

Music and Sound in Toyama City Up-close and from Afar: A Close Reading of Online Materials Informed by In-person Experience

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Abstract *The COVID-19 pandemic demands a re-examination of the ethics and practicality of research that relies on in-person interaction. After eight months of a planned year of on-site dissertation fieldwork researching the musical life of Toyama City, Japan, I returned to the US at the end of March 2020 due to the pandemic. I continued to correspond with local contacts, but even within a single city, not all are evenly connected online. I began carefully analyzing online materials to supplement my prior in-person experience and ongoing correspondence. Interpreting such media, representing different groups, demands careful attention to its varying production and engagement contexts. Furthermore, recordings and other online materials differ from the events they represent. In spite of these limitations, researchers already familiar with the events depicted may be able to tease out subtle clues indicating local sentiment, even from afar. In this article, I conduct a close reading of two videos posted on YouTube in 2021 as the pandemic continued to impact public music making in Toyama City: (1) a message and musical performance from chindon-ya performers scheduled to appear at the cancelled 2020 and 2021 National Chindon Competition in Toyama City and (2) a video of a lion dance performed as part of the 2021 Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival, which resumed in 2021 following its cancellation in 2020. This analysis demonstrates the potentials and limitations of ethnographically informed close reading and explores how prior in-person experiences with musical communities might inform subsequent close readings of online media depicting those communities.*

Sound, silence, and COVID-19 in the public spaces of Toyama City

In mid-March 2020, I rode the train, the Ai no Kaze, into the Toyama city center at eight in the morning. A few weeks ago, the train was crowded and noisy at this time. On weekdays, men and women on their way to work would

sit and stand in the car, some dozing. They would be quiet except when boarding or exiting the train, when the car would fill with the swish of the water-resistant jackets many of them wear during their commute to protect them from the wet and cold. Uniformed high school students would talk energetically with each other, sometimes joking or laughing loudly. A few older people in casual attire would sit scattered through the car, talking quietly with their companions or reading. On weekends, the train would be nearly as full. Many of those who commuted, stone-faced, to work from Monday through Friday would now chat with their friends and families as they made their way into the city alongside high school students carrying athletic equipment. The sounds of conversation would be louder, even in a slightly less populated train car.

This atmosphere changed dramatically with the news of the spread of COVID-19 to Japan, even before Toyama recorded its first case. Most people went about their lives as usual, but with some new precautions. Masks, already commonly worn by those feeling sick, were now ubiquitous. While the train cars were still mostly full, the human sounds were dampened. As schools closed, fewer high school students rode the train, their voices conspicuous by their absence. On the weekend, the comfortable conversations that had filled the train were muted, as people became wary of recreational gatherings. The sounds of human socialization along the lines of public transportation and in other public spaces in Toyama City gave way to the patter of rain, the cries of birds, the rumble of trains and buses, and the ever-present rush of water through the many deep gutters that drain rain and snowmelt safely through and under the city into Toyama Bay.

Toyama City and social connections in-place

Toyama City is a small city on the west side of Honshu, the largest Japanese island, with a population that has been aging since the 1990s, shrinking since 2010, and is expected to shrink further, particularly among working-age people (OECD 2015; The Economist 2018; Toyama City and Institute for Global Environmental Strategies 2018:7). It is also a sprawling administrative unit including multiple population centers, the product of the 2005 consolidation of multiple small municipalities. The Toyama City government hopes to support its residents more efficiently through a suite of infrastructure

projects collectively termed the Compact City Plan, while maintaining the region's internal cultural diversity (Toyama City Resilience Advisory Committee 2017:30–31). Social connections, particularly those that cross generations and bridge the multiple distinct population centers of Toyama City, yet keep residents rooted in place, are vitally important. People must not only have the support they need to stay in Toyama, they must also *want* to stay. No one can guarantee indefinite prosperity. People must feel a connection to a place and each other that keeps them invested through good times and bad.

Nagao Yōko (2019, 2013) in her work on shishimai (lion dances) and Owara Kaze no Bon of Yatsuo-machi, one of Toyama City's larger peripheral population centers, has discussed the importance of these music and dance performance traditions for the development and maintenance of social connections between generations and between long-time residents and newcomers. She describes the communal sense developed as *tsunagari*, a felt connection that implies simultaneous willing participation in and obligation to one's community. *Tsunagari*, which crosses generations and roots communities deeply in place, is ultimately vital to the long-term stability of Toyama City's population and the resilience of its communities.

Researching music and community in Toyama City

I first came to Toyama City in 2011, and worked there for one year as an assistant language teacher in two high schools. While there, I met a number of musicians and came to be an alternate house bassist for a local jazz club. I returned briefly in 2013 and 2015, before returning for a planned year of in-person dissertation fieldwork supported by a Japan Foundation fellowship in summer 2019. I spent the following months attending musical performances of multiple genres at a range of both commercial and public venues, speaking with musicians and other listeners, and sometimes performing at a local jazz club. My research approach consisted primarily of participant-observation and semi-structured interviews, long-time staples of ethnomusicological research.

In March 2020, the US Department of State instructed all US nationals abroad at the time to return immediately or prepare to stay indefinitely. I hurriedly made plans to return home, cutting my planned fieldwork short.

In my final few weeks in Toyama City, I observed a change in the sounds of public spaces. The quiet was even more dramatic in the commercial music venues where I spent many evenings. Customers abandoned these places weeks before any formal advice to avoid or close such venues. At The Cotton Club, where I had been performing as one of two alternating house bassists, we sometimes played sets for a single customer. On other nights, when not even one customer arrived, we played anyway, often workshopping owner and house guitarist Tommy Matsuura's original compositions.

Following my abrupt departure, I learned through correspondence and by monitoring social media that live music venues faced intermittent closures as pandemic fears rose and fell with new variants and changing case numbers. Large public events featuring music were also canceled. Some annual events, including the National Chindon Competition and the iconic Owara Kaze no Bon, faced multiyear interruptions. In their place, local people and organizations posted a small number of videos and statements of mourning, tempered by hope, to YouTube and social media. Watching, listening to, and reading these from my home in the US, I began to consider what was left out of these representations. I thought about the kind of knowledge that informed my experience of these scarce glimpses into pandemic life in Toyama and what I might still be missing. I do not consider this research method to be internet-based ethnography. In my understanding, 'ethnography' implies the exchanges that constitute participation in a community. Online ethnography, thus, implies such a social exchange through the internet (Costello et al. 2017). While I continue to correspond with contacts in Toyama City, the bulk of my active participation in musical communities there occurred while I was physically present. I did not engage in the creative and collaborative work implied by online ethnography in relation to the particular materials discussed in this article. The communities that created these materials – which are based around primarily in-person interactions – do not lend themselves to internet-based ethnography. Instead, what follows is an example of close reading informed by in-person experience. I argue that my understanding of the materials I discuss is dependent on my years of connection to Toyama City and my prior experience living, working, and researching in-person alongside its residents.

Perhaps my experience in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic is most important for this analysis. Unexpected changes to ethnographic fieldwork plans are commonplace. In this situation, however, everyone, citywide – and in varying ways nation- and worldwide – experienced similar interruptions to their lives. Any interpretation of online materials posted as a substitute for events cancelled during the pandemic or shortly following the resumption of such an event, thus, inevitably calls to mind living through the pandemic's onset and the halting process of adjusting to pandemic life. While the exact details varied, everyone living in Toyama City in early 2020 – including me – shared this experience.

In this article, I will first discuss my improvised response to interrupted ethnomusicological fieldwork in relation to more established approaches and its potential place in an ethnomusicology of a world increasingly characterized by inconsistent, frequently overlapping and interrupted virtual and in-person connections. Next, I will model the approach of ethnographically informed close reading through a discussion of two videos posted on YouTube while COVID-19 restrictions prevented large in-person musical events in Toyama City. These videos represent the National Chindon Competition and the Kagami-machi shishimai that begins the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival, respectively. Finally, I will discuss the potentials and limitations of this approach, and reflect on the transformative nature of ethnographic experience and some of its ethical implications.

Ethnographically informed close reading of audiovisual media

Studying music and sound in a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted life in communities around the world. An emerging body of scholarship, alongside many crowd-sourced research projects, seeks to document some of the novel soundscapes generated by the pandemic.¹ Some recent scholarship draws on survey data to begin to understand the implications of the pandemic for public music performances, listening habits, and music's impact on personal well-being during uncertain and isolating times.² Some scholars have called for or issued statements on the pandemic's impact on research and pedagogy in

disciplines that study sound and music as social phenomena (Mundy 2020; Strong 2021; Westgate 2021). Holly Hobbs, Raquel Paraíso, and Tamar Sella (2020) have curated an invaluable collection of interviews with American musicians regarding their experiences during the pandemic. Ethnomusicologists as a whole, however, have been slow to contribute ethnographic studies of musical life following the outbreak of COVID-19. This is understandable. Extended in-person research – now severely restricted – has long been a core disciplinary method. Gregory Barz and Timothy Cooley have noted that “ethnographic fieldwork requires meaningful face-to-face interaction with other individuals, and therein lie both the promise and challenge of our endeavors” (2008:4). They qualify this statement, noting the prevalence of online interaction and correspondence in contemporary ethnomusicological fieldwork. The basic point, however, that ethnomusicology’s particular strength lies in meaningful interaction with others, holds true. The COVID-19 pandemic, thus, poses significant methodological challenges to ethnomusicologists researching musical communities reliant on face-to-face interaction.

Promises and limits of online ethnography

Legal, practical, and safety concerns forced me to withdraw from my field site in Toyama City, Japan, in spring 2020. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I believed virtual fieldwork, now well accepted as a supplementary method or primary method for communities with significant online presences, would become a more central ethnomusicological technique, a way forward in an era of uncertain mobility. Timothy Cooley, Katherine Meizel, and Nasir Syed in their discussion of virtual ethnomusicological fieldwork state that “fieldwork should happen where music happens,” and “as an organic part of our very real experiences – as part of our everyday lives – virtuality is also one of the many ways we experience people making music” (2008:106–107). As virtual activity has become a significant part of many social worlds and engagement with music in virtual spaces has become increasingly common, it is intuitive that ethnomusicological fieldwork takes place at least partly in virtual spaces. Internet-based ethnography may be an ideal method to study primarily online or born-online communities. It is also promising for the study of musical communities that have adapted

to the pandemic by shifting their activities to online spaces. It is not so easy to apply to communities built around in-person music making that have not made such shifts. In such instances, the moments when activities typically experienced offline erupt into virtual spaces are significant because they are unusual. They may be stopgap measures to maintain some active presence in a time when opportunities for in-person contact are limited, or signal a profound and lasting change in the way a community socializes. No matter what these eruptions signal, their significance is easy to miss without some prior in-person experience with the people and musics represented through this virtual activity.

Not all of Toyama City's musical communities are equally online. Many depend on in-person and in-place interactions for cohesion. In fact, this is a key component of *tsunagari* and its potential contributions to Toyama City's long-term resilience. Some local traditions are so firmly connected to specific places within Toyama City that it is hard for people who have experienced them to imagine the musical practice or the place without the other. Online representations of these practices are rare, and do not lend themselves to interactive engagement. How, then, can the insights only achieved through interaction be brought to bear on an analysis of musical materials from a distance, with minimal ongoing interaction?

Shared experience underlying ethnographic interpretation

My response to this methodological challenge was a close reading of videos of events or related activities posted by performers or attendees to YouTube. While not ethnography in itself, prior ethnographic experience with local communities necessarily shapes my interpretation of these materials. While I am unable to interact directly with the people making these videos or shown in them, they can indirectly affect me through the medium, which I filter through the lens of my cumulative experiences in Toyama City. It is important to note that I have no in-person experience with the two specific events discussed in this article. Toyama, like any city, includes a diverse set of variably interconnected communities, with equally diverse experiences and attitudes. My interpretations are colored by acquired sensibilities overlapping with only some local communities. The events depicted in the videos I discuss are well-known within Toyama, but the majority of

residents do not participate in staging them. Most residents are spectators – if they attend at all – and these annual events probably form part of the taken-for-granted background of life in the city. These individuals' experiences – which more closely relate to my own – are unlike those of the performers and organizers of these events, or even particularly enthusiastic spectators. While these events may contribute to a subtle sense of belonging and influence ideas of place, they probably do not evoke a strong emotional response in these casual observers except by their absence. Researchers with previous experience participating in the communities represented or addressed by online materials will have unique insights into the significance of virtual materials, even with limited ongoing interaction. At the same time, public performances like these are complex and may represent and address multiple overlapping and diverging groups simultaneously. It is important for researchers examining these materials to give a full account of the nature of their own experience and to whom among these groups that experience relates.

The specific nature of this prior experience is what facilitates ethnographically informed close reading. Timothy Rice (2008) draws on his experience researching Bulgarian music and becoming a gaida player in his discussion of the relationship between explicitly research-oriented fieldwork and other related experiences in the field. He reflects on how the limits of verbal explanations for his theoretical questions gave way to experiential insights, and how this newly internalized embodied knowledge eventually led to further theoretical knowledge. Fieldwork is both a method for testing theory or generating knowledge and a transformative experience. Rice upsets rigid ideas of cultural insider and outsider status, while acknowledging the individual and collective transformation that researchers and the communities in which they work undergo through developing shared cultural knowledge, perspective, and habits.

As in Rice's discussion of his own experiences, my perspective is not defined solely by intentionally ethnographic fieldwork. I first lived in Toyama City as an assistant language teacher from 2011–12. It was during this time that I first learned of many of the musical practices I have since studied and met several of the musicians who later became my interlocutors. I visited multiple times before beginning graduate studies and ultimately returning for ethnomusicological fieldwork. My prior knowledge and established rela-

tionships with residents, including my sense of what they would find valuable, informed my research topic and perspective. I would not have attempted to research Toyama City at all if I had not known people who live there whom I believe would be proud to be part of such an international scholarly conversation. My research-oriented activities in Toyama City build on these prior professional and personal experiences, contributing to my perspective when approaching cultural materials representing the people of Toyama City. My experience falls between that of a fieldworker totally new to their field site and that of one conducting fieldwork “at home” as described by such authors as Jonathan Stock and Chou Chiener (2008).

The transformative ethnographic experience

The transformative experience described by Rice (2008) underlies an ethnographically informed reading. Some of a fieldworker’s understanding and way of being in the world can be clearly linked to specific experiences in the field. Some ways these field-specific experiences alter fieldworkers’ frameworks for interpretation occur below the threshold of focal awareness. As a result, an ethnographically informed reading is not necessarily superior to a culturally naïve reading. Each will lead to different insights. Experience makes some connections and subtle behaviors clear while obscuring others. The value of different types of interpretation is determined by context and the goals of each analysis.

My analysis draws on the shared experience of being in a city as public musical life ground to a halt. This experience is difficult to fully relate, but is key to the analysis of materials shaped by extraordinary events. It bears some similarity to allowing shared experience as a performing musician to tacitly inform ethnographic research design, fieldwork, and analysis, as discussed by Cassandre Balosso-Bardin (2022). This is distinct from the common ethnographic technique of explicitly examining the process of learning to act as part of a new community. One of ethnomusicology’s most unique contributions to the ethnographic process is the use of learning to become a musician as a means of incorporating oneself into a society in a role already established within that society, as discussed by John Baily (2001). This has been discussed extensively, particularly in relation to Mantle Hood’s (1960)

proposal of bi-musicality as a cognitive framework central to ethnomusicological process.

Music and music performance in ethnomusicological method

Michelle Bigenho (2008) has raised key questions about the relationship between performance and scholarship to discussions of ethnomusicological process. She asserts her own disciplinary identification with anthropology over ethnomusicology in part due to the latter's structural commitment to a Northern Atlantic understanding of music as a privileged domain of human activity. She also notes that there are many ways to participate in a musical event, not only as a performer. Lawrence Witzleben (2010) later reflected on whether musical performance should constitute a separate category of activity, noting the importance of performing to much ethnomusicological scholarship. According to Witzleben, a lot of ethnomusicology, in practice, has long sat at the intersection of anthropological ethnography and music performance, and ethnomusicologists frequently learn to perform or engage in performance as part of their studies. He affirms the significance of musical, as opposed to other types of experience, stating "a central premise of the present article is that music and musical performance are indeed 'different' from everyday life in both experiential and physiological terms" (ibid.:149). I agree with Witzleben, with some important additions, grounded in Bigenho's (2008) critique of ethnomusicology: music is different because and only if those involved believe it to be, and the role of a performer is unique only in so far as social custom dictates. That music is a categorically different domain of experience and performers are, to some degree, a separate class of person are common beliefs among many cultural groups, and the material repercussions of these beliefs often functionally separate music from other social domains.

In what respect, then, can my research be considered ethnomusicological, aside from the fact that the practices depicted in the videos are musical? It is my position that ethnomusicology offers two unique contributions to the social sciences: (1) access to relationships, experiences, and spaces unique to those participating in music in social contexts where musical performance is recognized as categorically distinct from other types of event or experience; and (2) a subjectivity compatible with understanding the lived

experience of people involved in music making or engaged with music in social groups that consider music a unique domain. In a context where music is not considered a unique social domain, activity, or product, ethnomusicologists do not have these practical advantages over other researchers of social activity. While I recognize that these evaluations of music and musical performance vary widely, in practical terms, I would not have been so easily accepted into the communities I work with in Toyama if I were not a performing musician. When returning for research purposes, commercial musicians said they trusted me to represent them in part because I had played with them. Similarly, my former coworkers from Yatsuo High School knew me as a musician, understood my interest in music, and helped me connect with friends and neighbors who played music for local festivals.

Recognizing that there are multiple, sometimes overlapping, roles to be performed at any live music event – including musician, audience member, organizer, or others, depending on context – performance in the temporally and spatially specific context of musical performance underlies much ethnomusicological research. Prior experience becomes particularly valuable when restrictions on in-person events have made this type of participation impossible. I, a researcher, was not the only one unable to attend highly anticipated musical events put on hold by the pandemic. My experiences living and working with people who regularly attend such events, as well as those who have casually observed them or even ignored them, informs my understanding of their experience of these strange and unexpected silences. Though my experience differs from that of a long-time resident of Toyama City's, we both experienced the city rapidly and unexpectedly descend into a strange hush. This experience necessarily shapes my interpretation of the musical materials I am able to access from afar.

Ethnography of audiovisual media

Close reading is a well-established humanistic methodology and social scientists have discussed both the role of video in ethnography and the potential contributions of ethnography to video analysis. Arjun Appadurai (1991), in his discussion of mediascapes as social fields intersecting with others that define contemporary life, stated the importance of ethnographic attention to the increasing ubiquity of new mass media technologies. Responding to

this call, the collection *Media World: Anthropology on New Terrain* began to address some of the blind spots of media theory from an anthropological perspective (Ginsburg et al. 2002). The contributors understood these omissions as the result of incomplete accounts of the creation and circulation of media and media technology around the world, largely due to ignorance of the circuits of production and distribution not firmly connected to North Atlantic markets. This oversight could be meaningfully addressed – in part – through ethnography. This collection also calls attention to the ways mass media upset the once assumed connection between culture and place.

Attention to representations of otherness and indigeneity and these representations' potential to influence the lives of people represented have been among ethnography's subsequent contributions to the study of media (Wilson & Stewart 2008; Rodríguez et al. 2009; Schiwy & Weber 2017). Hamid Naficy and Gabriel Teshome (2017) argue in *Otherness and the Media: The Ethnography of the Imagined and the Imaged* that to define “the other,” fixing its boundaries, renders it static, cutting off its most important potentials. This is a caution against both limiting the imaginative potentials of portrayals of otherness and the essentialization of marginalized people, which would reinforce existing inequitable hierarchies. In a concrete demonstration of these dangers, Smadar Lavie (2017) draws on in-person ethnographic experience to correct romantic depictions of the Mzeina Bedouin in literature and media targeting North Atlantic audiences. The author notes how both the military occupation has precluded the self-reliant freedom ascribed to these people, and tourism driven by fictionalized images has impacted their practices and livelihoods. Rather than using in-person experience to critique media made by and for a North Atlantic audience, I draw on in-person experience to understand the importance of media made by and for a local audience. This work raises questions of the impact of the increased visibility of representations to communities with little familiarity of the people, places, and practices represented.

Audiovisual media in ethnography

As ethnography can be used to constructively inform the analysis of independent, community-produced, and commercial media, so too have media technologies afforded valuable possibilities for ethnographic research. Video

can be easily understood as a simple mnemonic or transparent means of conveying information. However, when taken as part of ethnographic fieldwork, it is a limited record of a specific perspective. It comes with its own ideological and methodological complexities. Christian Meier Zu Verl and René Tuma (2021) analyzed the practice of analyzing video taken during ethnographic fieldwork, discussing sociological video analysis sessions as both a resource and topic of study. They note that at least one member of the research team typically has had direct experience with the practice depicted, but those with no prior knowledge of it often raise the most significant questions, precisely due to their ignorance. If the goal of analysis is explaining the practice depicted in the video to a broad audience, this is undoubtedly true: an inexperienced person will notice many things that are low in focal awareness for someone already thoroughly experienced in a given cultural practice. However, preexisting competency is vital to understanding the video itself as a social practice and product. Analyzing videorecorded social behavior without ethnographic experience within the community depicted may call attention to something significant that is too commonplace for one of those depicted to notice, but it misses a great deal of information and emotional connection that can only be gained through in-person experience (Nassauer & Legewie 2018). Understanding *what* is depicted in a way that avoids overlooking the specificity of certain ingrained, culturally specific practices may require some distance. Understanding *why* it is depicted in a particular way, by a specific person, at a particular time and understanding the importance of that act, requires more intimate experience.

Ultimately, an understanding of context is essential to an understanding of any recorded media as a cultural product. Ethnography is a powerful tool for parsing this context (Knoblauch & Schnettler 2012). In one sense, the analysis I demonstrate fits this model. I have many years of experience living with, working alongside, and corresponding with individuals in Toyama City and in Yatsuo, where the communities primarily addressed by these videos are located. At the same time, I have not been to either the National Chindon Competition or the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival. Furthermore, while I have experience performing music in Toyama City with people who were born in Toyama City and have spent their entire lives there, I do not have any experience performing the music for Kagami-machi's shishimai or chindon. I do, however, have experience living through the early stages of the pandemic in

Toyama City and learning of the cancellation of anticipated events, including the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival and the National Chindon Competition. My interpretations are, therefore, applicable mainly to the feelings and reactions of those who have lived alongside these yearly occurrences without participating in their staging or organization. This is useful for not only understanding the affective impact of the pandemic on these people, but also exploring the methodological limitations of close readings of cultural materials. I agree that the ethnographic dimension of video recordings is necessary to any complete video analysis and the subjectivity of both those depicted and researcher should be considered. My analysis shows that there are many perspectives from which to understand ethnographic context, subjectivity, and their relationship. While some may appear contradictory on the surface, all are potentially valuable.

Leaky media circuits

My analysis draws attention to two questions about the nature of particular media's transnational circulation. Firstly, what is the impact of media that reinscribes connections between place and cultural practices, even as it enters into transnational circulation? Secondly, how does the content of particular media target or limit its circulation, even on platforms that make broader access possible?

Both videos I analyze have a limited circulation due largely to their content. Because they have been uploaded to an internationally accessible platform (YouTube), their circuits are leaky, allowing the content to reach unexpected listeners. However, due to the targeting of these videos to an audience within Japan, Toyama, or Yatsuo, it is unlikely that they immediately begin to circulate beyond these audiences. This article actually contributes to a potential leakage, and knowing this, I would not write about these videos if I were not confident that the communities represented would be proud of these representations. The practices depicted featured prominently in public media representing these locations before the pandemic, and local people told me directly that I could write about their music – although they doubted it was significant enough to be worth the effort. Even so, video is not a transparent medium and I am a particularly positioned analyst. Misrepresentation is still possible.

I understand the video of Kagami-machi's shishimai as a statement for local people, maintaining a sense of unity and continuity between generations while in-person events that would normally serve this purpose were restricted and perhaps dangerous. Any broader circulation of this video is incidental. This is not to say it is without consequence, only that it is not the immediate purpose of this video. The chindon-ya video message is explicitly addressed to the people of Toyama City, but given the performers' occupation and the conventions of the genre, it can be understood as a broader commercial endeavor, aiming to hold on to as much attention as possible while public performances were restricted. It is safe to assume, however, that given the specificity of chindon-ya to the urban Japanese soundscape, this video's availability outside of Japan would have little immediate relevance to either viewers in Toyama or the performers themselves.

Reading Akebono-ya's 2021 chindon video message and the video of the 2021 Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival Shishimai

In this section, I examine two videos uploaded to YouTube. The first is a performance of the Tokyo-based chindon-ya (a traditional Japanese musical street advertising group) Akebono-ya. They created this video after the 2021 National Chindon Competition, which takes place every year in Toyama City, was cancelled for the second consecutive year as a precaution against the spread of COVID-19. The second video is of the shishimai, a performance that has its roots in an exorcism ritual, performed at the beginning of the 2021 Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival, a celebration in which large decorative floats are pulled through the streets with musical accompaniment.

Certain sensory information and improvisational elements – key to the development of tsunagari and a full understanding of these events' social impact – are missing from the media of video. In their absence, my prior in-person experience living, working, and conducting research in Toyama City informs my understanding of the following two videos' probable impact on local people. While the chindon-ya in the first video gives a characteristically upbeat performance, the emotions it probably evokes in many locals would be of sadness and loss, somewhat tempered by hope, as it calls to mind the city's suddenly and eerily quieted public spaces.³ The second video, which inspires a more hopeful and curious response, suggests a shifting of at least

one local's attention to details that were commonly overlooked or taken for granted prior to the interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Akebono-ya's 2021 chindon video message

After the 2020 and 2021 cancellations of the National Chindon Competition, several of the performers scheduled to compete sent video messages that the organizing committee posted on the Zen-nihon Chindon Konkūru Toyama (National Chindon Competition, Toyama) YouTube account. In one such video, Tokyo-based Akebono-ya perform two short pieces after a brief, stylized introduction.⁴ The man who speaks for the group mentions the cancellation of the competition – which would have been this group's first – but does not dwell on it. He expresses hope for a return the following year, and offers a “socially distanced” performance in the meantime. After the flamboyantly dressed smiling performers play their simple, upbeat melodies, the man who introduced the group states that they love Toyama and wish for the health and well-being of its residents, and any others who watch the video, before stating “let's meet again.”

When watching this video, I feel sadness in spite of the smiles, bright colors, cheerful music, and optimistic message. I visited The Cotton Club one evening in 2020, as COVID-19 began to spread in Japan. At the empty bar, the pianist looked up at me from reading on her cell phone, sighed, and told me that Tokyo Disney was closing as a precautionary measure. I had no idea why this would bother her, and I asked if she had plans to go. She snapped at me that she had no interest in going to Tokyo Disney, but this meant the Disney characters that were usually part of the Chindon parade at the conclusion of the National Chindon Competition would not be present that year. I considered how she must feel knowing that something that had happened every year of her life, that she had come to expect as a given, might not happen. While I have little experience with the National Chindon Competition, I know it as a harbinger of spring in Toyama and an important marker of the yearly cycle of seasons. What would someone who had grown up in Toyama and seen this parade nearly every year of her life feel watching videos like these, knowing that, for the second time, this fixture of spring would not come? Could there even be a spring in Toyama without chindon-ya parading under the cherry blossoms along the Matsukawa River which runs through

the center of the city?⁵ The feeling I have when watching the videos made by the chindon-ya who were scheduled to perform in the competition is a sadness for the loss of normalcy. This is just my own feeling, but it is a reaction conditioned by experiences shared with local people. I saw the flyers and posters advertising the 2020 National Chindon Competition appear all over public spaces in the city center, heard local people's anticipation of the event in conversation, and witnessed their disappointment as the event was reduced in scope and, as the public spaces in Toyama City fell under a nervous hush, hope that it could take place at all dwindled. Everyone living in Toyama City in early 2020 would have had similar moments in which they recognized the strangeness and uncertainty of life during a pandemic. These experiences would no doubt inform their reception of a video like this one.

The 2021 Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival Shishimai

YouTube user BLue ecosystem, who has posted numerous videos of festivals that occur in and around Toyama over the past several years, uploaded a video of the shishimai beginning the 2021 Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival.⁶ In the video, two "lions" each performed by two young men carrying a decorated cloth over their heads while the dancer in front carries a brightly painted, ornately carved mask of a lion's head, wind through the streets of Yatsuo's historic district. Three younger boys carrying wooden rods with white paper strips attached to one end march next to two lions. A group of musicians playing flutes and percussion keep time. When they arrive at Hachiman shrine, the younger boys exchange their rods for different ones with bright, multicolored streamers, which they wave at the lions in mock battle, as the lions perform tightly choreographed thrashing and circular movements. The group then proceeds out of the shrine grounds, continuing through the streets of Yatsuo and stopping at key locations for additional mock battles.

This performance is not, in itself, particularly unusual. The route was diminished in 2021 to avoid crowding and minimize the risk of a COVID-19 outbreak. Otherwise, this is a typical part of Yatsuo's Hikiyama Festival. The focus is unusual. While video of the large decorative floats pulled through the streets of the town are relatively common, I have found only three other videos of the shishimai of this festival, one posted 6 years ago, one 10 years ago, and one 13 years ago. The YouTube user who posted this video, BLue

ecosystem, active since 2015, has posted several videos in previous years of the decorative floats used in the Hikiyama Festival. They have also posted several videos of other shishimai, including several performed in nearby Gokkayama, where they are more central aspects of the events in which they occur.

This Hikiyama Festival, while not particularly well-known or prominently advertised outside of Yatsuo – probably because there are many similar festivals that take place in the region – is a significant event in Yatsuo. I knew about it through my coworkers, and later learned that many of the same amateur musicians who accompany the much larger Owara Kaze no Bon festival also perform for the Hikiyama Festival. There is an exhibition hall, located near the Owara Museum, where the decorative floats used during the festival are displayed year-round as part of the cultural heritage of Yatsuo. The coordination required for the festival also demands many community members to attend rehearsals leading up to the event, bringing together multiple generations of residents from multiple districts within Yatsuo, in a process that, as Nagao (2013) has demonstrated, is vital to the construction and maintenance of tsunagari. Similar to the Hikiyama Festival, shishimai require coordination and contribute to the formation of community bonds. Unlike the Hikiyama Festival, while some shishimai are well-known beyond the specific place of their performance and may attract tourists, many are so hyperlocal that it is easy to be unaware of them entirely. The shishimai that is part of the Hikiyama Festival maintains this hyperlocal status. While the decorative floats have come to represent Yatsuo as a whole, the shishimai remains the district of Kagami-machi's distinct contribution.

In 2012, my coworkers at Yatsuo High School informed me of the Hikiyama Festival and its elaborate floats. They recommended the exhibition hall where the floats are displayed year-round. In their descriptions of the festival, they never mentioned the shishimai. It was clearly not their major focus. The shishimai itself is not a new addition to the performance of the festival, but the decision to take and post a video is still significant, given the general lack of interest in this portion – except, perhaps, among those involved in Kagami-machi – and YouTube user BLue ecosystem's prior lack of attention to it. Sharing this video in 2021, the year the Hikiyama Festival resumed after it and all other major public events were suspended, suggests that the YouTube user BLue ecosystem may have a newfound appreciation

for certain elements previously taken for granted by all but those directly involved. This could be for a number of reasons. This shishimai has a particular historical significance for the town of Kagami-machi. When the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival began in the 1700s, six of the towns making up what was then the municipality of Yatsuo contributed lavishly decorated floats, displaying their prosperity (Etchū Yatsuo Kankō Kyōkai 2020). Kagami-machi did not contribute a float but, instead, performed shishimai at the beginning of the festival. This hints at an economic disparity between Kagami-machi and Yatsuo's other constituent towns, but it has been buried by nearly three centuries and a series of municipal consolidations and reorganizations. Kagami-machi's continued practice of shishimai to open the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival remains as an echo of this history, transformed into a marker of distinction for some local people. In the present, this history and Kagami-machi's unique contribution to the festival would probably have limited relevance to audiences outside of Kagami-machi. A probable explanation for Blue ecosystem's apparently new interest in this aspect of the festival is related to the pandemic context of the performance. It is outdoors and allows for social distancing, making it relatively unlikely to spark a major outbreak of COVID-19, and shishimai have traditionally been used to ward off misfortune – including disease – making them particularly relevant to life during a pandemic.

It would not be surprising if a lot of Toyama's residents took a new interest in details they might have overlooked prior to the pandemic. By encouraging a renewed interest in details previously thought too locally specific or incidental to notice, it is possible that the return of events like this one following their sudden and unexpected cancellation will make them, at least temporarily, more potent vehicles for establishing a sense of unified community in Toyama City, one that more effectively bridges the local cultural divides that have, up to this point, characterized the sprawling administrative unit.

Habits of imagination, maintaining community, and the analysis of fixed media

Videos of Owara Kaze no Bon, another local festival, are far more numerous than those of Kagamimachi's shishimai or the decorative floats of the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival. The song and dance of Owara Kaze no Bon are considered to be unique, while there are shishimai and events similar to Yatsuo's Hikiyama Festival that occur in other parts of Toyama City, other cities within Toyama Prefecture, and in other parts of Japan. As such, tourists are attracted to the Owara Kaze no Bon in particular among Toyama's festivals. Residents, in turn, understand Owara Kaze no Bon as singular among all of Japan's festival performances and recognize its value representing Yatsuo to Toyama and Toyama to the rest of Japan. This contributes to a sense of shared community grounded in place because it gives people a way of representing themselves as distinct from other groups and places.

Incomplete representation and maintaining community through imagination

The relative availability of videos of Owara Kaze no Bon, however, can still be deceptive to a researcher seeking to understand the festival performance's impact from afar. No number of videos can stand in for the experience of attending. The complex sensory experience that connects people to each other and to place during these festivals, rendering an idea of shared history and rootedness as something that can be deeply felt, cannot be captured in a fixed audiovisual format. No matter how many videos I watch and how many times I watch them, I will not smell the food prepared in the stalls that line the streets. I will not feel the excitement among the high school students in the weeks leading up to the festival as they rehearse for their performances. No drunken office workers will stumble into me late at night then insist on having a drink with me in one of the many restaurants that open their storefronts and set up tables on the streets for the duration of the festival. There are sensory elements missing from the video recordings, and the live improvisatory element of these social events does not translate into a fixed medium. The complexity and unscriptedness – or loose scriptedness – of the in-person experience of social events like these are not only key to

tsunagari, they are core elements of social life in general. The feelings they generate are central concerns for ethnomusicologists.

While the video cannot substitute for the event, this does not render such traces of in-person social activities past, present, and future meaningless. When I view these materials, I experience the elements not present – the smells, the tactile sensations, and the unexpected encounters – almost as though I were in Toyama again. These videos are powerful catalysts for imagination, and, as such, their reading is a useful supplement to ethnography. I expect that many who have not had any in-person experience in Toyama could still use these videos as a starting point for their own imagined narratives. In this respect, I believe direct, in-person engagement remains a central strength of the ethnographic method. My prior experiences in Toyama do not make me inherently better at imagining Toyama than someone who has not had such experiences. They do, however, make me far more likely to imagine Toyama as someone who has lived there would typically imagine it. This tendency helps me notice some of the sensory elements and interactions missing from the media of video. Furthermore, ideas of community as they are felt and expressed in everyday life in a city of approximately 400,000 people necessarily involve a great deal of imagining. As such, the means by which a community develops a shared set of habits of imagination, and the nature of those shared habits are chief concerns for anyone seeking to understand that community's social life. My prior history of living and researching in Toyama City leads me to interpret the two videos I have discussed as I do. The pandemic context is also a unique unifying experience. My interpretations of these videos, created with pandemic-related restrictions still in effect, are relatable to a broad swath of local people, because one major event interrupted life and colored nearly all aspects of experience for everyone in Toyama City at the same time.

Even having spent a great deal of time in Toyama City and communicating with local people, the relevance of my experience to these particular materials is sharply limited. My interpretations are based on experience living alongside people more familiar with the National Chindon Competition and the Yatsuo Hikiyama Festival and residing in Toyama City at a time when the festivals did occur, as well as the city-wide experience of their cancellation. Certainly, someone more involved in the planning or performance of these events or a particularly dedicated regular observer would have a different,

less overlapping experience, and, thus, a different lens through which to understand the videos I discuss. Videos like these cannot initiate new members into shared habits of imagining, leaving particular local viewpoints beyond my ability to understand through readings of online media. These media can, by exploiting an existing set of shared habits of imagination, help to maintain a sense of connectedness, even from a distance, founded on local, in-person experience.

Ethnographic experience, learning to imagine, and social responsibility

This approach to analysis reveals an important point about the position of a researcher embedded in a community for ethnographic fieldwork. In broad strokes, while the duration and depth are different and the specific content may vary, the process of cultivating a distinct set of habits of imagination, as well as those habits' impact, is the same for the researcher and life-long community members. As people connected by musical practices depend on a shared set of habits of imagination for the establishment and perpetuation of their communities, this process of cultivating shared habits of imagination is an important marker of community membership. An ethnomusicologist studying a musical community through direct engagement and some manner of exchange that cultivates such a shared set of habits of imagination – whether that engagement is in-person, virtual, or some combination of the two – should understand themselves as a member of that community, with the obligations implied by that membership. This is not to say they have all the rights to access afforded long-time practitioners, or that they are of an equal social standing to others in that community – nor is it to say that all local communities or community members will share all aspects of this habitus of imagination – only that they are part of that web of social material connections, and their actions will reverberate through it. Ethnographers can be responsible or irresponsible, social or antisocial, or respected or maligned members of the communities in which they study, but opting out is not possible.

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Notes

1. See, e.g., Challéat et al. (2020); Lenzi (2020); Fowkes (2021).

2. Examples include Kinnunen and Honkanen (2021); Roese and Merrill (2021); Talbert and Edelman (2021).
3. Particularly interested fans of chindon in Toyama might have a different reaction. If they are engaged enough to have particular favorite groups or to be invested in local performers, these observers might respond with curiosity or disinterest to an unfamiliar Tokyo-based performer's video message.
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jHgJhDD6yU> Accessed 29 April 2022.
5. The cancellation of the event is also probably a major blow to chindon-ya around Japan who rely on the event for income and exposure. Akebono-ya, as a new professional entrant missed an important opportunity for national exposure. Their video message is probably an attempt to salvage this opportunity and reach out to new audiences both in Toyama and beyond. For a detailed discussion of the economics of contemporary chindon and the social impact of chindon-ya, see Abe (2018).
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BsYgMAYfgW0> Accessed 29 April 2022.

About the author

William Donnie Scally received a PhD in ethnomusicology from the University of Maryland, College Park, in 2021. His dissertation “Sounds of the Compact City: A Musical Urban Ethnography of Toyama City, Japan” addresses urban musical life, aging and shrinking populations, the environment, and infrastructure change. His research areas include urban ethnomusicology, sensory ethnography, and sound and embodiment in combat sports.