

The Shakuhachi and the Ney: A Comparison of Two Flutes from the Far Reaches of Asia

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English

Abstract. This paper compares and contrasts two bamboo flutes found at the opposite ends of the continent of Asia. There are a number of similarities between the ney, or West Asian reed flute and the shakuhachi or Japanese bamboo flute, and certain parallels in their historical development, even though the two flutes originated in completely different socio-cultural contexts. One flute developed at the edge of West Asia, and can be traced back to an origin in ancient Egypt, and the other arrived in Japan from China in the 8th century and subsequently underwent various changes over the next millenium. Despite the differences in the flutes today, there may be some common origin for both flutes centuries ago.

Two reed-less woodwinds

Both flutes are vertical, endblown instruments. The nay, also spelled ney, as it is referred to in Turkey or Iran, and as the nai in Arab lands, is a rim blown flute of Turkey, Iran, the Arab countries, and Central Asia, which has a bevelled edge made sharp on the inside, while the shakuhachi is an endblown flute of Japan which has a blowing edge which is cut at a downward angle towards the outside from the inner rim of the flute. Both flutes are reed-less woodwinds or air reed flutes. The shakuhachi has a blowing edge which is usually fitted with a protective sliver of water buffalo horn or ivory, a development begun in the 17th century. The rim of the nay is often covered by a metal band to prevent damage to the flute, and the Turkish ney has a separate conical mouthpiece called the baspare which is produced from materials such as water buffalo horn, ivory, ebony or other wood (and more recently, plastic) a development dating from the beginning of the 13th century. The Persian ney has a cylindrical mouthpiece called the sari, often made of brass, which is to protect the reed flute from damage.

The meaning of names

As for the Japanese vertical flute, the name shakuhachi refers to the length of the instrument, shakuhachi meaning “one shaku, eight sun,” the shaku being a traditional unit of measurement in Japan regarded as equivalent to 30.3 centimeters, with the sun being 1/10th of a shaku (Ikuya Kitahara, Misao Matsumoto, and Akira Matsuda, p. 188). The standard length of shakuhachi is one shaku eight sun (1.8), equivalent to about 54.5 cm, and is an instrument in the key of D, but other lengths are played, for example, the 1.6 shakuhachi, in the key of E, for Japanese twentieth century traditional music compositions such as Miyagi Michio's Haru No Umi, and the common range of instruments is from about 1.3-2.4 shaku (33.3–72.7 cm), though longer flutes are played, especially for the shakuhachi's solo repertoire.

The shakuhachi has been traditionally constructed of bamboo though today there are wooden models and plastic flutes which are often used by beginning students, and in Australia, high quality wooden shakuhachis are sometimes made from various tropical hardwoods (notably by flute maker David Brown) as Australia's climate is rather dry, leading to problems with cracking in the bamboo shakuhachis.

The term nay derives from the old Persian word for bamboo or reed, and the instrument was originally made from a bamboo reed, but today it is also sometimes made of wood or metal. Nowadays, both shakuhachi and nay flutes are often constructed from the ubiquitous PVC pipe for the beginning player. The plant traditionally used for the nay is a yellow cane reed called *Arundo Donax*, a pseudo bamboo which resembles “real” bamboos in appearance and in the uses to which it is put (David Farrelly, 1984, p.198). (The other prominent woodwind connection *arundo donax* has is as a source for saxophone and clarinet reeds). The length of the nay varies according to the region in which it is found, for example, the Persian Nay ranges from 40–80 cm, while the Azerbaijan nay is 60–70cm long. The reed pipe nay is said to vary in length from 20–80 cm (Stanley Sadie, ed., vol. 17, p. 854). Both shakuhachi and nay flutes have a similar length range.

Fundamental notes

For playing the traditional Japanese music dating from the Edo period (1600-1868) the 1.8

flute with D as the base note predominates, while in Arab music there is no predominant length as such, but the Arabic standard nay, or nay Dukah, has D as its fundamental note. The shakuhachi is pitched at the note made when all five finger holes are covered, as is the Turkish ney, while the Arabic ney is pitched at the note made with the first fingerhole (the one nearest the bottom end of the flute) open. The modern shakuhachi, which took its present shape in the 17th century, has four finger holes in front and one thumb hole in back, situated higher up on the flute. The Persian nay has five finger holes in front and one thumb hole in back, also situated higher up on the flute, while the Turkish and Egyptian neys have six finger holes in front and one thumb hole in back. There are nays with other numbers of fingerholes, the Azerbaijan ney, for example, having from three to six finger holes (Anthony Baines, 1992, p. 220). In recent years shakuhachis with different numbers of finger holes have been made, in particular, seven and nine hole shakuhachis, often crafted in order to play jazz or modern music more easily, but these have never managed to supercede the five hole flutes in popularity, and some traditional shakuhachi players do not even regard flutes having other than five holes as being true shakuhachi. The ancient shakuhachi, eight instruments of which are found in the 8th century Shosoin, or National Treasure House, in Nara, have five finger holes in front and one thumb hole in back, the same number as today's Persian ney.

Diameter of ney and shakuhachi

The ancient flutes kept in Nara are made not only of bamboo, but also of stone and ivory. The bamboo flutes found in Nara are made from a bamboo called hachiku (*phyllostachys nigra*, var. *henonis*), while shakuhachi made from the Edo period up through modern times are in most cases made from madake (*phyllostachys bambusoides*), a bamboo with a wider internal diameter. The nay has a diameter that varies between 1.5–2.5 cm (Sadie, ed., vol. 17, p.154), close to that of the ancient shakuhachi's kept in the Shosoin, which have an external diameter of about 2.5 cm. Today's standard 1.8 (one shaku, eight sun) shakuhachi usually has a slightly larger external diameter of about 3.5 cm, flaring to 5.0 cm at the root, and an internal diameter ranging from 1.5-2.0 cm, with longer flutes having a slighter larger internal diameter and shorter flutes having a slightly smaller diameter.

The Persian ney is commonly referred to as the ney-e haftband, which means the ney with seven nodes (Sadie, ed., v. 12, p. 540), while the standard shakuhachi of today also has

seven fushi, or nodes. The Turkish ney is usually one made up of nine segments of reed. One length of bamboo reed is usually used for the nay, and one length of bamboo is also used in making a shakuhachi, though today's shakuhachis are usually given a middle joint and the one length of bamboo is cut into two pieces, though one piece flutes, or nobekan, are still crafted by some makers of shakuhachi.

Banding

Both instruments are sometimes banded to keep the bamboo from splitting, the ney with metal bands at the top and bottom of the flute, and the shakuhachi often with thinner metal or ceramic bands on either side of the center joint, and sometimes with bamboo strips at various points along the length of the instrument. The shakuhachi usually has a lacquered inner bore, though there are also ji-nashi flutes, those without ji, or "material," consisting of urushi, or lacquer, and tonoko, or polishing powder, and the inner bore of the ney, though not lacquered, is often coated several times a year with almond or another type of transparent vegetable oil. Some shakuhachi players oil the outside of their flutes with walnut or another vegetable oil, but the majority do not, the oils from one's hands being considered sufficient.

The nay is usually a straight length of reed, though not always, and while the shakuhachi is sometimes a straight length of bamboo, the aesthetic ideal is a curved instrument, and the bell of the vertical bamboo flute is often made to curve a bit outwards when the flute is made.

Reputations as difficult instruments

Both the shakuhachi and the ney have reputations as being very difficult instruments to learn to play. There is a well-known saying associated with the shakuhachi, "kubi furi san nen" ("to shake the head three years") which is used to indicate the difficulty connected with playing the instrument, and also a second part to that saying, known primarily among shakuhachi players, "koro hachi-nen,"-- "to do the koro technique (a finger tremelo), eight years," also a reference to the long period of time needed to master the instrument. As for the nay, according to Anthony Baines, "to most Europeans the nay is the most difficult of flutes to sound." (Baines, p. 220), and according to The Turkish Ney F.A.Q. on Heruka's

Original Homepage of the Ney (www.bardoworks.it/ney.html), "it is normal that you try for several weeks before getting the first sound."

For both instruments it is generally thought to be difficult even to produce an initial sound. Both flutes are played at an oblique angle, and the blowing techniques for the two flutes are somewhat different. With the shakuhachi, one must hold the flute at about a 45 degree angle, fit the lips into the top of bamboo rim while keeping them rounded and relaxed, and blow outwards across the obliquely cut edge or utaguchi, keeping the impact point of the breath at the center of the blowing edge. With the ney one must block off the top of the instrument with the lips using a bilabial technique and blow against the inside edge of the flute, aiming the air stream either towards the left or right edge of the instrument. In addition, for the Persian ney, a blowing technique developed in the 19th century where the player holds the top rim of the bamboo reed between the front teeth, using an interdental technique, and air is directed by the tongue in order to produce a more powerful tone. For both flutes, once one masters the difficult to learn technique of blowing, one is on the road to gaining control over pitch, timbre, and the ability to play a progression of microtones between the standard pitches, in addition to a wide range of ornamental patterns. Both instruments have about a two and a half octave range, though talented players of the ney are said to be able to play three octaves.

On playing one note well

In the teaching traditions of both flutes, there is an emphasis placed on the importance of playing one note well. Ney players or Neyzen have a saying "one breath, one life," while shakuhachi players have a saying "Ichion Jobutsu," or "enlightenment in one sound," which comes from the komuso, or wandering shakuhachi playing monks of the Edo Period (1603-1868). For both instruments, the term "blowing" as in "blowing ney" or "blowing shakuhachi" generally appears to be more commonly used than the terms "playing ney," or "playing shakuhachi."

Players of both instruments often use alternate fingerings for the same note in order to produce different tone colors, and ney players as well as shakuhachi players use movements of the lips and of the head for different musical effects. An essential part of playing the shakuhachi is moving the head or chin down to get meri or flattened notes and moving the

head or chin up slightly to get kari or sharp notes.

Name seals

The makers of the shakuhachi stamp their hanko or name seal on each instrument after it is made, with instruments the makers feel are exceptional pieces of work getting two or three hanko. Egyptian and Lebanese neys also get the signature of their maker burned into the flute or carved in and filled with ink.

Traditions of ensemble and solo music

Both instruments have distinct traditions of ensemble and solo music. The vertical bamboo flute started out as an instrument of the gagaku orchestra, thought to have been introduced into Japan in the 8th century from the orchestra of the Chinese court along with other instruments which are still used today in Japan's national gagaku orchestra -- the sho, hichiriki, and ryuteki, among others -- but by the 10th century it had disappeared from the court orchestra and also managed to vanish from the historical record for several centuries, to reappear in the Muromachi Period (1333-1568) as a flute called the hitoyogiri (literally "one-node cutting"), an instrument played by wandering beggar monks called komoso, literally "straw mat monks." In the Edo period it underwent yet another transition to become the chosen instrument of another group of monks, the komuso, "monks of emptiness," a sect of wandering Zen priests which only admitted members of the samurai class, who were often ronin, or masterless samurai who had lost their original ranks in conflicts among clans in the latter part of the 16th century.

Just as the ney has legends associated with its invention, it is generally believed that the komuso sect gave the shakuhachi a fabricated, or "legendary" history which traced the instrument's origin back to a 9th century Chinese priest named Fuke, whose chanting supposedly inspired a piece called Kyorei, or Empty Bell, the first of the "honkyoku," literally "original music" pieces of the Zen Buddhist sect. In association with the komuso, and their sect of Zen, called the Fuke-shu, with its 50 or more temples (according to various sources, the number of temples has been listed as 55, 64, 72, or 77), the distinct solo repertoire referred to as honkyoku developed for the shakuhachi (Blaesdel, 1988, p. 108). The instrument itself was referred to by the komuso as a religious instrument, or "hoki," as

opposed to “gakki,” or musical instrument, and the playing of the shakuhachi became a spiritual discipline (though not all of the komuso were religiously inclined). The breath became the primary element in the honkyoku, with rhythm being defined by the breathing pattern in the “original music” pieces, which often had themes based on Zen concepts or phenomena in nature, and which were passed down orally for several centuries before finally being written down and arranged in the 18th century by a komuso named Kurosawa Kinko (1710-1771), who may also have started the practice of teaching Fuke sect shakuhachi to laymen. The kari and meri, or sharp and flattened notes on the shakuhachi were thought to represent yo and in (yang and yin), respectively, and playing the combination of both types of notes in traditional Zen pieces was symbolic of playing the universe itself. Ney pieces also appear to have been passed down orally until Ottoman art music began to be transcribed in the mid 17th century.

It is thought that near the beginning of the Edo period the shakuhachi evolved from the straight and narrow six holed hitoyogiri to a stouter five holed flute with a curved bell displaying the prominent flaring root end of the bamboo, though the hitoyogiri still continued to be used until the 18th century, both for vocal accompaniment and in sankyoku (literally “music for three,” in this case the koto, shamisen, and hitoyogiri) ensembles in the Edo pleasure districts. The thicker walled Edo period shakuhachi, with its knoblike root-end may have developed to serve as a defensive weapon for the komuso on their travels through the Japanese countryside, though there is also a theory that the shape may have been influenced by the development in South China of a similar looking vertical dongxiao flute which may have been brought into Japan by Chinese immigrants in the 17th century (Sadie, ed., , v. 12, p. 833).

Towards the end of the Edo Period the instrument began to be used in Japanese ensemble music as part of a trio with the koto, a bridged, plucked zither, and the shamisen, the Japanese banjo-like lute, just as the hitoyogiri was. In this trio, or sankyoku, the shakuhachi took the place of the kokyu or Japanese bowed lute, which had accompanied the sangen, or shamisen, and the koto. The shakuhachi pieces for ensemble music were called “gaikyoku,” literally, “outside pieces,” to distinguish them from the honkyoku. In the early twentieth century the music of the instrument underwent further changes influenced by by 19th century European music arriving in Japan, and pieces from that period came to be referred to as “shinkyoku,” or “new pieces,” with pieces composed after the Second World

War given yet another name, that of "gendai kyoku," or modern pieces.

The ney also had distinct ensemble and solo traditions. In the countryside it was often an instrument played by shepherds, but it also became the only wind instrument used in the classical Persian orchestra, and was played along with the lute's ancestor, the oud, and with the qanun, a plucked trapezium box zither which was plucked with plectra on the fingers, just as the Japanese koto was, though the instruments themselves were quite different in appearance. Later the medieval Iranian ensemble was replaced by a smaller ensemble which included the ney and the tanbur, a long necked lute. Both the shakuhachi and the ney were played with a lute and a zither in their respective culture's classical music traditions. While the gaikyoku, or shakuhachi music pieces played together with koto and shamisen, were played in the entertainment districts of Edo as well as in the home, the Persian classical pieces were limited to special private gatherings, usually in aristocratic homes, as Islam imposed religious constraints which tended to discourage large public forums for musical events. (Sadie, vol. 12, p. 536). One key difference in the ensemble traditions of the two flutes is that in the Iranian ensemble, the ney was the lead melodic instrument, but in the Japanese classical music of the latter 19th century, the main melody line was either played by the koto or the shamisen, with the shakuhachi playing a supporting melody or a melismatic revision of the shamisen melody.

In its solo tradition, the nay also became associated with a particular religious sect, that of the Mevlevi Ayin, founded by Jalal Al-Din Rumi in the 13th century; its followers known in the West as 'whirling dervishes.' The "whirling dervishes" stressed the use of dance, poetry, and music in their religious ceremonies, and for the Mevelvi, "ecstatic movements of the body were recognized as expressions of a spontaneous emotion caused by experience of the divine." (Sadie, ed., vol. 12, p. 603) This whirling ceremony, called the Sewa, was a driving force in the sufi's search for truth, just as the shakuhachi in its role as a hoki, or religious tool, provided a focus for the komuso's search for enlightenment through what was called suizen, or blowing zen. The standardized musical form of the dervishes' ceremonial dances, which used the ney as a solo instrument accompanied by the percussive instruments def (a frame drum), and kudim (a small kettledrum) is thought to have originated in the 17th century, about the same time the komuso sect in Japan became established and began playing their honkyoku pieces as aids to enlightenment. In the Mevlevi Sufi sect, introductory passages before the ceremonial dance included a non-metric

taksim (meaning “division”), or improvisatory solo, on the ney. Melodic segments of varying length and intensity alternated with periods of silence (Bearman, P.J., ed., volume X, p. 143), in some ways similar to shakuhachi honkyoku, where the “ma,” or space between the notes was and is considered as important as the notes themselves. In the case of the free rhythm pieces on the ney, they were often supported by a rhythmic drone on one of several percussion instruments, whereas the shakuhachi honkyoku pieces were always performed solo (though some modern renditions of honkyoku or pieces derived from honkyoku have been accompanied by percussion or other instruments). Komuso honkyoku pieces for shakuhachi were also non-metric or non-rhythmic in character, with the bamboo flute pieces retaining an improvisatory character to a degree which allowed different versions of various honkyoku pieces to develop. The shakuhachi honkyoku tended to subject one basic melodic idea to constant subtle variation. The ney had a repertory (radif) of pieces exclusively reserved for it, just as the shakuhachi had its solo repertoire in the honkyoku. The taksim pieces on the ney are thought to have originally been borrowed from vocal forms, as the rhythm of the nonmetric music is similar to the prosody of Near Eastern poetry. Solo pieces from both traditions often tended to progress from the lower to the higher register, and then back again to the lower octave.

The influence of Western music

By the early 20th century, the music for the ney began to emphasize western music notation and the use of composed forms over improvised taksim. Similarly, at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in Japan, one main school of shakuhachi, the Tozan school, developed solo pieces influenced by Western music, and certain occidentally based symbols began to make their way into the traditional music notation. Honkyoku and gaikyoku pieces began to be played en masse, in imitation of the western orchestra.

Religious traditions connected with the flutes

There are certain similarities between the religious traditions connected with both flutes, though, of course, there are great differences as well. In the Edo period, the komuso shakuhachi players begged for alms while taking their pilgrimages across the Japanese countryside. They received three tools and three seals before they could begin life as

komuso monks. The three tools were the shakuhachi itself, a tengai basket hat which concealed most of the wearer's face and symbolized non-attachment to ego, and the kesa, a priest's sash worn over the kimono. The three seals were the honsoku, or komuso's license, the kai'in, or personal identity papers, and the tsuin, a pass which enabled the komuso to travel throughout the country without hindrance. There were originally only two ranks of komuso, the jushoku, those who were fully ordained priests who lived in the temples, and the kyogai, or wandering monks, the latter of which made up the majority of komuso (Riley Kelley Lee, p. 128).

The Mevlevi sect members in the Near East also begged for alms. After the novice had finished his instruction he received the equivalent of a license from his teacher, and a rough cloak, which served as an external sign of his status, similar to the tengai in the case of the komuso, though not providing the anonymity the komuso's basket hat offered. The Mevlevi sect member also often carried a prayer rug, a rosary, and a begging bowl. (Bearman, ed., Volume X, p. 315). The most important practice of the Sufis was the remembrance of God (dhiku), and for the Mevlevi sect, dance and music could help to bring the practitioner to the point where he could have mukashafat, or "unveilings" which he interpreted as coming from higher worlds, or from the Absolute. (Bearman, ed., volume X, p. 315)

Support from governments for the Mevlevi sect and the komuso

The Mevlevi Sufi order received strong support and political influence from the Ottoman Empire and so was able to further develop its own music, just as the Edo era komuso or wandering Zen monks were given certain privileges by the Edo era Shogunate in return for acting as government spies. Komuso monks had permission to travel freely from place to place, retained free access to roads and checkpoints, were assured free passages on river boats which connected with the roads used for traveling within Japan and were allowed to demand payment in exchange for the playing of honkyoku on the bamboo flute. The shakuhachi with its honkyoku pieces served as an instrument of enlightenment for komuso priests, at least for those who had a sincere religious purpose in mind, and in the Fuke sect there were rules against teaching secular tunes on the shakuhachi or permitting commoners to play it (though these restrictions were often flaunted). The members of the Sufi order

were also told to avoid secular tunes, and were not allowed to use instruments other than the ney flute and def and kudim drums for the whirling ceremony. (Sadie, ed., vol. 12, p. 603).

Under government support, and also the Shogunate's watchful eye on the activities of komuso -- one reason the Fuke sect was given official recognition by the authorities was so that the Shogunate could keep tabs on potentially troublesome ronin -- the Fuke sect moved its headquarters from Kyoto to Edo, the center of the shogun's government in Japan, and the religious center of the the Fuke sect was established in the Ichigatsuji and Reihoji temples outside the city, while the "business" center was based in the city, in Asakusa (William P. Malm, 2000, p. 169). Also with government support, the Mevlevi dervish order moved their focus to the Ottoman capital of Istanbul and began making a mystical art music which had a notable influence on the elite in urban society, with even sultans becoming proficient players of the the flute (Sadie, ed., vol. 18, p. 809).

Trouble with the authorities

Both sects eventually ran into trouble with the authorities. The Fuke Sect, ostensibly because of corruption and probably because it was associated with the Shogunate, was outlawed by the new Meiji government at the beginning of the Meiji Period (1868-1912). Following the ban of the Fuke sect, the instrument became fully secularized and an official member of the sankyoku (three instrument trio) with the koto and shamisen, playing the gaikyoku ("outside music") pieces, though the komuso tradition of shakuhachi as hoki was still passed down through a guild called the Meian ryu, based in Kyoto; the honkyoku pieces were also being passed down through the Kinko ryu, named after the samurai Kurosawa Kinko, though with Kinko the instrument itself was regarded as a gakki, or musical instrument, and not as a religious tool. As mentioned earlier, the Tozan ryu, which developed in the latter 19th century, was the first main shakuhachi school to alter shakuhachi music and performance methods due to the influence of Western musical forms which had entered Japan in the 19th century.

The Mevlevi sect, along with other Sufi orders, was outlawed in 1925 by the new government of Turkey created under Kemal Ataturk, seven years after the collapse of the old order, the Ottoman Empire. The Mevlevi whirling ceremony is still officially outlawed in Turkey today, but continues to be practiced in private.

Ultimate origins

It is interesting to speculate as to whether it is possible that the ney could have made the journey across Central Asia to China and then to Japan, becoming the Japanese shakuhachi. According to Stephan Blum, "Five of the ten court orchestras of the T'ang dynasty (618-907) bore the names of Central Asian oases and city states. - Turfan, Kucha, Kashgar, Samarkand, and Bukhara." (Sadie, ed., vol. 5, p. 369). Today the ney is found from North Africa to Iran and the Caucasus, and it is not unthinkable that it could have been carried across Central Asia to end up being an instrument at the Chinese court. Current scholarship traces the origin of the shakuhachi back to a notched Chinese flute called the chiba. Shakuhachi is the Japanese pronunciation of the Chinese ideograms for chiba, where chi is equivalent to shaku, and ba to hachi. (Sadie, ed., volume 12, p. 832). It is not impossible that the chiba could have been the modification of a ney that had been carried across Central Asia by travelers journeying the Silk Road.

Flutes similar to the ney are pictorially represented in Egyptian tombs from the time of the Old Kingdom (c 2575-2134 BCE), where the players depicted were mostly male, though women are at times depicted playing harps (Sadie, ed., volume 6, p. 2). By the time of the Middle Kingdom (c2040-1640 BCE) women are represented more frequently in wall paintings of chamber groups. In tombs from the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BCE) chamber music groups are represented, playing a lute, a lyre, and a pipe of an oboe type, perhaps the original sankyoku (three instrument) ensemble. Surviving end-blown flutes date back to the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (c. 2040-1640), with the number of playing holes ranging from 4-6, though recently even older vertical flutes have been discovered, with the oldest playable instrument discovered so far being a 9,000 year old flute carved from the wing bone of a crane, having been found in the village of Jiahu, along the Yellow River in China (Juzhong Zhang, 1999, p. 366). Both ney and shakuhachi continue to evolve, with some players of both flutes using the instruments more frequently in modern compositions and genres in addition to preserving the traditional repertoires.



shakuhachi maker in action



player of the popular nāy (rim-blown flute), Fez, Morocco

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