The “Heike Brothers” and the 700-year Transmission and Reception of Heike Musical Narrative

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There is a widespread sense of anxiety about the future of the traditional performing arts in Japan, with the numbers of performers and audiences continuing to decline across the board. Perhaps the Nagoya blind tradition of heike musical narrative is in the most parlous state of any genre, with only one remaining exponent, Imai Tsutomu (b. 1958).

Time does not permit a comprehensive overview of the various stages of this transmission of heike performed narrative over 700 years from medieval times to the present (see Tokita 2016, chapter 3), but I will focus on the recent state of transmission, and then will discuss a project for non-traditional transmission.

The Tale of the Heike is not only a written chronicle or romance, it is also a story told, or rather sung. Its tradition as performed narrative has gone through several stages of development, rise and decline; clearly the blind male tradition of heike biwa performance is now in decline. Komoda (1998) outlines four stages of heike’s musical development from few to many melodies, and from oral to written text to texts with musical notation. Of the 200 chapters of the Kakuichi version, which is the closest to the surviving performance tradition, only eight episodes are still transmitted in the Nagoya lineage. With such attrition of the repertoire, they do not really tell the “grand narrative” of Taira defeat and Genji ascendancy.

Of the different performance lineages from the medieval era, the best documented ones are the Yasaka and the Ichikata. The Ichikata later gave rise to Maeda, and to Hatano (active till the Taishō period). Maeda was prominent in Kyoto, Nagoya, Edo and eventually Tsugaru, and is the only surviving lineage.

There are two surviving traditions of heike recitation, the Tsugaru lineage and the Nagoya lineage. In the previous generation of Nagoya musicians there were three active transmitters, who possessed the remaining repertoire of eight pieces but now there is only one active blind professional (kengyō) who has inherited the tradition orally, Imai
Tsutomu. In collaboration with the musicologist Haruko Komoda he created a revived partial version of a piece in 1990 (Kaidō kudari) and later a partial revival of Gion Shōja, in both cases relying on the basic notation of the Heike Mabushi (Komoda 2009 CD set.)

The involvement of sighted amateurs in learning heike narrative in the Edo period led to the development of musically annotated performance versions (fuhon). In this way, the performance became reduced to one fixed musical realization, in contrast to the medieval period. The 1776 Heike Mabushi systematized the musical setting of the narrative, creating an orthodox or correct musical realization, making it consistent from one performance to another. This clinched the loss of orality from heike performance. The most significant musical score is the Heike Mabushi. It is very close to the Kakuichi-bon, but instead of the chronological order of chapters, they are arranged in the order that they were to be learnt. The episodes early in the book show greater musical variation and formal structuring in comparison with the later ones, suggesting that they were more popular and therefore frequently performed as independent pieces (Komoda 2003:187ff.).

The Tsugaru transmission derives from heike recitation as a amateur pastime (tashinami) of bushi dilettantes in the Edo period. The Sendai branch of heikyoku came into existence after a retainer of the Tsugaru Domain, Kusumi Taiso (1815-1882), studied heikyoku in the mid-nineteenth century. He stipulated in his will that heikyoku should continue to be transmitted (Komoda 2003: 7). His son Tateyama Zennoshin and grandson Tateyama Kōgo (1894-1989) both preserved this tradition through conducting historical research, performing, recording and teaching. This Tsugaru tradition has recently flowered into a viable practice with performers such as Tokyo-based Hashimoto Toshie. Because they are sighted and use as their score the Heike Mabushi text-notation, they can perform any episode or piece of the Tale.

In 1871, the abolition of the feudal class structure meant that the blind musicians of the Tōdō guild lost their patronage and their status as performers of official music, and with their loss of status, the support for their performance was taken away (Katō 1974/1985, 465-73), leaving only remnants of heike performance.

It is important to note that heike narrative was preserved in tandem with the development of the lyrical chamber music, jiuta-sōkyoku, as the same blind performers of heike also performed koto and shamisen, the two new representative instruments of the Edo period. It was they who developed this art music which has become perhaps the most representative genre of Japanese traditional music. Such multi-skilling must have contributed to the musical elaboration and refinement of heikyoku, as well as ensuring
its preservation through expanding the economic viability of music for the blind.

The previous generation of three carriers of the tradition were Inogawa Kōji (1905-1985), Doizaki Masatomi (1920-2000), Mishina Masayasu (1894-1989), all kengyō rank. They can be heard in this combined (tsure-beike) performance of Nasu no Yoichi, from an LP record Heikyoku: Heike Biwa (PH-7511〜2), 1972. (Youtube gives it divided into five sections)

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqoXsZY1uDo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FqoXsZY1uDo)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3tWbDlx48k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3tWbDlx48k)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzB3rpsrTUY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BzB3rpsrTUY)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odjQvOj1A0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odjQvOj1A0)
- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlHCv1mWIY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AlHCv1mWIY)

Another example of this generation is an extract from Ujigawa, performed by Inogawa Kōji (NHK Shimin Daigaku Kōza, 1974.11.11)

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5CDxvWo1Lw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5CDxvWo1Lw)

For an example of the current transmission, here is Imai Tsutomu’s performance of Kōyō.

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHCP8RkbfdA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHCP8RkbfdA)

(From a DVD titled Heike Mabushi, one of a series produced by the Ogino Keshōkai group in Nagoya.)

Imai’s lineage is continuous with the medieval blind biwa hōshi whose performance was orally transmitted without the need for written texts. Of course, as is well-known, many textual versions of the Heike monogatari were created, but their purpose was not for the oral transmission of heike by the blind.

The practitioners of the sighted performance lineage stemming from aficionados in the Tsugaru domain in the late Edo period can in theory recite any of the 200 chapters of the Heike monogatari based on the Heike Mabushi text. It is debatable however whether they are true carriers of the tradition. Some insist that they are indeed amateur, in the sense that their performance lacks the depth, musical skill and conviction of the Nagoya tradition. They had no contact with blind professional practitioners from the end of the Edo period, but wanted to continue the tradition as they knew it. The key exponent, Tateyama Kōgo (1894-1989), strayed radically from the traditional form. According to Komoda, since he did not possess a sufficient vocal range for heike, he changed the melodies at the upper and lower extremes to suit his voice; he also simplified the melodic line, altered the tuning of the biwa, and changed pronunciations
in the text. He attracted a number of followers, who in turn taught this to another generation. People were confused as to what was correct, and tended to make their own decisions about how to perform, leading to considerable differences in tuning, pronunciation, sawari (drone effect), and melodic realization.

The Tsugaru lineage gained considerable credence when it was embraced by historical linguist Kindaichi Haruhiko (1913-2004) who championed it as a valid transmission of heike biwa. Kindaichi himself learned heike from Tateyama Kōgo and taught others. This is Tateyama Kōgo’s performance of *Gion Shōja*.

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIIImwKxcvOY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MIIImwKxcvOY)

For an example of a young performer from this lineage, see the website of Arao Tsutomu (b. 1979).

- [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaqCsQRV5y0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iaqCsQRV5y0)

He calls his performance seichō 正調, or correct, orthodox tune, and claims to be one of the few carriers of the heikyoku tradition. According to his profile, he started to learn heikyoku from Kindaichi in 1999, and also from Suda Seishū, a Satsuma biwa performer. He works for Mitsubishi Jūkō (Heavy Industries) but finds time to perform in venues such as shrines and temples significant for the heike narratives, as well as doing demonstrations in schools and community centres. In 2014, he set up a Heike Learning Centre and takes students. In 2016 he performed at the Moscow Conservatory, his first overseas performance.

Suda Seishū (b. 1947) is a Satsuma biwa (Seiha school) professional who studied heikyoku under Kindaichi Haruhiko in 1991. Here is an example of his Satsuma biwa: the piece *Shōgitai*, about the Boshin War in 1868.

- [http://www.sudaseishu.com/](http://www.sudaseishu.com/)

Here is an example of his heikyoku, the piece *Giō*:

- [http://www.sudaseishu.com/2017026376123982417926354.html](http://www.sudaseishu.com/2017026376123982417926354.html)

It is very much in the Tsugaru mold.

The repertoires of the modern traditions of Satsuma biwa and Chikuzen biwa include stories based on the *Heike monogatari*, and their exponents often claim to be modern carriers of the medieval tradition; however, they are even further removed from the biwa hōshi tradition of Nagoya. When they perform heike narratives, with few exceptions they are short paraphrases or re-compositions of the literary text. These genres are characterized by extensive instrumental interludes, and are musically very different from the heike biwa tradition. Most people think however that kindai biwa is heike biwa. This misconception has been caused largely by Kobayashi Masaki’s 1964
film *Kwaidan*, based on four ghostly stories by Lafcadio Hearn, one of which is the myth of Miminashi Hōichi, a biwa hōshi who performs the Dannoura episode. The musical director of this film, Takemitsu Toru, selected Satsuma biwa performer, Tsuruta Kinshi, for the sound track. (She later premiered his famous concerto for biwa, shakuhachi and orchestra, *November Steps.* ) This has helped to legitimize Satsuma biwa as Heike Biwa.

**Ensuring the continuation of the Nagoya blind lineage**

Musicologist Haruko Komoda has developed a project that aims to ensure the future of the Nagoya lineage. What are the prospects for its success and what is its significance?

Komoda is the foremost researcher in Japan today of biwa, particularly the heike biwa recitation of the Nagoya lineage on which she wrote her doctoral thesis, published in 2003. She has worked with Imai Tsutomu for many years in reviving no longer performed repertoire, including *Kaidō kudari* and *Gion shōja*.

In 2001, she formed a group called Tōdō Ongaku Hozonkai (Preservation Society for Music of the Tōdō Heritage). Among its activities was the recruiting of talented young performers of jiuta-sōkyoku to have heike lessons with Imai Tsutomu in Nagoya. One was Kikuo Yūji (b. 1977) from the Osaka Kiku-suji lineage. The lessons were less productive than hoped (sometimes only lasting five minutes; it seems that reflected how Imai himself had learned heike from Mishina Kengyō), but he acquired two complete pieces and part of another of the eight transmitted pieces. Other activities of the Tōdō Ongaku Hozonkai included having a new instrument built for Imai; and training students in the Nagoya traditions of koto and kokyū. Another project was the production of a recording of Imai’s entire repertoire, and a transmitted fragment called *Sakura no chūon*, and the reconstructed *Gion Shōja*. These had actually been recorded a few years earlier, but Imai had not given permission for them to be released. They were finally published with substantial accompanying explanatory notes (in Japanese and English) and texts in 2009 by Kojima Rokuon.

Around this time, Imai became even less interested in teaching heike. Komoda thus decided to achieve a transmission of the Nagoya heritage indirectly. She has developed a project to train promising young performers building on Kikuo’s lessons with Imai, with two more young sighted professional musicians of jiuta, the shamisen and koto music developed by the blind as an addition to heike narrative in the Edo period, Tanaka Naoichi (b. 1974) and Hiyoshi Shōgo (b. 1987). Kikuo was to be an instructor in this process.
In 2011, Komoda used the Tōdō Ongaku Hozonkai to form a training programme called the Heike-gatari Kenkyūkai (Study Group for Heike Narrative), directed first at young kindai biwa performers and biwa researchers. The programme built on the concept of ensuring the future of the Nagoya transmission by teaching about heike biwa, both theory and performance. In 2015, this programme was extended and directed at the three hand-picked performers of jiuta and sōkyoku just mentioned.

The method of training is quite different from the traditional pattern of learning orally and aurally in a one-on-one lesson with a teacher. It is however based on Komoda’s deep musicological knowledge and her extensive research on heike biwa narrative. Komoda herself studied singing and biwa with Imai and went through his whole repertoire twice, so although not a stage performer as such she has in fact received the Nagoya transmission. She accompanied him on a number of overseas performance trips. She is in a good position to teach the three young men with supplementary materials. He collaborated willingly with her research, but has refused to train new professional heike performers.

The premise of the activity was that it would be based on aural imitation of the sung model of Imai’s rendition, supplemented by written texts and musical scores as interpreted by Komoda. A basic task was to create a reliable musical notation that accurately reflected Imai’s performance.

The first resource is the *Heike Mabushi* (1776), the musically annotated performance text authorized by Ogino Kengyō of the Nagoya lineage of heike.

Second are the transcriptions of the eight Nagoya pieces made by musicologist Fujii Seishin (1901-1972), based on reel tape recordings of the three performers active at that time (Fujii 1966). Both scores are carefully scrutinized and annotated to make them match Imai’s performance. The printed texts in the CD booklet for Imai’s 2009 CDs are also referred to.

Third are the various recordings of heike in modern times, but centrally of Imai’s performance as contained in the 2009 CDs (Imai 2009).

Close scrutiny revealed that not only has divergence occurred since the time of the *Heike Mabushi*, but even the 1966 transcriptions diverge in small details from Imai’s performance. The matter of accurately interpreting the *Heike Mabushi* score has also entailed painstaking work, and some questions still remain to be answered.

Komoda’s aim is that the three performers will rely almost completely on the *Heike Mabushi* in lessons with the model of Imai’s recorded performance and her guidance and correction. She hopes that eventually they will perform from memory without needing to have the text before them, or at least playing only from the *Heike Mabushi*.
Obtaining funding from the Bureau of Culture (Bunka-chō) has been significant, not just for material help in covering travel, instrument repair, strings, and room hire; but more importantly because of the recognition it gives to the project. Another Nagoya group, the Ogino Kenshōkai, working with Imai, also had Bunka-chō funding to put on a series of public performances of all his repertoire and produce DVD’s for sale. This group is centred on a descendent of the Ogino Kengyō who authorized the Heike Mabushi. They are very committed at a local Nagoya level to the future of the lineage, and hope that eventually Imai will teach successors for his heike, but so far they too have not been successful.

I observed a lesson of the Heike-gatari Kenkyūkai in Tokyo on October 4th, 2016. It was the 14th lesson, or study group (kenkyūkai), and the piece being practised was the second half of “Sotoba Nagashi”. Duplicating Imai’s method of teaching, an assistant operated the CD player, pausing after each phrase of Imai’s singing, then Komoda and the three apprentices sang that phrase following the Mabushi text-score, referring also to the staff notation as needed. Komoda comments from time to time, makes corrections, gives explanations and discusses unclear or problem points. The three trainees had obviously prepared thoroughly in advance, as they seemed to be quite confident with no hesitation. They sometimes asked questions.

The project has already borne fruit. The three made their first public performance of heike (Suzuki and part of the revived piece Gion Shōja) in Kyoto in 2015, just four months after their training began. This was possible because the musical ability required for heike is in common to jiuta-sōkyoku. A second performance was given in Tokyo in December, and a third in Hamamatsu in July 2016 (Ujigawa). They have been well received and have been given the moniker “Heike Brothers”, after the Yoshida Kyōdai of Tsugaru-jamisen fame.

Hiyoshi performed in Shanghai in October 2016 at an ICTM meeting at the Shanghai Conservatory, “Plucked Lutes of the Silk Road”. In December, Kikuo performed at the National Theatre in Tokyo, demonstrating the similarities and differences between heike and gidayū-bushi. In January 2017, all three trainees performed both jiuta-sōkyoku and heike for the Sankyoku kyōkai in the Kioi Hall in Tokyo, when the jiuta audience was encouraged to sing along in an excerpt of heike. In April 2017, a formal debut concert in the Kioi Hall in Tokyo marked the acquisition by the three trainees of the whole eight Nagoya pieces.

The aim for future study is to be able to perform more pieces than the Nagoya eight based on research of the Mabushi, starting with straightforward pieces consisting predominantly of the most basic and simple kudoki melody type. Komoda will also
work on the musical realization of pieces that have very well known stories, such as Dannoura and Atsumori. using the same approach she developed while working with Imai on Kaidō kudari and Gion Shōja.

The ultimate success of Komoda’s project will depend on whether the three trainees’s heike is recognized by the music community in general, and by Imai in particular. It is to be hoped that their achievement will move him to want to be involved in the transmission process and the continuation of the heike narrative tradition.

References