

**STUDIA INSTRUMENTORUM  
MUSICAE POPULARIS  
(NEW SERIES)**

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**SIMP\*5**

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**SERIES OF THE  
ICTM STUDY GROUP ON  
MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS**

Edited by Gisa Jähnichen  
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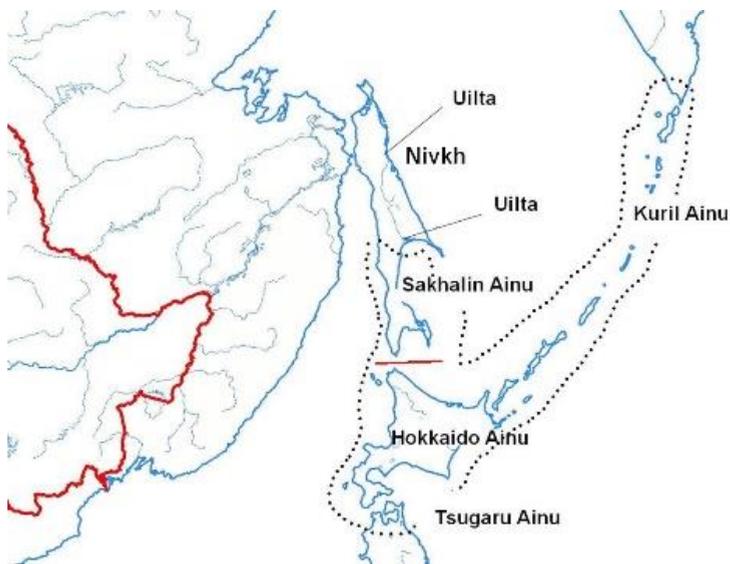
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Chika Shinohara-Tangiku and Itsuji Tangiku  
**Tonkori and Shichepshin**

**Introduction**

The Ainu are the indigenous people in northern area of Japan. Their ethnic population is about 50,000<sup>1</sup>. Their heritage language, the Ainu language, is isolated and has no genealogical relationship with Japanese or any other languages in the world. Today, most of Ainu people live on the island of Hokkaido but their traditional territory was wider than now. Until 19th Century, their territory included the southern half of Sakhalin Island, Kuril Islands, northern end of main island of Japan and southern end of Kamchatka peninsula.

This paper is on the origin of traditional musical instrument called the “tonkori” of the Sakhalin Ainu.



**Figure 1: Map of Ainu Traditional Territory (around 15-18 C), drawing modified by the authors according to a map in public domain.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> Hokkaido prefecture reported the population of Ainu people to be 23,782 in 2006, but many researchers personally estimate two times more. Accessible via Hokkaido Government, Environment and Lifestyle Section. 2007. Hokkaido Ainu Survey on Livelihood Report, accessed 20 March, 2011, <http://www.pref.hokkaido.lg.jp/file.jsp?id=56318>; Hokkaido Prefecture (2006). *Survey on the Hokkaido Ainu Living Conditions 2006* (in Japanese), Sapporo, Hokkaido Prefecture.

<sup>2</sup> Accessible model of the map: [kantei.go.jp](http://kantei.go.jp), Website for Ainu Policy Promotion.

## **Shape and Structure of Tonkori**

The musical instrument "tonkori" has a long and narrow body shape. Its length is about 1 meter including its "head." The shape of the head is round or triangle. The lower end of the body is sharp, pointed shape. The body and head are made entirely of wood. The hollowed wooden body and wooden sounding board is attached with glue. The cross section of the body is semicircle. It has usually five strings. Some old tonkori had three or four strings. The peg box of Tonkori was called "neck" (rekuh). However, from an organological point of view it is not correct that "its neck is the peg box". It is better understandable e.g. " five strings are inserted into a peg box – called "neck" – and held there with five pegs". The instrument does not have frets. It has two bridges; higher one and lower one. Because of the bridge, one cannot simply stop the strings with fingers. It is played with only open strings. Thus, "tonkori" has only five notes.



**Figure 2: Tonkori. Drawing by the authors.**

## **Holding Position of Tonkori**

The way to hold the tonkori and its playing style is quite unique. Players usually sandwich the body with palms of the both hands. It stands vertical or on a slight diagonal when viewed from the front, viewed from the side, a little bit diagonal. Traditional players basically play pizzicato plucking with fingers while holding with palms without a bow nor a pick.



Figure 3: Holding of Tonkori. Photo by the authors.

### Tune and Scale

Tuning and scale differ from player to player. Strings are not arranged in the order of the scale. The range is within one octave. Pieces are “minimal music” with continually repeating short motives. Good players play with improvised variations. Every player owns their own pieces, but some basic motives are shared by several players.

### Former argument on the origin of Tonkori

The first mention about the "tonkori" is a drawing in *Ezoshimakikan* in 1799. It was a report on Hokkaido Island written by Japanese explorer Murakami Shimanajō. Though Japanese people had recorded Ainu culture from the 15th century for the aim of trade, information of tonkori only go back to the end of 18th century, and when recorded in 1799, the tonkori was essentially the same as today. It had the same shape, same length, same holding as today. we cannot find any prototypes of this instrument. Accounting to the literature, the tonkori suddenly appeared in Sakhalin at the end of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Some Japanese researchers are interested in the origin of this instrument. First, in 1958 Kazuyuki thought that this instrument was strongly influenced by

Chinese instruments, and implied relationship with Japanese koto.<sup>3</sup> And after him, in 1963 Kyōjirō and Utamoe (Tomoko) Tomita thought that this instrument is a mixture of Japanese ancient "koto" and Japanese "shamisen." They did not write about their hypothesis clearly but only implied it. <sup>4</sup>And in 2000, Kazuyuki Tanimoto wrote that the tonkori resembled to Siberian musical instrument called "nars-yukh" of Khanti people in Russian Federation. He thought that tonkori was a mixture of nars-yukh and shamisen.<sup>5</sup> But these hypotheses seem not to be able to explain several incomprehensible features of tonkori.

### Shichepshin in Circassia

"Koto," "shamisen," and "nars-yukh" do not resemble the shape of the tonkori. There are other instruments in western Eurasia which do show strong resemblance to the tonkori. Especially the Circassian bowed instrument called "shichepshin" in Adyghe may seem to be the prototype of the tonkori. This hypothesis can explain the incomprehensible features of the tonkori.



Figure 4: Circassian instrument "Shichepshin" of Adyghe Republic. Drawing by the authors.<sup>6</sup>

The shichepshin has two strings, two pegs on the head, a bridge, and a bow. But how might it have become the tonkori? First, the bow was lost. Second,

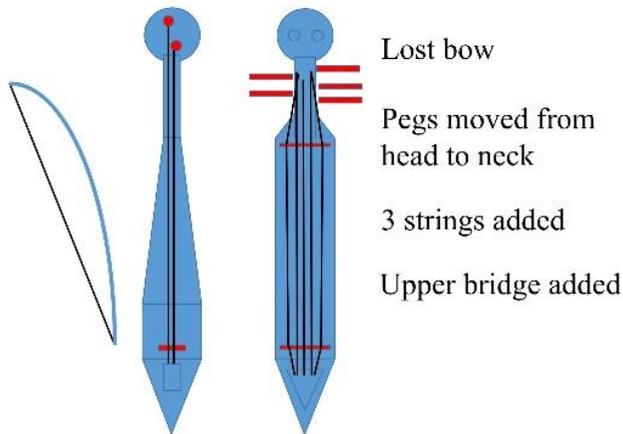
<sup>3</sup> Tanimoto, Kazuyuki (1958). Ainu-no gokenkin (Ainu tonkori musical instrument). *Horpo Bunka Kenkyu Hokoku* 13. Sapporo, Hokkaido University, 243-270.

<sup>4</sup> Kyōjirō Kondō and Tomita Utamoe (Tomoko) (1963). Tonkori -- a string instrument of the Aynus. *Ongaku-gaku (Musicology) - Journal of the Japanese Musicological Society*, 9 (1).

<sup>5</sup> Tanimoto, Kazuyuki (2000). *Listening to Ainu paintings: Music ethnography of a cultural transformation*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Press.

<sup>6</sup> Based on some explanations in Гучев, Замдин (2014). *Учимся Играть на Шичепщине*. Майкоп.

pegs moved from head to neck and three more strings were added. Third, the upper bridge was added. The precise process of development is not clear but the differences between these two instruments are shown in Figure 5.



**Figure 5: Shichepshin and Tonkori. Drawing by the authors.**

### **Explaining“Structural Defects” of Tonkori**

By this hypothesis, we can easily explain the several incomprehensible features of tonkori, which are represented by the following five features. Correctly speaking those features are in fact "structural defects."

1. Instability in holding position
2. Instability of bridges
3. First and fifth strings
4. Reason for sharp end
5. Reason for shape of head.

### **Unique Holding Position**

The holding position of the tonkori resembles that of a harp, but the row of its strings are parallel to the body of the player, not like a harp with the strings in a vertical position and fixed to the body of the player. Differ from the case of the harp, there is nothing to support the tonkori in the direction in which the force is applied and therefore the holding is not stable.

If you want to hold the tonkori more stable, it becomes more difficult to move your fingers to pluck the strings freely, because your hands hold and pluck in the same time.

But why is the holding position this way? The answer is simple. The row of the strings of Tonkori is parallel to the body front of the player simply because it was the way of bowed instruments. And by this position the tonkori stands vertically just like a bowed instrument.



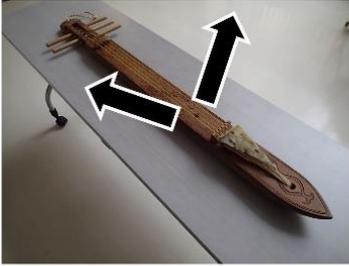
**Figure 6: Holding way of Tonkori. Photo by the authors.**

### **Unstable Bridges**

The strings are easily deviate from the bridges. Harp type instruments do not have bridges. Tonkori has a lower bridge because it was the way of bowed instruments. Bridges of bowed instruments are hardly moved because the bow always presses the strings. The upper bridge might have been added later. Some old Tonkori had bridges in the shape of arch. Another typical shape of those of bowed instruments. These bridges might have been the heritage from their prototype.

Plucked with fingers

Pressed by the bow

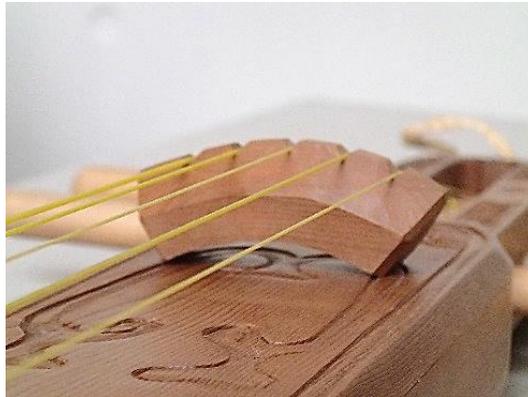


Tonkori



Shichepshin

**Figure 7: Bridges of tonkori are instable. Photos by the authors.**



**Figure 8: Arch type bridge, replica based on an old drawing. Photo by the authors.**

### **The First and Fifth Strings**

Most old tonkori have too narrow peg boxes. The two strings in the both ends—the first and the fifth string—always touch the frame of the peg box. And because of that, the sound of the tonkori is too small.

The two strings in the both ends were supposed to be not existed when the Tonkori was played with the bow. In fact, some old tonkori have only three strings. Of course, the sound might be louder when played with bow. Without the bow, the sound became smaller but with the bow, the size might become larger than before, to make the sound louder.



Figure 9: The first and the fifth strings touch the frame. Photo by the authors.

### Reason for the “Useless” Sharp End

The lower endpoint is sharp. But it does not work as a stopper. On the contrary rather it makes easier to slide down just like a sled. In fact, this shape is useless. The sharp lower endpoint might have been used for turning the instruments when you play with the bow.

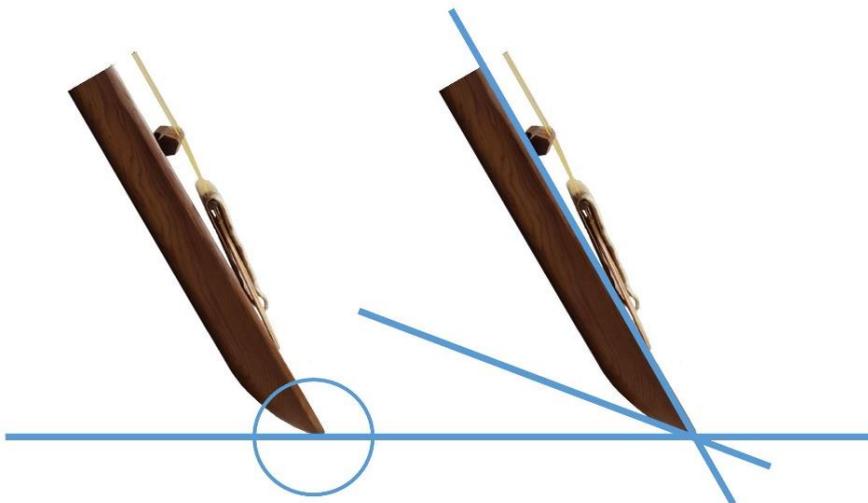


Figure 10: The sharp end. Drawing by the authors.

### Reason for the “Useless Shape of the Head”

There is no reason for having a “head.” The “head” might have been the space for standing 1-3 pegs. There is a hole on the head. It is said that those were for being hung on the wall, but an elder tonkori maker said that there were two holes on the head in old times<sup>7</sup>. They might have been holes to stand pegs.

There are two kinds of head shapes. A round shape and a triangle shape. You can find that some Circassian and Armenian stringed musical instruments have the same shapes of heads.



Figure 11: The two types of Tonkori heads. Photo courtesy by Tomita (2017) from the cover.

### Some Supporting Features and Historical Validity

Parts of the tonkori are compared to be human body parts<sup>8</sup>. In Ainu culture, parts of the things are not compared precisely to the body parts like the tonkori. Parts of the Adyghe shichepshin are also compared to be human body parts<sup>9</sup>. Those resemblances may support the hypothesis.

<sup>7</sup> Tomita Tomoko (2017). *The world of Tonkori*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, 15; “One or two holes are made in the center of the *tonkori* head.”

<sup>8</sup> Tomita Tomoko (2017). *The world of Tonkori*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, 15 and 60; An elder tonkori maker wrote “I have heard the tonkori has the shape of a human body.”

<sup>9</sup> Гучев, Замдин (2014). *Учимся Играть на Шичепшине*. Майкоп, 8. Not only parts of today’s Shichepshins but those of traditional Shichepshins are also called by human body part names.

The new hypothesis that tonkori is a derivation from bowed instruments like shichepshin is consistent with the history of this region.

### **The Sudden Appearance of Tonkori in 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

Circassia is almost 10,000 km away from Sakhalin Island. There was already a route between them in 17<sup>th</sup> century and, in fact, Cossacks lead by Vasili Poyalkov came to Sakhalin through Amur Region in 1648. The museums in Krasnodar have Manchurian trade objects brought by Kubani Cossacks<sup>10</sup>. Some Circassians might have joined to Cossacks themselves<sup>11</sup>. Before the Circassian war in 1763–1864, Circassians and Cossacks gave strong cultural influences each other. There is a possibility that shichepshin was brought to Sakhalin along this Cossack route. But Amur Region was closed in 1689 by the treaty of Nerchinsk and Cossacks lost the route to enter Sakhalin Island. If the shichepshin was brought by this route, the period was limited to only 41 years from 1648 to 1689. This hypothesis may explain the reason why the tonkori suddenly appeared in 18<sup>th</sup> century in the literature. Shichepshin came in 17<sup>th</sup> century, and 100 years later, Japanese explorers found the tonkori.

### **Why Tonkori Lost its Bow?**

If shichepshin became the tonkori, why does the tonkori not have a bow? The tonkori has kept many characteristic features of bowed instrument until now, but it seemed difficult to keep the “bowed” feature for a long time in 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The string of the bow for a shichepshin is a made of horse hair. Indigenous peoples in lower Amur district and northern part of Sakhalin Island have bowed instruments like Huqin and they use horse hair for bow strings<sup>12</sup>. But they have not had horses and the only way to obtain horse must have been the trade with Chinese or Russian merchants.

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<sup>10</sup> Korsakova, Nataliya (2016) Personal communication at Krasnodar Historical and Archeological Museum, 8th April.

<sup>11</sup> Korsakova, Nataliya (2016) Personal communication at Krasnodar Historical and Archeological Museum, 8th April. She Commented that it seemed possible answering to Itsuji Tangiku at Krasnodar Historical and Archeological Museum. Personal communication.

<sup>12</sup> They must be simplified derivations from Chinese Huqin and brought to this area from Manchuria. “Sirpakta” of Ulch and “Tyngryng” of Nivkh have only 1 string. Structures of musical instruments seem to be simplified by the difficulty to obtain materials in this area. The “loss” of bow of Tonkori may be a resemble case.

Horse hair has been used as the most important parts of sable traps among Amur and Sakhalin<sup>13</sup>. As sable fur is not strong enough, indigenous peoples in this area had not used them in daily use themselves. They have always exported them to the outside world. Cossacks could provide horse hair to indigenous hunters for sable traps. But after 1649 when Cossacks disappeared from Sakhalin Island because of Nerchinsk treaty, it became difficult for Sakhalin Ainu to import horse hair. Sable trade was stopped then and there were not horse hair in the list of trade objects from Japanese merchants to Ainu people at that time.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Japanese ethnographers started the research on Ainu traditional culture, already silk strings for the shamisen were used<sup>14</sup>. Elders inform us that strings of the tonkori were made of nettle or tendon of animals in old times<sup>15</sup>. Nettle strings and tendon strings were not suitable for strings of bow of musical instruments. In fact, it was impossible to make bowed instruments without horse hair at that time in this area. As the horse hair became rare material, bowed instruments might have been played without bows. And finally, the tonkori might have lost its bows before 1799.

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<sup>13</sup> Chiri, Mashiho (1973). *The Collected Works of Chiri Mashiho*, 3. Tokyo: Heibonsha, 197. This part is a joint-writing with Yuko Yamamoto.

<sup>14</sup> Tomita Tomoko (2017). *The world of Tonkori*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, 18. Ainu people bought Shamisen strings from Japanese people.

<sup>15</sup> Tomita Tomoko (2017). *The world of Tonkori*. Sapporo: Hokkaido University Center for Ainu and Indigenous Studies, 68. An elder tonkori maker wrote "I used to use whale's *shizu* to make the strings of a *tonkori*." *Shizu* is a Japanese word for tendon.

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