

Sounding the Conch Horn, *Hora-gai* in Modern Japanese Life: A Survey in Joetsu City and Nou Town (Northern Japan)

現代日本での法螺貝の響き－上越市と能生地区での調査

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日本語要旨

法螺貝吹奏は、現代日本の生活では遠い昔の情報伝達手段と思われているが、1970年ぐらいまで新潟県上越市では、伝達手段として日常的に用いられていた。伝達内容はさまざまで、農休日、祭り、冠婚葬祭などである。法螺貝は、清里区の無量寺では「お取越し行事のお知らせ」で、また様々な地域で行われる「さいのかみのお知らせ」で、清里区梨平では結婚式で、三和区では葬式のお知らせで、使用されていた。三和では、現在も様々な意志伝達に法螺貝が用いられている。糸魚川市の能生では、白山神社の春季大祭で楽器として用いられている。

本研究では、法螺貝はコミュニケーションの手段として、あるいは楽器として今も用いられ続けていることが確認された。情報伝達技術の進んだ現代にこそ、伝統的な法螺貝吹奏による連絡法の利点は見直されてよい。

Summary

To blow a conch horn as a form of signal is considered an ancient custom within the modern Japanese life. However, at least until 1970, this form of signal was used frequently in a number of wards and localities within a rural district of Japan (Joetsu city and Nou town). The meanings of the signals were varied, including signals to mark farm-work holidays, festival events and ceremonial functions. The conch horn was sounded at the otorikoshi festival in Muryoji temple, Kiyosato ward, the sainokami festival held in various localities, and in marriage ceremonies in Nashidaira, Kiyosato as well as in funeral

ceremonies in Sanwa. The conch horn is even in use today in Sanwa to convey a variety of different messages. In Nou town, the conch horn is used as a musical instrument in the spring festival.

This study confirms that the conch horn is in continued use as a form of signal and musical instrument in rural areas of Japan. Precisely because we lead modern lives based on advanced information technology, the benefit of such traditional signal forms should be recognized again and traditional conch horn sounds should be further introduced into modern life through music.

Introduction

The conch shell trumpets, for example, *pūtātara*, an example of *taonga pūoro*, the traditional musical instruments of the Māori people in New Zealand, *dung dkar* in Tibet, *hora-gai* in Japan¹⁾, have been used as communication tools for a long time.

In New Zealand, the instruments previously fulfilled many functions in the ethnic society including a call to arms and communications with the gods²⁾. Now, *taonga pūoro*, including *pūtātara*, have undergone a renaissance and continue to be used as a modern musical instrument^{3,4)}.

Likewise in Japan, historically the conch horn was used for a variety of communications. However, because mobile phones and the internet, including e-mail are widely used, for modern Japanese people living in urban settings, blowing a conch horn (*hora-gai* in Japanese) (Fig.1) as a form of signal is thought to be a relic of the ancient past, belonging to a time over 1000 years ago¹⁾.

However, there is evidence in literature of conch horns being used as a signal to mark farm-work holidays in Japan⁵⁾. Because the institution of a farm-work holiday was devised in the modern age, the conch horn being used as a signal can be considered to be part of recent history.

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Fig.1 A conch horn used in Maki ward (possessed by Mr. Sadao Habuka).

図1 牧区で使われていた法螺貝（羽深定男氏所有）

In the current study, we have confirmed that the conch horn is in continued use even today in Joetsu city and neighbouring Nou town located in northern Japan (Fig.2). This paper will introduce the current status of use of the conch horn by common people living in a rural area.

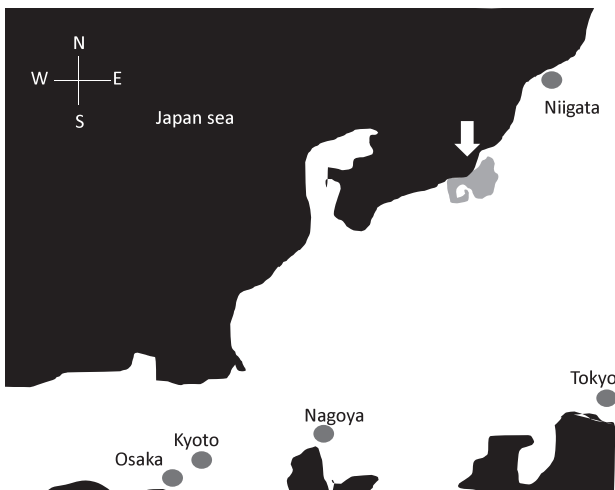


Fig.2 Joetsu city located in northern Japan.

図2 北日本に位置する上越市

Method

The field of the current study is Joetsu city located in northern Japan. Joetsu lies about 350km northwest of Tokyo on the coast of the Sea of Japan. It is situated on the Takada plains, a fertile agricultural area known for its heavy snowfalls in winter which provide a water rich environment contributing to both the quantity and quality of rice production. Main local industries include rice farming and horticulture, fishing and seasonal tourism based around the skiing industry. Naoetsu, the site of Joetsu's main trading port sees business from both coastal cargo ships and trade routes to the neighbouring countries across the Sea of Japan. The history of scattered settlement in the Joetsu area goes back thousands of years to the Jomon period, but from the Heian period the area began to develop as a center of settlement and a seat of culture. The

Sengoku (Warring States) period, particularly around the 16th century saw further cultural development of the area as the seat of Uesugi Kenshin, a powerful feudal lord. The name of "Joetsu city" was given to the urban center created by the amalgamation of former Takada city and former Naoetsu city on April 29, 1971. Joetsu city then merged with the surrounding towns and villages on January 1, 2005 to form its current city boundaries consisting of 13 wards. The city has a current population of 197,231, but, Yasuzuka, Uragawara, Oshima, Maki, Yoshikawa, Itakura, Kiyosato, Sanwa, and Nadachi wards are officially designated as depopulated areas.

In this study, interviews were conducted (face-to-face or telephone) with a representative of lay individuals in Joetsu city and a neighboring town, "Nou" as well as representatives from a local agricultural cooperative society (JA Echigo) and from Kiyosato Museum of History and Folklore, in order to ascertain information regarding what, if any, usage is being made of conch horns in modern rural life.

Details of the interviewees are as follows:

In former Takada city, three members of the Ishino brothers (79 years old, 74 years old, and 68 years old, all males, born in Kuroda, Takada, telephone interview conducted on March 21, 2015); In former Naoetsu city, Mr. Shinichi Sekiya (64 years old, university professor, born in Matsudai, Tokamachi city and residing in Ishibashi, Naoetsu, interview conducted on March 19, 2015), and Mr. H.Y. (87 years old, retiree, lives in Gochi, Naoetsu, interview conducted on February 5, 2015); In Yasuzuka ward, Mr. Seiji Jinbo (84 years old, residing in Sugawa, Yasuzuka, interview conducted on April 11, 2015); In Urugawara ward, Mr. Yasuo Nagai (49 years old, university administrative staff member, born in Kami-Inokoda, currently residing in Yokokawa, interview conducted on March 27, 2015); In Maki ward, Mr. Sadao Habuka (65 years old, residing in Sakuradaki, telephone interview conducted on March 24, 2015); in Yoshikawa ward, Mr. Masayuki Ichimura (58 years old, Chief Editor of the Joetsu Times newspaper, born and still residing in Haranomachi, telephone interview conducted on March 30, 2015); In Itakura ward, Mr. A, a man in his late 40's who wishes to remain unnamed (a representative of Kiyosato Museum of History and Folklore, telephone interview conducted on March 18, 2015); in Kiyosato ward, Mr. Hiroshi Yoshihara (63 years old, residing in Nashidaira, interview conducted on March 24, 2015), Mr. B, a man in his late 50's who wishes to remain unnamed (a representative of the Kiyosato Museum of History and Folklore, residing in Maya, interview conducted on March 18, 2015), Mr. H.N. (60 years

old, residing in Terawaki, interview conducted on March 18, 2015) and his father, Mr. Toshio Kawatani, the head monk of Muryo-ji temple (residing in Aramaki, telephone interview conducted on March 18, 2015); in Sanwa ward, Ms. M.K. (46 years old, born in Oh, interview conducted on March 21, 2015) and her mother (71 year-old, born and residing in Oh); In Kubiki ward, Mr. Kazuo Isogai (66 years old, taxi-driver, residing in Ishigami, interview on March 19, 2015); In Nadachi ward, Mr. C, a man who wishes to remain unnamed (60 years old, staff of city office, telephone interview conducted on March 30, 2015); In Nou town, Yoshihiro Ino, (a professor at Niigata University, born in Nou, interview conducted on April 24, 2015). (Refer to Fig. 3 for respective geographic locations.) Interview questions were as follows:

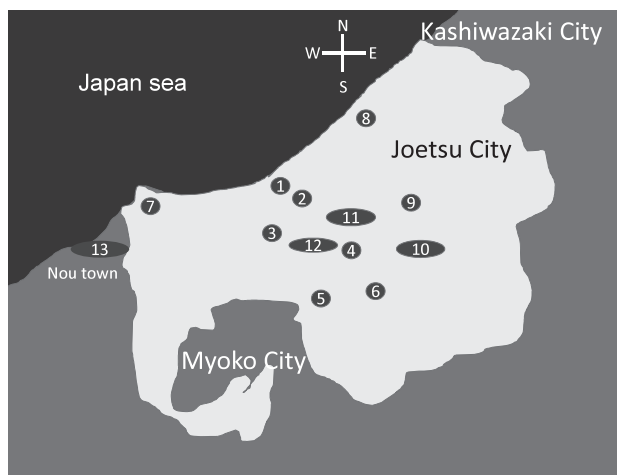


Fig.3 Research fields

- 1) Gochi, in former Naoetu city,
- 2) Ishibashi, in former Naoetsu city,
- 3) Kuroda, in former Takada city,
- 4) Terawaki, Kiyosato ward,
- 5) Itakura area,
- 6) Sakuradaki, Maki,
- 7) Nadachi area,
- 8) Haranomachi, Yoshikawa,
- 9) Yokokawa, Uragakawa,
- 10) Sugawa, Yasuzuka,
- 11) Oh, Sanwa area,
- 12) Aramaki, Kiyosato ward,
- 13) Nou town

図3 調査地域

- 1) Is (Was) a conch horn used as a signal to mark a farm-work holiday in your town?
- 2) Is (Was) a conch horn used as a signal to convey any other neighborhood association information? If so, what kind of information is conveyed?

Results

In answer to question No.1, “Is (Was) a conch horn used to signal a holiday from farm-work in your town?” all except one

(Yasuzuka) respondents answered affirmatively. All stated that conch horns had been used as a signal to mark a farm-work holiday until circa 1970. They reported that in each ward, a man would walk around blowing a conch horn. In Kuroda suburb, the Ishino brothers answered that until 1950, on a farm-work holiday (the 1st day and 15th day of each month), a member of the local council would blow a conch horn in a hall at the center of the ward. The conch horn trumpeter was determined by turn taking. Mr. Isogai (Ishigami) also answered that similarly, in Ishigami, a conch horn sounder belonging to the local council was decided by taking turns. Mr. Yoshihara (Nashidaira) reported that “the horn blower was either the chairman of my ward or an elder of my town”. Advanced techniques in horn blowing were not needed, as the sound of the horn blast itself was sufficient. No one had received special horn blowing training.

In Maya, Kiyosato, a respondent reported that “only two houses had conch horns”. In Yoshikawa, Sanwa (Oh), and Nadachi ward, similar responses were received. On the other hand, in Nashidaira, Kiyosato, according to Mr. Yoshihara, almost all houses were in possession of a conch horn. In fact, Mr. Yoshihara himself used to have one, but, because as the mouthpiece was broken, he disposed of it last year. Confirmation that almost every household had a conch horn was provided by the father of Mr. H.N. of Terawaki, Kiyosato.

In Itakura ward, a respondent reported that a holiday from farm-work was determined by the local neighborhood committee and one of its members would blow a conch horn. A man blowing the conch horn would walk through the streets accompanied by another man carrying a staff similar to a priest’s crosier which would emit a jangling sound when struck upon the ground.

To question no.2 “Is (Was) a conch horn used as a signal to convey any other neighborhood association information, and if so, what kind of information?” a variety of responses were received. The master of Muryo-ji temple (Aramaki, Kiyosato) reported that, on every December 7th, the *otorikoshi* festival was announced by conch horn. However, this tradition disappeared after the Pacific War (World War II). Signaling of the event proceeded as follows: around six o’clock p.m, the young gathered together at the temple and one of them walked through the town blowing a conch horn. When the blower completed his pass around the town he returned and the next horn blower started into the town. Again, no special conch horn blowing training was required as just making a sound was thought sufficient. Mr. H.N. (Terawaki, neighboring Aramaki)

stated, “In my childhood, signals by conch horn were used to mark temple festivals..

Another reported use of the conch signal is to mark the *sainokami* festivals in Ishigami, Sakuradaki and Oh, with reports that the conch is still used to this day. Specifically, according to Mr. Habuka (Sakudarakai), a conch horn is blown to mark both the commencement and climax of the *sainokami* festival. According to Ms. M.K. (Oh, Sanwa), a conch horn was blown just recently at this year’s *sainokami* festival held on February 10, 2015. The horn blower was a member of the local Volunteer Fire Department in her ward.

Next, there were a number of responses indicating that the conch horn is (was) used for ceremonial functions. One such situation was the sounding of the conch during a funeral. Ms. M.K. (Oh suburb), reports that a conch horn was blown as a signal to inform the local inhabitants on the occasion of the funeral of her grandfather in 2005. Ms. M.K.’s mother added that the tradition of a conch horn signal for funerals is continued until today (the latest of such funeral was held in December, 2014). Now, there is only one conch horn used in the ward, and it is kept by the local community chairman. Other reports of ceremonial use of the conch horn were received. Mr. Yoshihara (Nashidaira, Kiyosato) stated that until approximately 1980, the conch horn was used to mark the beginning of a marriage. In Nou town, at the spring festival held at Hakusan-shinto shrine, the conch shell continues to be used as a musical instrument even now (Figure 4).



Fig.4, A man in traditional Japanese formal dress blowing a hora-gai horn as a musical instrument at the Spring Festival in Nou town.

図4 能生の春祭りで法螺貝を吹く正装した楽人

Discussion

The sound of a conch horn is distinct and strident in volume; therefore, all who hear it, appreciate that some significant

information is being conveyed. The conch horn has been essential to inform common people of significant happenings, such as farm-work holidays, festivals and various ceremonial events. Without a doubt, the conch horn has been considered an effective communication tool for a long time in Japan.

There are of course limitations of using *hora-gai*. It may be difficult to obtain a conch horn. The conch mollusc (*Charonia tritonis*) does not inhabit the Japan Sea around Joetsu city. There is no choice for local authorities in Joetsu who wish to use conch horns in their communities but to purchase the horns from other places. In spite of the economic burden, however, conch horns are used in Joetsu city widely. The fact that almost all households had a conch horn in some neighborhoods is clear evidence of its common use. In this study, while it has been proved that the conch horn is in use in Joetsu city, further research may prove that the conch horn has been or is still currently being used extensively across Japan.

In the current study, it is clear that common people sound the conch horn without using advanced blowing techniques. Special training had not been undertaken beforehand local inhabitants sounded the horn. However, the conch horn is also recognized as a highly ritualized implement of *shugen-do* (a mountain religion blending esoteric mysticism, spiritualism and Buddhist traditions). Practitioners of *shugen-do* blow the conch horn as an element of religious training. Special techniques are employed to elicit alterations in pitch and tone, such as, *kan-on* (a high pitch tone), *otsu-on* (a low pitch tone), *kaeshi* (a pitch bend), *yuri* (tremolo, super high pitch tone), etc. These special techniques need much training^{6,7}. These types of blowing techniques were not reported in the present study of conch horn usage in Joetsu. Locals produced simple sounds by blowing the conch horn with little technique, and that was considered good enough. The selection of the conch horn blower was determined by turn taking and hence was independent of the blower’s musical techniques. Needless to say, a religious license or membership in or adherence to a religious organization is not a prerequisite for those who blow the horn. These facts suggest that in rural areas, the conch horn is recognized as a secular tool, not a ritualized religious or spiritual instrument and can be (and is) used casually by everyday people. This finding contradicts the assertions of Fukui (1994) who contends that while historically the conch horn was used for a variety of reasons, its use in modern times is rare and mostly limited to followers of *shugen-do* and some sects of Buddhism.

Interestingly, according to one report, in Itakura ward, a man

with a staff like a priest's crosier accompanied the horn blower when walking around the neighborhood. Unfortunately, this report has not been verified with photographic proof. In many Japanese festivals, it is common for the leader in a parade to walk with a staff (called *kanabo*). Old photographs give proof of such even in former Naoetsu city^{8,9}. Travelling monks also hold a similar staff, but of a different style (called *shaku-jo*), but as no photographic image of the staff used in Itakura has been obtained, it is unfortunately not possible to identify what kind of staff it was. Moreover, the reason why the conch horn blower in Itakura ward was always accompanied by a person with the staff remains unclear. Further research is expected to resolve these riddles.

Perhaps the biggest limitation of conch horns is the inability to convey any detailed information regarding the intended message. In this regard, mobile-telephones or e-mail are overwhelmingly superior to a conch horn. However, telephones and e-mail are also imperfect. For example, in the world of instantaneous bi-lateral communication, there is significant psychological pressure to immediately answer if the mobile phone rings, and if the phone is configured not to accept incoming calls, or if a call is not answered in a timely fashion, the caller may feel rejected. Even with e-mails, similar troubles cannot be avoided. It is always necessary to reply to incoming emails.

On the other hand, a conch signal is a unilateral form of communication that does not necessitate an answer. Those who hear the signal can choose to ignore the message if they prefer. There is freedom to accept or reject the call. This is a benefit of a unilateral signal. This form of signal can be termed "lenient communication" and one can contend that it is needed even in this modern age.

The development of technology does not permit "lenient communication". We cannot help answering "yes" or "no" clearly and instantly to those who call. Some people may feel stress in this situation. Signals such as the sounding of a conch horn that do not inflict stress must be recognized as a useful tool now more than ever.

Recently, a Japanese musician has started to use *hora-gai* as a musical instrument. A famous Japanese rock musician, Kiyoshiro Imawano blew the conch horn to great applause at his concert held in 2004. Similarly, in New Zealand, the conch shell has undergone a renaissance through the efforts of people like Hirini Melbourne, and the sound of the conch shell is being rediscovered and appreciated all over the world.

Now, in the current study, the conch horn is confirmed to be

in continued use as a signal and musical instrument in modern Japanese life. These facts suggest that it adds a necessary richness to modern Japanese society.

Acknowledgement

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