
THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF 'GOZE' IN JAPAN

Blind Female Musicians on the Road

INGRID FRITSCH
(University of Cologne, Germany)

The *goze*, blind itinerant female singers who accompany themselves on the *shamisen*, a three-stringed long-necked lute, belong to the large group of wandering performers and street artists who characterized Japanese folk culture for many centuries until recent times. Ingrid Fritsch discusses the guild-like organizations of these wandering singers, the function of their music in Japanese society and the role of the blind.

Many of the so-called *geinô*-arts, outdoor performing folk arts, were originally religious in nature and were derived from popular beliefs and rituals rooted in magic. The transformation to (more or less) purely entertaining and theatrical arts was gradual. Nevertheless, 'the belief of the spectators in the power of these performers has remained strong even to recent times' (Raz 1983:37).

In the present paper some elements of the organization of the *goze* are briefly described, shedding light on the function and functioning of guild-like musical organizations in general as well as on the function of music in Japanese society and the role of the blind. Of course these short remarks can only be introductory and tentative.

Nothing is known in detail about the early historical development of the *goze*, who have probably existed since the Japanese Middle Ages (i.e. Muromachi period: 1392-1573). Originally active throughout the country, from the Meiji period (1868-1912) on their organizations were only to be seen in the northwestern part of the main island. After flourishing at the beginning of this century their number decreased rapidly during and after the second World War. Today only seven *goze* remain. They live in a home for old blind people. The youngest is 69 years old, the oldest is 91.

For the research material for this study I referred mostly to written documents which were either transmitted within the organization itself or recorded by outsiders in the 18th or 19th century, and to field research done by Japanese folklorists, usually twenty or more years ago.

THE PROFESSION

First some words about the practice of the *goze* profession. The *goze* spent a large part of their life on the road. Even during the long winter months, when northwest Japan is



1.

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↑ Goze scene from *Wakoku hyaku-onna* ('Hundred Japanese Women'), a picture scroll from the late 17th century.

↓ 3.



Photos: 1) Three *goze* at the beach of Futagawa, one of the 'Fifty-three Stages of the Tōkaidō' (colour print by Andō Hiroshige 1797-1858). 2) To the accompaniment of the *shamisen*, two *Goze* sing a short blessing called *kadozuke*. (From: Murata's *Goze-sa wa kieta*, 1981, p.30.) 3) *Goze* often went in groups of three. (From: Murata's *Goze-sa wa kieta*, *ibid.*, p.105.)

covered in snow, they would leave their residences for long journeys, wandering from village to village to entertain the peasants. They often went in groups of three, one after another, forming a line. The woman at the head of the line was usually a *tebiki* or 'hand-holder'. She was not blind. Her function was to help the *goze* with their housekeeping at home and to find their way on the journey. The *tebiki* were not musicians, that is, not being blind they were not taught by a *goze* master and thus were not fully recognized as *goze*. Usually they were the daughters of very poor peasants who had given them as infants to *goze*-houses.

Upon arrival in a village the *goze* first went to the *goze-yado* – the house in which they were to stay for the night – to leave their luggage. This luggage, which contained clothes and other necessities for a 'concert tour' of at least a few weeks (including a second *shamisen*), was carried on the back. Each *goze* carried about 15 kg.

After a short rest in the *goze-yado*, which was often a rich farmhouse in which the musicians found shelter every year, the *goze* would go from door to door in the village and play at the gates. To the accompaniment of the *shamisen* they sang a special type of very short blessing called *kadozuke-uta* ('song sung while standing at the gate'). In return they received a small amount of rice or money. Then they announced the performance, which would take place at their lodging. In the evening the villagers would gather for the concert, which followed roughly the following sequence: first the *goze*, dressed in beautiful kimonos, announced *danmono* sections (old long epics in several parts) and *kudoki* (shorter ballads of a more recent origin, mostly telling a tragic love romance). This singing (called *yado-uta*), was meant as a form of payment for shelter and hospitality. Then a kind of musical request programme was performed during which the *goze* might receive small presents from the guests. The repertoire of the *goze* seems to have been incredibly wide: apart from their special domain of *kadozuke-uta*, *danmono* and *kudoki* they also knew parts of the narrative *shamisen* genres *gidayû-bushi*, *tokiwazu* and *kiyomoto*, of the lyric genre *nagauta* and of course all categories of *minyô* (folk songs) up to the latest popular ditties. The following morning, after a long night of entertainment, the *goze* would start off for the next village.

Of course this brief outline of the *goze* profession is a very simplified, idealized version. The women did not always find shelter for the night, nor were they always well received. In addition – especially for young *goze* – it was difficult to avoid the attentions of young village men, an occurrence which resulted in severe punishment, even dismissal from the guild.

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

In order to explain the way in which the *goze* tried to cope with the impact of the outer society, I shall now briefly describe the organizational form of two different groups, the Nagaoka and the Takada Goze in the Niigata prefecture.

The nucleus of all *goze* organizations is a small group consisting of a master *goze* (called *oyakata* or *kumi-gashira*), her pupils and a *tebiki*. In Takada in 1901 there were 89 *goze* living in 17 houses. If the parents of a blind girl living anywhere within the sphere of activity of the Takada *goze* wanted their daughter to become a *goze*, then the child – usually at the age of about six to eight – had to be officially adopted by a master *goze* into her house in Takada. After seven years of irreproachable behaviour the girl would be awarded the rank of *honkyoku* and given permission to adopt a stage name. From now on she would be treated as an adult and called *nêsan* (older sister) by younger disciples. After 10 years she would be allowed to take pupils herself, after 15 years she would be awarded the rank of *churô* and after 27 years the rank of *ichirô*. The headmistress (*zamoto*) of the whole Takada guild was always the *goze* with the most experience – usually over 40 years.



Myōon-kō ceremony, May 1988. Tanaka Kisa (b.1911), Kobayashi Haru (b.1900) and Sugimoto Shizu (b.1916). In the background a scroll with the guardian deity Myōonten.

In contrast, the organization of the Nagaoka-Goze was geographically much less centralized. The groups lived throughout the region of Chū-Etsu, which comprises several districts. When they were not travelling the pupils were allowed to stay with their parents if the master *goze* was not living too far away; this would mean that they had to pay for their lessons. Other disciples (so-called *uchideshi*) stayed with their teacher all the time, helping her in the house; some were also adopted. If the parents were rich, there was also the possibility that the master *goze* would visit the house of the pupil as long as the child was small. The apprenticeship lasted for twenty-one years. Afterwards the young *goze* normally went back to their mother homes to found a new group which would take the name of the village.

The large size of the Nagaoka-group, which around 1900 had about 400 members, may be due to this geographic decentralization. The headmistress (*goze-gashira*) called Yamamoto Goi lived in the main quarter in Nagaoka. The first Yamamoto Goi was considered to be the founder of the Nagaoka guild and all following headmistresses took that name. There have been six generations of Yamamoto Goi *goze*. In 1898 a special reform was instituted to strengthen further the administration and the moral behaviour of the members. In the head office in Nagaoka and in each of the 9 rural branch offices a paid vice-president and an office clerk were appointed. The office clerk, who did not belong to the *goze* guild, was not blind and did not have to be female.

WORSHIP AND MORAL CODES

Once a year among all *goze* organizations a *Myōon-kō* meeting was held in honour of their common guardian deity *Myōonten*. Attendance was strictly obligatory and absence severely punished. In the case of the Takada and Nagaoka *goze* the meeting place was a temple. Other, smaller groups called a priest to the house of the headmistress. After the recitation of the sutra '*Hannya-shingyō*' in front of an image of

the goddess, parts of the myth of origin and the guild's principles were read and the most gifted *goze* performed some songs. According to these writings, which are nearly identical in all organizations, the founder of the *goze* is the blind daughter of Emperor Saga (reigned 809-23). When she was seven years old she had a dream in which she was told that she 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.

The *Myôonkô* meetings were important in several respects: because punishments and commendations of members were announced in public it served to imbue the moral rules of the *goze*-society. One effective form of punishment was the prolongation of the training and a loss of social status in the group by the penalty of *nen-otoshi* : a degrading of the years of apprenticeship. It was a severe psychological punishment for a young woman who had studied for ten years suddenly to be treated like a child again, losing her stage name and being referred to as 'younger sister' by much younger girls. Often these *goze* had violated the guild law which stated that contact with men was strictly forbidden. A pregnant *goze* had to leave the group, but was allowed to come back if she agreed to give away the baby and to apologize in front of her master *goze* and the guild's headmistress. Another aspect of the *Myôonkô* meetings was the distribution of new songs the *goze* had learned during their travels. When the formal part of the ceremony was over, they would have a meal, talk about their travels and sing new songs they had learned. Still another aspect of the *Myôonkô* was the recitation of the guild rules and the legend of origin. This document, which was considered by the group members as historically authentic, served a twofold purpose: it convinced the members of the guild as well as the world outside the organization that the transformation of a Buddhist deity into the body of a blind noble person gave the *goze* a political and religious legitimacy with historically vested rights.

In fact, however, their social rank was very low, and they may even have belonged to the class of outcasts (*hinin*), as was the case with some other artists (see Nakayama 1976: 445). The *goze* developed two ways of legitimizing their existence:

1. by submitting to a strict organization with an extraordinarily severe musical education in order to be taken as seriously as other artisan guilds (*shokunin*);
2. by making a virtue of necessity, considering their blindness to be a divine stigma which invested them with a particular power and spiritual capacity.

Each of the elements which characterizes a *goze*, i.e. blind, itinerant, female and the subsistence as a musician is, perhaps in all societies, strongly associated with magical connotations. Indeed, the *goze* were not regarded purely as entertainers by the peasants, but to some degree credited with a certain religious power: that meant, for example, that to drive a *goze* away would bring misfortune to the house and the harvest. In some regions their power was believed to be particularly effective on silkworms, who, as one of the *goze* told me, loved the sound of the *shamisen* so much, that they raised their heads when the *goze* approached.

The isolation of the guild from the rest of society, the long years of severe apprenticeship, the final initiation (which imitated the form of a wedding ceremony) and the prohibition of contact with men, in addition to ensuring the continued existence of the guild, had the correlative function of protecting the women and their magical qualities from the world around them.

THE ROLE OF THE BLIND

In conclusion, let me say some final words concerning the motives for entering the *goze* guild. A girl was impelled to become a *goze* simply because she was blind or had

a strongly reduced visual faculty. Her motive or that of her parents was purely practical and, at least at the time of the decision, did not imply the presence of outstanding musical talent. By becoming a *goze* she would become a viable member of her community rather than a useless burden.

A number of occupations have been traditionally reserved for blind people in Japan. The most prominent example is what was called the *tôdô-za*, a strictly organized nationwide guild which was officially recognized by the Tokugawa government. It included not only all male professional blind chamber musicians but also covered the fields of massage and Chinese medicine (acupuncture, moxa cautery). In fact licences for teaching *biwa*, *shamisen*, or *koto* music, a domain which is nowadays mostly dominated by women, were until the abolition of the *tôdô-za* in 1871 only given to blind men. In Kyûshû, the southern island of Japan, blind men can become *môsô*, priests who recite buddhist sutras while accompanying themselves on the *biwa*. In the northern region, in Tôhoku, the profession of shamanistic medium (*itako*) is, in some districts, the monopoly of blind women. In all these cases it is not so much a musical or religious calling that is of prime importance as simply the need to find a gainful occupation for otherwise 'useless' members of society.

Today, with improvements in medical care, compulsory education for blind people, the changing of religious attitudes and the introduction of radio and TV in the smallest mountain villages, the traditional professions for blind people, which enabled them to live an independent life, have been rendered meaningless. As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper the last 7 *goze* are living in a home for old, blind people, but once a year they still have their *Myôonkô* ceremony, offering their guardian deity, who is also out of work, a few songs.

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GLOSSARY

biwa	琵琶	kumigashira	組頭
chûrô	中老	minyô	民謡
danmono	段物	môsô	盲僧
geinô	芸能	Myôon-kô	妙音講
Gidayû-bushi	義太夫節	Myôonten	妙音天
goze	瞽女	nagauta	長唄
goze-gashira	瞽女頭	nen-otoshi	年落し
goze-yadô	瞽女宿	oyakata	親方
Hannya-shingyô	般若心經	shamisen	三味線
hinin	非人	Shimogamo-Daimyôjin	下賀茂大明神
honkyoku	本曲	shokunin	職人
ichirô	一老	tebiki	手引
itako	イタコ	tôdô-za	当道座
kadozuke-uta	門付唄	Tokiwazu	常磐津
Kiyomoto	清元	uchi-deshi	内弟子
koto	箏	yado-uta	宿唄
kudoki	口説	zamoto	座元

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