

## The sociological significance of historically unreliable documents in the case of Japanese musical guilds

Ingrid FRITSCH (Bonn)

When investigating the origin and early history of musical guilds we find two kinds of source materials:

1. historically authentic contemporary records, which are however by no means sufficient enough to give a satisfying insight into the conditioning factors of the early developments of musical guilds.
2. writings of mostly unknown original authorship, which are transmitted within the organization itself. Their content, which is considered by the group members as historically authentic, usually does not correspond with solid historical information, making it difficult to draw firm line between the realities and the inventions in the texts. Their credibility and usefulness as an historical source is generally questioned by historians and musicologists today, simply because there are too few historical materials with which to corroborate the stories they relate. Yet those writings, which actually belong to the realm of *denshō*, that is "traditions" or miscellaneous "lore", gained widespread credence at least among the members of the groups concerned and the legends provided a good deal of the ethos of the guilds.

Let me first roughly summarize the myths of origin of three guilds of blind musicians and then, after analyzing their common motifs and structures, discuss the purposes and intentions which possibly led to the fabrication of those so-called "sources".

The members of the *tōdō-za*, a widespread organization to which all *heike-biwa*, *koto* and *shamisen* belonged, venerated as their guild's founder and ancestor an historical figure, Prince Saneyasu, the fourth son of the Emperor Nimmyō (reign date: 833-850) and younger brother of the Emperor Kōkō. There exist quite a number of written records<sup>(1)</sup> dating from the Tokugawa period, which tell about the origin of the guild. While they differ in certain details the following general outlines coincide. Among the *tōdō-za*, Prince Saneyasu was called "Amayo". As a young man he lost his eyesight due to an illness and entered the priesthood. Ashamed of his blindness, he fled the capital and called together blind men of good lineage to keep him company. He taught them to play various stringed instruments and flutes, and instructed them in the secret *biwa* melodies. Out of pity for the blind the prince presented them with three Kyūshū-provinces (Ōsumi, Satsuma and Hyūga) and introduced the rank-and-title-system of the *tōdō-za*.

According to reliable imperial genealogies<sup>(2)</sup>, the fourth son of Emperor Nimmyō was indeed named Saneyasu, and had retired because of an unspecified illness to become a Buddhist monk. But there is no solid historical information about his blindness or his music-teaching to blind men. The main ceremonies of the *tōdō-za*, to which all members of the organization were strictly obliged to attend, were the so-called "pagoda-meetings" (*tō-e*). They took place in Kyoto, where the administrative authority, which had control-function over all subgroups in the whole country, was located. The so-called *shakutō-e* occurred on the 16th of February, that day being said to be the anniversary of Prince Amayo's death, and the *suzumitō-e* was held on the 19th of June, which was considered to be the day of the death of Prince Amayo's mother. About the proceedings of the ceremonies exist numerous descriptions in Edo literature. Paintings of the patrons of the blind and of the Goddess Myōon-Benzaiten were hung up and worshipped. After recitation of the sutra *Hannya-shingyō* parts of the *heikyoku* were recited to the accompaniment of the *biwa*. These ceremonies were

imitated among *tôdô*-members of the whole country. In Edo, the meetings took place in a Benten-shrine. Outside of Kyoto and Edo, the ceremonies, being performed only once a year, were mostly called *myôonkô*. Besides the above-mentioned events, parts of the records concerning the origin of the *tôdô*-organization and its rules were read. Thus, by hearing whole life once a year through the myth of origin, the consciousness of the members was imbued with the story of Prince Amayo.

The next musical guild I want to speak about is the organization of the so-called *goze*, made up of blind female singers, who played the *shamisen* while wandering from village to village. Nothing is known in detail about their historical development. Formerly active in the whole country, from the Meiji period on they were only to be seen Niigata prefecture. Besides simply entertaining the village inhabitants with their songs, they were, at least in some places, credited with a certain religious power: that meant, for example, that to deny a *goze* one's home to stay for the night would have brought misfortune to the house and the harvest. Considered as the foundress of their guild is a certain princess Sagami, blind fourth daughter of Emperor Saga (809-23). Their myth of origin may be summarized as following<sup>(3)</sup>:

When the blind Princess was 7 years old she had a dream in which the Nyoirin-Kannon of the Nachi mountain in the province Kii appeared. She explained that the princess was in fact a transformation of the god Shimogamo-Daimyôjin, who had taken her appearance out of mercy to the coming generations of the blind. From now on the princess was to rule over all blind women, descending to the common people and earning her living by the arts. Furthermore the Nyoirin-Kannon told about five friend who would learn the arts together with the princess and establish the five sub-schools of the later *goze* organization. When the princess woke up, she told her parents about the dream, and they brought together five young girls of noble descent.

The following passage of the record tells something about the ranks of the organization and of the prohibition of going vulgar places. This is said to be prescribed by the Emperor Saga, and those who act against the laws of the organization will be severely punished by the gods Myôon-Bosatsu, Benzaiten and Shimogamo Daimyôjin.

Once a year among all *goze* groups, a so-called *myôonkô* meeting is held. Attendance is obligatory and absence is severely punished. As with the pagoda meetings or the *myôonkô* of the above-mentioned *tôdô*-organization, after the recitation of the sutra *Hannya-shingyô* in front of a Myôon-Benzaiten image, parts of the myth of origin and the guild's principles are read, and the most gifted *goze* offer some songs.

Concerning the group of the *môsô*, blind *biwa*-playing priests traveling mainly in Kyûshû to calm local deities of the earth by reciting sutras, there exist no reliable historical documents referring to the time before Edo period, but a number of written records transmitted within the groups speak of the origin of their profession<sup>(4)</sup>. According to those writings, the beginnings of *môsô* activities lie in India. The historical Buddha Sâkyamuni out of pity to one of his blind disciples — he is known in Japan under the name of Anaritsu Sonja or Gankutsu Sonja — taught him how to calm the earth deities by performing special sutras with *biwa* accompaniment. Prince Kunâla, the blinded son of King Aśoka, is credited with the propagation of the sutras, and after their transmission to China they were finally introduced into Japan in the 6th century. The first who learnt the art of recitation is said to have been a blind son of an official in southern Kyûshû. The legend of the blindness of Prince Kunâla or "Kunara-Taishi", who is (as well as sometimes Anaritsu Sonja) regarded by the *môsô* as a personification of Myôon-Bosatsu, is also preserved in Indian and Chinese sources and is found in Japan in the well-known *konjaku-monogatari*, a collection of stories which dates from the beginning of the 12th century.

According to the *môsô*-records, at the time of the foundation of the famous Tendai-monastery on the Hieizan in Kyôto, their forefathers were invited from Kyûshû to calm the

earth deities and ensure the safety of the ground. It is said that the bonds between the powerful Tendai-shû of esoteric Buddhism and the *môsô* were established at that time. The Satsuma-*môsô* in South-Kyûshû claim as the founder of their line a certain Manshō Ajari, who after having fulfilled his task on the Hieizan, stayed in the region of Kyôto and built a temple at Ôsaka-yama which he called Myôonji-Jôrokuin. Semimaru, the legendary poet and musician, and well-known in Japanese literature, is said to have been the fourth chief priest of this temple. For political reasons the Jôrokuin was shifted 19 generations later to Kagoshimaken in Kyûshû, where it still exists.

Interestingly enough, Semimaru was considered as ancestor deity by another group of itinerant performers known as *sekkyôshi*, priest entertainers who recited local stories and folktales in order to spread the teachings of Buddhism. In the Tokugawa period, when it became advisable for traveling artists and craftsmen to carry identification papers proving their registration with a controlling institution, all *sekkyôshi* got their licence of the Seki-Semimaru shrine in Ôsaka-yama, the same region, where also the founder of the Satsuma-*môsô* is said to have built his temple. The document<sup>(5)</sup> tells of the life of Semimaru, who is regarded to have actually been a personification of Myôon-Bosatsu, and mentions an elder sister of Semimaru, called Sakagami, who also has to be venerated.

Between the above mentioned origin-records, of which I have given here only vague abstracts, exist two kinds of links. One is a more literal one, referring to identical names and places, the other one is a striking consistency in the structural principles of the composition of the myths of origin.

First some hints on the literal level:

The most conspicuous connection between the records is their common mention and veneration of Myôon-Bosatsu or Myôonten as titulary of the guilds. In the case of the *môsô*, the blind Indian lute priests Anaritsu-Sonja or Kunara-Taishi are regarded as manifestations of Myôon-Bosatsu. In the case of the *sekkyôshi*, it is the legendary figure of Semimaru. In the records of the *shamisen*-playing female *goze*, the Nyoirin-Kannon is said to be another appearance of Myoon-Bosatsu. In the documents concerning the origin of the blind *heike-biwa* musicians, the name of Myôon-Bosatsu does not appear, but from descriptions of their annual meetings, which in some regions were called *myôonkô* (*kô*=assembly) we know, that his image had to be worshipped. It is not in the scope of this paper to discuss in detail the various facets of Myôon-Bosatsu, Myôonten and Benzaiten and their related beliefs, nor to investigate the question of which of the musical guilds was the first in taking up the belief in Myôonten (also venerated by *gagaku*-musicians since the early Kamakura-period).

Another similarity occurs for example between the records of the *goze* and the (so-called) historical materials of the *sekkyôshi* of Ôsaka-yama. The *goze* consider Princess Sagami to be foundress of their guild, whereas among the *sekkyôshi* a certain Sakagami, the supposed sister of Semimaru, is mentioned. Depending on the Chinese characters, Sakagami can also simply mean "god of the slope", and thus refer to the location of the Semimaru-shrine at the mountain-pass Ôsaka-yama (the placename Ôsaka, or "Ausaka" in old reading, means "meeting slope"). In a document of the Semimaru shrine, Sakagami is seen as an incorporation of Nyoirin-Kanzeon-Bosatsu; in the guild records of the *goze*, it was Nyoirin Kannon who appeared in the dream of Princess Sagami. Other similarities can be seen among the *môsô* and *sekkyôshi*, for example, in mentioning Semimaru as the fourth chief priest of a former *môsô*-temple located at Ôsaka-yama.

In the present state of research it is not possible to satisfactorily explain those thematic consistencies, or to retrace the transmigrational forms of common motifs among the various musical groups. Perhaps future detailed studies will reveal something about the connection of the various guilds in history and their possible common origin.

Let me now come to the formal level of the legends of origin, that is to the thematic

structure of its organization. The stories always begin with a noble person in early history, who has to give up the privileges of his birth because of blindness. A Buddhist deity reveals to him a special musical skill, with which all the blind will be enabled to earn their living. The new profession and the thereby-connected privileges such as special ranks and titles or the traveling around the country are sanctioned by a contemporary Emperor or, in the case of the *mōsō*, by the powerful Tendai-school of esoteric Buddhism.

Except for the blindness, these basic themes are not unique to the above mentioned musical guilds, but, as Takashige Ubukata has shown in his essay <sup>(6)</sup>, are to be found in origin-legends of artisans and craftsmen as well. The guild of the turners (Jap. *kiji-shū*) for example, considered the founder of their profession to be the historical figure of Prince Koretaka, eldest son of Emperor Montoku (850-58) who, after quarreling with his brother concerning the succession to the throne, renounced his privileges, left the capital and became a monk. After serious pursuit of Buddhist knowledge he invented the most important tool for turnery and taught its use to the inhabitants of the small mountain village where he had retired. Some years later Koretaka was rehabilitated in the capital and presented with landed property.

To understand the purpose of those so-called historical sources and their structural principles a few words have to be said about the origin and functions of the Japanese guilds in general. Since the medieval period, merchants, artisans and performers of various arts had formed protective groups called *za* under the patronage of politically influential institutions or individual courtiers to whom they had to provide certain services. This type of subordinate relationship to a patron (Jap. *honjo*) granted guild-members special status privileges, e.g. exemption from business taxes, and asserted their rights to monopolistic control over specific professional or mercantile activities. Thus under the decentralised feudalism of the period of Ashikaga, organizations were established within a great variety of professions. In contrast, the centralized feudal bureaucracy of the Tokugawa regime, which ruled Japan from the beginning of the 17th century, tolerated no other autonomies and tried to deprive the guilds and ecclesiastical organizations of their privileges and liberties. For example they limited the freedom of movement by controlling the traffic between the provinces, and by setting up arbitrary barriers for imposing tolls upon passengers and goods in transit. The new shogunate laid a special emphasis on family lineages and genealogies, demanding complete information about the descent of its vassals and their professions. Thus, in order to maintain their special privileges, the *za* organizations had to establish a dignified ancestry, one which had from the beginning granted the special rights indispensable for carrying on their profession. The most important of those privileges, especially for traders and semi-nomadic performers such as musicians, was the right to pass freely through the barriers, and it is quite understandable that in the fabrication of the records of origin attention is paid to this point.

A peculiarity of the myths of origin of the blind musicians perhaps the conception of their guild-founder as an incarnation of a deity who transformed himself into a blind human being in order to help all the blind. In Japanese society the attitude towards blindness has been rather ambivalent. Whereas in early folk religion the blind were and are in fact still nowadays credited with a particular power and spiritual capacity to communicate with the gods, according to the Buddhist view, blindness, like other physical disabilities, was seen as a sort of retribution for misconduct in a previous incarnation. Thus, the mixture of admiration and suspicion in the attitude of villagers towards musicians, who, as wandering performers, were real strangers and outsiders, was all the more intensified by the musicians' blindness. The origin-legends convinced the guild-members as well as the people outside the organization, that by the transformation of a Buddhist deity into the body of a blind noble person the negative aspect of blindness was vanquished and that on the contrary the blindness served as stigma to acquire merits by practicing the prophesied profession.

Thus, besides strengthening the group against the impact of the outer society, the

origin-records also served as tool to strengthen self-confidence of the guild-members. Hearing every year again and again the legend of their wonderful origin convinced the blind musicians of the importance of their profession, which in fact socially was ranking very low.

As perhaps became clear from the remarks above, the usefulness of guild-records of the origin of the groups has to be reconsidered. Certainly they are not reliable in their possibly pretended intention to document historical events from a far earlier time. Nevertheless, they present interesting material about the efforts of musical organizations to cope with the social and political situation of the early 17th century. Furthermore, by a comparison of records of different groups and by detailed analyzations of their literal similarities, it is perhaps possible to learn something about the connections between the various groups in an early stage of their development.

## NOTES

1. See "Môjin kankei shiryô", in: *Nihon shomin seikatsu shiryô shûsei*, Vol.17 (Minkan geinô), (Tôkyô Sanichi-Shobô: 1972), p.229-253; Shibata, Minoru: *Chûsei shomin shinkô no kenkyû*. Tokyo: Kadokawa-shoten, 1966, p.243-254 ("Môjin-hôshi to sono densho — Tôdô-hôshi issû kongen-ki ni tsuite"); Abe, Masanobu (Ed.): *Sunkoku zasshi*, Shizuoka: Yoshimi-shoten, 1941, repr. 1909, Vol.1, part 7, p.246-264.
2. Matisoff, Susan: *The legend of Semimaru*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978, p.44.
3. See the treatises of Suzuki, Shoei in: *Nagaoka-shiritsu kagaku hakubutsukan kenkyû hôkoku*, no.7(1972), no.8(1973), no.9(1974) and no.11(1976); Abe, Masanobu, *ibid*, p.241-246.
4. Narita, Mamoru: *Môsô no denshō*. Tôkyô Miyai-Shoten: 1985; "Môsô -biwa", in: *Nihon shomin seikatsu shiryô shûsei*, *ibid*, p.109-228.
5. See the various origin-records in: Muroki, Yatarô / Sakaguchi, Hiroyuki (Eds.): *Seki-Semimaru-jinja bunsho*. Osaka: Izumi-shoin, 1987. An English translation of a Sekkyô license document is given in Matisoff, *ibid*, p.174-176.
6. Takashige, Ubukata: "Tôdô-denshō no kôzō to sono imi", in: Atsumi, Kaoru; Maeda, Mineko; Ubukata, Takashige (Eds.): *Tôdô-za Heike-biwa shiryô*. (Kyoto: Daigakudō-Shoten 1984,) p.435-454.

DISCUSSION: chaired by KAMISANGÔ Yûkô (Tôkyô).

Silvain GUIGNARD (Kyôto): As historians or musicologists, how do you think we should respond when we come across Japanese traditional musicians who have inherited theories which our own researches clearly indicate are erroneous. Do you think we should attempt to correct them?

FRITSCH: I have interviewed a *goze* and a *môsô* as well. They told me stories which suggested how proud they were of their profession. I would never say, "No, I don't believe that, it's merely legend", because that is not the point for them, although it may be for musicologists. It is the same with religion: one would never say "No, I don't believe what you believe."

Steven G. NELSON (Tôkyô): This kind of field study has yet to be performed in such detail by Japanese scholars, and it is very rewarding to hear the results of your research put together so well in your paper. My own particular interest is in Myôonten and the worship of Myôon-bosatsu in its relation to *gagaku*, especially from somewhat earlier than the thirteenth century, since I feel that the relationship may stretch back another couple of centuries. At the end of the twelfth century, the most famous musician in Japanese music

history, Fujiwara-no-Moronaga, refers to himself as Myōon'in, using exactly the same characters and derived of course from the Bodhisattva. He founded a school of Buddhist chant called the Myōon'in-ryū, also using this name. Perhaps the belief may therefore stretch back a little further in time.

FRITSCH: I did some research on the Myōonten belief and its dating among the *gagaku* musicians, but I could find no references prior to Fujiwara-no-Moronaga. The name Myōonten appears once in the diary of Moronaga's father, but the context is not a musical one. Both Myōonten and Benzaiten originate in esoteric Buddhism, but that is another field.

### Glossary

Anaritsu-Sonja 阿那律尊者	Myōon-ji Jōrakuin 妙音寺常楽院
Amayo 雨夜、天世、天夜	Myōonten 妙音天
Benzaiten 弁才天、辯財天	Myōonkō 妙音講
Denshō 伝承	Nyoirin-Kanzeon 如意輪観世音
Gankutsu-Sonja 巖窟尊者	Ōsaka (Ausaka)-yama 逢坂山
Goze 瞽女	Seki-Semimaru-jinja 関蟬丸神社
Hannya-shingyō 般若心経	Sekkyōshi 説経師
Heike-biwa 平家琵琶	Semimaru 蟬丸
Honjo 本所	Shakutō-e 積塔会
Kiji-shi 木地師	Shamisen 三味線
Koto 箏	Shimogamo-Daimyōjin 下賀茂大明神
Kunara-Taishi 俱奈羅太子	Suzumitō-e 涼塔会
Manshō-Ajari 満正阿闍梨	Tōdō-za 当道座
Mōsō 盲僧	Tō-e 塔会

# Tradition and its future in music

Report of

SIMS 1990 ÔSAKA

## Editors

TOKUMARU Yosihiko

OHMIYA Makoto

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SHIMOSAKO Mari

**Mita Press**

Tôkyô; Ôsaka, Japan

1991