An Introductory Guidance to
The Research of the Shamisen

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This article is arranged chiefly for foreigners who are interested in various problems about the shamisen, one of the typical string-instruments of Japan.

(I) The Designations

Even at present, we call this instrument by two names, “shamisen” (三味線) and “Sangen” (三弦, 三絃), both derived from “three string”. “Sangen” is the Japanese articulation of the characters of the Chinese designation which were imported to Japan. On the contrary the characters of “shamisen” were formed in Japan according to the corrupted pronunciation of the Chinese designation “san-hsien”. In South China in the age of the Ming dynasty it was articulated as “sam-sien”. Imported to Japan, it was corrupted into “samisen” and later into “shamisen”. (We often find it spelled as “samisen”, but practically it is articulated as “shamisen”.) The character “mi” (味) in “shamisen” means “taste” or “implication”, which is one of the expressions of the Asiatic aestheticism. Therefore this is one of the nomenclatures which Japanese are very fond of.

The designation “sangen” is used in case it is necessary to name generically all Asiatic instruments of the same type as the Japanese shamisen, and in case a designation either simplified or dignified is preferable. Besides, in the genre of jiuta, the name “sangen” is customarily used. But, still in this case, it is mostly for the announcements of the broadcast and the programmes of concerts, and the other name “shamisen” is more commonly used.

In the Loochoo Islands another name “sanshin” (三線) is popular besides the two names above mentioned.

(II) The Origin

The Japanese shamisen, as below stated, came from China through the Loochoo Islands, but the origin of the Chinese sangen has not yet been fixed up theoretically.
In point of the age when this instrument began to be used in China, the opinions of various specialists seem to be almost in accord with each other as it should be in the later period of the Yuan dynasty. However, in point of the process and the models of its invention the opinions are diverse. Formerly it was said that the sangen was derived from the genhan(阮咸), yu-anhsien in Chinese), but different new opinions have been advanced lately. Here are three principal ones:

1) Nefer as the Origin: Mr. Hisao Tanabe insists that the nofre(of the nefer), an instrument of the ancient Egypt, was imported to Arabia and was improved on its body and pegs, and next in Persia it became an instrument with the body covered with animal skin. In China, the animal skin being replaced by the snake skin, it became sangen. (Cf. H. Tanabe: Nippon-Ongaku no Kenkyū. (Study on Japanese Music.)

2) Qubuz as the Origin: Mr. Shigeo Kishibe insists that the sangen derives itself from the kobusu(四胡, qubuz in Turkish) and has some elements of the keikin(奚琴, hsi-ch' in in Chinese), the biwa(琵琶, p'i-p'a in Chinese), the gekkin(月琴, yieh-ch' in in Chinese), etc. (Cf. S Kishide: Tōyō no Gakki to sono Rekishi. (Asiatic musical Instruments and Their History.)) The qubuz(四不恩, or 海不似) is a four-stringed instrument with snake skin.

3) Setar as the Origin: Mr. Kenzo Hayashi disclosed his new pinion that the Chinese san-hsien originated from the setar, a Persian instrument with three strings and a long neck, which was improved by a certain Mongolian in the age of the Yuan dynasty, and later reimproved by a Chinese. (Cf. Mr. Hayashi's treatise on the subject in this issue).

(III) Differences between the Japanese Shamisen and the Other Asiatic Sangen

The Japanese shamisen is, so to speak, a remodeled style of the Chinese sangen. The remodelling in Japan has been accomplished under the influences of the biwa in many respects: because, having been imported into Japan, this instrument was first taken by biwa players. Drawing a parallel between (A) the Japanese shamisen and (B) the sangen of other Asiatic peoples including Chinese, which are played today, we can find these differences as follows.

1) Either of them has a body made of a wooden frame covered with skin on both faces. But, the frame of (B), made by hollowing out a block of wood, is more oval than square, while that of (A), made by gluing together
four pieces of wood, rather square: the former is covered with snake skin, the latter with tanned leather of cats or dogs.

2) The bridge of (A) is much larger and more stabilized that of (B).

3) There is at the upper end of the fingerboard a small cross ledge which terminates the vibrating section of the strings and holds them away from the fingerboard. (It corresponds to the nut in the violin. In Japan it is called kamikoma.) In case of (B), it holds all of the three strings, whereas in case of (A), being a little shorter than of (B), it does not hold the lowest string, which touches the surface of the stick at its end. This is a device for producing a characteristic acoustic effect, which is explained in details below in (IV).

4) Having been remodeled after the biwa, the top of the handle of (A) is warped backward, wherein (A) is quite different from (B).

5) (B) is plucked with a small piece of bone tied on to the player’s index, or with a horn-shaped artificial nail attached to the index, or with the bare finger. But (A) is almost always plucked with a large plectrum, which originally was the plectrum of the biwa diverted to this instrument fresh from China and has been improved in many ways.

6) There are some more differences in the tunings of the strings, in the techniques, in the posture of the players, and otherwise. But let us leave out relating them in details here.

(IV) The Structure of the Shamisen and the Names of its Parts

Roughly speaking, the Japanese shamisen is composed of a wooden body covered with animal skin on both faces and a long wooden stick piercing through it. It is played by plucking the three silken strings stretched over it with a large plectrum held in the player’s right hand. Its detailed parts are called by following names. (Cf. Fig. 1.)

1) Ebio (เเบบ). The warped part at the upper end is called ebio, because of its resemblance to the tail (เเบบ) of a lobster (เเบบ, “ebi”). It is also called by another more colloquial name, tenjin (เทนจิน).

2) Aze (เเบ). The part which follows the ebio forms a hollowed pegbox, the both sides of which look like a pair of strips attached in parallel and are called aze. The word “aze” means a boundary or a division.

3) Itomaki (ยิน). Or peg, is the name of the three turning pins, used to tune the strings, which are inserted in the aze. The spare part of each
string is wound round each of them. *Itomaki* means a string-winder.

4) *Itojura* (糸蔵). The literal translation of this word is "a storehouse of strings". It is the name of the space between the both *aze*, where the spare parts of the strings are, as it were, stored. Hence this name.

5) *Chibukuro* (乳袋), sometimes corrupted into *chibukura*. This part is called by this name, because the sidelines of the stick are curved at this part like women's breasts, which were called in old Japanese "chibukuro", i.e. "bags (袋, "fukuro") of milk (乳, "chi" or "chichi")".

6) *Sao* (樋). In a broad sense it indicates the whole parts except the body and the pegpins, that is, the entire stick including *ebio*, *aze*, *chibukuro*, *nakago* and *nakagosaki*. (The last two are explained below.) But in a narrow sense it indicates the part of the stick between the body and the *aze*, the surface of which serves as the fingerboard. In many cases the *sao* is made of three sections rigidly joined with each other at two joints, so that, taken to pieces, it is readily portable. The two joints are disposed so as to mark some of important finger-positions on the fingerboard.

7) *Hatomune* (鸠胸) is the part of *sao* nearest to the body. This name is derived from its curve like the breast (胸, "mune" of a pigeon (鴕, "hato").

All these parts above mentioned are made of wood, usually hard wood of tropical growth, such as the red sandal-wood and the Chinese quince, and yet one set is of the same wood.

8) *Nakago* (中子) is the lower part of the stick, next to the *hatomune* and hidden inside of the body.

9) *Nakagosaki* (中子先). The stick being pierced through the body, its lower end, namely the *nakagosaki*, is protruded from the body. It is covered with a metallic cylinder to protect it.

10) *Neo* (根者) is a cord caught on the *nakagosaki* and serves as a string-holder. It has three loops to which the lower ends of the strings are knotted.

11) *Dogi* (胴木) is the wooden part of the body (胴, "dō"). In most cases the material is the Chinese quince. Four pieces of wood are glued together to make a rectangular frame, box-like and a little bulged. In the first-class pieces fine diagonal figures are embossed on the inner sides, but no conclusive scientific explanation has been given for the acoustic effect of this embossed membrane called *ayasugi* (稲杉).

12) *Dogawa* (胴皮), that is, two sheets of the membrane covering the body on both faces, are of tanned skin of cats or dogs and are pasted on the *dōgi*
with paste made from glutinous rice. A shamisen with cat-skin makes a softer timbre than one with dog-skin, while the latter has more sound volume than the former. The preference depends upon the schools and the genres of the music. The back-skin is in general thicker than the front-skin. There are some which have the front-skin of cat-skin and the back-skin of dog-skin.

13) Bachigawa (漆皮) is a piece of thin skin pasted on the upper part of the dōgawa to protect it from the scratches that would be made by the plectrum.

14) Ito (糸), or the strings, are made of stiffly starched silken twines. They are called in sequence “ichi-no-ito” (一の糸), or the first string, “ni-no-ito” (二の糸), or the second string and “san-no-ito” (三の糸), or the third string. The first string, the one nearest to the player, is the thickest and the third string the thinnest of the three. Most strings are dyed yellow but there are some left undyed and milk-white.

15) Koma (駒), or the bridge, is put between the dōgawa and the strings in order to hold the strings away from the soundboard or dōgawa and transmit the vibrations of the strings to the soundboard. It looks as if the strings were sitting astride of the bridge, wherefore it is designated “koma”, which originally means a colt. It is kept in place merely by the pressure of the stretched strings, and is not stuck on to the dōgawa. Though its position is very near to the neo, it should not be on the dōgi but a little inside on the dōgawa. Bridges are made of different materials, as ivory, buffalo horn, wood, bamboo and such. The material varies according to the genre of the music and the school, and sometimes to the player's taste. For its weight and size, especially the size of its base osculating with the dōgawa, have delictae influences on the timbre.

16) Kamikoma (上駒), which corresponds to the nut in the violin, is a tiny cross ledge attached to the stick. Most ones are made of metal, but there are some exceptional ones of bone of bamboo. Usually it is made in the following way. A piece of metal is inserted into the itogura and attached to the end of the sao: the edge projected in front is turned down and rounded; thus it forms a tiny ledge like a small bar attached to the stick. It shold be noticed that the kamikoma holds only two of the three strings and leaves the ichi-no-ito or the first string unheld. (The metal piece is cut off at the corner. Cf. Fig. 2.) This is devised in order to give a specific timbre to the open first sting. The vibrating section of the first string is terminated by no
ledge but by the edge of the sao, where there is another device for the same purpose. The surface of the sao is shaved off and slightly for about one centimetre from the kamikoma toward the body. Consequently an obtuse-angled edge is made on the surface of the sao at about one centimetre from the kamikoma. There is so narrow an interval between this edge and the first string which is not held by kamikoma that the open first string can not vibrate without touching the edge. This touch reinforces complex overtones of high pitch and produces a peculiar timbre. (Cf. Fig. 3.)

17) kase (カセ) is an attachment used for the uwa-jōshi (上調子), i.e. the treble shamisen tuned either a fourth or a fifth higher than the ordinary shamisen which plays the main part. Uwa-jōshi means "high pitch". In order to make it easy to tune the strings in higher pitches, the vibrating section of the strings are shorten by the kase. The kase is a tiny stick about two centimetres long made of bone or wood. Lashed crossly to the fingerboard with a cord, it presses the strings against the fingerboard. Its position is at about one fourth of the distance from the kamikoma to the koma. Uwa-jōshi is not performed on independently but only in concert with the ordinary shamisen.

18) Dōate (胴当て) is an attachment covering the side of the body in order to prevent from slipping the player’s right wrist pressed to that side while playing. It is made either of pasteboard covered with cloth, or of papier-mâché.

19) Bachi (バチ) is a kind of plectrum. Being diverted from the biwa to the shamisen, it is peculiar to the Japanese shamisen and is not used in any other kind of sangen. Some bachi are made of ivory, some are of buffalo-horn with the plucking-edge of tortoise-shell, and others are of oak-wood with the plucking-edge of box-wood. The size and the weight of the plectrum are roughly limited by the genre and the school in which it is used, but are variable to some extent according to the player’s taste. The length of ones generally used today ranges from 19 to 25 centimetres.

(V) Introduction to Japan and Remodelling

a) Introduction

In point of the introduction of this instrument to Japan, diverse opinions have been expresses since olden times. As regards the time of the introduction, the view asserting the year of 1562 seems the most credible, but there are
those who say that it occurred between 1592 and 1595. It is commonly believed that this instrument of Chinese origin came to Japan through the Loochoo Islands, while some specialists think that it came directly from China. And according to the widely believed view it was at Sakai (a port-town in the south of Osaka) that it first entered Japan. Some have advanced different opinions in which the entrance was one of the districts of Kyushu——Buzen (one half of which belongs to Oita prefecture and the other half to Fukuoka prefecture today), Bungo (most part of Oita prefecture), or Satsuma (Kagoshima prefecture)——but they are not popular. (For more detailed report on this subject cf. Eishi Kikkawa's treatise in this issue.)

b) Remodelling

There are also different opinions about the number of the strings, the shape and the way of performance of the original instruments imported from China. The number of the strings ought to have been three from the outset, but some say that it had been two until it was remodelled in Japan. (This view is expressed in "Onusa".) Besides the opinion that the original instrument was a plucked string-instrument, there are another opinion that it had been a rubbed string-instrument and was remodeled into a plucked one in Japan. (This opinion is advanced in "Shichiku-sho-kin-shi." It is a mistake to relate the shamisen with rebeck which is regarded as an archetype of the violin. (Mr. Shuji Izawa's opinion:)

Anyhow, whether it was a plucked string-instrument or not, it was remodeled in Japan in many respects. The remodelling was caused by the fact that it was players of the biwa who initially took and played this instrument in Japan and that they played it in the same way as they played the biwa. The strings of the biwa they played were rather struck than plucked with a large plectrum which at the same time struck the wooden soundboard too. Trying to apply this way of performance to the new instrument, they played it with the plectrum of the biwa. But the soundboard of snake-skin was not so strong enough to withstand the blows of the plectrum as the wooden soundboard of the biwa. The snake-skin was very easily broken. So, it was replaced by the tanned skin of the cats or the dogs. Also because of the strong blows of the large plectrum the koma or the bridge had to be stabilized. It was made larger and heavier. Especially its base osculating with the deigawa was enlarged. Afterwards its weight was increased again by putting a bit of lead inside it.
The improvement on the *kanikoma* has a great acoustic meaning, though it is small by appearance. In the original instruments the three strings are all held by the *kanikoma*. but in the Japanese *shamisen* the lowest string is not held by it. (Cf. (IV)16.) This was devised in order to produce a peculiar timbre with noises or overtones of high pitch, and is also considered as one of the influences of the *biwa* which similarly produces peculiar timbres with noises. This artificial reinforcement of complex overtones of high pitch was made much more effective by the invention of shaving off the surface of the *sao* for about one centimetre from its upper end. It seems that this invention was made in the latter half of the 18th century, but it was not until the latter half of the 19th century that it became adapted to all *shamisen*.

(VI) The accordaturas

In *shōmisen* the accordatura is called "chōshi" (調子). In some cases Japanese word "chōshi" implies the pitch or the tonality as well. But, when used in the sense of the accordatura of *shamisen*, it does not imply any sense of the absolute pitch. In other words, an accordatura of *shamisen* only shows the relative intervals between the strings.

There are three principal accordaturas in *shamisen*, "hon-chōshi" (本調子), "ni-agari" (二上り) and "san-sagari" (三下り). *Hon-chōshi* is the basic one of these three accordaturas, in which the second string is tuned at the interval of a fourth above the first or the lowest string, and the third or the highest string at the interval of a fifth above the second, consequently an octave above the lowest string. (1-4-8). *Ni-agari* (it means "the rise of the ni-no-ito or the second string") is an accordatura with the second string a whole tone higher than that in *hon-chōshi*. (1-5-8). In the accordatura of *san-sagari* (it means "the lowering of the san-no-ito or the third string") the third string is tuned a whole tone lower than that in the basic accordatura. (1-4-7). Beside these principal accordaturas there are some derivative, accidental ones, but, different from the principal ones, they are used only partially and not throughout a whole music.

Changing of the accordatura in the middle of a music is usually done without any interruption to performance. The player changes the tone of the string by turning the pegpin with his left hand while plucking open strings with his right hand. The designations, "ni-agari" and "san-sagari" show that these accordaturas are originally derived from the basic one, the *hon-chōshi*. 
But later it became prevalent to change the accordaturas in the middle of a music in various ways without reference to their derivation. Here is an example. (Cf. Fig. 4.) A certain music composed of four parts begins in the accordatura of hon-chōshi: between the first part and the second the accordatura is changed into ni-agari by rising the second string by a whole tone: before the third part it is changed into san-sagari not by lowering the third string but by rising the first string by a whole tone: before playing the last part the third string is risen by a whole tone too to change the accordatura into hon-chōshi again: but this hon-chōshi is just a whole tone higher than that in which the first part is played. Such changings are possible because the accordaturas of shamisen appoint only the relative intervals between the strings without any sense of absolute pitch, as stated above.

Fig. 4.

Using such different accordaturas, the player can play on different musical scales with very little change in the left-hand fingering. But the essential reason why there are so many accordaturas is a matter of delicate tone colour. If there were only one accordatura, the finger-positions on the fingerboard would have to be varied with the music scale. Then it would often happen that a tone which should have the colour of an open string cannot have its proper tone colour, and that another tone the colour which should be that of a stopped string cannot help being of an open string. Such sacrifices of the tone colour are insupportable to the Japanese people who appreciate the tone colour so greatly.

(VII) The Way of Performance

Principally the shamisen is performed on by a player sitting on the floor with his knees completely bent. Nowadays, though on rare occasions, it is also performed on by a player sitting on a chair in accordance with the Europeanization of the style of living in Japan. In either case, the player puts the body of the instrument on his right lap and presses his right fore-arm to the side of the body to hold it tightly between the lap and the arm. Many a player puts a rough, thin piece of rubber between the lap and the body of the instrument in order to prevent it from slipping off the lap. Very rarely
the shemisen is played by a standing player, but such a performance is not an artificial one in general. In this case the instrument is usually hung with a string from the player's neck.

The sao or the stick is held in slanting position, its top or the edio being a little higher than the player's left shoulder. As the fingerboard of this instrument is longer than double that of a violin, the player has to move his left hand very quickly. So the player puts on a piece of knitted worsted called yubihame between the thumb and the index of his left hand to minimize the friction of the hand with the stick so that his left hand can be easily slid along the stick.

In case of the violin the strings are stopped on the fingerboard with finger-tips, but in case of the shamisen they are stopped with finger-nails. We found at the top of expert players' finger-nails a small scratch made by the friction with the strings. The scratch is called itomichi (糸道), namely "path of the string". The strings are stopped chiefly by the index and occasionally by the middle and the ring finger. The thumb and the little finger are not used usually. So the itomichi are found almost always on the nail of the index.

The bachi or the plectrum is held tightly in the right hand with the three fingers, i.e. the first, the middle and the third finger, uniformly bent at the first and the second joint. The thumb, stretched apart from the index, is put on the upper end, near the plucking-edge, of the bachi, and the little finger, bent at every joint, on the lower end. In the basic technique the strings are plucked by downward movements of the plectrum made by turning the hand and the wrist, but sometimes they are also plucked by upward or scooping movements of the plectrum. The latter technique produces a softer timbre than the former. Though the main function of the fingers of the left hand is to stop the strings on the fingerboard, they occasionally pluck, strike or rub the strings to produce different timbres. The fact that there are so many techniques of plucking the strings shows the great interest of the Japanese people in the delicate nuance of the tone colour.

It is worth noticing that techniques vary according to the genre and the school of the music. In jiuta (地呪), which formerly was a genre played exclusively by the blind, a technique of a kind of portamento is very frequently used. To use this technique, the player does not press the finger immediately at the proper position on the fingerboard, but presses it at a position either slightly higher or lower and slides it instantly to the proper position, so that
each note is preceded with a kind of grace note. This technique sounds striking in the slow tempo part of a music. Foreigners often mistake it for the poorness of the player unable to find the right position immediately.

The position where the plectrum plucks the strings also varies in some measure with the genre and the school of the music. In case of the accompanying shamisen in the genres of theatrical music, as nagauta (長唄) and gidayū (義太夫), it is just on the bachigawa which is struck at the same time by the plectrum, while in case of jiuta, sonohachi (隠入), etc. it is almost outside of the body. The former technique adds to the plucked sound a percussive sound made by striking the bachigawa, and the latter produces a pure plucked sound. Consequently the former brings about the feeling of tension and urgency, while the latter leads to enjoy the graciousness of the timbre. In the accompanying shamisen of kouta (小唄), a genre of little songs, no plectrum is used, and the strings are plucked just at the centre of the body with the bare index finger. Yet in this case it is not the finger-nail but the skin of the finger just beside the nail that plucks the strings. The resulting timbre is very soft and muffled. This timbre, which is meeting the requirements of aesthetic senses tired of beautiful but monotonous timbres, is considered as an embodiment of “sabi” (さび), one of the objects peculiar to the Japanese aestheticism.

By means of the technique above mentioned of striking the bachigawa with the plectrum, this instrument has acquired the function of a rhythmic instrument in addition to that of a melodic instrument. Even in a same genre of music, on one occasion it is used as a rhythmic instrument by striking the skin, and on other occasion as a melodic instrument by producing pure plucked sounds of the strings. The Japanese shamisen is an instrument which has a double function of a melodic instrument and a rhythmic instrument, and it is this double function that characterizes this instrument.