

THE LAST BIWA SINGER

This page is intentionally left blank.

THE LAST BIWA SINGER

*A Blind Musician in History, Imagination
and Performance*

HUGH DE FERRANTI



East Asia Program
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York 14853

The Cornell East Asia Series is published by the Cornell University East Asia Program (distinct from Cornell University Press). We publish books on a variety of scholarly topics relating to East Asia as a service to the academic community and the general public. Standing orders, which provide for automatic notification and invoicing of each title in the series upon publication, are accepted.

If after review by internal and external readers a manuscript is accepted for publication, it is published on the basis of camera-ready copy provided by the author who is responsible for any copyediting and manuscript formatting. Alternative arrangements should be made with approval of the Series. Address submission inquiries to CEAS Editorial Board, East Asia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York 14853-7601.

*Cover photos: Yamashika preparing to play biwa before the grave of Hori Kōjun.
Photograph by Kimura Yoshio. Used by permission of Mrs. Kimura Yoshio.
Cover design, book layout and formatting: Lindsay Rowlands*

Number 143 in the Cornell East Asia Series
Copyright ©2009 by Hugh de Ferranti. All rights reserved.
ISSN: 1050-2955
ISBN: 978-1-933947-13-6 hc
ISBN: 978-1-933947-43-3 pb
Library of Congress Control Number: 2009925879

Printed in the United States of America
24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

 The paper in this book meets the requirements for permanence of ISO 9706:1994.

CAUTION: Except for brief quotations in a review, no part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form without permission in writing from the author. Please address all inquiries to Hugh de Ferranti in care of the East Asia Program, Cornell University, 140 Uris Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-7601.

For Claudio Yoshiyuki Zani de Ferranti

*Born as you were,
one hundred years after Yamashika —
weaving threads of song
to bind each day and night
without a word.*

This page is intentionally left blank.

CONTENTS

List of Figures, Tables and Examples	x
Note on Conventions in the Text	xii
INTRODUCTION	1
The Setting: Kyushu and Kumamoto	6
The Biwa Music Traditions	9
Biwa and <i>Biwa Hōshi</i> in Modern-day Japan	13
The <i>Biwa Hiki</i>, Yamashika Yoshiyuki	14
1 IMAGES AND HISTORIES	19
Characteristics of the Blind Biwa Traditions	20
<i>Biwa and Blindness</i>	20
<i>Biwa and Sanctity</i>	28
<i>Biwa and Gender</i>	36
<i>Biwa and Musical Narrative</i>	40
The Social Status of Blind Musicians and Itinerant Performers	42
<i>Images and Depictions of Biwa Hōshi</i>	44
<i>Biwa Hōshi</i> and <i>Mōsō</i>: Entangled Musical, Literary and Religious Figures	48
<i>The Established Accounts</i>	48
<i>A New Approach: Mōsō as Biwa Hōshi Who Gained Buddhist Patronage</i>	51
<i>Ancient and Medieval Period Biwa Hōshi</i>	52
<i>Heike Recitation and the Biwa Hōshi Guild, the Tōdō-za</i>	55
<i>Biwa Hōshi and Zatō after the Waning of Heike Recitation's Popularity</i>	58
<i>Mōso and Mōsōbiwa Traditions</i>	60
<i>Mōsō Groups' Dispute with the Tōdō-za and Its Consequences</i>	63
2 BIWA MUSIC OF THE HIGO REGION	69
Varieties of <i>Mōsōbiwa</i> in Kyushu	70
<i>Terms That Identify the Biwa Traditions and the Musicians</i>	71
<i>Writings on Zatōbiwa, Higobiwa and Mōsōbiwa</i>	74
<i>Populist Accounts and Depictions</i>	85

Performers' Consciousness of Tradition and Accounts of Origins	88
<i>Tradition and "History"</i>	88
<i>Historical Evidence</i>	93
Repertories of the Kyushu Biwa Traditions	108
<i>Tales</i>	109
<i>Rites</i>	125
3 IMAGINING, ENCOUNTERING AND DOCUMENTING YAMASHIKA	143
Documentation of "The Last Biwa Hōshi"	144
<i>Academic Documentation</i>	145
<i>Representations for the Broader Public</i>	148
Yamashika and His Interlocutors	154
<i>Scholars</i>	155
<i>The Kimuras</i>	157
<i>Foreigners</i>	158
Kimura's <i>Kikigaki</i> Life History of Yamashika	163
<i>Kimura Rirō and His Various Writings on Yamashika</i>	164
<i>The Text and Its Construction</i>	166
4 TALES IN PERFORMANCE	177
Performance Contexts and Procedures	177
<i>Settings and Audiences</i>	178
<i>Kadobiki and Zashikibiwa</i>	179
<i>Other Contexts: Myōon Kō, Nabiraki and Yogomori</i>	185
<i>Concert Performances Since the 1960s</i>	185
Formal Elements in Narrative Performance	187
<i>Framing Tales</i>	187
<i>Sonic Elements of Performance</i>	190
Tales in Performance: The Oral Compositional Process	202
<i>Performance and Narrative Units: The Shōdan Model</i>	202
<i>Fixity and Variability: Yamashika's Dōjōji</i>	205
<i>Dōjōji (Performance of October 14, 1989)</i>	208

5	THE LIFE OF THE ROAD: YAMASHIKA REMEMBERS	231
	Becoming a <i>Biwa Hiki</i>	232
	<i>Yamashika's Choice of Vocation in Context</i>	232
	<i>Apprenticeship</i>	240
	Participation in Local <i>Biwa Hiki</i> Groups and Acquisition of a Professional Name	252
	<i>Yamashika's Participation in the Tamagawa-ha</i>	253
	<i>Acquisition of Professional Status and a Performer's Name</i>	256
	Making a Living as a <i>Biwa Hiki</i>	258
	<i>Acquisition of Skills and Repertory from Other Biwa Hiki</i>	259
	<i>Kadozuke and Discrimination against Biwa Hiki</i>	262
	<i>Discrimination and Its Persistence</i>	265
	<i>Working Regions and Remuneration</i>	270
6	BLIND BIWA SINGERS FORGOTTEN, REMEMBERED AND REHABILITATED	277
	<i>Effects of the Social Re-positioning of Biwa Hiki</i>	279
	<i>Fragmentary Transmission of Yamashika's Repertory</i>	280
	<i>Another "Last" Biwa Hōshi</i>	282
	<i>Contemporary Biwa Hōshi and Public Demand</i>	284
	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	287
	APPENDICES	290
	Appendix 1	
	<i>Map 1. Kyushu, showing prefectures and their approximate correlation with pre-Meiji provinces.</i>	291
	<i>Map 2. Principal places in central Kyushu that are mentioned in the text.</i>	292
	Appendix 2	
	<i>Transcription of the First shōdan of Dōjōji (Yamashika Yoshiyuki; performance of October 14, 1989)</i>	293
	Bibliography	301
	Audiography and Videography	312
	Index	313

List of Figures, Tables and Examples

- Figure 1.1
Eighteenth-century Chinese devotional image of
Sarasvati showing her names in Tibetan, Chinese, Mongolian
and Manchu. (Walter E. Clark, *Two Lamaistic Pantheons*, vol. 1,
288. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1937) 30
- Figure 1.2
Fourteenth-century *Benzaiten-zu* (detail).
Collection of Hōjōin, Mt. Koya. (Tokyo: *Nihon e gakkan*,
Kodansha International Ltd. 1971) 31
- Figure 1.3
Biwa hōshi depicted in the fourteenth-century scroll
painting *Boki ekotoba* (detail). Collection of Nishi Honganji.
(*Zoku Nihon emakimono taisei*, vol. 4.
Tokyo: Chūō Kōronsha 1985) 47
- Figure 2.1
Yamashika preparing to play biwa before the grave of Hori Kyōjun.
Photograph by Kimura Yoshio. Used by permission of
Mrs. Kimura Aiko. 90
- Figure 2.2
Yamashika preparing *gohei* for a *kamado-barai*.
Photograph by the author (April 1989). 134
- Figure 2.3
Yamashika performing the *kamado-barai*. He is wearing a priest's *kesa*
garment because at the time he was temporarily a member of the
Gensei Hōryū *mōsō* sect. Photograph by the author (April 1989). 135
- Figure 2.4.
Performance of a tale after a *kamado-barai* held in Yanagawa.
Photograph by the author (April 1989). 136
- Figure 4.1
Yamashika performing while seated on a chair behind a banner
bearing his professional name, Tamagawa Kyōen (-shi).
Photograph by the author (November 1991). 182

Table 4.1		
	Profiles of Yamashika's primary <i>fushi</i> set.	196
Example 4.1		
	Tetrachordal formations in all Yamashika's <i>fushi</i> types.	201
Figure 4.2.		
	Depiction of Kiyohime in distress on the banks of the Hidaka River. Chikanobu Toyohara, <i>The Boatman</i> , 1898. Triptych from the Bamboo Knots (<i>Take no hitofushi</i>) series. (http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chikanobu_The_Boatman.jpg)	207
Table 4.2		
	<i>Shōdan</i> articulation in <i>Dōjōji</i> (performance of October 14, 1989).	225
Table 4.3		
	Narrative events and <i>fushi</i> structure in four performances of <i>Dōjōji</i> .	226
Figure 5.1		
	Yamashika outside his teacher's house in Amakusa. Photograph by Kimura Rirō (used with permission).	241

Notes on Conventions in the Text

Japanese and Chinese names are rendered as family name first, personal name second, except for individuals whose professional lives have made them known in the English-speaking world, or whose work has been published in translation using the opposite name-order.

Pitches are designated using the Western system of letter-names (*a, b, c, d, e, f, g*), but without any implication of absolute or fixed pitch. From the lowest octave to the highest, pitches are represented as follows: an upper case letter with prime symbol (*A'*), upper case alone (*A*), lower case alone (*a*), and lower case with prime (*a'*). When staff-notation examples or transcriptions are referred to, the octave *A - a* corresponds to that from *A* below middle-*c* (that is, on the top line of the bass clef) to *a* above.

Titles of Japanese works, other than tales in the repertoires of *biwa hiki* and other tales from oral tradition, are given in italics with only the initial letter and the first letter of proper nouns capitalised. In the titles of tales all words are capitalised (for example *Kikuchi Kuzure*).

The following abbreviations for reference volumes have been used in the book's text and footnotes:

- ODJ = *Ongaku daijiten*
- NKBD = *Nihon koten bungaku daijiten*
- NMD = *Nihon minzoku daijiten*
- NMJ = *Nihon minzokugaku jiten*
- NODJ = *Nihon ongaku daijiten*

INTRODUCTION

Popular culture in late-twentieth-century Japan repeatedly fixed upon images that valorise older values and ways of life—“traditional Japan.” This was specially so in representations of the country’s peripheral rural areas of the far north and south, whose people were framed again and again by the nostalgic gaze of Tokyo-based journalists, film directors and television producers. Elderly musicians and practitioners of regional performing arts traditions who had made their living as performers since before the Second World War and Occupation were of strong interest to the creators of this romantic imagery for consumption in the metropolises of central Japan. Their songs, tales, dances and lives were interpreted in terms of ideas about folk culture, tradition, and regional and national identity that had been in circulation since Japanese modernity gained impetus in the 1920s, but also in accordance with values reflective of folk heritage preservation movements that emerged from North America and Britain in the post-war era. Inevitably, a group of blind men who played an ancient string instrument while singing tales or chanting invocations to local gods in remote parts of Kyushu became caught up in this evocation of a dreamlike past.

The Kyushu blind musicians were also the subject of my own work during most of the 1990s, but this book is centred on just one of them, Yamashika Yoshiyuki (1901–1996). He was a man almost unknown beyond the vicinity of his village in Kumamoto Prefecture, Kyushu, until his late sixties, when he began to acquire renown and eventual fame as “the last” of the *biwa hōshi*, blind *biwa* (lute)-playing bards who performed ritual placations for the angry ghosts of warriors killed in battle, and who first popularised the medieval *Tale of the Heike*, which became Japan’s “national epic” in modern times (Bialock 2000). From at least the end of the Second World War until the 1980s, Yamashika

lived a life of apparent, and at times actual, privation in the rural district where he was born. In many respects his life was one of hardship and considerable tragedy. The visible evidence for this aided some researchers and many photographers, journalists and artists in their portrayals of Yamashika as a living relic of the image of the *biwa hōshi* as it exists in the popular imagination—namely, a solitary blind man, dishevelled and pitiful, yet rich in his knowledge of rites and old lore. From the early 1970s there was much academic, media and public interest in Yamashika, manifested in a variety of publications, events and documentations: academic and commercial books and journals; recordings; performances in Tokyo; photographic exhibitions and a photo-essay on his lifestyle and character; television specials; and national honours and awards. In 1992 a full-length documentary film was produced, and photographs and articles about Yamashika appeared in the *Japan Times*, the *New York Times* and the *International Herald Tribune* (see de Ferranti 1992b; Sanger 1992). With the Japanese Education Ministry's 1993 approval of the film *Biwa hōshi Yamashika Yoshiyuki* for use in high schools, Yamashika's posthumous fame became assured, for he soon became known to many young people throughout Japan as “the last *biwa hōshi*.”

I first heard of Yamashika Yoshiyuki while a student in Tokyo from 1985, but was not able to meet him until 1989, when I visited Kyushu shortly before returning to Australia. The meeting was a decisive one for me, and I resolved to undertake fieldwork research with any former blind biwa players whom I could locate. During 1991 and 1992 I worked with three such musicians, including Yamashika. The bulk of textual and musical analysis in my previous work documents the music of Ōkawa Susumu (1918–2000), for the reason that among the three his explanations of performance practice were the most lucid, and his melodic style most consistent (de Ferranti 1997, 2003). I have taken an altogether different approach in writing this book because I came to view Yamashika and his practice as significant for broader cultural and historical reasons—not solely as a key to oral compositional processes and performance techniques of the kind that occupied me in the early 1990s. While Ōkawa and another former *biwa hiki*,¹ Hashiguchi Keisuke

1. *Biwa hiki* was among the most common of vernacular terms for blind biwa players in central Kyushu (see further chapter 2).

(b. 1914), were fully trained musicians who had made a living from biwa before the Second World War, both had turned to other trades soon after the war. The media and field researchers remained largely unaware of them; they were never drawn to Ōkawa and Hashiguchi in the way they were to Yamashika, who almost invariably became the face of traditional biwa music in Kyushu whenever it was mentioned publicly or written about.

This work, and the form of documentation offered in this book, has been shaped to varying degrees and at various times by topics and theoretical concerns that arise from Japanese and English-language academic writing. They include the genre of biwa music (*biwagaku*) in the context of Japanese music history, with its concomitant forms of ritual and narrative, as addressed by scholars of Japanese religion, folklore and literature; Japanese society's treatment of the blind, and in particular the historical status of blind musicians; questions of musical style and oral compositional performance practice as addressed by music historians, folklorists and ethnomusicologists; the significance of individual musicians in the shaping and transmission of a musical tradition; and questions of representation and identity in the making and reception of ethnographic texts, which have occupied a central place in cultural studies and anthropology since the 1980s. Those concerns are not so much a unitary set whose elements intrinsically belong together, as a field of topics within which I have sought to interpret the musical activities of Yamashika and other blind biwa players.

These topics and concerns are addressed in various sections of my text, but it must be emphasised here, at the beginning, that synthesis and interpretation of materials of Japanese origin have been the central activities in the preparation of this book. The performance traditions of blind biwa players in south-western Japan have come to be regarded as important for themes at the interstices of the disciplines of literature, musicology and history as they are practised in Japan, and that importance is reflected in texts of many kinds produced by amateur and professional scholars since the late 1980s. In addition to the primary material of performances and interviews themselves, the principal representations of and tools for contemplating *biwa hiki* are three kinds of Japanese sources: those on biwa music and its history;

portrayals and accounts of Yamashika Yoshiyuki, including the 1994 partial life-history by Kimura Rirō, *Higo biwa hiki Yamashika Yoshiyuki yobanashi* (Fireside tales of a *biwa hiki* of Higo, Yamashika Yoshiyuki);² and extensive analytical writings on performance and professional practice among Kyushu *biwa hiki*—much of it data about Yamashika—including the seminal works produced in the 1990s by the researcher of oral and medieval literature, Hyōdō Hiromi. I give primary emphasis to these sources unapologetically, while giving due consideration to writings in European languages that touch upon *biwa*, music traditions of the blind, and ritual “begging” in Japan, as well as some of the pertinent theoretical issues I have referred to above.

An important common theme emerged from working with the latter two of these three kinds of Japanese sources: the appropriateness of characterising a performance tradition through examination of the practice of a prominent individual. While Kimura’s book about Yamashika makes no claims to being a source for knowledge of the broader practice of *biwa* music among blind professionals in Kumamoto Prefecture or other regions of Kyushu, as one of only two monographs on the Higo-region *biwa* tradition it bears considerable weight as a resource. Scholarly sources on the *biwa hiki*, their tales, rites and music include texts that focus solely on Yamashika (Murayama 1986), or else position him as a central figure among surviving musicians (Ga 1972; Narita 1985a). Similarly, notwithstanding Hyōdō Hiromi’s occasional suggestions that Yamashika’s narrative practice was unorthodox, data about this individual has come to be treated as data about “the tradition” of Kyushu *biwa hiki* largely because a scholar of Hyōdō’s stature devoted a long article and much of two subsequent articles on *biwa* narrative to discussion of Yamashika’s training and performances (Hyōdō 1991, 1993, 1999).

In Euro-American scholarship since the mid-1990s there has been increased attention to the individual’s embodiment of “culture” and “performance tradition,” which are core concepts in the disciplines of anthropology and ethnomusicology (Danielson 1997; Reed-Danahay

2. Reasons for my choice of wording in the title translation are given in chapter 3. Note that I often quote the first-person speech by Yamashika that makes up the bulk of Kimura’s text, but also draw upon passages in which Kimura presents his own authorial voice; the latter are identified as such, although both kinds of passage are referenced as Kimura 1994.

1997). The processes through which ideas of culture and tradition can be “created” by researchers, namely, intersubjective experience and authorial representation, have been broached in anthropological theory (Jackson 1998; Marcus 1999), but are touched upon little in musical ethnography (Kisliuk 1998). In recent ethnomusicology monographs, the relationship between researcher and researched is consistently problematised, but few include extensive documentation of those individual musicians whose knowledge of tradition underpins much of what is written (Bakan 1999; Keister 2004; Babiracki 2008), and even fewer provide first-person expositions of such knowledge and its acquisition (Walton 1996).

Two basic questions arise from a focus on individuals in documenting music traditions: Firstly, in what sense did a tradition exist that bound together the repertoires and styles of disparate performers? Secondly, was the practice of the individual sufficiently similar to that of other musicians for it to be treated as representative? For the narrative and ritual music that Yamashika performed, the first question can only be answered by a combination of historical research and ethnographic documentation of ways in which *biwa hiki* spoke about their lineage and affiliations as musicians, while the second calls for examination of commentary by Yamashika and others, and ultimately comparative analysis of the range of archive performances by *biwa hiki* recorded since the 1960s. In this book I address the first question, and provide some suggestions toward answering the second, chiefly in light of my knowledge of the profiles and performance styles of Yamashika, Ōkawa and Hashiguchi.

For these reasons, I do not present Yamashika’s practice as representative of the music of *biwa hiki* as it was in the twentieth century—much less how it “always” had been in earlier times. As chapter 2 shows, even the twentieth-century history of this music is hardly documented; there are not even partial repertory lists from before the 1960s, for example, and the sole pre-1950 aural record of performance has never been made available to researchers—if indeed it still exists. The primary diachronic element in this study is that of Yamashika’s life and experiences, as accessed through my own recordings and memories of his words, and through the words of other researchers to whom he spoke over several decades.

My approach to Yamashika and the performance tradition he has come to represent acknowledges the complexity of an individual's identity, and the processes of its documentation and production through textual and other media. Consequently this book also documents the meanings created through interaction between Yamashika's own words and actions (including performative ones for audiences) and a variety of verbal and cultural texts about him in late-twentieth-century Japan. All of those texts, in turn, must be considered in relation to images of blind singers yielded by history, for Yamashika was a twentieth-century practitioner of a narrative tradition that bore significant points of similarity to ones practised by blind males in Japan during the best part of a millennium. Qualities of the *biwa hōshi* depicted in scroll paintings, folk tales, drama and other media since at least the fourteenth century took root in a particular form in popular imagination in the modern era, for reasons that I discuss in chapter 1. Remoteness, sanctity, fear, poverty and suffering are a set of core characteristics in commonly held images of the *biwa hōshi*. Some or all those characteristics are ever-present in portrayals of Yamashika, his life and music.

The Setting: Kyushu and Kumamoto

Historically, blind performers of biwa have been active in many regions of Japan, but it is only in south-western Honshu and Kyushu that *mōsō* (blind Buddhist priests who played biwa in various contexts) and *biwa hiki* remained active until the mid twentieth century. Of the two regions, by far the majority of musicians were in Kyushu, and *biwa hiki* were concentrated in the centrally positioned prefecture of Kumamoto (which approximates the former Higo Province), where at least eight were still capable of performing in the early 1970s.

Kyushu (see appendix 1, map 1, which shows the island with its modern prefectures and pre-modern provinces) is the southernmost of Japan's four principal islands, but is a place of great historical significance. The likelihood that the founders of the Imperial lineage came from Kyushu is reflected in the Sun Goddess Amaterasu Ō Mi-Kami's legendary descent to earth at a mountain in Miyazaki Prefecture. The proximity of the Korean peninsula to the west and the Ryūkyū

archipelago to the south produced broad cultural contact from earliest times—possibly yielding the introduction of biwa-playing, according to one theory. The military and political power of Kyushu regimes, in particular that of Satsuma Province’s Shimazu clan and the Satsuma samurai-class figures who dominated much political life in the period 1870 to 1899, was a decisive factor in the formation of the Meiji-era (1868–1912) state and its ideology.

Biwa has been played by blind males throughout Kyushu, but in the former provinces of Satsuma (Kagoshima and southern Miyazaki Prefecture), Higo (Kumamoto Prefecture and the Amakusa islands) and Chikuzen-Chikugo (Fukuoka and parts of Saga Prefecture) concentrations of players were sustained by limited support from religious institutions and widespread belief in the efficacy of agrarian rites performed with biwa. Buddhist institutions for association among “blind”³ priests still exist and exercise authority over members in several regions of Kyushu, but in the former Higo region the Higobiwa Hozonkai, a governmental organisation established in the 1970s to preserve the regional tradition that some called *higobiwa*, has become effectively obsolete, and no local musicians have maintained competence in performance.⁴

The localities most important for the aspects of Yamashika Yoshiyuki’s professional life presented in this book are all contained in a region approximately sixty kilometres square which straddles central and northern Kumamoto Prefecture and the southern reaches of Fukuoka Prefecture, where Yamashika spent his ninety-five years of life (see appendix 1, map 2): Nankan, Tamana, Yanagawa, Yamaga, Ōmuta, Amakusa, and the prefectural capital, Kumamoto. The first four are towns of diverse sizes in an area around what was once the Higo-Chikugo provincial border. Nankan is where Yamashika was born and lived, with the exception of two years in Amakusa in the

3. Very few member priests today are blind, and only one blind member plays biwa in rites for his *danka* (parishioners; see chapter 6).

4. The background to the term “*higobiwa*,” as well as its potential inaccuracy, is explained in chapter 2. Katayama Kyokusei, a Kyoto-based musician who learned some pieces from Yamashika, occasionally performs “*higobiwa*,” and has taught a small group of Kumamoto residents to play beginners’ pieces (see chapter 6). Among *biwa hiki*, however, competence in performance meant far more than this rudimentary level of skill.

1920s and nearly twenty years spent in the coastal town of Yanagawa during the 1940s to 1960s. Nankan is written with characters meaning “southern gate” (南関), a reference to the fact that in the Edo period the barrier gate between Higo, domain of the Hosokawa clan daimyō (provincial ruler), and Chikugo, the southern half of the Kuroda clan’s domain, was located nearby on the Buzen Kaidō Road. The old Nankan town had prospered as a point of accommodation for travellers waiting to pass through the gate, but declined with the advent of railways in the 1890s, when what became the Kagoshima Line was laid far away, along the coast.⁵ Being adjacent to the old domain border (which was taken as the basis for the modern borders of Fukuoka and Kumamoto prefectures), the local culture and dialect of Nankan inhabitants drew strongly upon both Higo and Chikugo traditions. For most of the twentieth century Nankan was a farming village that produced rice, barley and vegetable produce for the markets of Ōmuta, Tamana and other towns whose economies derived from their positions as ports, transportation hubs, and attractive natural resources (the last applies to Yamaga, known for its hot springs since the Edo period).

The Ōhara area of Nankan (now known as Kobaru) in which Yamashika grew up and lived most of his life is today picturesque, as the population is small and the remaining farmhouses are large and in good repair, and because both the urban and suburban settings that frame most Japanese people’s lives seem remote from the place.⁶ Yet in the past living conditions for many there were far from comfortable. Poverty was not rare in rural Japan in the first half of the twentieth century. Unlike the Tōhoku region of northern Honshu where famine occurred in the early 1930s, the milder climate of Kyushu meant that there was always some form of food available (the last famine in Kyushu was in Meiji 4, 1871). Yet for rural Nagasaki Prefecture and Kumamoto Prefecture’s Amakusa islands (where Yamashika spent just over two years during his unfinished apprenticeship), poverty and lack of education have been cited as principal reasons for these regions’

5. This now runs from Fukuoka in the north to Kagoshima in the south, but was laid only as far as Yatsushiro, some thirty kilometres south-east of Kumamoto, by the end of the Meiji period.

6. This is in part because noise from the expressway that passes about three hundred metres to the south is barely perceptible, due to sound baffles.

inordinate representation among the numbers of Japanese prostitutes in brothels throughout the Japanese empire and adjacent regions in the first half of the twentieth century.⁷

Finally, the city of Kumamoto, some thirty-five kilometres from Nankan, had been the castle town of the rulers of Higo, the Hosokawa. Always subsidiary in size and importance to Fukuoka in the modern era, it is nonetheless one of three large cities in Kyushu and has been home to over 500,000 people since the mid-1970s. In the time I knew Yamashika he visited Kumamoto rarely—and most often for performances arranged by scholars and amateur folklorists who worked with him. Most of the officials and governmental bodies charged with documenting and preserving the regional blind biwa tradition were based in Kumamoto, and the Folklore Studies division of Kumamoto National University has been an important centre for research on biwa music in central Kyushu.

The Biwa Music Traditions

Apart from court ensemble music and modern instrumental compositions, the bulk of biwa repertory has been vocal music, either melodic recitation of poetic narrative or ritual recitation, accompanied by biwa. It is a major genre of traditional music practised in various regions, but especially prevalent on Kyushu. While modern styles of biwa music are played by professionals and amateurs of both sexes, prior to the Meiji period it seems that only males performed biwa narrative (see chapter 1), and the majority of styles were practised solely by blind professionals.

Biwa is not an indigenous Japanese instrument. The origins of the various forms of biwa that have developed in Japan are in the transmission of Continental Asian short-necked lutes and portions of their repertoires to Japanese musicians, by at latest the eighth century. The principal historical traditions of biwa can be divided into four groups:

7. See the accounts of the experiences of some women from those areas in Yamazaki (1972; published in English as Yamazaki 1999).

Biwa in *gagaku*—The earliest documented transmission was of several forms of short-necked lute performed by both men and women for instrumental, dance and song forms within the music repertoires of the court and major Buddhist ecclesiastical institutions, from as early as the eighth century. The court music repertory, generically referred to as *gagaku*, continues on a reduced scale today, and the four-stringed *gaku biwa* (or *gagaku biwa*) is considered to be a form of the instrument little changed since its introduction from the Asian continent.

Singers of tales with biwa: *zatō* and *biwa hōshi*—In sources from the tenth century on there are accounts of blind male musicians, most commonly called *zatō*, a general term for blind men of low status. Such blind musicians were also often referred to as *biwa hōshi*, a literary term for which the earliest documented usage is a poetic diary of the 980s. These blind musicians were not associated with court society and in most cases lacked any formal Buddhist affiliation. As itinerants whose shaven heads and apparel often gave them the appearance of priests, they could be referred to as *hōshi* (literally, “teacher of the Buddhist law,” or one who has given up a home for the purpose of practising austerities). They are thought to have performed recitations of war tales as a ritual means of placating the souls of slain warriors; hence they are important figures in accounts of the creation of representative *gunki monogatari* (tales of war) during the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. The *biwa hōshi* are best known for their role in shaping the most representative work of medieval Japanese narrative literature, the *Heike monogatari* (*The Tale of the Heike*). Performers of *heike* recitation with biwa (*heikebiwa*) began as low-status itinerant musicians in the early thirteenth century. After developing their recitational art over centuries, they received Shogunal patronage, and established a formal guild, the *tōdō-za*. Low-status *zatō* who recited *heike* and other local repertoires with either biwa or *shamisen* accompaniment existed in several regions of Japan, in varying relation to the administrative network of the centrally-administered *tōdō-za*. While the guild frequently made efforts to force all such musicians into membership, many continued to work outside its jurisdiction.⁸ After the guild’s

8. In addition to Kyushu, such performers are documented for northern Honshu—most famously in Bashō’s account in *Oku no Hosomichi* of a blind biwa player’s

dissolution in the 1870s, traces of its organisational practices remained among regional blind musicians, and among a small number of blind and sighted *heikebiwa* players who transmitted that tradition until the present day.

Biwa-playing Buddhist priests (*mōsō*) and other blind biwa players in Kyushu—The word *mōsō* appears in early Japanese sources, but only to refer to priests who are blind; its use to designate members of particular social groups whose members were blind and played biwa dates from much later, in the late seventeenth century, when blind males who performed certain sutras and ritual narratives with biwa sought patronage from powerful Buddhist sects. It is reasonable to interpret *mōsō* as a designation for *biwa hōshi* who gained affiliation from the late seventeenth century with regional and national institutions, both Buddhist and “Shintoist” in nature. In the case of Satsuma *mōsō*, the patronage of the powerful Shimazu daimyō was also secured. As a result of these affiliations, *mōsō* engaged in a greater range of ritual activity than other *biwa hōshi*. This position, which I present at length in chapter 1, was developed by Komoda (2004), and has largely displaced the understanding of *mōsō* and *mōsōbiwa* as ancient institutions and traditions, which was standard to musicological reference sources of the latter half of the twentieth century.

It is likely that legitimate status as “monks” or “priests” was rare for blind biwa players until the modern period, but in Kyushu and the westernmost reaches of Honshu (Yamaguchi and Hiroshima prefectures), both *zatō*—that is, low-status *biwa hōshi*—and *mōsō* were important as celebrants of rites central to local veneration of deities of fire and earth, known most simply as Kōjin and Jijin. Exorcism (*harai*) of these deities was performed in a range of rites carried out for householders, such as the *Jijin-barai* and *kamado-barai*, as well as in formal group rites within *mōsō* temples, such as the Jijin-kyō Hōraku of the Fukuoka-based Chikuzen *mōsō* sect and the Myōon Jūnigaku of the Kagoshima-based Satsuma sect.

In music scholarship, the term *mōsōbiwa* has had two usages, a broader and a narrower one. The former sense is as a collective term

performance of tales of the *oku jōruri* repertory (see Hirose 1997, 116), which continued in fragmentary form into the twentieth century as a *shamisen*-accompanied genre.

for the biwa performance traditions that have been practised by blind males in south-western Japan; as such, it remains in currency as the broadest and most common general term for the blind traditions of Kyushu. Hence it encompasses both the ritual and secular repertoires of Yamashika and other *biwa hiki* of the former Higo Province—*zatō* who were bearers of what has been called the *higobiwa* tradition (see chapter 2)—and the biwa music of certified member priests of two *mōsō* organisations, the Gensei Hōryū and the Jōrakuin Hōryū. When used in its narrower sense, *mōsōbiwa* denotes the musical repertoires of member priests of those two sects. As the head temples of these sects are in the former (pre-Meiji) provinces of Satsuma and Chikuzen, respectively, scholars have distinguished the repertoires and ritual practices as the *Satsuma mōsōbiwa* and *Chikuzen mōsōbiwa* traditions.

Chikuzenbiwa and *satsumabiwa*—Early in the Edo period (1603–1867), a new form of biwa playing emerged from interaction between *mōsō* and the samurai class in the province of Satsuma. It subsequently became well known throughout Japan from the end of the nineteenth century, at the start of a period of popularity for “modern biwa” (*kindai biwa*) that lasted until the 1930s. Equally as popular as *satsumabiwa* (the term by which this music became known) was a style called *chikuzenbiwa*, which had its origin in the 1890s in the Chikuzen region of Kyushu, and drew upon elements of the music of *mōsō* in the region, as well as *shamisen* music and *satsumabiwa* instrumental techniques. By the 1920s both styles were played for leisure by tens of thousands of amateurs and several hundred professionals in all of the country’s major centres. *Chikuzenbiwa* and *satsumabiwa* are the two styles of biwa narrative that have been most widely practised in Tokyo, Osaka and other cities since the late Meiji period. The histories of both styles up until the time of their popularisation among urban audiences in central Japan, between 1880 and 1920, are inseparable from the histories of biwa performance by blind males in the Chikuzen and Satsuma regions. Distinct four- and five-string instruments are played in each style; in the case of *chikuzenbiwa* the four-string *chikuzen biwa* instrument⁹ was a little-altered form of a type of biwa played by Chikuzen-region *mōsō*.

9. In this text, forms of instrument will be denoted by separation of the word “*biwa*” from what precedes it, hence *mōsō biwa*, *heike biwa*, *satsuma biwa*, and so forth.

Biwa music performed today in the cities of Japan is almost invariably that of schools within these two styles.¹⁰ In addition to the instrument played, what most distinguishes “modern biwa” music from the recitations of Kyushu *biwa hiki* (and from other traditional narrative genres such as *jōruri*) is the uniformity of vocal delivery style throughout a *satsumabiwa* or *chikuzenbiwa* piece; even when first-person speech phrases are recited, change in sonic quality of the voice occurs only briefly.

Biwa and *Biwa Hōshi* in Modern-day Japan

There are now only a limited number of contexts in which most people have contact with biwa, the instrument or its music. The word *mōsō* is unknown to most people, as is the fact that in the late twentieth century there were blind priests in rural Kyushu who played biwa in ritual contexts. The biwa’s most common and immediate association is with the expression *biwa hōshi*, which in turn conjures up a set of images acquired principally from two sources: compulsory study of the *Tale of the Heike* for a few days during high school, and the one story about biwa that almost everyone knows—*Mimi Nashi Hōichi*, as rendered by the Irish-Greek essayist and documentor of Meiji-period Japan, Lafcadio Hearn, or as recast in film, manga, anime and other media. Through exposure to these sources most Japanese come to think of the biwa as a battered old string instrument played by a decrepit blind man who looks like a Buddhist priest and wanders about chanting old tales about war and ghosts.

Live performances of biwa narrative singing are on the whole rare, and almost all performers are practitioners of *chikuzenbiwa* and *satsumabiwa*.¹¹ These traditions were popular during the first decades of the twentieth century largely because they expressed the prevailing nationalist, militarist sentiments of late-Meiji imperialist ideology. The repertoires of both *chikuzenbiwa* and *satsumabiwa* changed greatly in the post-war era as they came to be seen as refined classical pursuits,

10. There are also a small number of *heikebiwa* performers active in Nagoya, Tokyo and Sendai.

11. As biwa narrative singing continues in these two “modern biwa” traditions, the title of this book is not intended literally, but as a characterisation to be understood in light of the array of representations of Yamashika that I discuss.

and today they may be heard far more often than *heikebiwa*. There is no general awareness of this, however, nor of the fact that the instruments and music of modern biwa traditions are not those of *biwa hōshi* of times past.

Apart from at occasional performances, the biwa itself can often be seen in the benevolent arms of the goddess Benzaiten at her numerous shrines, and in images of the Seven Lucky Gods (*shichi fukujin*) in homes, shops and offices. Notwithstanding, for Japanese I have spoken with over the last fifteen years, it is not these everyday objects or images that come to mind when the biwa is mentioned, but rather the *biwa hōshi* and Hearn's story of the blind priest, "Earless" Hōichi. Most are not quite sure what the instrument sounds like, and few can recognise its tones without being prompted by accompanying visual references to ghosts and medieval warriors offered in films and television programs. In all cases there is an emphatic sense that the biwa cannot be a thing of contemporary Japanese life and experience, but is tied forever to the world of the *Tale of the Heike*; a gloomy world of martial valour and samurai ghosts. Outside the realms of scholarship and the few who are involved in learning and performing, then, biwa narrative music is no longer experienced even as a marginal genre "inscribed within the nostalgic register as vanishing" (Ivy 1995, 242). Notwithstanding, the biwa's association with the provision of solace for the dead and appeasement of the gods continues to be fixed in the public imagination.

The *Biwa Hiki*, Yamashika Yoshiyuki

Born in 1901, in the Ōhara district of Nankan in northern Kumamoto Prefecture, Yamashika lost sight in his left eye at the age of four. His right eye was also weak, and had virtually failed by the time he reached his twenties, although he retained some ability to make out shapes and light contrast until his eighties. In his teens he became fond of a *shamisen*-accompanied narrative style that had been extremely popular since the last decade of Meiji, *naniwa-bushi*, and dreamed of becoming a professional performer. His father, however, forbade this, and insisted that he train as a professional biwa player, as he felt that "even if the tales (*gei*) lose their audience, there'll always be ritual (*harai*) work for you" (Murayama 1986, 430–431).

In 1923 Yamashika was apprenticed for five years to a biwa player named Ezaki Shotarō (performer's name Tamagawa Kyōsetsu) in Amakusa. The teacher, a skilled performer in Yamashika's opinion, had been a student of Tamagawa Kyōjun, a renowned *biwa hiki* of the Nankan area and the founder of the Tamagawa line (*ha*), who is said to have received his performer's name from the last of the Higo daimyō. He taught infrequently, however, and by his third year of apprenticeship Yamashika had learned only a handful of short pieces. When his father took sick in 1926, Yamashika returned to Nankan, where for a few years he proceeded to work the family's small plot (something he could do because he still had partial sight in one eye) while also doing *kadobiki*, biwa performance door-to-door for whatever payment the occupants would offer, and learning new tales and some ritual procedures from a number of other biwa players in the area. From time to time, too, he was associated with a group of blind performers in the Chikugo region, whose purpose was to assist in organising concerts and other events to generate members' income (Hyōdō 1991, 16). Yamashika took the performing name Tamagawa Kyōen and, despite the fact that his apprenticeship had been cut drastically short, declared his "professional" status with a ceremonial name-taking performance in 1927.¹² He also learned to perform some *naniwa-bushi* and *jōruri* recitations, both of which styles had enjoyed great popularity in northern Kyushu.

From the 1930s to the late 1960s, Yamashika supported himself and his family through formal biwa engagements, ritual activities and *kadobiki*, supplemented by produce grown in a field near his home in Nankan. The small family plot was especially important as a source of sustenance during the years of war against the United States of America and the Occupation years (1945–1951) that followed, when biwa engagements were rare. In 1973 Yamashika applied to the Gensei Hōryū *mōsō* sect in Fukuoka to become certified as a Tendai priest, both in an effort to ensure a continuing income from ritual work, and to fulfil a long-held aspiration for professional recognition and legitimacy.¹³ Also in 1973, the so-called *higobiwa* tradition was declared

12. There is some doubt as to the exact year of the ceremonial performance; see chapter 3.

13. This was Kimura Rirō's interpretation, expressed in conversation, but Yamashika himself later gave confirmation. To judge from Yamashika's statement to Murayama

to be an Intangible Cultural Asset by the national government's Office of Cultural Affairs. Following this, a number of prestigious awards were given to Yamashika by governmental and private cultural foundations, including the Imperial Fifth Order of the Sacred Treasure (*Zuihō-shō*) in 1980. Yamashika had married several times and had children, but from 1988 on he lived alone.¹⁴ Although his career as an active performer had effectively ended by 1990, he continued to be asked to perform in occasional events instigated by researchers and aficionados of local culture. In the first week of July 1992 he performed in Tokyo for two nights, to well-above capacity houses at the Mokubatei, a small theatre in Asakusa. The concert was organised by the producers of the 1992 documentary, *Biwa hōshi Yamashika Yoshiyuki*, and footage of the event forms the denouement of the film (Aoike 1992). A few months after returning from Tokyo, he fell from steps and was hospitalised. Although he recovered, and was able to spend most of 1993 in his home, he maintained, in October of that year, that he was absolutely incapable of holding the biwa, and that “without the biwa, my voice just won't work.”¹⁵ His health failed again in 1995, so that he entered a nearby old people's home where he died on June 24, 1996.

* * *

In writing this work I have assumed that most readers will have little or no prior knowledge of biwa music, nor of Japanese scholarship on historical performance traditions. Even in musicological and literary research on Japan published in English, there has been no extensive writing about *biwa hōshi* since Susan Matisoff's 1978 book on Semimaru.¹⁶ Accordingly, chapter 1 provides a general account of

in 1974 that he no longer received any requests to do *kamado-barai* rites, this strategy for generating work as a Gensei-sect *mōsō* was hardly successful (Murayama 1986, 439). It should be noted that Yamashika was not included in the Heisei 3 (1991) directory of member priests of the Gensei Hōryū, as he had not paid dues for some years (Yasuda 2001, 22–23).

14. According to Kimura Rirō, Yamashika's first wife, Ine, bore five children, of whom only Tetsuo lived beyond childhood (1994, 101). Tetsuo died in his twenties, and one son by another of Yamashika's four wives remained alive in 2007.

15. Telephone conversation of October 1993.

16. In German, Fritsch (1996) deals with the history and origin-stories of the *mōsō* blind priests and the *biwa hōshi*, as well as other blind musicians and ritualists. Matisoff's

available historical evidence on blind male performers of biwa, as well as past and modern-day images of *biwa hōshi*, while chapter 2 concerns blind biwa players in central Kyushu and presents an overview of the repertory of “*higobiwa*,” with most detail about Yamashika’s known repertory, as the largest and best documented among the *biwa hiki* whom researchers contacted since the 1960s. In chapter 3, I examine closely the problems of such “contact,” and representations of Kyushu biwa traditions and of Yamashika the individual musician that they have given rise to in scholarship, the mass media and populist writings. Chapter 4 deals with the changing contexts for performances by Yamashika and with the performance process itself in a rendition of the *Dōjōji* tale. Chapter 5 concerns how Yamashika came to train as a *biwa hiki*, and the circumstances and characteristics of his training and professional life from the 1920s through 1960s. The final chapter, “Blind Biwa Singers Forgotten, Remembered and Rehabilitated,” concerns the interstices of history, representation and the individual in the social rehabilitation of *biwa hiki*, whom most locals had considered little better than beggars until the late 1960s, and the subsequent transmission of some of Yamashika’s repertory to sighted musicians that this change enabled. Efforts since Yamashika’s death to pass the mantle of “the last *biwa hōshi*” to a blind Tendai-sect priest in Miyazaki Prefecture are also examined, to suggest the enduring cultural meanings that the perceived persistence of this kind of pre-modern musician has in Japan.

The concerns of this book for social and individual history, as well as imaginings and interpretations of those histories, have necessitated inclusion of only a limited amount of analysis of the performance process and musical and textual elements of the narrative and song repertories.¹⁷ Nonetheless familiarity with the music of *biwa hiki* (and Yamashika Yoshiyuki’s performances in particular) will enrich the reading of all that follows. Despite Yamashika’s fame among the research community and folklore enthusiasts since the 1970s, at the time of his death no recordings of representative repertory had been made commercially available. I sought to rectify that lack by working

book is now available again as a reprint (2006).

17. I have presented extensive analyses of the oral compositional process elsewhere (see de Ferranti 1995, 1997 and 2003).

with Kimura Rirō and the Japan Traditional Cultures Foundation over several years to produce a compact disc anthology with extensive documentation in Japanese and English (Nihon Dentō Geinō Shinkō Zaidan 2007). As one of the three discs includes Hyōdō Hiromi's field recording of the performance of *Dōjōji* that is presented in full in chapter 4, I would urge readers to seek out the CD-set and familiarise themselves with how Yamashika's performances sounded during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁸ I have also deposited a number of field recordings of performances by Yamashika with the Pacific and Regional Archives for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC), some of which will be made publicly accessible.¹⁹

18. A fuller sense of performance can of course be gained from audiovisual resources, of which a selection is listed in the Audio-Videography. As this book was going to print, a wonderful audiovisual resource appeared in the form of a twenty-minute excerpt from a 1989 performance of *Shuntokumaru*, on the DVD included with Hyōdō Hiromi's book *Biwa hōshi* (2009, Tokyo: Iwanami Shinsho).

19. On the archive website, paradisec.org.au, search the catalogue for the set of field recordings whose persistent identifier is HDF1-YY.

IMAGES AND HISTORIES

Today all except one of the forms of biwa music described in the introduction continue, albeit among far smaller numbers of performers and audiences. The exception is the performance of songs and narratives by blind males of low social status commonly called *biwa hōshi*. Late in his life Yamashika Yoshiyuki became broadly identified as a twentieth-century *biwa hōshi*—and seemingly “the last *biwa hōshi*”—for the reason that his professional activities as a performer and his lifestyle accorded with the essential features of the historical *biwa hōshi* as represented in scholarship, and selectively imparted by education and the media. As an icon of the past and its remoteness, the term *biwa hōshi* has a marketing value that has been immediately apparent to writers on Yamashika, as well as to television and film producers who documented his lifestyle. The publisher of Kimura Rirō’s 1994 book, moreover, opted to exploit that same value in the rhetorical phrase that serves as the book’s sub-title, “He’s been called the last *biwa hōshi*, but . . .” (*hito wa saigo no biwa hōshi to iu keredo*). The image of the medieval *biwa hōshi*—a combination of a blind priest and an entertainer—hovers in the background of almost every text on Yamashika; “the last *biwa hōshi*” expresses a view of Yamashika in terms of stereotypic images from national history.

While *biwa hōshi* have long been regarded as key historical figures for canonical genres of national literature and performing arts, the practice of biwa music in Higo remains a topic of interest primarily for local scholars and enthusiasts. If not for the framing concepts of the *biwa hōshi* and their significance for the development of canonical performed narrative (*katarimono*) genres, it is doubtful that knowledge of Yamashika would have extended beyond Kumamoto and Kyushu folklorists and historians. Kimura’s book was put together at a time—the early 1990s—when Yamashika’s national significance had been

emphatically established by the activities of scholars and a film-maker, and the construction of his text implicitly argues for a local and personal significance that supercedes the claims of “outsiders” who appropriated Yamashika for their own intellectual and ideological agendas. While aware of my status as one of the latter group, in this chapter I aim to convey the density of historical and ethnographic layering that bears upon representations of Yamashika and other blind biwa players of the modern era.

Characteristics of the Blind Biwa Traditions

The treatment of blind biwa players in historical documents and representative literature reflects a set of characteristics that *biwa hōshi*, *mōsō* and *zatō* (or *biwa hiki* as they were often called in central Kyushu) have had in common: blindness, maleness, a degree of association with sacred and supernatural phenomena, and various degrees of engagement in performance of narratives for entertainment.

Biwa and Blindness

As in many societies, music and narrative performance have been common professions for the blind throughout much of Japanese recorded history.¹ Among musicians, blind professionals were of central importance for most major genres (the exceptions being court music and genres of theatre music) from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries, and among blind musicians, biwa players figure in sources spanning nearly one thousand years. In folklore and literature, stories about biwa players other than those of the court music tradition are invariably about blind *biwa hōshi* and *zatō*. Apart from the modern biwa traditions, and *gaku biwa* as played in the *gagaku* ensemble, most professional biwa performers were blind throughout recorded history.²

1. For a brief but thorough overview of blind musicians in Japanese history, much of which concerns *biwa hōshi*, see Groemer (1999, 3–19). A more extensive treatment is given in German by Ingrid Fritsch (1996). The principal studies in Japanese are Nakayama (1934), Katō (1974), Nagai (2002) and several chapters in Hirose (1997).

2. Note that in the Tsugaru tradition of *heikebiwa* (*heikyoku*), non-blind professionals were not uncommon. Since the late twentieth century, moreover, a small number of

By no means, however, should it be assumed that all “blind” biwa players were completely lacking the sense of vision and knowledge of writing. The denotation of words for blind people, the most common of which were *mōjin*, *zatō* and *mekura* (a slang word now officially listed as a discriminatory expression), must be acknowledged at the start of any historical assessment of blind biwa performers. There is little doubt that many people called by these terms were in fact only impaired in their vision. It is also worth remembering that many blind people became so only gradually, or else suddenly as adults, due to illness or accident, so that they were able to learn to read and write. In reading sources on the blind biwa traditions of Kyushu, and talking with blind performers in the early 1990s, I have often been struck by the fact that representative figures (for example, Yamashika and the Kunisaki-peninsula *mōsō*, Takagi Seigen) had had sufficient sight in one eye for them to read and even write some characters into their early adulthood (Kimura 1994, 164–178; Nagai 2002, 362). What is more, Yamashika and other former “*higobiwa*” performers spoke on several occasions of professional players and teachers who were sighted and in some cases literate.³ The records of the Jōjuin or Gensei Hōryū *mōsō* tradition, moreover, include evidence that even during the Edo period sighted men were often admitted, even if their numbers were small (Nagai 2002, 13, 126, 333). Statutes of the Gensei Hōryū from its establishment in 1907 contain no requirements for blindness, and by the 1930s sighted men had already become a majority in the sect’s membership (Fukuoka-ken Kyōiku Iin Kai 1983).⁴ Any study of blind biwa performance in Japan must take into consideration the potential role of sighted participants in the tradition, in particular in the production of written texts and their utilisation in transmission of repertory.

both male (for example, the established *satsumabiwa* player Suda Seishū) and female (for example, Hashimoto Toshie) non-blind performers of *heikebiwa* have been active.

3. For a discussion of the implications of this in the case of Ōkawa Susumu’s performance tradition, see de Ferranti (2002).

4. In 2002 the Gensei Hōryū had no blind members, while in the Jōrakuin Hōryū there were four blind priests, of whom only one played biwa in the households of his *danka*. A few sighted priests of both *hōryū* did so; among them, the practice of Ōkawa Gyōshun, of Hiradojima near Nagasaki, has been partially documented by researchers (*Fugeki mōsō gakkai kaihō* 1991).

The earliest documentation of biwa playing outside the court traditions refers to blind male performers. What might have been the historical roots of this association, beyond the practical consideration of the instrument's portability for itinerant performance by people with visual impairment? Blindness and the playing of lutes for alms were linked in Indian Buddhist culture in the early centuries of the first millennium of the Christian era. One of the central episodes among the origin stories of blind biwa players recounted in documents of the *mōsō* sects and the *biwa hōshi* guild concerns Prince Kunala, son of King Asoka, who is said to have become an itinerant player of the *vina*, led around by his wife or (in some versions) five-year-old son, after having his eyes ripped out at his stepmother's request. In Sanskrit, the tale is to be found in a fourth-century text, the *Asokavadana* (translated as *The Legend of King Asoka*; Strong 1983). In South Asia, then, from at least the fourth century there were blind itinerants, described as priests or holy men, who played lutes and received alms. The Kunala story was also popular throughout the Northern Buddhist cultures, and exists in a seventh-century Chinese version.⁵ Scattered accounts of blind holy men who play lutes suggest that the practice of such semi-ritualistic performance was transmitted to East Asia with Buddhism. For example, in the sixth volume of the Tang-period chronicle *Xu gaoseng zhuang* there is a record of a blind man named Zhenyu who "preached" (presumably in chant) while playing *pipa*⁶ and won many followers after being invited to perform at the Imperial compound (Hyōdō 1985b, 102).⁷ Before the 1949 revolution, blind beggars who recited tales and travelled with *pipa* accompanists were common in the Shanbei region near Inner Mongolia (Wu Ben 1992, 58). It is also

5. *Hsi Yu Chi* [Records of Western Countries; mentioned on page 69 of Matisoff 1978 (2006)]. See also the bibliographic notes on page 151 of Strong (1983).

6. *Pipa* is the etymological source of the word *biwa*, and is written with the same two characters (琵琶), although historically the word has referred to a variety of plucked, fretted lutes played in China. From the seventh until at least the fourteenth centuries, the Chinese and Japanese terms denoted instruments that were structurally identical or similar, namely, forms of the four-stringed, pear-shaped lute played with a large plectrum (*gagaku biwa*) that has continued to be played in the *kangen* ensemble of *gagaku*. Structural modification to the *pipa* since the fifteenth century has produced an instrument, performance style and repertory unlike those of any forms of *biwa*.

7. The original text can be read in *Gaoseng Zhuan* (Biographies of eminent monks) (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 1991).