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The Shakuhachi of the Fuke-Sect: Instrument of Zen¹

Of all the Japanese musical instruments still played today the *shakuhachi*-flute has perhaps the strangest history of all, making it into something of an outsider in this regard.

Introduced into Japan from China in the 7th century, soon forgotten, perhaps arriving once again in the 13th century, the *shakuhachi* for long had a special place and only in the 19th century came to associate with other instruments. But the *shakuhachi* is not only an outsider in historical terms: it is also an instrument of outsiders, and even its music, which has developed over long periods in social isolation, has taken on curious, eccentric features: an eccentric among instruments and an instrument of eccentrics.

How far back the link between the *shakuhachi* and Buddhism goes, is unclear, as is the exact nature of this link. There is little information as to whether such a connection already existed in China, before the instrument was brought to Japan. The *Wên-hsien t'ung k'ao*, written in 1317, mentions that a monk of the Ekô-Temple performed on the *shakuhachi* before the Emperor Hsüan Tsung (reigned 712–756) (Kurihara 1918: 22–23). One is forced to assume, however, that this was an isolated case and that as part of religious exercises *shakuhachi*-playing developed much later, and in Japan. For the *shakuhachi* was introduced to Japan in a secular context – one of the instruments of the *gagaku* court-orchestra. In keeping with its Chinese origins it was employed in *tôgaku*, “Chinese music” (ill. 1). Although high-ranking Buddhist priests are occasionally mentioned as being *shakuhachi*-players – thus Jikaku Taishi (794–864, Kurihara 1918: 53–54) –, there are no grounds for concluding that some form of religious exercise was connected with the *shakuhachi*. As early as the 9th century the *shakuhachi* was being used less and less as an orchestra-instrument, and in the 12th century the Emperor Goshirakawa had trouble finding a competent performer. Although as late as the 14th century a certain Prince Kananaga is mentioned as being a *shakuhachi*-player (Kurihara 1918: 49–60), it would appear that by that period the instrument had become virtually obsolete in courtly milieu.

Hence all the more astonishing is the emergence of the *shakuhachi* at about this time at the opposite end of the social scale, namely amongst loosely

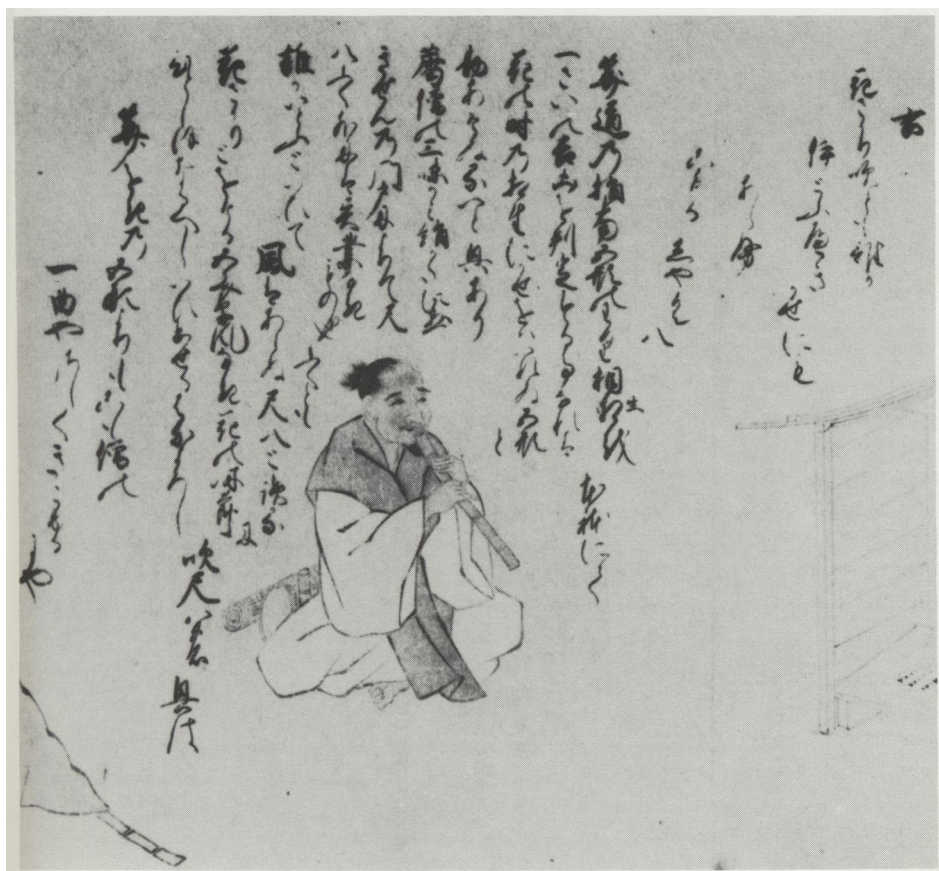


ill. 1: Gagaku shakuhachi, 8th century, presumably made in China, length 43.7 cm, preserved in the Shōsūin, Nara

organised groups of mendicant monks, even though no “migration” of the *shakuhachi* from courtly milieux to mendicant monks has been demonstrated so far. Presumably the *shakuhachi* was introduced a second time to Japan from China, which would certainly have been possible, as trade and commerce was resumed in the 13th century, after a long break.

Of the many groups of mendicant monks which were a by-product of the great Japanese religious revival between the 11th and 13th centuries there was one whose emblem was the *shakuhachi*. The monks of this group were named *komosō*, “straw-mat monks”, as their one and only possession was a straw-mat which they carried around with them (ill.2). Nothing is known about their music. But from them arose the *komusō*, the “monks of the Void and Nothingness”, even though these laid claim to a different lineage. They first became significant in the 17th century (ill.3) and in 1677 under the name of the Fuke-Sect succeeded in obtaining recognition as a collateral line of the Rinzai-Sect of Zen Buddhism, as the Zen Master P’u-k’o (Japanese Fuke, ca. 845), whom the *komusō* claimed as their founder, had had occasional contact with Lin-chi (Japanese Rinzai) (Suzuki 1971: 14).

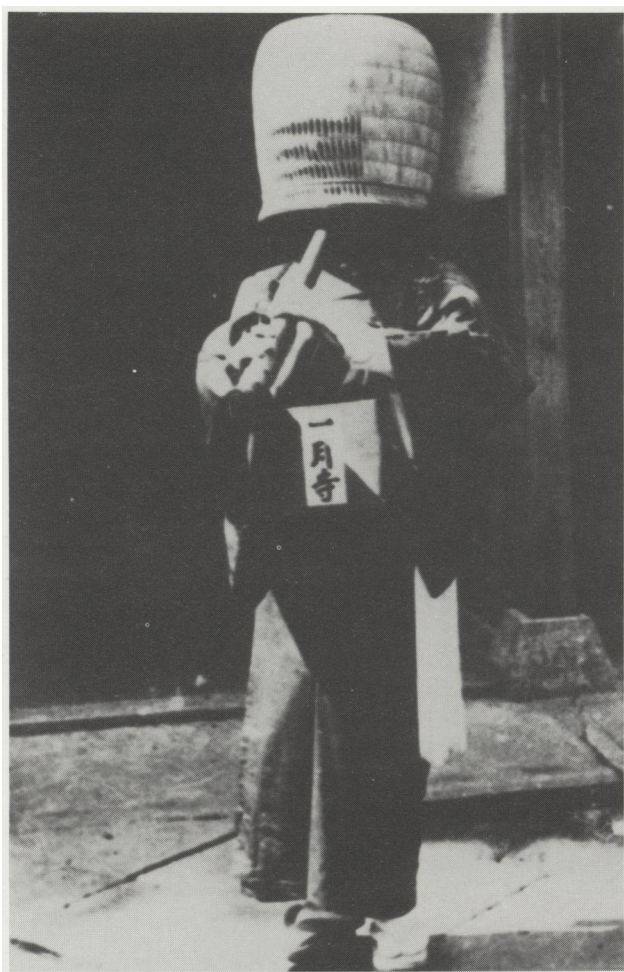
Thus it is only from a very late period, the 17th century, that the link between the *shakuhachi* and Zen can be demonstrated. Despite the writings which the sect produced substantiating their claim to Chinese origin, one may today assume that the Fuke-Sect emerged from the rather more modest circles of the *komosō*, and that their use of the *shakuhachi* had no earlier antecedents. Given the conditions of that time it was a matter of survival for the Fuke-Sect to be able to boast of great antiquity and a well-known founder, and to achieve this end



ill. 2: Komôso ("straw-mat" monk), detail from the picture scroll Sanjuniban shokunin utaawase emaki, Muromachi period (1338–1573), National Museum Tokyo

they did not hesitate to use forged documents. All this has been discovered time and again by an impressive series of researchers – from Arai Hakuseki (1656–1726) to Sanford (1977: 411–440). What, however, has been appreciated all too little is the original achievement of the *komusô*, which consisted in having linked music to the practice of meditation in a unique manner.

The Fuke-Sect regarded the *shakuhachi* not as an instrument of music but as *hōki*, an “instrument of religion, instrument of instruction”. That meant that play-



ill. 3: Komusô ("monk of the Void and Nothingness") from the Ichigetsu Temple, photographed before 1870

ing the *shakuhachi* was part of the religious practice, which consisted of *zazen* (meditation) *shakuhachi*-playing, and fencing-exercises (Takahashi 1973: 19). The three oldest pieces, one of which, *Kyorei*, is supposed even now to be of Chinese origin, were played on ceremonial occasions, where they replaced the singing of *sutras* (Araki 1971: 19). The playing of the *shakuhachi* was likewise

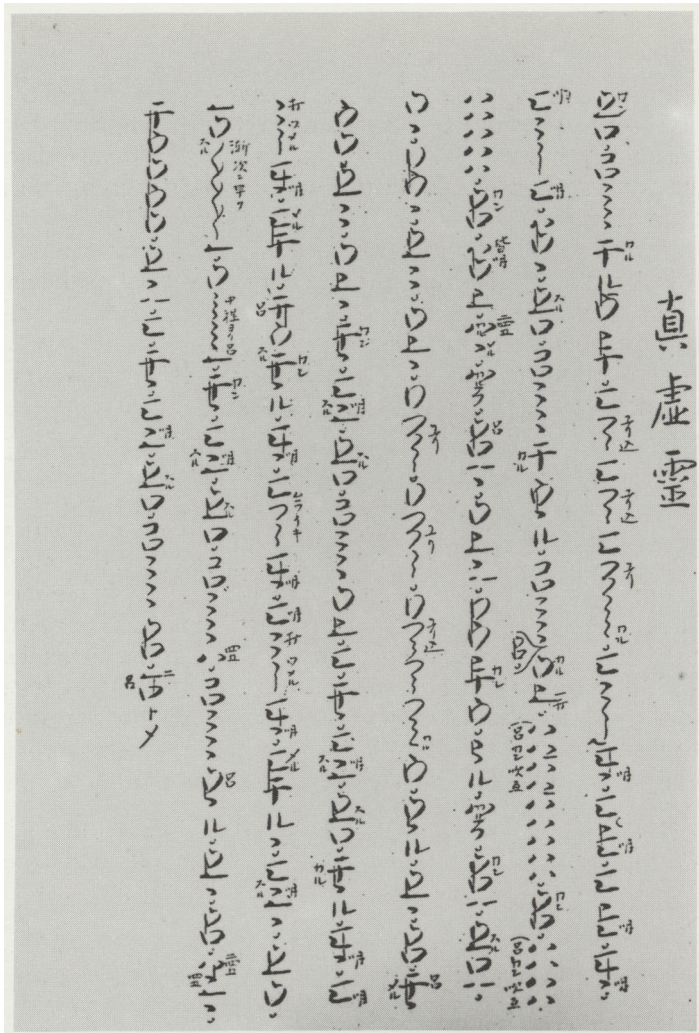
carried on in the temples quite apart from religious ceremonies: namely as meditative exercise. As such it was called *suizen*, “breathing- or blowing-meditation”, and complemented the form of meditation typical of the various Zen schools, i.e. *zazen*. Outside the temple the *shakuhachi* was played by the *komusô* in the ritual collecting of alms (*shuppachi*). The pieces which were performed on these latter occasions were regarded as the second most important group within the repertoire of the Fuke-Sect. As time went on, the different temples developed an immense number of local variations in these music pieces. Wadazumi (1969: 159) puts the entire repertoire of the Fuke-Sect at 200 pieces, Takahashi (1973: 66) at 300. Most of them were lost with the dissolution of the Fuke-Sect in 1871.

In the middle of the 18th century there was a reform-movement which sought to prevent the repertoire from getting out of hand; it devoted itself to purifying the repertoire of elements of popular and entertainment music. Its most prominent representative was Kurosawa Kinko (1710–1770), who in the course of his extensive wanderings as *komusô* became acquainted with the various local musical traditions. Towards the end of his life, when he became a *shakuhachi*-teacher at the two main temples of the Fuke-Sect, he selected 36 pieces and laid down a set notation for them (ill.4).

There can be no doubt that Kinko was earnestly committed to the Zen aspect of the playing of the *shakuhachi* and desired to raise the general standard of *shakuhachi*-playing in the Fuke-Sect by selecting pieces which he considered of value, and by laying down their form. Utterances such as *ichion jobutsu*, “reach enlightenment in one single tone” and *chikuzen ichinyo*, “bamboo (i.e. *shakuhachi*) and Zen are one”, are attributed to him. However, nothing more survives of this writings. His diaries were destroyed in an air-raid on Tokyo in 1944.

All the more important are the three essays which are still extant of Hisamatsu Fûyô (ca. 1790–1845), who was a pupil of the grandson of Kurosawa Kinko. These essays are virtually the only sources for the spiritual background of the musical practices of the Fuke-Sect.²

Fûyô regards the practice of playing the *shakuhachi* in terms of the concept of *shugyô*, “spiritual exercise, religious discipline”. In *shakuhachi shugyô*, i.e. in playing the *shakuhachi* as spiritual exercise, the instrument becomes *zenki* or *sengu*, a “tool of Zen”. The essence of *shakuhachi*-playing, he says in *Hitori Mondô*, is “to play in a state of freedom from the rational mind”; thus *shugyô* is the spiritual discipline of freeing oneself from the rational mind, in order to attain



ill. 4: Shukuhachi notation of the honkyoku “Shin Kyorei”, Kinko school, 19th century

the level where “Truth appears” in the form of *tettei on*, the “Absolute Tone” or the “Tone in Itself”. That this level, which other Zen schools call *satori* or *kenshō*, has been aimed at by means of music, is the real and original contribution of the Fuke-Sect to the practice of Zen, which is by tradition rather negative to music as being a worldly diversion.

Certainly it was not any music which was played by the monks of the Fuke-Sect, but rather one which was specially created for the purpose of *shakuhachi shugyô*, a music which was called *honkyoku*, the “real, original music”. Little is known of the origins of *honkyoku*. The legend says that the core of the repertoire dates from the 13th century, which in itself is very doubtful. The origin of most of the extant pieces is unknown and the collection of 36 *honkyoku* undertaken by Kurosawa Kinko in the mid-eighteenth century reveals most diverse influences: Buddhist ceremonial music, bourgeois chamber-music, folk music. However the crucial thing is not the antiquity and the “purity” of the music but the fact that no matter where the music originated, it was completely metamorphosed and recast in an independent, distinctive form. *Honkyoku*, in the form it assumed in the 18th century and which is preserved in essence down to the present day, is characterized by an extremely slow tempo and flexible rhythm. These two characteristics have the effect of breaking up the melodic coherence in favour of complex, largely self-contained patterns of notes, which I have elsewhere termed “tonal cells”.³ Today there is little hope of finding more information as regards the origins of *honkyoku*, but it would appear that simple melodic patterns have been resolved, as it were, into their individual component parts, the notes, through the practice of musical meditation and again solidified in the form of tonal cells. For even the name given the goal of the meditation, *tettei on*, “the Absolute Tone”, indicates that the emphasis was put on the tone as an isolated event, and not on a coherent melody. That is also how the saying *ichion jôbutsu*, “to reach enlightenment in one single tone”, is to be understood.

But if the isolated tone, the sound of the *shakuhachi*, assumes such a central role, then the manner in which the tone is produced also becomes more significant. The breath, the act of breathing, becomes all-important, the control and establishing of which produces the tone. To characterize the function of the breath Fûyô uses the term *kisoku* (a compound of *ki*, “spirit”, and *soku*, “breath”), “spiritual breath”, and in *Kaisei Hôgo* he describes this as follows: “In truth, the success of (*shakuhachi*) *shugyô* is dependent only on the Spirit and the breath. If the Spirit becomes enlightened, the breath becomes Spirit. If the Spirit be motionless, then the breath is in a state of perfection. That means completely to enter into Zen”. In the following passage Fûyô describes the Path which must be trodden in order to attain to *kisoku*, the Spiritual Breath, comparing *shakuhachi shugyô* to a painful course of treatment:

“He who wishes the Spiritual Breath to rise must first rid himself of toxins. He who wishes to purge away the toxins may not fear the attacks of dizziness brought about by the antidote. Do not shrink back from the unclean sound which



ill. 5: Shakuichi playing Bodhisattva, cast in bronze, Tōdai Temple, Nara, 8th century

is caused when the Great Bamboo is blown! This sound is like a potent emetic which expels the poisonous mucus. (...) He who has thus regained his health is also able to make the Spiritual Breath appear. But he who really makes the Spiritual Breath appear also attains the level of the Absolute Tone.

Banish all doubts! Those who are most resolute do not fear the attacks of dizziness and attain, after long *shugyô*, to the true Path. But those who are not so resolute, those who fear the bitterness of the healing process and do not take the medicine, find it difficult to avoid the wrong Path. But those who are irresolute, those who hear about the rigours of the treatment and are too afraid to take the medicine, are those who love the Small Bamboo. Such people treat the Spiritual Breath in a smug, complacent manner. They only trifle with the Path and produce a sound which resembles absurd babbling. Such people are without honour and see only blindness. Have nothing to do with such people!”

The goal then is to allow the Absolute Tone to become manifest. In this connection Fûyô uses a drastic metaphor: the tone of the *shakuhachi* is an antidote, an emetic which expels the bad mucus. It is most informative that Fûyô describes the tone of the *shakuhachi* when it is properly played, i.e. when the Great Bamboo is played, as “unclean”, as something unpleasant. Thus if the *shakuhachi* is used as an instrument of Zen, those aesthetic values which would otherwise hold good are virtually reversed. Although the tone to be “sure and firm”, as Fûyô writes in *Hitori Kotoba*, a fine tone is not the goal of *shakuhachi*-playing, and Fûyô describes it as being nothing short of “despicable, if someone loves to produce a splendid tone.”

The process of healing, as the striving for enlightenment is here described, is in its totality by no means a pleasant experience but demands great determination. In contrast to the Great Bamboo and its purifying function Fûyô describes those who “love the Small Bambo” as those who “only trifle with the Path” and treat the Spiritual Breath “smugly and complacently”; these as Fûyô writes elsewhere “labour under the delusion of false egocentricity”. But it is necessary to free oneself from *ushin*, the reality-oriented spirit, in order to play in a state of detachment from rational mind and from all that is to be experienced through it. That is why, as Fûyô writes at the end of this passage of the *Kaisei Hôgo*, “the way in which the *shakuhachi* is an instrument of Zen has to be explained by reference to the concepts *mui* (purposeless activity) and *kisoku* (the Spiritual Breath).”

However, *honkyoku*, the old music for *shakuhachi* which is rooted in religion, does not consist of individual notes (although, as described above, the tonal

cells do show a tendency to isolate themselves vis-à-vis from each other), but of pieces of music, of which Kinko chose 36 for his collection. It is noticeable that Fûyô assumes an ambivalent attitude towards the musical aspect of *honkyoku*, just as he avoids the word “music” generally, and always calls the *shakuhachi hōki* (instrument of religion) and not *gakki* (musical instrument). It is true that in *Hitori Mondō* he says that it is “an offence to depart from the set form of each piece. Although it is possible even then to hear the beauty of the bamboo-tone, it is not possible to recognize the nature of the *shakuhachi* as an instrument of Zen”. On the other hand, however, it is clear that he has reservations about regarding musical mastery as a criterium for accomplishment. There is a passage in *Hitori Mondō* where it is precisely music which comes in for his strictures: “It is not the number of pieces learnt that makes a good player, but rather the way he plays one piece. (...) But one piece is no piece; no piece is Spiritual Breath; Spiritual Breath is nothing other than Void and Nothingness”. For all Fûyô’s emphasis that in the last analysis the musical form of *honkyoku* is unimportant and that the goal of *shugyō* is to enter into the “Spirit of the Void”, he still stresses that the Path can only be followed by strict adherence to the form and by an impeccable mastery of technique for playing the *shakuhachi*. In *Hitori Kotoba* he presents the relationship between technique and the Spirit of *honkyoku*, which as far as he is concerned is quite clear-cut: mastery of technique leads to an understanding of the Spirit of the music. Although, he says, mastery of the *shakuhachi* does not essentially lie in the mastery of technique but in the understanding of the Spirit of the music, the learning of the technique is the precondition for entering into this Spirit. Thus, whoever has no mastery of the technique of *shakuhachi*-playing will, so Fûyô, not enter into the Spirit of the music. It is, he says, beyond doubt that whoever as a beginner troubles about the Spirit of the music instead of the playing technique will his whole life long remain a *chikudō no rikutsusha*, a “theoretician of the Bamboo-Way”.

Despite all his insistence on *shugyō*, the spiritual exercise whose expression is *honkyoku*, Fûyô’s attitude in this question shows at what point *honkyoku* changes from being a purely religious exercise without primary aesthetic claims into music, and at what point it becomes possible to gauge the depth of understanding of what *shugyō* is all about from how the music is played. From there it is only a small step to equating technical perfection with understanding; a step which Fûyô tries to avoid, but which is too obvious for not having been taken. Already in 1838 Yoshida Itchō (1812–1881) could write that the number of those who had seen Truth had greatly shrunk and that it was probably unavoidable that the *shakuhachi* would cease to be an instrument of religion and sink to the level of a musical instrument (Kurihara 1918: 206).

For the second half of the 19th century it is justified to say that *honkyoku* became more and more a music which was free of specifically religious ideas. This at any rate was the prerequisite for the survival of *honkyoku* after the dissolution of the Fuke-Sect in 1871. Had it not even before then ceased to be exclusively the musical expression of that sect's religious exercises, it might never have survived the prohibition.

The dissolution of the Fuke-Sect was the consequence of the drastic, far-reaching reforms of the Meiji-Restoration. The abuses which were widespread in the sect provided the pretext for the prohibition, but it is scarcely possible to imagine that the Fuke-Sect would have survived the upheavals, even if the abuses which were prevalent in it were no worse than in other sects. At all events its close association with the ancient régime of the Tokugawa rendered the Fuke-Sect intolerable to the new government.

The use of the *shakuhachi* as an instrument of Zen thus came to an end. This unique "experiment", which had lasted more than 200 years and which had consisted of introducing music or tone-meditation into Zen, was broken off. The number of those who still continued to cultivate *honkyoku* declined sharply. Thus in 1895 Uehara Kyodô (1848–1913) could write: "There has of late been such an extraordinary decline in the number of those learning this music that the tradition is only just kept from extinction. In the long run, given the extraordinary difficulties presented by the music, interest in it will only be maintained when it is adapted to the taste of the masses" (Uehara 1927: 76). This has not happened, fortunately. It is true that even in the 19th century the *shakuhachi* achieved a greater degree of dissemination by being included as third instrument in Japanese chamber-music and thereby established itself as a secular music instrument outside the narrow orbit of the Fuke-Sect. In like manner *shakuhachi*-playing has had a large audience in the 20th century, thanks to the activity of Nakao Tozan (1876–1956), whose compositions, mostly of the Western polyphonic variety have found an extensive market. However, the old *honkyoku* of the Fuke-Sect, now divested of their narrower religious associations, have been, and still are, played by a small number of devotees.

Notes

¹ Translated from the original German text.

² The three works *Hitori Mondō*, "Self-Answered Questions", written in 1823, *Hitori Kotoba*, "Monologue", written before 1830, and *Kaisei Hōgo*, "Sermon on the Stillness of the Sea", written in 1838, are found in the German translation and with commentary in Gutzwiller 1983: 164–198.

³ Apropos tonal cells and the form of *honkyoku*, see Gutzwiller 1983: 119–148.

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Andreas Gutzwiller

Die Shakuhachi der Fuke-Sekte: ein Werkzeug des Zen (Kurzfassung)

In der buddhistischen Musik nimmt die *shakuhachi* eine Sonderstellung ein. Sie ist das einzige Instrument, das eine im eigentlichen Sinne religiöse Instrumentalmusik entwickelt hat. Ob die *shakuhachi*, eine Flöte chinesischen Ursprungs, bereits in China eine engere Verbindung mit dem Buddhismus eingegangen ist, muß bezweifelt werden. Nach Japan kam die *shakuhachi* im 7. Jahrhundert zunächst als Instrument des *gagaku* Orchesters. In religiösem Kontext wurde die *shakuhachi* erst vom 14. Jahrhundert an von den *komosō*, den „Strohmatte-Mönchen“ und später von den *komusō*, den „Mönchen der Leere und des Nichts“, gespielt. Diese zweite Gruppe formierte sich im 17. Jahrhundert als Fuke-Sekte, eine Richtung des Zen Buddhismus, und entwickelte in einzigartiger Weise eine Verbindung von Musik und Meditationspraxis. Unter ihren Händen wurde die *shakuhachi* zu einem *zenki*, einem „Werkzeug des Zen“. Im 18. Jahrhundert vereinigte Kurosawa Kinko 36 Stücke zu der *honkyoku* Sammlung, die für

die östlichen Haupttempel der Fuke-Sekte verbindlich wurden.

In drei Aufsätzen von Hisamatsu Fūyō (ca. 1790–1845), den einzigen heute noch erhaltenen Quellen zum geistigen Hintergrund des *shakuhachi* Spiels innerhalb der Fuke-Sekte, wird *shakuhachi shugyō* (*shakuhachi* Spiel als religiöse Disziplin) folgendermaßen erklärt: Das Ziel ist *tettei on*, der „Absolute Ton“, der der Erleuchtung gleichkommt. Zentrale Bedeutung kommt dem Atem zu, der zu *kisoku*, dem „Geistigen Atem“, werden muß, damit der Absolute Ton erreicht werden kann. *Honkyoku* ist also zugleich eine geistig-religiöse Übung und Musik. Im Verlauf des 19. Jahrhunderts rückte der musikalische Aspekt von *honkyoku* vermehrt in den Vordergrund, was eine Verflachung des religiösen Aspekts mit sich brachte, jedoch die Voraussetzung dafür bildete, daß diese Musik nach der Auflösung der Fuke-Sekte 1871 als ihrer religiösen Funktion entkleidete Kunstmusik weiterexistieren konnte.

Andreas Gutzwiller

Le shakuhachi de la secte fuke: un instrument du zen (résumé)

Le *shakuhachi* occupe une place particulière dans la musique bouddhique. Il est le seul instrument d'une musique foncièrement religieuse. Il y a lieu de douter que cette flûte ait été déjà étroitement associée au bouddhisme en Chine, son pays d'origine. C'est au 7^{ème} siècle que le *shakuhachi* a été introduit au Japon, où il s'est tout d'abord ajouté aux instruments de l'orchestre de *gagaku*. Il fallut 7 siècles avant qu'il ne soit adopté par les *komosô*, «les moines à la paille», puis par les *komusô*, «les moines du vide et du néant». Les *komusô* formèrent au 17^{ème} siècle une secte fuke, une branche du bouddhisme zen, et entreprirent d'associer, d'une manière singulière, la musique à la méditation. Par eux, le *shakuhachi* devint un *zenki*, un «instrument du zen». Au 18^{ème} siècle, Kurosawa Kinko ajouta au répertoire *honkyoku* 36 morceaux obligatoires pour les temples principaux de la secte fuke dans l'est du pays.

Dans trois écrits d'Hisamatsu Fûyô (vers 1790–1845), qui sont les seules sources encore existantes sur les fondements spirituels de la musique pour *shakuhachi* de la secte fuke, le *shakuhachi shugyô* (c'est-à-dire la pratique du *shakuhachi* en tant que discipline religieuse) est décrit en ces termes: le but est *tettei on*, le «son absolu», équivalent à l'illumination. La respiration revêt une importance essentielle, car elle doit devenir *kisoku*, «souffle spirituel», qui permet d'atteindre le son absolu. Le *honkyoku* est donc à la fois un exercice spirituel et religieux, et une musique. Au cours du 19^{ème} siècle, l'élément musical du *honkyoku* revêtit une importance croissante, entraînant l'affadissement de l'aspect religieux, tout en créant d'autre part les conditions nécessaires à la survie de cette musique comme musique savante dissociée de son contexte religieux après la dissolution de la secte fuke en 1871.