouraging people to appreciate the riches of Japanese folk traditions. Through Mr. Miyamoto's introduction, Mr. Den travelled to Sado and met Mr.



Homma. There was a meeting of minds in their shared vision of a school for the study of traditional arts and crafts.

10 years after their first meeting Mr. Den returned to Sado and with Mr. Homma tried to encourage local young people to become involved in the study of folk traditions, but with little

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success. In a change of tactics, they had Mr. Rokusuke Ei, a TV scenario writer and poet, (who incidentally wrote the words for '*Sukiyaki*') on his alternative late-night radio programme to ask for applicants for the *Ondekoza Summer School* to be held in August 1970. This was at the peak of the student movement period in Japan, when many young people were challenging the status quo. 40 students came for to the 4 night, 5 day-long programme. They watched local performing arts, visited temples and shrines, made crafts and learned about the history and traditions of Sado. On the last night Mr. Den spoke of his dream of beginning a school of the traditional arts and crafts. He said they would generate money to support themselves and attract attention to their cause by playing taiko all over the world.

10 of the young people regathered on Sado the following spring of 1971 to pursue their dream. With no background in the Japanese performing arts, they began with physical training. The link between running and taiko may have first arisen in Mr. Den's mind when he saw the film '*Muhomatsu*' with Toshiro Mifune as an odaiko-playing rickshaw man - someone who runs all the day for a living.

Between 1971 and '75 the best music and dance teachers in Japan came to Sado to teach. The members also travelled throughout Japan to study traditional performing arts first-hand. In 1973 Ondekoza made their Japanese debut at the Kyoto International Industrial Design Conference. Later that year they played at the finish line of the Boston Marathon and at Espace Pierre Cardin in Paris. Mr. Den's original plan was for Ondekoza to play for 7 years in order to make enough money to start the arts and crafts university, after which the drumming group was to be disbanded. But the success abroad and continuing bookings for engagements created its own momentum. New members began joining the group because they wanted to play, rather than with the idea of beginning an arts university. Mr. Den, long a fanatical movie fan, wanted to document the lives of these young people and so began pouring his energy into the making of films. The first was a documentary by Masahiro Shinoda and the second, a drama, by director Tai Kato which in the end was never released.

The film projects increasingly consumed time and money resulting in a traumatic 'divorce' in 1981 between Mr. Den and the players. Fundamentally differing visions of the group's goals had become irreconcilable. Mr. Den, they discovered, held the copyright to the name *Ondekoza*, so along with their taiko and instruments, it left with him. All 12 members decided to remain on Sado and start from scratch under the new name *Kodo*.

Meanwhile the taiko boom was gaining momentum. Internationally there was an increasing interest in 'World Music'. There were local factors too. Traditionally in Japan each area has its own unique festival which serves as a means to connect the people. But work like farming and fishing have increasingly become part-time jobs with people often commuting to industrial or service jobs in faraway towns. This has eviscerated many a local festival. The introduction of local taiko groups - which were unburdened by the old connections and open to everyone - began to take over the function of the older festivals. The taiko appeal not only because anyone can play them, but they uniquely have at once ancient Japanese roots, and yet are completely modern. Taiko groups are unfettered by age-old restrictions like 'men only' or 'farmers only' as is the case with many other traditional genres. As amateur taiko groups were mushrooming in the countryside, they looked to the new taiko professionals like Kodo for instruction and inspiration. These new 'taikoists' also provided an audience as Kodo toured Japan. A perfect symbiosis.

Next year traditional Japanese music will be made a compulsory part of the Japanese curriculum for elementary and middle schools for the first time since the war. Such is the change wrought over attitudes towards traditional culture over the last 50 years, and taiko has played no small part in that reassessment, both at home and abroad.

It is with great sadness that we must report Tageyasu Den's death in a traffic accident on April 11th. As the founder of the original Ondekoza and a key figure in the creation of the taiko *boom*, we would like to express our appreciation for the part he played in our lives and offer our condolences to his family.

## Kodo Close-up: Ryuji Sato

*The 19th in a series of profiles of individual Kodo members.*

Ryuji Sato (Ryu san) was born in Tochigi Prefecture in Utsunomiya near Tokyo, in 1953. During the war his Korean father married his Japanese mother (who was then disinherited) in Korea. Ryuji's father was drafted into the Japanese Army but was left with nothing after the war. His wife returned to Japan at war's end and he followed her, sneaking into the country in the bottom of a fishing boat. After arriving in Kyushu in the south, he walked all the way to Shizuoka in central Japan along the rail lines. Ryuji's sister, (13 years his elder) tells him that with the prejudice they encountered and the poverty, life was extremely hard. Though they lived in a prefab shack, Ryuji says that his parents always made sure he and his three sisters had enough good food to eat.

Ryu san was brought up as a Japanese without a Korean name or speaking Korean. There was a Self Defense Forces base nearby and his father ran a little bar where, like so many other Koreans in Japan, he served Korean-style animal gizzards or *horumon yaki* (literally: roasted throwaway scraps). He also worked as a scrap dealer and Ryu san remembers having to disassemble clocks and things to separate the wood from the metal. He thinks that work led to his current ability to being good with his hands.

He remembers his early childhood painfully; his inability to make friends and the development of a serious stutter which deepened his isolation. In middle school *kendo* became the centre of his life and he pursued it passionately right through high school. He worked at a car repair garage during the day and went to industrial high school at night. His stuttering was so bad by this time that he could scarcely say his own name. Then one day his kendo teacher gave him a book showing him how to discover the source of his problem. His mother told him it had begun at the same time he had been forced to 'correct' his left-handedness (a common practice in Japan). Understanding the cause allowed him to overcome his speech impediment.

Upon graduation he went to Kyoto Technical

University where he did enough kendo to earn his 3rd dan, but not enough studying to stay in school. He kept working at the university though for another 5 years as a physics lab assistant. His interest in kendo was soon supplanted when he joined a local mountain and rock climbing club. Mountains became his life for the next 8 years, the final 3 of which he supported himself by working in a bicycle store.



At the age of 28 he felt the need for a change. He remembered seeing a television documentary about Ondekoza and their very physical lifestyle appealed to the mountain climber in him.

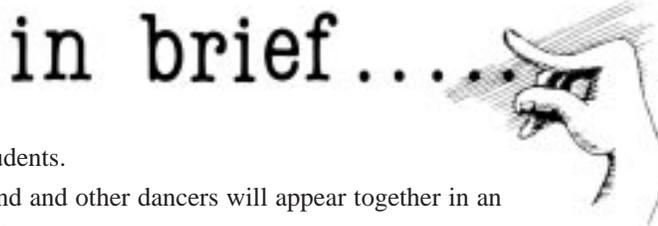
Phoning for an interview, he arrived on Sado on December 28th 1981. He liked what he saw of Kodo and asked to join. He admitted to no musical talent and said he had nothing to offer but himself, a 'self' whose life he wanted to change. He also told Hanchō that as he had already quit the bicycle shop he had nothing to return to. It was agreed he could stay for 3 months and see if he could fit in. Yoshiaki Oi sat him in front of a *shime daiko* and told him to repeat '*Ten teke teke*' endlessly till the members got back from tour. It was very slow going, but Ryuji eventually won himself a place on stage. 'Considering how musically untalented I am, I think I at least managed to keep my end up for seven years' he quips.

No longer on stage, Ryuji looks after the Kodo village grounds, does the gardening and a bit of carpentry. He goes regularly to the Apprentice Centre where he assists in the instruction of the *Tea Ceremony* and *Kyogen* singing. He also teaches farming, building, and basic cooking - from making fish broth to filleting fish. In the beginning he used to do a lot of work on their garden and rice paddy, but now he lets them make their own mistakes. He is most anxious to pass on to the next generation the importance of what he describes as 'life's basics'. This includes good, not luxurious, food. He has the apprentices striving to assure that at least one part of every meal, no matter how small or what season, is something they have grown with their own hands.

In May and June, Korean percussionist and *Park Jaesoon* drummed and danced up a storm while appearing with Kodo's school touring troupe. This was as exciting and educational for Kodo's players as it was for the students.

On August 25th in Shinjuku, *Chieko Kojima* and other dancers will appear together in an evening produced by costume designer *Tokihiro Shingo*.

*Ryutaro Kaneko* will play taiko together with singer *EPO* and *batoukin* (a Mongolian stringed instrument) player *Haruhiko Saga* on September 30th in Yokohama, October 5th in Sendai, October 10th in Roppongi and October 12th in Kyoto. *Ryutaro* will also do a workshop with dancer *Toru Iwashita* in Itami-shi, Hyogo on Oct. 8.



## upcoming performances

### Aikawa Kinzan Matsuri & Fireworks

July 27 Aikawa, Sado Island 0259-74-2220

### Earth Celebration 2001

August 17-19 Ogi, Sado Island 0259-81-4100

### One Earth Tour Japan

#### September

12 Hokkaido Sapporo Concert Hall, Kitara Dai Hall  
011-241-3871  
14 Hokkaido Obira-cho Bunka Koryu Centre 0164-56-9500  
16 Hokkaido Asahi-machi Sunrise Hall 016528-3146  
18 Hokkaido Nemuro-shi Sogo Bunka Kaikan 01532-3-4705  
20 Hokkaido Kushiro Shimin Bunka Kaikan 0154-22-3529  
22 Hokkaido Obihiro Shimin Bunka Hall 0155-23-9480  
24 Hokkaido Urakawa-machi Sogo Bunka Kaikan  
01462-2-5000  
26 Hokkaido Tomakomai Shimin Kaikan 0144-55-3247  
29 Aomori Misawa-shi Kokaido 022-299-3955  
30 Iwate Hanamaki-shi Bunka Kaikan 022-299-3955

#### October

1 Miyagi Ishinomaki Shimin Kaikan 0225-94-1500  
3 Fukushima Aizu-fugado 022-299-3955  
4 Fukushima Iwaki-shi Taira Shimin Kaikan 022-299-3955  
6 Yamagata Nanyo Shimin Kaikan 0238-43-3466  
9 Tochigi Kuroiso-shi Bunka Kaikan 0284-72-8268  
10 Ibaraki Hitachi Ota Shimin Koryu Centre 0294-73-1234  
11 Ibaraki Ushiku Shimin Centre 0298-74-3111  
13 Tochigi Tochigi-ken Sogo Bunka Centre 028-622-4101  
14 Tochigi Ashikaga Shimin Kaikan 0284-72-8268  
16 Tokyo Bunkyo Civic Hall 03-3201-8116  
17 Tokyo Amyu Tachikawa 03-3201-8116  
18 Saitama Tokorozawa Shimin Bunka Centre 042-998-7777  
20 Niigata Niigata Kenmin Kaikan 025-378-9266

### One Earth Tour Europe

#### November

4 De Montfort Hall Leicester, UK 44-116-233-3111  
5 Symphony Hall Birmingham 44-121-780-3333  
7 St David's Hall Cardiff 44-29-20-878444  
10 The Anvil Basingstoke 44-1256-844244  
12 Bridgewater Hall Manchester 44-161-907-9000

13 Philharmonic Hall Liverpool 44-151-709-3789  
16-18 Barbican Centre London 44-20-7638-8891  
21-22 Philharmonie Munich, Germany 49-89-936093  
24 Festspielhaus St. Pölten, Austria  
43-2742-908080-222  
25 Brucknerhaus Linz 43-732-775230-237  
26 Kultur & Kongresszentrum Rosenheim, Germany  
49-8031-3659365

30 Venue to be announced (Berlin)

#### December

3 Jahrhunderthalle Frankfurt  
5 Liederhalle, Hegel-Saal Stuttgart 49-7031-711-26  
6 Burghof Lörrach 49-7621-94081-11  
15-16 Savoy Theatre Helsinki, Finland 358-9-169-3703  
18 Vanemuine Concert House  
Tartu, Estonia 372-7-442272  
19 Estonia Concert Hall Tallinn 372-6-147760

On July 31st from 10pm-10:44pm, EC'99 guest singer/songwriter Jadranka Stojakovic from Bosnia Herzegovina will appear on NHK Educational TV. Jadranka will appear with members of Kodo and the children of Sado's Fukaura Elementary School.

On August 31 from 8pm-8:45pm Kodo is scheduled to appear for 10 minutes of music and conversation on an NHK TV song programme.

## Notice to Kodo Beat Readers

Kodo Beat is a newsletter focusing on the activities of Kodo and is sent quarterly to members of *Friends of Kodo*. *Friends of Kodo* is dedicated to bringing Kodo closer to our audience and fellow taiko enthusiasts. Membership is available to all. As well as receiving *Kodo Beat*, members also get special advance ticket reservations for selected concerts in Japan, the chance to buy original goods available only to them, and selected discounts on a range of Kodo goodies. For further information about these offers contact us or check our website.

For those readers who only want the newsletter, an on-line version is available on the Internet.

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