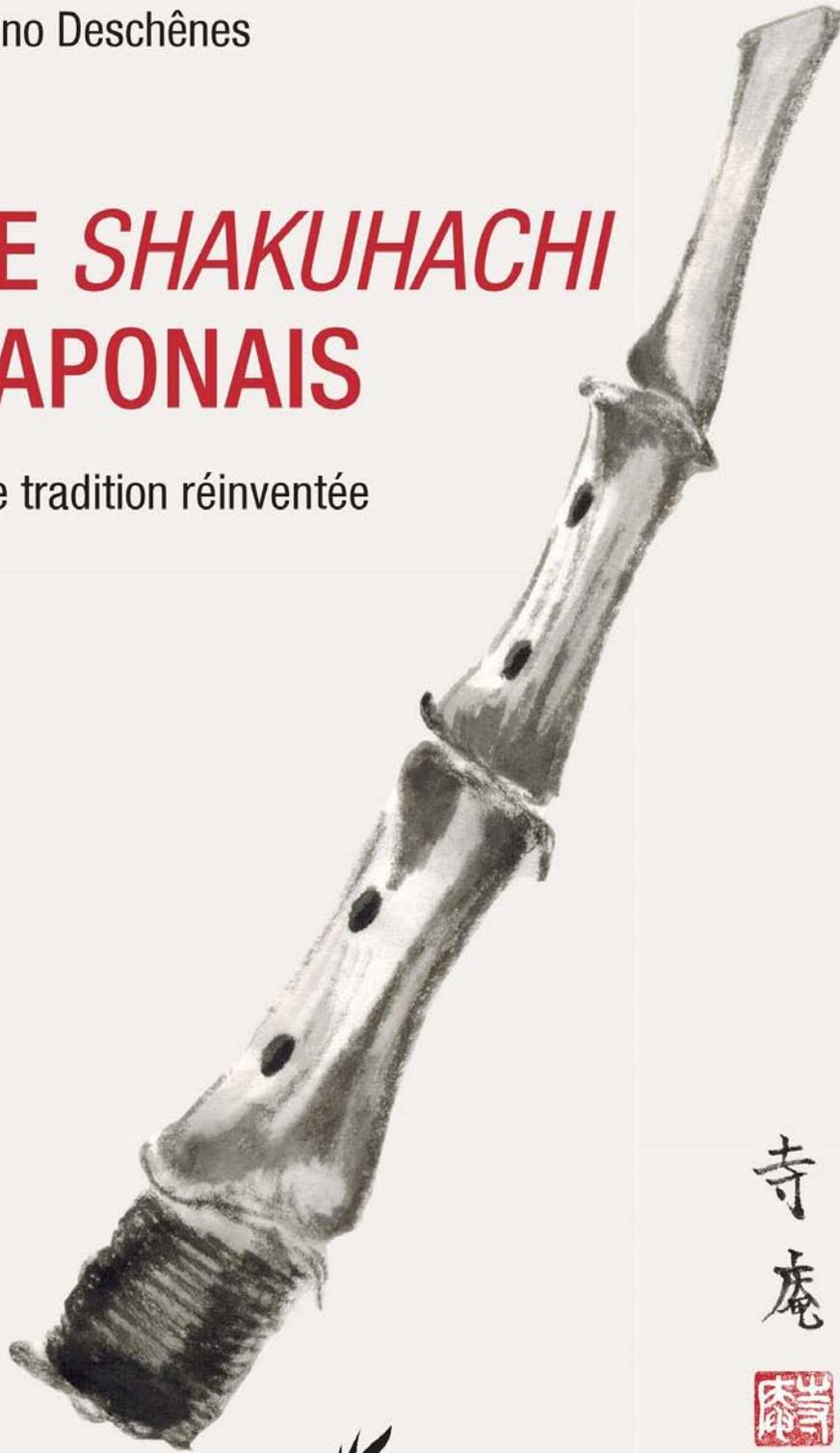


Bruno Deschênes

# LE *SHAKUHACHI* JAPONAIS

Une tradition réinventée



L'Harmattan

***Le shakuhachi japonais, une tradition réinventée***

***(The Japanese Shakuhachi, A Reinvented Tradition)***

Bruno Chikushin Deschênes, Paris, Éditions L'Harmattan, 2017. In French.

May be ordered at : <http://www.editions-harmattan.fr> (site in French).

This book is the first work in French entirely dedicated to the *shakuhachi*. A good number of books and thesis are available in English, but none in French. The subtitle refers to the fact that this flute is not played, made and understood as it was during the Edo era (1603-1868). Following the banishment of the Fuke sect in the Fall of 1871 by the Meiji government, the shakuhachi started to be 'reinvented' to take it into the modern era, a reinvention that was subsequently heightened following WWII, in particular since the 1970s with the growing interests of non-Japanese about this flute all around the World. My aim with this article is to give an overview of the content of this book by providing the non-French speaking reader a summary of each of the chapters. Although my objective was to present the shakuhachi in a historical as well as from an ethnomusicological perspectives, the viewpoint of the musician guided my discussions, not the scholarly one. As well, I did not want solely to present the shakuhachi, its history, its technique or its repertoire, as many books and articles have already done, I wanted to discuss aspects of it that are rarely discussed, in particular the self-discipline it requires from everyone to learn, its ritualistic aspects in its transmission, as well as the aesthetics of *honkyoku* music, in particular in regards to the notion of *ma* 間. My primary aim was to discover how a non-Japanese can learn to perform that music from a native perspective, if it is at all possible, since there is more to this instrument and its music than learning a repertoire or a technique. How to think this music and its

aesthetic differs largely from our Western views about music as a whole, something I wanted to grasp, and hopefully so that the reader can have a grasp as well.

The introduction tries to show what I mean by ‘reinventing’ a tradition. My main example before to tackle the shakuhachi is taken from the advent of the modern taiko ensembles that appeared in the 1950s. These flashy and somewhat exuberant ensembles did not exist prior to that time, though they are obviously an outcome of the existing taiko tradition in Japan. It was a jazz musician who came with the idea of using a large number of players to revive an old shinto ritual around Lake Suwa. It was such a success that it gradually became what we know today of these taiko ensembles. Since these ensembles were created more than 60 years, can we considered them a tradition or a *new* tradition? Or should it be more appropriate to call it a reinvented tradition? There is a controversy in scholarly writings about the notion of invention of traditions, an expression coined at the beginning of 1983 by two British historians<sup>1</sup>. Some authors say yes it exists, some say that a tradition can not be invented, especially that in the West, invention refers to something create out of nothing. One thing is sure is that any tradition can be reinterpreted and revisited to fit a new social, cultural and even political context and order, which is exactly what has been going on with the Japanese taiko, as well as the shakuhachi from the end of the 19th century on.

The first chapter is in two parts. The first one gives an overview of some aspects of the traditional Japanese way of thinking that have aesthetic overtones. Japanese philosopher and historian Katō Shūichi suggests that the Japanese way of thinking is based on a view of aesthetic deeply rooted and embedded into the fabric of everyday life. The second part is about a myth disseminated outside of Japan that the Japanese way of thinking *is zen*. This myth has been promulgated mainly by the monk D.T. Suzuki at the beginning of the 20th century, Eugen

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf., Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger (1983). *The Invention of tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Herrigel who is famous for his book *Zen and The Art or Archery* and philosopher Allan Watts, among others. The reason why Zen was accepted when it came to Japan in the 13th century is because it was in line with the native way of thinking of the time among the warrior class, the artisans and artists, although overtime it gradually had an influence over the entire population, when it comes to the question of aesthetic. To say that the Japanese way of thinking is Zen is not totally false, yet it is inaccurate; it is more a melting pot of Shintoism, first of all, Confucianism and Taoism than purely Zen or Buddhism, to which can be added today the influence of Christianity. Also, one thing that is not much known is that the two main Zen sects, Sōtō and Rinzai, at the beginning of the 20th century, supported the war efforts of Japan in the first half of the century. It must be said that these 2 sects feared that they might be banished with the creation of a Shintoist national religion by the government at the end of the 19th century. Even, D.T. Suzuki contradicted himself by agreeing with these war efforts in his Japanese writing, while claiming in the West that it was a religion and a philosophy of peace.

In the second chapter, I present a history of the shakuhachi from its beginning to today, how it is made, its technical aspects, its notation and some aspects of the melodic structures of its repertoire. It is a condensed presentation of what can be found in a large number of writings on the shakuhachi.

The main core of the book starts with the third chapter, in which I discuss one aspect of the learning of the shakuhachi that has rarely been discussed thoroughly in writing, i.e. the almost ascetic discipline that is necessary to properly learn to play this flute. The Japanese Zen buddhist concept of *shūgyō* is translated in English as self-cultivation. Few authors have talked about it, but no one discusses it in regard to music, and more so the shakuhachi, when we know that the Fuke sect was a Zen buddhist sect affiliated to the Rinzai sect, and that some were playing this flute to replace meditation. How was *shūgyō* was implemented by the *komusō*? How is it

implemented today by shakuhachi *sensei* in their transmission of this unique repertoire? Since it was part of the Zen training, I strongly believe that it had some influence on the music these monks were composing and playing. I was forced to a certain extent to speculate since I could not find any author discussing Japanese self-discipline as it pertains to music. Zen and *shūgyō* had an influence on all Japanese arts, it is called *keiko*, but without the ascetic aspect.

The fourth chapter is about rituals and *kata*. Here too, these aspects of Japanese life and arts are rarely discussed in regards to the learning and playing of the shakuhachi, though we find some writings about the learning of the *shamisen*, and *nagauta*, the long songs of Kabuki theater<sup>2</sup>. It is surprising we do not find anything (at least in French and English), when we know that rituals and *kata* are crucial in Japanese life as a whole, not only in martial arts. For my discussion, I had to rely on writings about the *shamisen* and *nihon buyō* (Japanese traditional dance), and other anthropological writings to propose how it applies to my learning and playing of the shakuhachi. The last section of this chapter is about transmission of traditional arts in Japan. In the West, learning is an intellectual endeavor, while in Japan learning, as it pertains to traditional arts, is embodied. The body must learn first. From a Zen point of view, if the body learns first, the mind learns as well; if the mind learns first, there is no guarantee the body will. This is one of the most difficult things to do for non-Japanese, intellectual thinking and rationalism is so much ingrained in our way of thinking that rarely a non-Japanese can learn first from one's body. We have the tendency to intellectualize everything we put our mind into, as if the body is peripheral, which is not the case at all in Japanese arts.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to one of the most known and most important Japanese aesthetic notions: *ma* 間. Most writings about this notion are about architecture, garden design, dance or theatre, rarely about music. Yet, a lot of non-Japanese shakuhachi players talk about it,

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jay Keister, *Shaped by Japanese Music, Kikuoka Hiroaki and Nagauta Shamisen in Tokyo*, New York, London, Routledge, 2004.

while most Japanese *sensei* do not say much, they even elude it when we ask them. This term can be translated as space and interval of time. Generally, non-Japanese thinks of it in quantitative and intellectual terms, while *ma* is a space or an interval of time that must be first of all *felt*, not calculated or pondered intellectually. For example, the length of time between phrases in *honkyoku* pieces is secondary, what it most important is how the *ma*, i.e. the silence it creates, is felt. In Buddhism, *mu* 無, vacuity or nothingness, refers to a void in which everything is possible. Similarly, silence in Japanese music, at least in *honkyoku*, does not mean absence of sound as is current in Western music, but a place from which sound emanates and to which it returns. It is from silence that sound is possible. In this sense, the silence that *ma* creates is as important as the phrase to come since it is where we find the source of the phrase to come.

In the last chapter, I tackled the aesthetics of *honkyoku* music, as well as the notion of *honnin no kyoku*. Not an easy endeavor, since I did not have as well much writing to rely on in regard to the aesthetic of this music. Most discussions about traditional Japanese aesthetics are usually about such notions as *wabi-sabi*, *yūgen*, *ma*, *mono no aware* and others. Since numerous authors have presented these aesthetic principles, I was more interested to get a sense of the way of thinking underlying such notions. I thus suggest in this chapter that aesthetic in traditional Japanese arts is basically metaphorical, similarly as Japanese gardens are metaphors of nature. In European poetry, a metaphor is a play with words that creates an image, while in Japanese poetry, it is the other way around: it starts from a perception, then an image, followed by a feeling or an emotion, that the poet wants to put into words. Words are thus an outcome of what is aesthetically experienced. With *honkyoku* for example, the title of a piece, let's say *Tamuke*, which is usually translated as *Offering* (though it literally means hands in prayer), is not about describing in music what it represents, but how it is felt and experienced by the musician. The performance is about expressing metaphorically the experience of being in prayer. The last

section of this chapter discusses the notion of *honnin non kyoku* that non-Japanese musicians have appropriated for the modern and current reinvention of the shakuhachi, especially following the trend that is growing among musicians to bring back the *jinashi* shakuhachi, when we very well know that in Japan, there are hardly anyone playing it. This discussion includes some comments from well-known Japanese shakuhachi players who agreed to answer my questions in this regard.

Finally, in the epilogue, I give a critical assessment of my discussions. I am fully aware that I am looking at this musical instrument from a Western viewpoint. In the West, we have the tendency to view Japan from an exotic and even essentialist point of view. Zen attracts non-Japanese because it is exotic. Paradoxically, we rationalize it from our Western point of view, when it is a known fact that Zen has a distrust of intellectualism and rationalization. One of the aims of Zen is to break down the hold that intellectualism has on our grasp and our experiences of life, while we, non-Japanese, do exactly the opposite. Zen is about experienced beyond the mind. We may have the tendency to rationalize our experiences before to understand how we did experienced them.

I also included 3 annexes. The first is a short overview of how traditional Japanese aesthetic was modernized. In particular, at the end of the 19th century, there was no words meaning beauty and aesthetic as we define these 2 terms in the West. 2 words had to be forged in this regard. The second annex gives an overview of Japan historical eras, as well as few important historical musical events and development. And the third annex is a glossary of the Japanese terms mentioned in the book.

## ***Synopsis - back cover of the book***

This book is the first publication in French devoted entirely to the *shakuhachi*, the Japanese bamboo flute emblematic of a sect of Zen Buddhist monks from the Edo period (1603-1868). These monks used this flute as a spiritual tool; their repertoires of solo pieces are unique. Following the collapse of the shogunate at the end of the 19th century, the new Japanese government banned the Fuke sect in 1871. These monks began to teach this flute, in addition to giving concerts. As well, the making, the repertoire and the playing of the shakuhachi have been modernized under the influence of European music. Since the 1960s, shakuhachi has gained great popularity outside Japan. An increasing number of non-Japanese musicians obtain their master title (*shihan*), teach it in their native country and use it in the most heterogeneous musical styles. One of the primary interests of non-Japanese musicians with respect to shakuhachi is the affiliation of the Fuke sect with Zen, to such an extent that these solo pieces are considered by many musicians to be Buddhist in nature. Although the pretext for this publication is the shakuhachi, it goes far beyond its history, repertoire, playing or modernization. The objective of the author is to place this flute in its traditional and modern contexts, giving at the same time a critical look at the orientalist image that the West has of Japan.