



# Drum Songs

## The Intoxicating Music of Hachijojima

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**D**ressed in an ochre kimono, sleeves drawn up with cords, and a white kerchief knotted around his brows, 89-year-old Kumao Okuyama turns to face a packed Tokyo hall. At one end of a large Japanese drum, his student Ikuo Nagayama at the other, he lifts up his two mandarin-orange wood drumsticks. Then he cocks his head towards the audience with a boyish grin and begins.

Kumao and Ikuo both hail from Hachijojima, an island 287 kilometers south of Tokyo in the Pacific Ocean. Today's concert is to mark the publication of a book on Kumao; famous on the island for many years, recently the octogenarian farmer-folk musician has also been attracting the attention of main-

land writers and researchers.

To musicologists and inhabitants of Hachijojima alike Kumao represents a living link back to the mid-19th century. The folk musician has a repertoire of tens of songs, hundreds of verses, and folk tales in the local dialect he learned from the old ladies in his village as a child—ones they themselves learned when they were girls during the Tokugawa shogunate. His exceptional memory has made him a walking archive of Hachijojima folk culture and brought a stream of researchers to his door. Ethnomusicologist Jane Alaskewka, who has just coauthored a book on Kumao, jokes that “he has to be the most studied man in Japan.”

Kumao is also famous for being the island's

most accomplished drummer in the Hachijojima tradition; a gentle and informal style a world away from the sweaty somewhat frenetic drumming you will find elsewhere in Japan; it is a style the islanders developed to accompany their local folk songs; the rhythms are relaxed and often improvised. Then, as they do now, the islanders brought out their drums for festivals and feasts. Once, when drums were too precious to use every day, islanders made do with tree stumps and pieces of driftwood for ordinary occasions. Even today, many bars and homes on the island have a drum.

**A** women wearing an island-made kihachijo ochre kimono practices at one of several traditional drumming groups on Hachijojima.

## Flavor the Beat

Every Sunday evening in a small community hall in the island's main village, Kumao holds a practice with his student Ikuo Nagayama and other islanders; one of several traditional drumming groups set up on Hachijojima.



This Sunday, we've come to listen. The first song is one I remember from the concert—it is called "Shome-bushi." Kumao calls out the phrase in a querulous but sure voice in time with the rhythm. The name comes from two words: "shio," which means salt, and "ume," Japanese plum. Literally, the interjections are "to give flavor" to the song. As he plays Kumao stands with his feet close together, swaying slightly. He describes the stance as "standing on a sake cup."

Afterwards, Kumao sits down to rest. The still barrel-chested 89-year-old could probably pass for 70, but these days just one song has him breathing heavily. He watches his student play then corrects Ikuo's technique with a Japanese teacher's customary severity. "You ate rice as a child didn't you?" For me at least, Kumao's island dialect is almost impenetrable, so another islander "translates" into standard Japanese. It's Kumao's way of telling the mainland-born Ikuo to try harder.

Kumao has got quite a bit stricter in the last few years and has been picking up on the finer points of his student's technique, Ikuo later confides. "I guess Kumao is getting impatient." Ikuo stresses that he still has a lot to learn, but for all his modesty, he is Kumao's most accomplished student. He has been studying under Kumao for a decade now, and they have performed together all over Japan. Born near Tokyo, he came to the island 23 years ago, and, like many mainland-born residents of the island, he came to escape the urban crush. "I don't like packed trains," he says.

## Murderers, Rapists, Sculptors and Poets

Hachijojima has a long history of hospitality to newcomers. Most of the Japanese countryside is chronically depopulated, but a steady influx of immigrants has just about kept Hachijojima's population stable. According to Mari Kikuchi of the local newspaper, the Nankai Times, about 40 percent of the island's 9,000 residents were born elsewhere in Japan. "There are very few married couples on the island where both are island-born," she says. It is part of the so-called "i-turn" movement; young Japanese who relocate to the countryside in search of a slower, more wholesome lifestyle.



The newcomers find a warm welcome on Hachijojima, something the islanders proudly credit to their home's unusual history. Throughout 250 years of military dictatorship before Japan opened to the West, Hachijojima served as a prison isle. Historian Shigo Kasai rather dramatically describes the Tokugawa-era Hachijojima as an island of "defeated soldiers, dissident priests, arsonist-whores, gamblers, smugglers, pickpockets, murders, rapists, adulterers, sculptors and poets." The first prisoners were political dissidents banished to the island to thwart a real or imagined threat to the Tokugawas—none were told the length of their sentence, and many lived out their lives on the remote island waiting for pardons that never came.

Later on ordinary criminals joined the rebels, but the tolerant islanders welcomed disgraced aristocrats and light-fingered commoners alike as "teachers and innovators." Many exiles married locals and set up home. The unwilling pioneers were respected for the knowledge they brought; imports including broad-bean cultivation, barbering, wooden clogs, palanquins, sweet-potato liquor, tofu, and preserved sweet potatoes—not to mention folk music and dance from all over Japan, the ingredients for the island's unique melting-pot folk culture of today.

On their arrival, the exiles found an island, in Kasai's words: "in the shape of squat sake decanter... as though thrown by a dissatisfied customer at the semicircular bar that is the mainland of Japan." Two large volcanoes (one

extinct and one dormant) stood at either end of the lush and green island. Most of the population lived on the strip of land in between the two—arable ground has always been short on Hachijojima, and fishermen contended with merciless waves and an inaccessible black volcanic shore.

Perhaps the islanders were grateful for any help they could get from the exiles. Despite its tropical climate and the second highest rainfall in Japan, the islanders were reliant on supply ships from the mainland. Life on Hachijojima was hard. Typhoons, epidemics, famines and plagues of rats periodically devastated the island's food stocks and decimated its population. In 1959 the islanders even introduced



**D**rum-master Kumaomao Okuyama, his student Ikuo Nagayajima and folk singer and dancer Kazuyo Minemoto; (bottom) view of Hachijo harbour from one of the island's two peaks.





**A**bove: Traditional Hachijo thatched house; (middle) hanging kimono silk out to dry; (bottom) kusaya preserved fish.

weasels to try and control the rodents. (Now weasels are common on the island—as, unfortunately, still are rats.)

## A Lot of Spirit

When Ernest Satow visited the island on behalf of the Asiatic Society of Japan in 1878, he reported that the men of the island filled their leisure time by smoking “a good deal of bad leaf tobacco” and drinking “as much potato spirit as possible.” Of the latter, he was “given to understand by not a few of the inhabitants that it was their chief source of happiness, and indeed almost the only thing that made



life worth having in Hachijo.”

It’s a shame that apparently no one told Satow about the drumming—then, as now, it was at the center of the islanders’ culture. Although unlike today, at that time drumming was almost exclusively the province of the island’s women. Perhaps that was because the women were then in charge of the island’s weaving industry, its main source of income and means to pay taxes to the government on the mainland. Hachijojima’s women certainly enjoyed a much higher status than their counterparts in the rest of Japan.

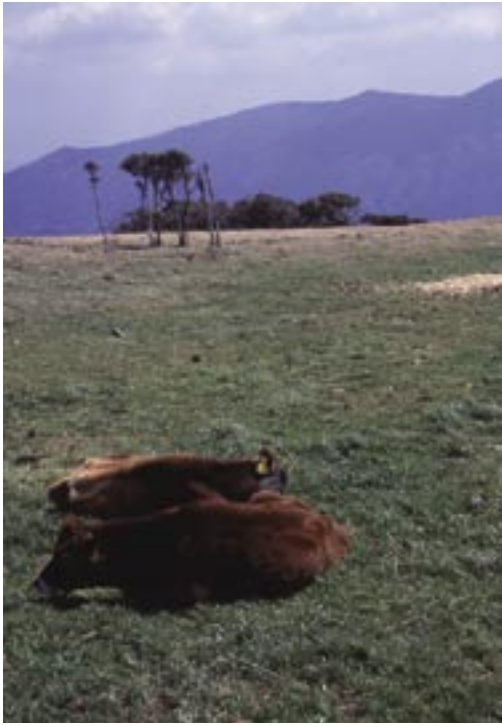
These days almost everyone on the island drums, and some, like Kumao’s students, are dedicatedly preserving the traditional style. Yet, once the islanders neither intentionally studied drumming nor even practiced.



“Friends drummed at get-togethers and feasts. They watched other people and gradually got better,” Ikuo says. “I’ve never heard Kumao-san say they practiced on purpose. People watched and copied each other, had fun, and got better at drumming that way.”

The islanders still drum at special occasions and festivals, but they don’t gather together as often as they once did. Gatherings that once might have ended in drumming and song now often finish up in the nearest karaoke bar. Many children on the island head for Tokyo as soon as they are old enough—not many are interested in studying the traditional culture of the island.

“I am 67 now. I tell young people that they have to learn,” says folk singer and dancer Kazuyo Minemoto. “But now there are only two or three young students. We are taking videos



of the old dances.” Kazuyo is one of the only women on the island who can still sing the “Ba-odori” folk song. “The songs are beautiful. You can get intoxicated by them,” she says. She remembers how she has seen members of the audience with tears in their eyes. “People have said to me: ‘don’t let it die.’ Sometimes I feel I have a responsibility.”



## Choose Your Partner

Perhaps the island’s best chance to preserve its folk culture will be to encourage tourism. Islanders put on regular drumming and traditional dance shows for tourists. But although Hachijojima benefited from a fashion for island holidays in the 1980s and 1990s, nowadays visitors are rather thin on the ground.

In 1878 Satow described Hachijojima as “an interesting island, which although situated so close to the busiest center of this country, appears to have been only imperfectly known to the Japanese themselves.” He could have said the same thing today.

Still, in one way at least, the island’s drumming tradition is very much alive; what Kumao-san calls the “mating call” drumming of Hachijojima. Up to the 19th century drumming was a means for boys and girls on the island to choose their future wives and husbands—part of the island’s courtship rituals. At island festivals and gatherings, the drums were for the island’s boys and girls what music and dancing are for young Tokyo nightclubbers today. Youths could recognize each other just by drumming style, and by



**T**op: Dairy farm on Mount Hachijo-Fuji; (middle) a wall built with stones rounded in the rough seas around the island; (bottom) taking the ferry to a nearby island.

the sound of the drumsticks they each carved themselves. “That’s why a hundred people each had to have their own individual sound,” explains Kumao.

And even today, despite all the other changes that have come to the island, the best drummers still tend to get the girl (or the boy), says researcher Jane Alaszewska. “The drumming is part of everyday life on the island, even now.” Kumao says that the islanders of his grandparents’ generation used the drums to choose their marriage partner. Though his own marriage was arranged by his parents, as was the custom at the time, Kumao has seen the island’s traditions come full circle. The young people of the island are once again free to choose their own partners, he says—even by the drums if they like. “It has gone back to the old way of doing things.” 