

**Asakusa Ondo:  
Soundscape, Agency, Montage, and Place  
in a Dynamic Tokyo Neighborhood**

by

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Dedicated to my family,  
my foundation and my refuge,  
whose love and support have  
made this possible.

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## Preface

“*Haa, nishi ni Fuji-gane, choito, higashi ni Tsukuba, yoi yoi* (*Haa*, Mt. Fuji’s peak is in the west, *choito*, Mt. Tsukuba is in the east, *yoi yoi*).” The townspeople chanted and sang together, their *yukata* (light-weight cotton kimono) sleeves waving in the summer breeze as they performed a local folk dance together. It was the night of *bon-odori* (Buddhist summer festival dance) in mid-August of 2007, my first summer in Japan, and I had joined the other city residents in the square next to the train station to celebrate. Although some people wore their everyday shirts, blouses, and pants, a great number also dressed in colorful *yukata* in the festive spirit of the event. Dusk was falling and the oppressive heat of the afternoon was lifting. Red and white paper lanterns strung high above the square bobbed in the wind, glowing brightly. The savory and tangy smells of festival foods—*yakisoba* (fried noodles), *okonomiyaki* (grilled savory pancakes), and their accompanying *beni shōga* (pickled ginger)—wafted through crowded tents around the perimeter where many people were chatting and laughing together between bites. All the while, the most spirited among us danced and sang around the *yagura* (raised wooden scaffold) erected at the center of the square performing an *ondo*, a local song celebrating the town.

There are a great many *ondo* written about localities large and small throughout Japan. They are a type of modern folk song typically performed at *bon-odori* each year, like the one described above. At such events, a few lead dancers and a *taiko* drummer or two climb onto a *yagura*, and community members dance around them in formation, chanting



lines of *kakegoe* (stylized shouts) at key moments of the (usually pre-recorded) song. *Ondo* melodies are lively and typically pentatonic, and the lyrics make reference to features and/or sites of that particular town or neighborhood. Performances of *ondo* are, therefore, not only acts of collective music-making, dance, and traditional festivity, but also local pride.

I chose to name my dissertation after the *ondo* written for and about Asakusa, the Tokyo neighborhood whose soundscape is the object of my musical analysis. I have done so not only because the word *ondo* carries the connotations listed above, but also because its literal meaning (the “on” [音] of *ondo* literally means “sound”), and the lyrics of “Asakusa Ondo” in particular, directly intersect with my theoretical subject matter. The lyrics of “Asakusa Ondo” are a potpourri of the neighborhood’s famous sights, sounds, people, and features, both historical and contemporary—a musical and literary expression of the neighborhood as montage:

Springtime in Asakusa, one thousand cherry trees  
There is also jazz playing [on] the pleasure boats  
Opera, “Kappore,” “Nonki-bushi”  
Entertainment, dancers, young girls in kimono  
Shitamachi[’s] Asakusa, town of the masses  
Hearts are dancing, hearts are dancing  
(*soiya, soiya, soiya, soiya*)  
The [cherry] blossom of Edo

Summer in Asakusa, one thousand fireworks burst  
Sanja Matsuri’s flutes and drums  
Samba, morning glories, The Potted Plant Fair  
Goldfish peddlers at the Chinese Lantern Plant Fair  
The world’s Asakusa, foreign visitors also [have]  
Trembling hearts, trembling hearts  
(*soiya, soiya, soiya, soiya*)  
The emotion of Edo

Autumn in Asakusa, kabuki superstars  
Danjūrō's Sensō-ji  
Kabuki, *jōruri*, *nō* theater  
Women's sword theater, *naniwa-bushi*  
Tokyo[s] Asakusa, the entertainers' town  
Geisha, courtesans, geisha, courtesans  
(*soiya, soiya, soiya, soiya*)  
The luster of Edo

Winter in Asakusa, Edo's great urban sprawl  
[Is the sound of that] bell in Ueno or Asakusa?  
Bashō, Hokusai, Hiroshige too  
The great men of Edo [by the] Sumida River  
Japan's Asakusa, the town of woodblock prints  
Chic and dashing, chic and dashing  
(*soiya, soiya, soiya, soiya*)  
Now [we are really] alive

If you spend one peaceful year [with me],  
Out to the world, out to the world  
(*soiya, soiya, soiya, soiya*)  
The New Year's bell will ring

“Asakusa Ondo” was composed in 2005 by lyricist Shōji Ryō and composer Seshi Bonta. It was first performed in March of that year in a comparatively conventional *ondo* style by *kayōkyoku* (early-twentieth-century popular song) and *enka* (sentimental ballad) singers Yamanaka Akemi and Kubota Kenji. That initial performance was at a publicity event in an Asakusa shopping district rather than a *bon-odori*, but as a familiar type of festival song and dance, the *ondo* brought a particularly traditional and celebratory air to that scene. Later in 2005, Shōji and Seshi commissioned a local fusion band, Asakusa Jinta, to arrange their own interpretation of the song. Asakusa Jinta took the music—which already combined various ideas about the neighborhood in its original melodies, harmonies, and lyrics—and incorporated numerous Japanese and international genres. In doing so, the band was able to transform that fundamentally festive local song in order to musically

perform the multifaceted Tokyo neighborhood as simultaneously local and global. In the conclusion of this dissertation I offer an analysis of Asakusa Jinta's 2005 recording of "Asakusa Ondo" as a way of considering the juxtaposed inner workings of Asakusa's soundscape that I examine in the preceding case studies. By doing so, I also highlight the poetics of the song as a musical rendering of the neighborhood's soundscape montage, as well as demonstrate the implications my theory has for engaging with overlapping soundscapes on a global scale.

\* \* \*

To help frame the text of my dissertation as a whole, I have created a real video montage of my ethnographic film footage taken in Asakusa. Please access Video 1 at the link provided in the List of Videos above on page xxii.

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[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn\\_3r\\_Uc2NmF8fjukDB5eQ9KL5VQf0J4a](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLn_3r_Uc2NmF8fjukDB5eQ9KL5VQf0J4a)

Or access videos individually at the following links.

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## **Note on Japanese Names and Romanization of Japanese Language**

In this dissertation, Japanese names are denoted in Japanese order—surname followed by the given name.

I use the modified Hepburn system (*Hebon-shiki*) to Romanize the Japanese language. Accordingly, long vowels are marked with macrons (ā, ē, ī, ō, ū). Japanese terms commonly used in English (such as kabuki) are not italicized, and well-known place-names (such as Tokyo) are written without diacritical markings, unless they appear in a Japanese phrase or as part of a proper name.

Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

Japanese history is conventionally divided into periods based on dynastic names and individual imperial reigns. Where possible, I provide specific dates in Western terms, but the following era names are also used:

Kamakura period (1192-1333)  
Muromachi period (1338-1573)  
Edo period (1603-1868)  
Meiji period (1868-1912)  
Taishō period (1912-1926)  
Shōwa period (1926-1989)  
Heisei period (1989-present)

## Abstract

In this dissertation, I offer a theoretical framework for analyzing and understanding the ways people make sense of sound, music, and place in dense, diverse urban environments. Scholars often apply the concept of *soundscape* when considering matters of sound and place, but the term has mainly been used to refer to the entire mosaic of sounds in a usually pastoral, homogeneous environment. In crowded urban areas, however, people typically interact with and perceive their environments as heterogeneous, subdividing them into many socially and conceptually distinct places. The conventional application of the term, therefore, cannot adequately explain the reality of today's world in which more than half of its now seven billion people are living in cities, and where the trend toward urbanization is expected to continue for the foreseeable future.

To properly contend with these realities, I adapt the term *soundscape* to refer specifically to all of the audible sounds experienced in a *place*. Understanding *place* as the physical setting of a social activity, it is possible to analyze how differently meaningful sounding places come in contact with one another, and to examine human beings' roles in creating and making sense of those settings. I investigate the Tokyo neighborhood of Asakusa to demonstrate this theoretical framework. In Asakusa, strongly contrasting soundscapes merge; sounds drift far from their sources, overlap, and complicate the perception of meaningful senses of place. In such an environment, differently situated individuals have the agency to create, experience, and negotiate the neighborhood's sounds

for themselves. People embrace and define certain sounds while choosing to not hear and silence others, constructing their own *musikscape* to fashion their personal sonic sense of emplacement. Investigating these processes on both individual and collective levels, I ultimately demonstrate that overlapping soundscapes act as a montage, allowing Asakusa to be understood both as a conglomeration of its variety of parts, and as a cohesive whole within larger Tokyo.

## Introduction

# Encountering Asakusa: First Impressions

### I. Initial Fieldwork Impressions

My introduction to Asakusa came in November of 2006, just one week after arriving in Japan for the first time. As an Iowa farm girl transplanted to an East Asian metropolis, I was excited to be starting a yearlong adventure in Japan, but—surrounded by skyscrapers, unfamiliar scents and flavors, and millions of people speaking a language I barely understood—my new environment seemed bewildering and a bit alienating. I hardly knew anyone in the entire country and was preparing to live on my own for the first time in my life. Still, determined to fight my feelings of loneliness, I set out to explore Tokyo.

I relied upon my newly purchased guidebook to choose a destination. Its description of Asakusa fascinated me: “The historic riverside quarter that’s home to one of Tokyo’s temple gems,” which was “far and away the most exciting and dynamic part of town...for a couple of centuries up until around 1940.... [Asakusa is the district] where the commoners lived cheek by jowl, [and which still dons] a sense of faded grandeur.”<sup>1</sup> Today, it said, Asakusa is home to festivals both old and new, including the traditional Sanja Matsuri and the modern Asakusa Samba Carnival (Brazilian music and dance). Here, there are centuries-old thoroughfares with stalls selling traditional goods, an ancient Buddhist

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<sup>1</sup> Time Out Group Ltd., *Time Out: Tokyo*, 4th ed. (London: Ebury Publishing, 2005), 92.

temple, Japan's oldest amusement park, folk music performances, traditional comic storytelling, kimono makers, and theaters showing 1960s *yakuza* gangster films.<sup>2</sup> My curiosity was whetted by such a description: a neighborhood echoing with history, where sacred and secular mix, and traditional Japan intermingles with contemporary sights and sounds from other parts of the world. With my guidebook and city map tucked into my shoulder bag, I hopped on a commuter train bound for the western bank of the Sumida River.

As the home of such a curiously diverse and dynamic assortment of happenings, in which sound and music play an indispensable role, Asakusa has fascinated me ever since that first visit. I came to discover, over the course of many return trips to the neighborhood, that its particular regional character is borne not simply out of the unique nature of its happenings, but out of the density of different activities, and the particular combination of contrasting cultural categories that overlap and converge there. As Video 1 illustrates, Asakusa's sounds are both myriad and fundamental to how most people experience the neighborhood.<sup>3</sup> From the bong of a great temple bell, to nostalgic songs of yesteryear, hawking voices of shopkeepers, chants of pious monks, digital roars of *pachinko* parlors, swinging rhythms of Dixieland jazz, and delicate melodies of geisha, in Asakusa distinct sounding places become superimposed, blending together, and blurring at the edges. Although the neighborhood has a clear and discrete sense of place within the city, the soundscape of contemporary Asakusa is as varied as its landscape, in which people construct, act within, come into contact, and interact with diverse environments and with each other.

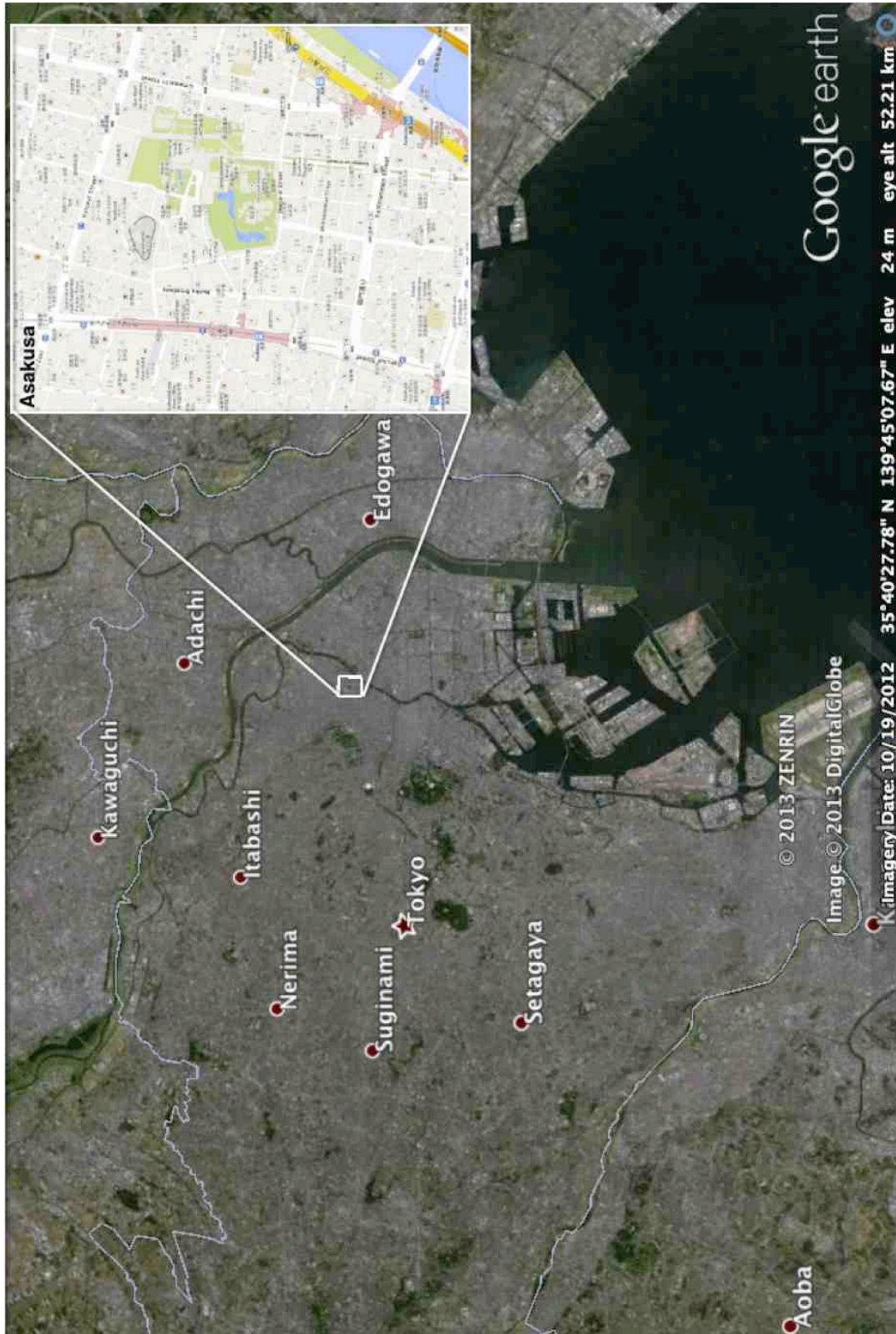
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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 92-94.

<sup>3</sup> See the list of Video Examples on page xxii for the hyperlink to each example.



**Map 1. Satellite image of the main islands of Japan. The location of Tokyo is marked by a red star (image generated by Google).**



**Map 2. Satellite image of much of the Tokyo Metropolitan Area, with Asakusa highlighted and including an inset map of the neighborhood (images generated by Google and modified by the author).**

I came to wonder, how do people in Asakusa make sense of its unique cacophony of cultural signifiers? If Asakusa is a place that has a definite cultural identity, as its inhabitants claim, how do people interact with and understand its sounds as meaningfully placed “Asakusa sounds” without becoming disoriented by those sounds’ inconsistencies and unusual intermingling? Studies on sound, music, and place have typically treated sounding environments as all-inclusive and effectively homogenous. However, this model is clearly inadequate for explaining the reality of today’s world in which, for the first time in history, more than half of the world’s now seven billion people are living in cities, and in which the trend toward urbanization is expected to continue.<sup>4</sup> In dense urban areas like Asakusa, people typically interact with and perceive their environments as heterogeneous, subdividing them into many socially and conceptually distinct places. Therefore, if we are to meaningfully engage with the questions above, a new approach to understanding sound and place is necessary.

In this dissertation, I employ the example of Asakusa, exceptional in its sonic variety and human density, to propose a new framework equipped to examine human agency in urban sonic spaces. I suggest that considering city soundscapes as montages—made up of component soundscapes which become superimposed on one another, and in which individual observers are the agents who must interpret those juxtapositions for themselves—can shed light on the ways that larger urban places maintain their distinct and unique identities despite internal cultural inconsistencies. It is my hope that this new model can be adapted to other municipal contexts in order to investigate how people create

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<sup>4</sup> Population Reference Bureau, “Human Population: Urbanization,” 2012, <http://www.prb.org/Educators/TeachersGuides/HumanPopulation/Urbanization.aspx>.



and make sense of the multifarious flows of diversely meaningful sounds in cities around the world.

***i. Seeing Asakusa and hearing its sounds***

The geographical and sonic realities of Asakusa’s soundscape montage are best contextualized by a virtual ethnographic tour. I have constructed the following account based on my extensive personal experience in the neighborhood, gained through a short research trip conducted in the summer of 2010 and a yearlong field research period from September 2011 until September 2012. Two important tasks during those periods were to build a composite understanding of Asakusa and develop a material and sensorial experience of its diverse places. With this virtual tour, I aim to illustrate the overlapping “sound pockets” that one encounters in the neighborhood. Because Asakusa is a place where many contrasting sounds are created simultaneously, they mixed together in time and space. Like a crowded bazaar, however, one can hear particular sounds more distinctly in the location they are being produced. The experience of moving through the



**Image 1. Rickshaw drivers trying to attract potential customers in front of Kaminarimon.**

neighborhood is one of navigating spaces that reverberate with differing meanings and ambiances, which each person will perceive and interpret in their own way.

For instance, climbing up the stairs out of the Asakusa subway station (Map 3, numeral 1), one cannot help but hear the soliciting shouts of rickshaw runners: *"Jinrikisha desu! Jinrikisha ni norimasen ka? Hello! How about a tour of Asakusa in a rickshaw?"*



**Image 2. The heavily trafficked boulevard, Kaminarimon Street, and Kaminarimon, one of Tokyo's most easily recognized landmarks.**



**Image 3. Nakamise Street, the shop-lined pedestrian thoroughfare leading from Kaminarimon (seen here in the background) to Sensō-ji, Asakusa's most famous Buddhist temple.**



**Map 3. Asakusa, with the route of the ethnographic tour described in the text delineated in red, and locations of some of the neighborhood's activities and landmarks indicated with large numerals. The key is found on the next page (image generated by Google and modified by the author).**

Through the roar of traffic, they hawk their services in both Japanese and English to tourists along the bustling boulevard of Kaminarimon Street approaching Kaminarimon

### Key - Map 3

- 1 – Asakusa Subway entrance
- 2 – The Thunder Gate (*Kaminarimon*)
- 3 – Sensō-ji
- 4 – Nakamise Street
- 5 – Shin Nakamise and Kannon Streets
- 6 – Denbō-in Street
- 7 – Asakusa Public Hall
- 8 – Treasure-House Gate (*Hōzōmon*)
- 9 – Statue garden and Kagetsu-dō noodle shop
- 10 – Waen-tei Kikkō restaurant
- 11 – Yōgō-dō temple building
- 12 – Hanayashiki amusement park
- 13 – Rokku Broadway
- 14 – Site of Rokku street show stage
- 15 – Asakusa HUB

(The Thunder Gate, Images 1 and 2; Map 3, numeral 2).<sup>5</sup> This seemingly ancient structure is the outer of two large entrance gates that lead to Sensō-ji, the great Buddhist temple at center of much activity in Asakusa (Map 3, numeral 3). Passing through the gate, ducking under the giant red lantern, one then enters the lively and congested pedestrian street of

Nakamise. Crowds of tourists and worshippers fill the lane, flocking toward Sensō-ji. The traffic sounds become more faint. Loafers shuffle and wooden sandals clack against the stone pavement. The street is lined with small red paper lanterns with wind chimes that flutter and ring gently in the breeze.

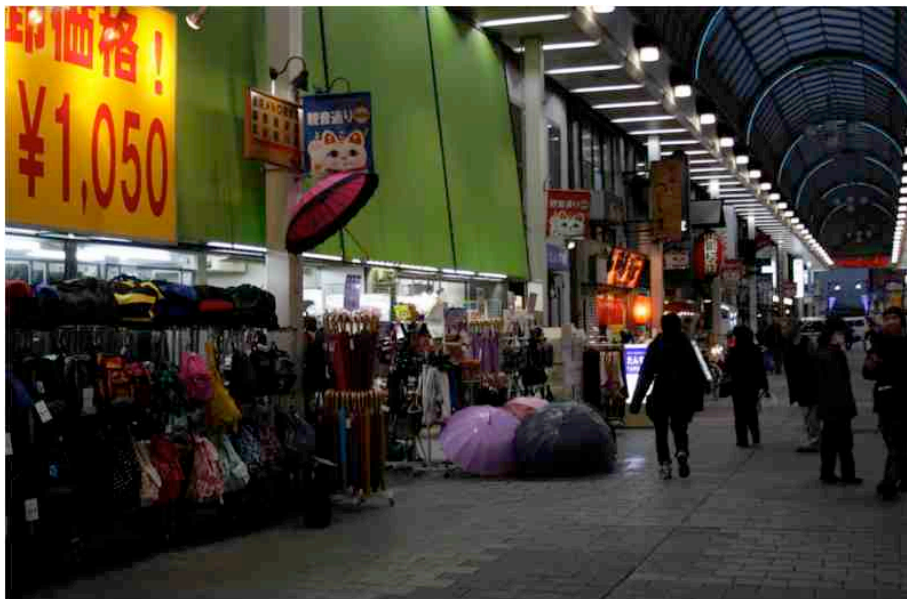


**Image 4. Customers browse souvenirs on Nakamise Street.**

<sup>5</sup> All photographs are the work of the author unless otherwise attributed.

Amid all of this, shop owners shout “*Irasshaimase!* (Welcome, please come in!),” the common greeting of vendors throughout Japan for encouraging customers to consider their wares. Here, shops offer everything from fresh-baked *ningyō-yaki* (sweet bean-filled cakes), to tourist T-shirts and bandanas, *geta* (wooden-soled sandals), hand-carved statues of the Buddha, factory-produced reproduction samurai swords, elegant woodblock prints, beautiful handmade folk art, and even geisha-style wigs for pet dogs. Most in the crowd do not notice as a tour helicopter passes overhead.

On the entire length of one covered pedestrian street market that intersects with Nakamise—Shin Nakamise (“New Nakamise”) and its cross street, Kannon, where everyday clothing, shoes, toys, and umbrellas can be purchased (Image 5; Map 3, numeral 5)—an orchestral arrangement of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It” is being piped in within the rotation of typical *bijiemu* (BGM or “background music”). Continuing a few blocks farther north to Nakamise’s next main cross street, the street known as Denbō-in (Map 3, numeral 6), antiques and traditional Japanese items are being sold. Here, a recording of a female singer



**Image 5. Kannon Street covered market, throughout which American and Asian-style pop BGM is played from an extensive sound system.**



**Image 6. Denbō-in Street, with its storefronts built to resemble Edo-period architecture. Speakers playing “traditional Japanese music” down onto the street are mounted on the red lampposts (encircled in yellow).**

accompanied by *shamisen* (three-stringed plucked lute), reminiscent of geisha’s performances, floats down from speakers mounted on lampposts onto the streets. Each lamppost (Image 6) is painted scarlet and topped by a miniature green tile roof, under which the lamp light glows through colorful shades depicting scenes of clever wordplay.<sup>6</sup> On this street, rather than the tile or concrete façades seen in most parts of Tokyo, the exterior of many storefronts are vertical slats of wood spaced across a solid tan background with rows of tile awning embellishments, giving an aura of rustic age. Amid this ambiance of “charming Japanese yesteryear,” groups of tourists cluster—some speaking Chinese, some English, some Japanese, a few Malay—pointing at trinkets as they pass from one shop to another.

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<sup>6</sup> These street lamps, referred to as *jiguchi andō* (“pun lanterns”), are made to resemble decorated paper lanterns popularly made in the Edo period. As in the Edo-period practice, Asakusa’s *jiguchi andō* are painted with well-known proverbs, altered to include puns for comic effect, and embellished with an illustration of the resulting humorous phrase.



**Image 7. Kabuki scene painted on the loading door on the north side of the Asakusa Public Hall.**

At the corner at the end of Denbō-in sits Asakusa Public Hall (*Asakusa Kōkai-dō*, Map 3, numeral 7), where well-attended annual kabuki performances are staged each New Year season.<sup>7</sup> There are two large aluminum doors on the side of the building that open onto Denbō-in Street; each is painted colorfully in an old-fashioned style with scenes of kabuki being performed in a crowded theater (Image 7). A nearby bulletin board advertises the other theatrical and musical performances that are also presented throughout the rest of the year: everything from stage revues, jazz contests, *enka* concerts, Western classical music performances, *taiko* (Japanese drumming) performances, and dance exhibitions in countless genres, among others.<sup>8</sup> Around the corner on the Public Hall's front entryway sits the Plaza of the Stars (*Sutaa no Hiroba*, Image 8) where, since 1979, the handprints and signatures of renowned Japanese popular entertainers—singers, actors, composers, directors—have been imprinted in the pavement. Amid regular clacking footfalls of

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<sup>7</sup> Kabuki is a type of Japanese musical drama that follows highly stylized forms and takes up stories with popular appeal.

<sup>8</sup> *Enka* is a genre of Japanese sentimental ballad that developed in the post-WWII years.



**Image 8. The Plaza of the Stars in front of the Asakusa Public Hall.**



**Image 9. Hōzōmon. The temple's five-storied pagoda stands to the left behind the gate.**

pedestrians, sightseers utter exclamations as they find and touch their favorite singer's or actor's handprint.

At the end of Nakamise Street is Hōzōmon (Treasure-House Gate), the second and larger of the temple's two gates (Image 9; Map 3, numeral 8). The faint yet sharply metallic sounds of *omikuji* (fortune lottery) cans being shaken by temple-goers drift under and



around the giant red lantern from the temple grounds beyond the gate.<sup>9</sup> Immediately to the right (east) is a fenced-in garden that is home to a number of statues of bodhisattvas, where—along with the sweet yeasty smell of freshly baked *melonpan* (sweet buns)—the sounds of a crackling old recording of mid-century Japanese jazz waft between the solemn stone figures (Images 10 and 11; Map 3, numeral 9). It is singer Kasagi Shidzuko’s 1947 hit tune “Tokyo Boogie-Woogie” (*Tōkyō Bugi-Ugi*), which the managers of a nearby restaurant play constantly during business hours. The sound of the song drifts out into the garden from a small portable stereo tucked behind an outdoor curtain at Kagetsu- dō, the small noodle shop on the edge of the courtyard that boasts its early origins on its fabric awning—



**Image 10. Bodhisattvas in a small garden area in front of Kagetsu-dō. The newly built Tokyo Skytree looms in the background.**



**Image 11. Kagetsu-dō.**

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<sup>9</sup> *Omikuji* are random fortunes written on strips of paper at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan. At Sensō-ji, temple visitors shake metal cans containing numbered pegs in order to randomize the pegs—perhaps also to make a cheerful racket and in doing so inspire the gods to treat the shaker well—and draw one peg out, the number of which then indicates which fortune the individual is to retrieve.

Shōwa 20 (C.E. 1946). A few feet farther east and just around the corner stands what appears to be a very old wooden building—another restaurant, Waentei-Kikkō (Map 3, numeral 10)—tucked back among some bushes, from which issues the sound of a *Tsugaru-jamisen*.<sup>10</sup> The placard outside explains, in both Japanese and English, that the restaurant owner, Fukui Kōdai, is an accomplished *Tsugaru-jamisen* player, and that he performs the spirited folk instrument for his restaurant guests daily as part of their traditional Japanese meal experience at Waentei-Kikkō (Image 12).



**Image 12. Fukui performing *Tsugaru-jamisen* at lunchtime for customers in his restaurant.**

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<sup>10</sup> *Tsugaru-jamisen* is a dynamic, improvisatory music using a *shamisen* with a thicker neck. In this genre, the instrument is held with the neck angled upward toward the left shoulder. The player presses the soundbox against his or her abdomen to aid in the powerful striking of the plectrum against the dog-skin membrane with the playing of each note. This particular style of *shamisen* playing developed as an instrumental genre in the Tsugaru district at the northern tip of Japan's main island, Honshu, where it was practiced by itinerant blind musicians since the mid- to late-19<sup>th</sup> century. It has become widely popular throughout the country since WWII.

Back at the temple (Image 13 and 14; Map 3, numeral 3), the atmosphere inside the Main Hall of Sensō-ji is quite boisterous. It is early afternoon and a service is being conducted at the altar, with sutras chanted in classical Chinese, performed behind a screen that keep unauthorized visitors at bay. All the while, crowds of worshippers and tourists unceasingly climb the steps to the temple. All around, they chat and laugh with friends or family members; snap photos on their digital cameras; toss coins noisily into the massive



**Image 13. Approaching Sensō-ji's Main Hall from the south. Tourists and worshippers mill about the precincts.**



**Image 14. Worshippers inside Sensō-ji's Main Hall, tossing coins into the collection box and folding hands in prayer.**

offering box; put their palms together for a moment, heads bowed in prayer; again shake the metal *omikuji* cans; or peruse the good luck charms and protective amulets for sale from temple employees before heading elsewhere for work or more sightseeing and entertainment. Somewhere in the crowd, a mobile phone rings.

Outside and to the west of Sensō-ji's Main Hall is a sizable green area, home to the hall Yōgō-dō, where a plaque explains that the monks of Sensō-ji regularly perform services for the eight Buddhas housed inside (Image 15; Map 3, numeral 11). Over a babbling



**Image 15. Yōgō-dō with Hanayashiki in the background.**



**Image 16. Hanayashiki's drop tower above the precincts of Sensō-ji**

stream and through the twittering of birds, the shouts from revelers at Hanayashiki (Japan's oldest amusement park) carry through the treetops as the drop tower ride roars and propels its riders toward the sky (Image 16; Map 3, numeral 12). Just beyond the amusement park is Rokku Broadway, a wide avenue lined by adult theaters, *pachinko* parlors, arcades, one of the country's leading *rakugo* and vaudeville theaters, a large off-track betting facility, and a shopping mall (Image 17-20; Map 3, numeral 13).<sup>11</sup> At the rear of Hanayashiki, the digital roar of *pachinko* explodes onto the street as a patron triggers a parlor's automatic door. Farther down on a building's barricade, a large yellow poster is



**Image 17. Looking southward on Rokku Broadway.**



**Image 18. People playing *pachinko* at the Enjoy Space Sunshine Asakusa (*Enjoi Supeesu Sanshain Asakusa-ten*).**

<sup>11</sup> *Pachinko* is a very popular type of game used both as a recreational arcade game and as a gambling device. Game play involves firing balls into a machine resembling a vertical pinball machine. The balls then spill down through a dense arrangement of pins, and those that fall into certain positions might be captured, or fired elsewhere in the machine triggering other balls to be released. *Pachinko* is played widely throughout Japan in *pachinko* parlors, which can house dozens upon dozens of the machines. *Pachinko* parlors tend to generate an impressive din created by a combination of the sounds of the balls and mechanisms of the pachinko machines, electronic music and sound effects created by the machines, patrons' and employees' voices, etc. This din is heard to differing extents on the sidewalks and streets outside of the parlors depending on levels of soundproofing of the building, and the frequency at which the (usually) sliding automatic doors at the front of the parlors are triggered to open.

*Rakugo* is a form of comic storytelling whose popularity among commoners dates to the Edo period. In this tradition, a single storyteller sits alone on stage, using only a paper fan and small cloth as props, and depicts a long, complex, comical story. *Rakugo* artists perform in vaudeville theaters in cities throughout Japan. Asakusa Engei Hall is among the most famous in the country and is a gateway for many ambitious storytellers.



**Image 19. Posters outside the Rokku-za theater on Rokku Broadway.**



**Image 20. The aspiring J-Pop band Otsukareezu plays for pedestrians on Rokku Broadway, promoting their latest single in the winter of 2012.**

hung which reads, in bright colors, “*Rokku Buroodouei Shōten-gai Sutoriito Shō Suteeji* (Rokku Broadway Shopping District Street Show Stage).” The edges of Rokku Broadway are often used as a site for musical and stunt street performances, allowing budding performers to busk or promote their band’s latest recording for passersby. A small J-Pop (Japanese pop) group—a singing guitarist, a percussionist, and a keyboardist, all young men—is attracting a crowd of teenage girls to gather around them as they play their happy tune (Image 20; Map 3, numeral 20).

Only a block from the south end of Rokku Broadway is one of Asakusa's many jazz "live houses," Asakusa HUB, whose sign reads "From New Orleans Bourbon Street" in English (Image 21; Map 3, numeral 15). It is "Dixie Night" on the club's schedule, and the clarinetist is just arriving. The sound of the trumpeter issues from inside the dark room; he is warming up with an ascending major scale. The banjo player is already picking an improvised variation of "When the Saints Go Marching In." A poster on HUB's



**Image 21. The façade of HUB Asakusa Jazz and Bar and its neighboring shops**



**Image 22. The band Dixie Castle (*Dekishii Kyassuru*) performs at the HUB Asakusa in August 2012.**

announcement board outside advertises its annual New Orleans Jazz Festival in August. Pictures of Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald adorn the pub's entryway.

In this area, the rumble of traffic flows through the narrow streets; Kaminarimon Street is only one block to the south, and another thoroughfare, Kokusai Street, just one block to the west. Heading south and then east onto Kaminarimon Street, clumps of pedestrians shuffle and congregate along the sidewalk, shaded by a metal-tiled awning (Image 23; Map 3, numeral 16). The sounds of a low drum pulses faintly over the din of cars and trucks, then a shrill pentatonic melody on a clarinet can be heard, and finally the metallic ding of a bell, all playing together in time; a *chindon-ya* is passing.<sup>12</sup> Two women with their hair pinned up with colorful flowers, wearing kimono in blazingly bright colors, pass down the sidewalk, each playing percussion instruments. A man strolls behind them in a vivid red jacket and a can-can hat, the wailing clarinet at his lips (see Video 2). They are accompanied by a small parade of people waving banners, wearing blue and green jackets, and passing out packets of tissues with advertisements that encourage Asakusa residents to pay their local taxes electronically. In their wake, traffic sounds again dominate along the storefronts of various shops and restaurants—sushi, tempura, shoes, gifts, coffee, hamburgers, pasta, pottery, knives, CDs, karaoke—whose doors are closed to keep out the

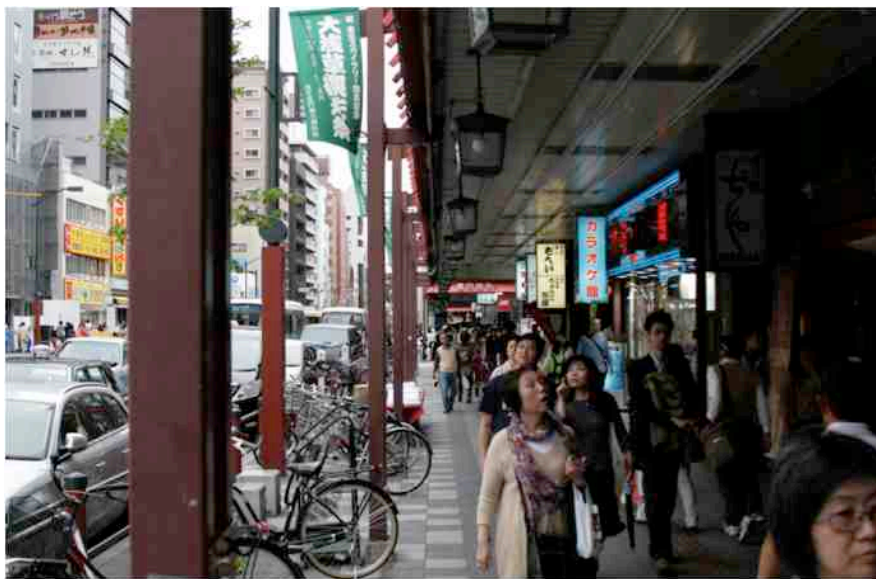
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<sup>12</sup> A *chindon-ya* is a type of advertising street band in Japan, usually hired by shops and other establishments to attract the attention of potential customers. They are typically elaborately and colorfully costumed troupes of three to five players, carrying banners with their clients' names, and often distributing flyers. They play a mixture of Japanese and Western musical instruments, the essential instrument being the so-called *chindon*, made up of two Japanese drums (the *ōdō* and the *shimedaiko*) and a small metal gong (*kane*), all mounted on a wooden frame. The name of this instrument, and indeed of the ensemble as a whole, derives from the *chindon's* sound, with the syllable "*chin*" mimicking the sound of the gong, and "*don*," the sound of the drum. The melodic instrument may be a clarinet, trumpet, saxophone, or accordion. Rising in popularity in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, such ensembles were once a common sight in urban Japan, but their numbers have greatly declined since the 1970s. The sight and sound of one today is rather rare, and carries a sense of nostalgia for many people [Ingrid Fritsch, "Chindonya' Today: Japanese Street Performers in Commercial Advertising," *Asian Folklore Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 49–51; Marié Abe, "Resonances of Chindon-Ya: Sound, Space, and Social Difference in Contemporary Japan" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 2010); Shūhei Hosokawa, "Chindonya," Unpublished Manuscript].





**Image 23. The north side of Kaminarimon Street, under the awning of the pedestrian sidewalk.**



**Image 24. A *chindon-ya* plays on Kaminarimon Street to attract attention for the local tax bureau's advertising campaign.**

distractions in the street. Passing Kaminarimon again, the buzz of tourists' voices intensifies, and the strident hawks of the rickshaw drivers again carry over the commotion. "*Jinrikisha ni norimasen ka?*" Descending back into the subway station, deep under the streets, trains pull away from Asakusa with a clanking clamor similar to that heard in stations throughout Tokyo.

## **II. Theoretical Questions, Fieldwork, and Methodology**

In order to grasp how the people in Asakusa interpret such a dense and diverse sounding environment and construct a cohesive and meaningful sense of place, I sought to understand three main issues. 1) What are the widespread perceptions of the neighborhood as a distinctive and meaningful place within Tokyo? The answer to this question would allow me to understand the variety of ways that a given individual might interpret Asakusa, as well as how it is perceived and continually recreated on a societal level. 2) What are the physical particularities of overlapping sounding environments in real time and space in Asakusa? Being aware of the material realities of the neighborhood would allow me to more effectively analyze how human individuals navigate and perceive its sounds and places. 3) What are the ways in which a variety of differently situated (both physically and socially) individual people have agency to act in, contribute to, negotiate, and interpret those overlapping soundscapes in constructing a personal and meaningful sense of place for themselves?

To answer the first question concerning the widespread perceptions of the neighborhood, I researched current journalistic and commercial references to Asakusa—in print, online, etc.—during my year of fieldwork to accumulate information on the popular characterizations of the neighborhood today. I also visited the neighborhood almost daily to look for evidence of those characterizations. In doing so, I gave particular attention to sounds, making audio recordings and taking note of where and when they were heard. In addition, I conferred with my primary consultants and various other inhabitants (shopkeepers, musicians, tourists, clerks, residents etc.) to find out how they view the neighborhood as a whole. I then cross-referenced their responses with the answers to my

first questions about the neighborhood's representations.

In confronting the second question concerning the physical particularities of overlapping sounding environments, it was essential to consider the locations, ranges, and durations of Asakusa's various meaningful sounding environments. Understanding these points would enable me to distinguish how particular sounding places relate to one another and become juxtaposed in time and space. This, in turn, would help me understand how individual people interact with and negotiate meaningful sounds in the physical environment of Asakusa. To address these issues, I created sound maps through my own observations of institutions' and businesses' permanent locations, as well as their typical ranges of activity throughout the neighborhood.<sup>13</sup> In making these maps, I noted the locations of unofficial activities (such as street performances) and temporary/seasonal activities (such as festivals or holiday periods). I recorded observations by location, date, and time. Since the area is too large for one person to fully examine every day and night, I divided the neighborhood into five roughly equal regions. I explored two of these segments per day on a rotating basis, and took care to alternate days of the week and times of day so that my exposure to the space and its sounding activities could be as comprehensive as possible. By identifying the locales and time frames of different activities, it was possible to distinguish from which portions of the neighborhood various meaningful sounds normally emanate. The resulting sound maps (see Chapter 3) provide a way to relate the experiences

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<sup>13</sup> The term "sound map" most typically is used to refer to digitally rendered maps that allow users to click on certain points to hear audio recordings made at those locations, such as the New York Sound Map (<http://www.nysoundmap.org/>, accessed 19 September 2015) and the Stanley Park Soundmap (<http://www.sfu.ca/geog/geog351spring09/group07/>, accessed 19 September 2015). However, other scholars have made maps that also work to illustrate visually the locations (and sometimes intensity) of sounds heard in a given geographical region, such as Jonathan Gunderlach, who mapped the ambient sound levels in Chatham Village, Pennsylvania on different days and at different times to investigate the typical range of sounds heard there [Jonathan Gunderlach, "Sound: Exploring a Character-Defining Feature of Historic Places," *APT Bulletin* 38, no. 4 (2007): 19].

of individual inhabitants spatially within the neighborhood, a way to understand those experiences in relation to each other, and a way of identifying the variety of meaningful sounding environments—and their particular juxtaposition—within Asakusa as a whole.

Lastly, I wanted to understand the ways that differently situated individuals use their own agency to act in, contribute to, negotiate, and interpret Asakusa's overlapping soundscapes and construct a meaningful sense of place for themselves. To do this, I engaged in ethnographic research with individuals to develop the seven case studies presented in this dissertation. I asked each of them about their perceptions of the character of the neighborhood, its acoustic reality, and how its sounds reflect and confirm the neighborhood's sense of place for them. In addition, to nuance their comments, I observed how the variety of audible sounds in Asakusa might contribute to or detract from each of their particular emplaced activities and experiences there. In other words, I sought to establish how each agent acts as a creator and perceiver of meaning in the neighborhood's soundscape montage. The methods for dealing with these issues varied somewhat from one case study to the next, but all case studies required (participant-) observation and/or interviews with people in the neighborhood. With the permission of each consultant, I made audio/video recordings of my observations, interviews, and experiences with them for potential inclusion in my dissertation materials. Certain case studies required unique methods. For instance, I actively participated alongside local residents in the neighborhood's largest festival and took lessons on a musical instrument. I also attended countless different kinds of performances, participated in several local festivals, and witnessed a number of religious ceremonies.

My consultants represented a variety of people operating in one or more different social spheres of activity, sound, place, and meaning in the neighborhood: Tanaka Hiroshi, a Buddhist monk; Asakusa Seiko, a geisha; Cynthia Lu, a tourist; Fukui Kōdai, a *Tsugaru-jamisen* player and restaurant owner; Ōno Megumi, a jazz singer; Okuzawa Makoto, a local resident and *chōkai* (neighborhood association) officer; and Oshow, the leader of Asakusa Jinta, a fusion music ensemble based in the neighborhood. It was important that my informants have divergent backgrounds; their contrasting experiences illuminate the local culture in distinctive and dynamic ways. To address my fundamental research questions concerning sound, place, and agency, I asked open-ended questions. In addition to general queries about their biographies (which I raised in the effort to understand the basic aspects of their social backgrounds as accurately as possible), a number of questions focused on the nature and amount of their time spent in Asakusa, activities they pursued there, and their knowledge and opinions about the neighborhood. I also asked about their musical practice (if applicable) and their awareness of, and participation in, the creation of music and sound in Asakusa.

I interacted with many of my consultants outside of interviews. I witnessed and made audio/video recordings of morning rituals at Sensō-ji, like the one that Tanaka described to me, on a number of occasions. I attended the Kinryū no Mai (the Golden Dragon Dance) festival, in which Seiko, my geisha informant, has participated several times. I took *Tsugaru-jamisen* lessons with Fukui in his family's restaurant, as well as dined there to experience personally its mealtime ambience and the performances that he stages there. I also attended Fukui's large-scale concert—in which Seiko also performed—staged at the Asakusa Public Hall in celebration of his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday. On other occasions, I attended

performances by the jazz singer, Ōno—one in the jazz bar where she regularly sings in Asakusa, and one in a bar in Kabuki-chō in Shinjuku Ward—in order to observe and later inquire about the importance of the performance setting (be it Asakusa or elsewhere) for her. Moreover, I attended two live performances by Oshow's band, one in nearby Ueno, and one in Setagaya Ward on the western side of Tokyo.

I connected with Okuzawa at his nearby Mukōjima Ken-yū-kai (Mukojima Kendo Club). A deeply generous man, he not only met with me for a formal interview and exchanged countless emails with me, but also invited my husband, who studied kendo with him, and me to participate in a number of major festivals held in the area. These included a party to watch the Sumida River Fireworks Festival assembled on the patio-roof of his home on the western bank of the river, and a casual gathering at his tax office to watch the Asakusa Samba Carnival from his second-floor balcony overlooking Kaminarimon Street. The most exciting and rare opportunity he offered to us was the chance to participate in Sanja Matsuri with his *chōkai* (neighborhood association), carrying the *mikoshi* (portable shrine) along with the clamorous and heaving mass of thousands of local residents.

In my research, I sought to identify how the variety of audible sounds in Asakusa might contribute to or detract from each of my informants' particular emplaced activities and experiences there, and how the overlapping of each of their soundscapes help to create—and are created by—larger senses of place in the neighborhood. Consideration of music was key in this task since music is practically ubiquitous there, and since it plays an essential role in the ways that people engage Asakusa and construct its unique sense(s) of place. Each case study required different modes of sonic/musical analysis, but when

appropriate and possible, I reference actual musical sounds to illustrate how music can act as a nexus of people's expressions and interactions in particular times and places.<sup>14</sup>

Developing these case studies has enabled me to understand the typical sounds and physical use of space in contemporary Asakusa over time. I have learned about individuals' agency in negotiating Asakusa's soundscape montage, including the role of music in that process. Additionally, I have gathered information about the commonly acknowledged characterizations of Asakusa as a whole, gained experience of the environment for myself, examined complex relationships between the physically discernable sounds within Asakusa's component soundscapes and the neighborhood's common cultural characterizations, and consulted with inhabitants about their perceptions of Asakusa's character and its acoustic reality.

### **III. Chapter Summaries**

This dissertation proceeds in Chapter 1, where I give a thorough explanation of the concept of soundscape as I apply it, and relate it to earlier work on soundscapes and on music in urban environments. I then expound on my idea of overlapping soundscapes and introduce the notion of soundscape montage, emphasizing the significance of human agency to that framework. Chapter 2 presents a history of Asakusa, providing the background for the neighborhood's present-day identity within Tokyo. This history is followed by an in-depth exploration in Chapter 3 of the numerous and conflicting ways Asakusa is socially constructed and received in contemporary Japan—categories of cultural meaning which I call *tropes* of Asakusa. I go on to demonstrate how these tropes manifest sonically through (or in spite of) the various cultural/sound pockets experienced within

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<sup>14</sup> See Joseph Lam's theory of *musiking* in his article, "Music and Male Bonding in Ming China," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 70–110.

the neighborhood. The sound maps are also included here, representing how each trope manifests sonically and geographically. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are comprised of six case studies that illustrate how differently situated individuals create, experience, and negotiate the neighborhood's soundscape(s). I relate each individual to one of the tropes of Asakusa discussed in Chapter 3. Each individual's encounter with the neighborhood is examined by considering their agency as they engage in the mutually generative processes between making and perceiving sounds and making and perceiving a sense of place.

After these six case studies, Chapter 7 concludes by taking a step back to reconsider the interconnected nature of Asakusa's six tropes and the neighborhood's popular identity on a wider cultural scale. Having demonstrated how Asakusa's tropes and commonly recognized senses of place work in a mutually generative manner, I reevaluate the neighborhood as a sonic montage, wherein people individually and collectively contribute to, negotiate, and interpret the meaning of Asakusa. This is illustrated with a single diagram, in which the experiences of sound and place of each of the individuals profiled in the preceding six case studies are represented to demonstrate not only that their disparate experiences are in fact interconnected, but also that the overlapping of soundscapes and cultural meanings in the neighborhood contribute to the larger soundscape of Asakusa. In other words, juxtaposed soundscapes working in montage enable the collective experience of coherence.

This coherence is sonically embodied in the work of Asakusa Jinta, an ensemble based in the neighborhood who employ diverse ideas about Asakusa in their musical performances for Japanese and international audiences. Working beyond the geographical and conceptual bounds of the neighborhood, however, they also overlap the diverse



soundscape of Asakusa with musical soundscapes from around the globe. By way of concluding, I examine their performance of the song “Asakusa Ondo” to demonstrate that, although the processes of soundscape montage may be artificially circumscribed for the sake of analytical ease, it is also possible to consider sound, place, and meaning from ever-widening vantage points. In doing so, I hope to show that this project not only offers a new way of understanding Asakusa, but also a framework for considering the nature of soundscapes and the experience of emplacement in virtually any other context as well.

## Chapter 1

# Soundscape Montage: A New Model

“A whole range of people gather [in Asakusa] expecting different things, but also different sorts of things happen here because lots of people come.”

- Oshow

### I. Introduction

In urban areas, people encounter a variety of densely situated sounding environments. Sound and music created in these environments often inevitably bleed into one another, complicating the ways that city inhabitants perceive a sense of emplacement as they navigate those spaces in their daily lives. Past scholarship has done much to explore human beings' relationships to sonic environments, but research on sound, music, and place has continually treated soundscapes as discrete, all-inclusive, and homogeneous. This chapter builds upon that wealth of existing scholarship, offering a new way to address the tensions and contradictions that often arise within compact and heterogeneous urban spaces. In such settings, diverse acoustic signals cannot be meaningfully addressed under the aegis of a single sonic landscape; considering how such environments might be socially bounded or subdivided into conceptually distinct places is essential. Attention must be given to the unbounded and permeable nature of sound and to the social implications of soundscapes' acoustical contact. Furthermore, it is essential to consider the human actor's agency in determining which perceptible sounds contribute to their meaningful sense of

place. With all of these factors in mind, I propose the concept of soundscape montage as a means of examining people's encounters with sound in cities. By conceiving of Asakusa as a soundscape montage, it becomes clear that individuals have the agency to determine the meaning of juxtaposed sonic environments for themselves. Furthermore, acoustical contact between otherwise separate places within the neighborhood play a role in how people are able to understand the larger place of Asakusa both as an aggregate of its diverse parts, and as a cohesive and discrete whole within larger Tokyo.

In this chapter I review the literature on sound, music, place, and agency that has informed my work, examine the efficacy of earlier theoretical models in answering my research questions, and detail this new concept of sonic montage. The reviewed literature includes the work of music scholars such as R. Murray Schafer, Steven Feld, Martin Stokes, Joseph Lam, Tia DeNora, Sophie Arquette, and others, in addition to research from a variety of fields including anthropology (Howes, Helmreich, Ingold), geography (Krimm, Leyshon, Matless, Revill), sociology and cultural theory (Bourdieu, De Certeau, Giddens, Hall), philosophy (Ihde), history (Silverberg), and film theory (Eisenstein). For the sake of clarity, efficiency, and simplicity, I use the example of one acoustic environment in Asakusa, the restaurant Waentei-Kikkō, to illustrate the ability of each of the reviewed theories in addressing the theoretical questions that this dissertation aims to answer.

Inside of Waentei-Kikkō, located just outside Sensō-ji's precinct, diners chat with one another cheerfully over their elegant *bentō* lunch plates, sipping tea and picking up grilled fish, simmered vegetables, and rice between wooden chopsticks. The server carefully slips the sandals off of her socked feet, taking care to move silently as she climbs the step from the stone-cobbled floor onto the raised *tatami* (woven rice straw mats) on

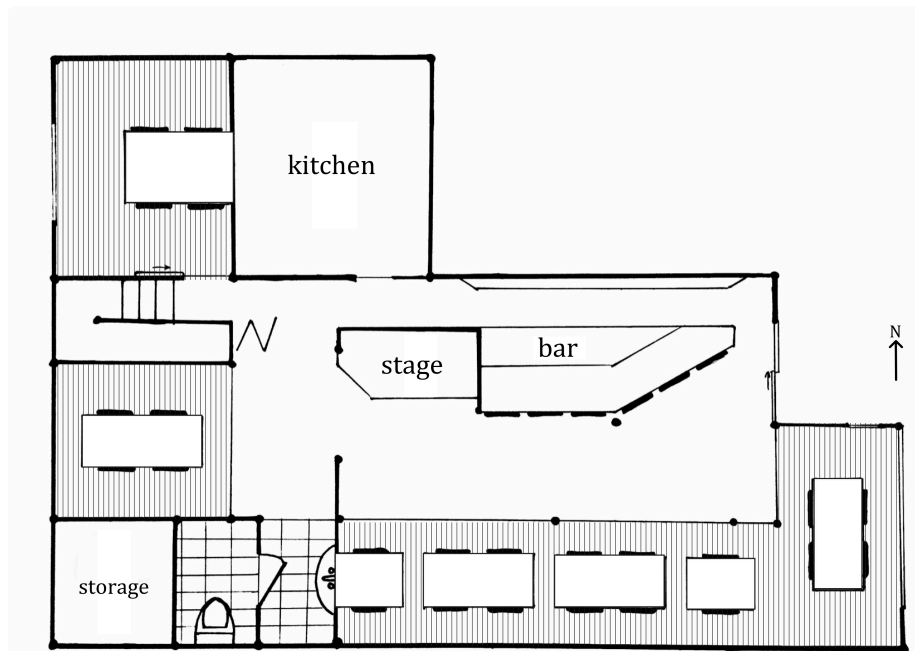


**Image 25. Exterior of Waentei-Kikkō**



**Image 26. Interior of Waentei-Kikkō during a lunch session.**  
Photograph by from Laura and Yoshio Ohata's "Sounds of the Shamisen,"  
*The Asia Files: Film, Food and Fun From the Far East.*

which the patrons sit. Her *tabi* socks shuffle across the woven straw at the front of the room, and, kneeling down to the low table, she smiles as she carefully reaches between two of her guests to replace their teapot with another fresh one. The ceramic lightly clinks on the table's polished wooden surface. Hot tea splashes steamily into a mug as a woman pours it for her lunch partner. The clatter of dishes and muffled voices issue faintly from the kitchen door in the corner at the rear of the building's main room. Music is playing: a fusion



**Figure 1.** Floor layout of Waentei-Kikkō, indicating *tatami* flooring (vertical stripes), table layout, and the location of the kitchen, stage, and bar. The street lies just outside the restaurant’s front door, to the east. Created by the author.

of Japanese traditional music and global pop—a pop-style drum kit and a Western-style string ensemble playing diatonic functional harmony accompany a solo *shakuhachi* (Japanese end-blown flute)—issues softly from the restaurant’s sound system.

From behind the curtain leading to the kitchen walks the owner of Waentei-Kikkō, Fukui Kōdai, carrying his *Tsugaru-jamisen*. The diners notice his entrance while still tittering to one another and break into applause. The volume of the sound system fades. Fukui, with a beaming smile, bows deeply to the crowd, slips off his sandals, and climbs onto the tiny polished wooden stage nestled next to the bar. Sitting down onto a wooden stool under a glowing overhead light, he gives a charming self-introduction and a brief explanation of *Tsugaru-jamisen* and its traditional playing style and repertoire. Lifting the neck of his instrument, he focuses his attention and energy and begins to play a rousing folk tune. The crowd sits silently in rapt attention, listening with smiles on their faces to the virtuosic playing of this spirited music. This is Waentei-Kikkō’s soundscape.



**Image 27. Fukui performing for customers at his restaurant, Waentei-Kikkō. A model of a Nebuta Matsuri float—an icon of the northern region home to Tsugaru—is seen over his shoulder to the left.**

## **II. Theoretical Literature: A Review**

### ***i. Early notions of soundscapes: sound, place, and human culture***

Though the term *soundscape* has been in usage for nearly half a century, its definition and application have not been consistent. The application of the word has ranged from depictions of sounding environments as inert landscapes of sound that human listeners simply tune in to, to those that emphasize the subtleties of human sonic experience. The word may refer to all audible sounds, or may selectively exclude some, such as the “noise” of urban, industrial society. It has, however, generally been used to refer to the comprehensive acoustic reality of a given environment. In the case of the sonic environment at Waentei-Kikkō, for instance, the sounds of chatting diners and Fukui’s music would be considered alongside other audible sounds created outside the restaurant, such as the hum of a passing helicopter and the shouts of children playing very nearby.

Treating dense and diverse sonic environments in such an all-inclusive and essentially homogenizing manner, however, is to turn a deaf ear to the sonic complexity of those environments and the role of human actors in making sense of the cultural dissonances of which they are composed. In order to analyze such environments in a way that better reveals these processes, we need to put ideas about soundscapes in conversation with other scholarship that has addressed similar matters of human agency, sound, music, and the sensation of emplacement.

In using Waentei-Kikkō to probe soundscape theories, Anthony Giddens's concept of *place* becomes critical. Giddens describes place as "the physical setting of social activity as situated geographically."<sup>1</sup> He also explains that one of modernity's effects is the "phantasmagoric" detachment of space from place, as places can be "shaped in terms of social influences quite distant from them."<sup>2</sup> For instance, someone might turn a corner where Kokusai Street and Kaminarimon Street meet and find themselves suddenly in the midst of a Brazilian-style samba carnival. As a space in twenty-first-century Asakusa, the corner is always the corner; the corner becomes a place defined partly by social influences from South America when Japanese-Brazilian style music is performed there.

Ethnomusicologist Martin Stokes explains that "this dislocation requires ... [a] process of relocation or, to use Giddens's term, 'reembedding.'"<sup>3</sup> He goes on to observe that music plays an essential role in the ways in which we can locate and relocate ourselves. Indeed, music and other meaningful sounds inform our experience or sense of place, and musical events in particular—from collective dances to the act of tapping the play button on an

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990), 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Stokes, "Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music," in *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, ed. Martin Stokes (Providence, RI: Berg Publishers, 1994), 3.

MP3 player—“[evoke] and [organize] collective memories and present experiences of place with an intensity, power and simplicity unmatched by any other social activity.”<sup>4</sup>

Stokes explains that the “places” created through music involve notions of difference and social boundaries and organize moral and political hierarchies. Making clear the complex nature of the process of musical place-making, he also draws on practice theory, demonstrating that music, like any social performance, is “seen as a practice in which meanings are generated, manipulated, even ironised, within certain limitations.”<sup>5</sup> Sound designer and theorist Sophie Arquette adds that, in the phenomenological approach to understanding space, place allows particular sites to be defined by their history and social use. Through this process, places become invested with cultural meanings and values, enabling them to be used for active invention and transformation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, music, dance, and other socially meaningful sounds do not merely symbolize or reflect preexisting cultural patterns and social structures that define a place, but in fact, in Stokes’s words, “provide . . . the means by which [that] space can be transformed.”<sup>7</sup>

Place, therefore, is not solely determined by geography nor always confined by political boundaries, but instead is constructed, molded, and negotiated by social agents through various means, including meaningful sounds. For instance, the style of music that Fukui performs on *Tsugaru-jamisen* for his customers at Waentei-Kikkō each day is a folk tradition that developed not in Asakusa, but in the Tsugaru region of Japan at the very northern tip of the country’s main island. Though it is recognized and played throughout

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4; citing Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Sophie Arquette, “Sounds Like City,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 160.

<sup>7</sup> Stokes, “Introduction: Ethnicity, Identity and Music,” 4.





**Image 28. Mount Iwaki - the landscape of the Tsugaru region**  
(<http://www.am.askanet.ne.jp/~tugaru/itimai/winter/win28.htm>).

Japan—it is even regarded as a “national” music under certain circumstances (see Johnson 2006)—the genre is still strongly associated with that region, as its name clearly demonstrates. By performing it in his restaurant in Asakusa, Fukui is also to some extent inflecting that site with ideas associated with the rural and mountainous Tsugaru in the public imagination.<sup>8</sup>

Further considering the sense of place fostered at Waentei-Kikkō, part of the social meaning of the restaurant is evident in the architecture of the building—it is fashioned to resemble an old-fashioned Japanese farmhouse—but also in the manner in which the owners have worked to manage the space in and around it, and in the ways that the staff and customers behave there. It is an elegant yet comfortable traditional Japanese

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<sup>8</sup> As Gerald Groemer describes, the image of Tsugaru is reiterated in Japanese popular culture, and is associated with ideas of rural isolation, rugged agricultural diligence, “beautiful girls, stubborn and taciturn but honest men, joyful festivals, apples and more apples....” See Groemer’s pages 66-72 for more on the “Ideologies of *Tsugaru-jamisen*.”

The stage upon which Fukui and his students perform at Waentei-Kikkō is also adorned with objects and images that are strongly associated with the region of Tsugaru and its prefecture, Aomori (most notably a model of a float from Nebuta Matsuri held each August in Aomori City, and a poster advertising Fukui’s large-scale concert at the Asakusa Public Hall, also depicting a Nebuta Matsuri float).

restaurant, courteous, genial, and tinged with musical bravura. There are a number of sounds, as described in the scene above, that are either created intentionally as a way of generating this ambience (such as Fukui's *Tsugaru-jamisen* music), or that result from the restaurant's regular activities as a certain kind of place (such as the sound of tea being poured for mealtime guests). It is possible, however, that the staff or customers could make sounds that do not positively contribute to the restaurant's consciously fostered sense of place; perhaps someone's mobile phone rings loudly while the customers are eating, or even during Fukui's performance. The phone's owner would very likely rush to silence it as quickly as possible, and apologize profusely to those around them for rudely disrupting everyone's experience of the environment with an incongruous sound. In other words, the meaning of the place, and the meaningful sounds that are allowed there, are negotiated and enforced by the mutual agreement of the people involved in that place.

In this dissertation, I use the term *soundscape* very specifically to refer to all of the audible sounds experienced in a *place* that are perceived by the social actors in that site as contributing to its social meaning. This means that just as one can conceive of and refer to countless places, soundscapes too are plural and may even be compound; for any place that people identify as discrete and meaningful, a corresponding soundscape can also be identified. In a given soundscape, human beings experience and manipulate placed and emplacing sounds to negotiate their identities, social realities, and the social realities of others. A place's soundscape can include both sounds that agents create intentionally to cultivate its meaning, as well as those that are produced incidentally through other actions that cultivate that meaning.

Therefore, audible sounds that are incongruous with the meaning of a place are not

a part of its soundscape. My usage of the term consciously and artificially isolates certain audible sounds from certain others for the sake of analytical ease. In reality, however, most soundscapes are not sonically sealed, naturally impenetrable, or isolatable. Sounds from outside of the restaurant may be—and often are—perceivable to the people participating in Waentei-Kikkō’s sense of place inside, such as the engine buzz of a tour helicopter, the voices of passing pedestrians, or children playing nearby. For the purposes of my analyses, these sounds are *not* a part of the restaurant’s soundscape since, broadly speaking, and according to the people participating in it, they do not contribute to the sense of place consciously cultivated through the particular social environment there. They are instead a part of separate soundscapes that overlap with that of Waentei-Kikkō, a consequence of the restaurant’s particular positioning in Asakusa. For this reason, they require a new and separate theoretical tool—which I will introduce presently—with which to consider their significance to the people involved in Waentei-Kikkō.

In reviewing earlier scholarship on soundscapes, the word was not defined in terms of the hierarchies of significance that people perceive among sounds in culturally defined places. Instead it tended to include the entirety of sounds audible in a particular location. The demarcating of soundscapes has not been a part of the term’s usage prior to the present study. The invention of the word is normally attributed to composer and author R. Murray Schafer, who used the term beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>9</sup> He founded the World Soundscape Project in 1969 to “[raise] public awareness of sound, [document]

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<sup>9</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *The New Soundscape; a Handbook for the Modern Music Teacher* (Don Mills, Ontario: BMI Canada, 1969); R. Murray Schafer, *The Book of Noise* (Vancouver: Price Print, 1970); R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1993). Schafer is one of the first music writers to bring scholarly attention to matters of environmental sounds in human life, and he has been an influential pioneer in the field of acoustic ecology.

environmental sound and its changing character, and [establish] the concept and practice of soundscape design as an alternative to noise pollution.”<sup>10</sup> Schafer’s use of the term “soundscape” is all-inclusive—anything audible is a part of the soundscape. He does, however, perceive a hierarchy within it, where the sounds of industrialization and urbanization are regarded as pollutants to an ideal and otherwise “natural” acoustic environment. Rather than aiming to theorize and understand how diverse groups of people engage with sound in their lives, Schafer mainly focuses on solving the problem that he has discerned in modern human beings’ relationships to environmental sounds. He has, however, been interested in the ways that environmental sounds contribute to the character of a given space, and those sounds’ significance to the people living among them.<sup>11</sup> Although I eschew the politics that Schafer and many who have followed him espouse, his contributions are undeniable; his writings have been a catalyst for awareness of and theorizing about people’s relationships to sounds in everyday life, issues which bear obvious relevance to the present project.

Since the late 1960s, other scholars have adapted Schafer’s concepts and applied them in a variety of different ways to consider human beings’ experience of their sonic worlds. In recent years alone, researchers have examined, for example, the acoustic sense of place felt in a rustic Pennsylvania suburb (Gunderlach 2007), the cultural meanings and symbolism of animal bells in a Greek island village (Panopoulos 2003), and even patients’ understanding of hospital sounds as symbols of their sense of selves as medical patients

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<sup>10</sup> Helmut Kallman, Adam P. Woog, and Hildegard Westerkamp, “The World Soundscape Project,” *Encyclopedia, The Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, (2012), <http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/emc/world-soundscape-project>.

<sup>11</sup> For details on Schafer’s categorization of culturally meaningful environmental sounds, see Schafer, *The Soundscape*, in its entirety.

(Rice 2003). As early as 1984, ethnomusicologist Steven Feld used Schafer's ideas in his analysis of the rural and agrarian Kaluli people of Papua New Guinea.<sup>12</sup> In order to examine the Kaluli's acoustic sociology, Feld developed a framework in which he considered the role of the people's environment, investigating, for example, the links between cultural aesthetics, environmental sounds, and societal myths that scaffold people's perception of their environment. He did not specifically theorize the concept of soundscape, though he was concerned with the relationship of the people's sounds (both those that they create and those of their natural environment) to the fabric of their social life and thought, and his work directly paved the way for the present study. However, his framework was specifically designed to investigate the structure of organized sounds of the Kaluli, an apparently very isolated, delimited, "small-scale society" with "classless and generally egalitarian features."<sup>13</sup> The intricacies of his analytical model therefore bear little relevance to the particularities of the populous, globalized, and deeply interconnected social environment of Asakusa's soundscape(s).

Nonetheless, a significant facet of Feld's research on the Kaluli—and one that has consequence to the present study—is the consideration of the "dense, multilayered, overlapping, alternating, and interlocking" nature of sounding environments. While Feld does not directly theorize the hierarchies of meaning in Kaluli soundscapes—he does not (nor do the Kaluli people he represents) explicitly demarcate certain sounds as more important or meaningful in certain settings and times than others—this observation of the dense, overlapping nature of sound in the Kaluli's environment does hint at such hierarchies. This aspect of his analysis has great resonance in the overlapping mosaic of

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Feld, "Sound Structure as Social Structure," *Ethnomusicology* 28, no. 3 (September 1984): 383–409.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 383.

soundscapes in the dense, urban Asakusa. Feld explains, “The constantly changing figure and ground of this spacio-acoustic mosaic is a ‘lift-up-over-sounding’ [the Kaluli metaphor of *dulugu ganalan*] texture without gaps, pauses, or breaks.”<sup>14</sup> This facet of his work also emphasizes that diverse sounds—both musical and non-musical—have meaning for people and collectively assist in organizing social life.<sup>15</sup> So it is in Asakusa, where, for example, in Waentei-Kikkō, the sounds of the shuffle of *tabi* socks on *tatami* mats, the muffled clatter of dishes and the kitchen staff’s voices, the tinkling sound of pouring tea, and the cheerful tenor of the talk given by Fukui all have non-musical but not insignificant meaning for the people involved in its environment.

Arquette also emphasizes the significance of manifold musical and non-musical sounds to the human experience, although she still treats soundscapes as all-inclusive.<sup>16</sup> She writes in direct response to Schafer’s work concerning noise pollution and the sounds of industrial, urban modernity. Schafer asserts that industrial, commercial, and traffic sounds are sonic pollutants that should be purged, and that such low-signal sounds result in a sonic compression, a drone, wherein a listener’s sense of place and identity is eroded. Arquette insists that such a view is a misreading of the notion of city. She points out that “city space has been and is constantly being carved up into communities defined by economic, cultural, ethnic, religious divisions and consequently acoustic profiles and soundmarkers are in constant transition.”<sup>17</sup> She acknowledges that urbanites must negotiate the amplitude and range of sounds created in their public and private spaces,

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<sup>14</sup> Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 265.

<sup>15</sup> See also Michael Rahfaldt, *Music-Based Radio and Youth Education in South Africa*, Dissertation (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2007), 19-20.

<sup>16</sup> Arquette, “Sounds Like City.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

managing the sonic sense of place in their everyday lives. For instance, sounds created by others might add a layer to one's ambient environment or become an intrusion. While she does recognize that aural space cannot be contained within fixed boundaries, she, like Feld, does not demarcate differently meaningful sounds, nor directly theorize the ways that people have the agency to negotiate their sonic sense of place when soundscapes overlap. Denouncing the romantic bias towards rural soundscapes, her central argument is still quite relevant to the present study, as she advocates for an approach to sound that can aid in our understanding of social relationships.

***ii. Recent theoretical developments:  
urban spaces, cultural production, and human agency***

Since Feld's landmark work, other music scholars have also begun to address issues particular to dense cities' sounding environments. In "Sounding Out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place" (1995), Sara Cohen applies aspects of Schafer's ideas concerning music, sound, and place to her investigation of the urban and industrial environment of Liverpool.<sup>18</sup> Working with an individual informant, Cohen explores the role of music and biography in producing a sense of place. Drawing on the work of Stuart Hall (1995), her essay illustrates how music helped to define the particular geographical and material space that an individual and his community inhabited and invested with a sense of identity and place, thus distinguishing it from other locations within the city. In addition to considering the ways that music can reflect social, economic, political, and material aspects of the particular place in which it is created, she demonstrates the role of music in *constructing* a sense place for people in a way that is in line with Stokes's description of the

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<sup>18</sup> Sara Cohen, "Sounding Out the City: Music and the Sensuous Production of Place," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 20, no. 4 (1995): 434–46.

same process. Cohen, therefore, attends to much of the complexity of dense urban sounding environments in ways absent from Feld's model. Her study is limited in scope to the perspective of one Liverpool consultant, however, and so it does not provide the range to account for a larger sense of place that includes other differing perspectives of the city. Furthermore, this kind of analysis isolates a single individual's soundscape, disregarding for the most part the physical reality of other meaningful sounds encroaching upon it, the causes and effects of those interminglings, and the larger urban sense of place that springs from those meaningful juxtapositions.

Adam Krims, in his 2007 monograph *Music and Urban Geography*, has offered a more top-down approach to considering music and city environments.<sup>19</sup> He focuses his attention on urban areas in general—though he does examine a few particular cities, and songs about particular cities, as case studies—noting the worldwide increase in urbanization, and the growing influence of major cities on economic and cultural life throughout the world. He applies a broad-based Marxist framework (as originally put forward by Derek Sayer in 1987) to examine the relationships between the changes in urban environments in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries and the peculiarities of the music that is produced in, about, and for those changing environments.<sup>20</sup> He argues that cities have become more “place oriented” in post-Fordist

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<sup>19</sup> Adam Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Krims's (and Sayer's) broad-based Marxist framework interprets Marx's conception and application of the term “production” to include not only economic but also *social* production. Thus Krims and Sayer assert that Marx redefined “economic” relations to comprise the totality of social relations (Ibid., xx). Krims applies this understanding of Marx to “treat both broader urban change and specifically musical practices as particular locations in a single mode of production (capitalism), at a certain point in history. In keeping with what Derek Sayer maintains are the actual contours of Marx's argument, ‘culture’ [is] not separated off from the ‘economic’ and treated as epiphenomenal. Rather, the two, as conventionally (and too narrowly) conceived, [are] taken as proper to both the mode of production and to the mode of accumulation in which they fully



society; cities are marked by the departure of heavy manufacturing, the influx of information and business services, increased class polarization, increased reliance of the city's economy on entertainment and tourism, increased privatization of urban spaces, and the subsequent intensification of spatial design, particularly to encourage retail consumption. As the result of such post-Fordist trends, cities—or their component districts—have been developing more unique and defined identities in order to attract tourists, entertainment-seekers, artists, and workers for the purposes of encouraging economic growth. Krims is interested in exploring how the changes in musical practice can be mapped in relation to those changes in urban place-making. While they both deal with cities, Krims differs from Cohen in that he suggests that changes in the ways that people use and think about urban environments is affected by musical practice, while *also affecting* musical practice in return.

Considering Asakusa with Krims's approach would likely create a fascinating picture of the neighborhood and its soundscape today as the product of both Japan's post-bubble economy, and of Tokyo's bifurcated landscape that splits the more affluent west from the more working-class east where Asakusa is located. Krims is most interested in socio-economic *changes* in cities that bring about new musical realities, and vice versa. Therefore, his approach would give credence to my observation that a sense of place in an urban environment enables certain sounds to be created within it, while that sense of place is in turn reaffirmed and supported by those sounds. Krims gives practically no attention, however, to the interaction of various meaningful sounds/music—and the effects of those interactions—within cities, perpetuating the premise that sounding environments must be

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participate" [Ibid., xxi-xxii; Derek Sayer, *The Violence of Abstraction: The Analytic Foundations of Historical Materialism* (New York: B. Blackwell, 1987)].

viewed as homogenous or considered in isolation. Thus Krims's model is unable to account for the tensions and contradictions that inevitably arise in culturally diverse acoustic places.

Other writings on soundscapes have been produced in response to a perceived dominance of visual experience in social and culture studies rather than from a strictly musicological interest. David Howes's *Sensual Relations* (2003) specifically addresses the apparent bias toward the visual, where he notes that historically, sociologists and anthropologists have neglected the social and cultural experience of taste, scent, touch, and hearing, in favor of sight.<sup>21</sup> Howes does indicate exceptions to this tendency, however, most notably referring to Feld's work on the "ear-minded culture" of the Kaluli people.<sup>22</sup> The work of geographers Andrew Leyshon, David Matless, and George Revill has also contributed significantly to my thinking about the soundscapes of Asakusa, and is in line with the work of others such as Krims's that highlights the mutually generative properties of sound and place. Writing on *The Place of Music* (1998), they explain that *space* and *place* are not simply sites where music (and, I would add, other sound) happens to be made, but rather that different spatialities are "formative of the sounding and resounding of music." In other words, "space produces [music/sound] as space is produced [by music/sound]."<sup>23</sup>

Thus, many scholars in a variety of fields have explored the notion of soundscape in a number of different ways, laying the groundwork for the present study. But, as yet, scholarship on sound, music, and place has continued to treat soundscapes as discrete but

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<sup>21</sup> David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 36-39; Feld, "Sound Structure as Social Structure."

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Leyshon, David Matless, and George Revill, *The Place of Music* (New York: Guilford Press, 1998), 425.

all-inclusive units. Moreover, there has been no notable attention given to the unbounded and permeable nature of sound and the social implications of soundscapes' acoustical contact. The theoretical approaches reviewed thus far cannot be used to adequately examine the social heterogeneity of dense urban sonic environments central to the concerns of my project, nor do they sufficiently shed light on the ways that human agents create and make sense of the flow and overlap of diversely meaningful sounds in the city.

Anthropologist Stefan Helmreich has pointed out, however, that many more recent applications of the term no longer necessitate the expulsion of industrial sounds. He acknowledges, however, that contemporary approaches typically continue to treat soundscapes as “things in the world, waiting to be tuned into.”<sup>24</sup> He discusses anthropologist Tim Ingold's piece, “Against Soundscape” (2006), in which Ingold suggests that the traditional conceptualization of soundscapes objectifies sound rather than regard it as experiential. Ingold insists that, for the scholar interested in human experience, it is essential to investigate sound as a phenomenon of experience, rather than pondering whether sound is the vibrations in a medium, or something that we register inside of our heads.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, I concur with this philosophy; in my model, a soundscape is defined by all of the sounds experienced by the social actors involved in it, as well as those social actors' interpretation of the sounds and the social meaning of their own activity and/or environment.

But in the model that I propose here, there is still the potential—and usually present—reality of perceivable sounds that are external to a place's agreed upon meaning.

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<sup>24</sup> Stefan Helmreich, “Listening Against Soundscapes,” *Anthropology News*, Soundscapes and Music Traditions, 51, no. 9 (December 2010): 10.

<sup>25</sup> Tim Ingold, “Against Soundscape,” in *Sound and Anthropology: Body, Environment, and Human Sound Making*, ed. A. Carlyle (Paris: Double Entendre, 2007), 10–13.

This is the reason that only analyzing artificially isolated soundscapes, or insisting that a soundscape remains all encompassing, does not shed light on the nuanced experience of sound in densely populated urban environments. Joseph Lam's work partly works to solve this problem with his concept of *musikscape*, rooted in his theory of "musiking." When people "musik," they manipulate music as objects, sites, and processes in particularized times and places to achieve personal and social agendas.<sup>26</sup> Concerning sonic environments, Lam explains that usual blanket definitions of soundscape are often inadequate in addressing the actual phenomenological experience of a given setting since people rarely give equal attention, or attribute equal value, to all perceptible sounds. For instance, a person actively listening to the *Tsugaru-jamisen* performance at Waentei-Kikkō might completely fail to notice the clatter of dishes issuing from the nearby kitchen. Lam offers the term *musikscape* to refer not to all audible sounds, but only those given attention and attributed value.<sup>27</sup> He distinguishes soundscape from *musikscape*, explaining that:

Soundscapes include many sonic objects and activities that their practitioners choose to ignore as music or even as sound... When people create and operate in *musikscapes*, [on the other hand,] they intellectually and selectively construct orderly and meaningful musical sites so that they can effectively and intellectually make sense of their sound worlds, actual or imagined.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, a *musikscape* is a site where human agents hear musics/sounds that they have embraced and defined, and where they choose to 'not hear and silence' certain undesirable sounds which are nevertheless audible in the physical location. I adopt his term *musikscape* in my new theoretical model, but pair it with my definition of soundscape,

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<sup>26</sup> For an application of the musiking concept, see Joseph S.C. Lam, "Music and Male Bonding in Ming China," *Nan Nü* 9 (2007): 70–110.

<sup>27</sup> Joseph S.C. Lam, "Music, Sound, and Site: A Case Study from Southern Song China (1127-1275)," in *New Perspectives on the Research of Chinese Culture*, ed. Fan Ka Wai and Pei-kai Cheng (New York: Springer, 2013), 99–118.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

which is bound not by sonic range and human hearing as Lam describes, but by social actors' perception of the meanings of emplaced and emplacing sounds.

The process of fashioning one's musikscape from among a plethora of sounds can be thought of in terms of philosopher Don Ihde's discussion of the "auditory field," his term for a person's auditory experience in a given situation. He describes the phenomenology of sound as a process of keying one's attention on certain *focal* phenomena, while other sounds become background or *fringe* phenomena without disappearing. This focus-fringe ratio can constantly shift with an individual agent's interests and circumstances.<sup>29</sup> In a setting where the sounds of more than one soundscape are simultaneously audible (or even simply conceptually present), a person may shape their musikscape by intentionally focusing on the sonic phenomena associated with one soundscape, while those of the other soundscape(s) recede into the fringes of their consciousness.

Helmreich also points out that in order for the traditional notion of soundscape to function, it must "presuppose a human listener with a distinct attitude toward spatiality," where the soundscape is a human being's audible experience of emplacement. His way of thinking is in line with Lam's musikscape, where the soundscape's human listener must have an *acoustemology* that imagines persons as emplaced in space, experiencing interior subjectivities that process outside objectivities.<sup>30</sup> Helmreich argues against the notion of a listener merely tuned into a soundscape or "immersed" in an acoustical sense of place. He instead suggests that a sense of "immersion"—which he describes as "a sense of presence and immediacy," and to which I would add "a sense of emplacement"—is produced by the

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<sup>29</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 73–5.

<sup>30</sup> The term "acoustemology" was coined by Steven Feld by condensing "acoustic epistemology." Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso, *Senses of Place* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 1996), 97.

transmutation and conversion of sensory signals across media, including but not limited to sound. Helmreich calls this process *transduction*, and explains that when sensory signals are converged seamlessly, a sense of effortless presence can be produced.<sup>31</sup> In my usage of the term, a soundscape is not the *experience* of sound, but rather it is the infinite but bounded collection of sounds that make possible a certain audible experience of meaningful emplacement. A human agent might be able to “tune in” to a soundscape if they can selectively give attention only to certain sounds that have particular meaning in an environment, fashioning their musikscape to experience the sense of place they want. While I am, in the present study, primarily interested in the ways that *sound* enables the experience of emplacement, I concur with Helmreich that for the experience of place to be “effortless,” all consciously experienced sensory signals should converge seamlessly. I will address below, however, what may happen when this process occurs less than seamlessly.

If human beings have the capacity to alter their own sense of emplacement through selective creation of and attention to sound, issues of agency are inherent to considerations of soundscapes and musikscapes. The notions of agency that have been most influential to my formulation of this project have been those coming from practice theory, a system of ideas that aims to explain the social influences of agency on a relatively small scale, but maintains that this agency must be considered in relation to the social structures that shape them. Giddens’s work on agency and social structure is foundational to this way of thinking. He explains that people’s actions are shaped—in both constraining and enabling

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<sup>31</sup> Helmreich, “Listening Against Soundscapes.”

ways—by the very social structures those actions then serve to reinforce and reconfigure.<sup>32</sup> This is notably similar to the mutually generative processes of sound and situated social meaning that contribute to soundscapes described above.

Pierre Bourdieu contributes further to practice theory with his redefinition of the term *habitus*, through which he theorizes the bounds of human agency. Bourdieu defines the *habitus* as both the generative process that produces practices and representations, and the “structuring structures” which condition them and from which they emerge.<sup>33</sup> Thinking in terms of soundscape and musikscape, a human actor’s *habitus*—the factors of nature and nurture that structure their subjectivity—generates their actions, thoughts, and perceptions of a given sounding environment, informing their comprehension of their sense of emplacement: which sounds do and do not have meaning and value in that place, and which actions are or are not appropriate there. A soundscape can exist only when human agents perceive and define a place and its sounds as meaningful, and perpetuate (or alter) that meaning through action. Their *habitus* also plays a role in their choice or ability to give attention to certain sounds and ignore or silence others, thereby defining their musikscape.

Where Giddens and Bourdieu stress the top-down nature of agency, historian Michel de Certeau emphasizes the microprocesses of resistance. De Certeau is more interested in the modes of social behavior and social representation used by individuals and groups in the face of larger and more powerful social institutions. He describes the tactics available to the ordinary person for reclaiming autonomy from the all-pervasive forces of commerce,

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<sup>32</sup> In particular, Anthony Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure, and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>33</sup> Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*.

politics, and culture (strategies).<sup>34</sup> This can be observed in a contemporary soundscape context where, for instance, a human actor in a particular sounding place can work to eschew any audible sense of their location—and indeed supplant it—by wearing headphones and using their own personal listening device. As far as the noise-cancelling technology of their headphones allow, they can cease to participate in the soundscape that might be bubbling and pulsing around them in favor of another recorded one. In such a microprocess of resistance, someone can choose a desirable soundscape that fractures their sense of immersion by mentally placing them elsewhere, to a certain extent, through sound. They must then use their non-aural senses to interpret and negotiate their bodily emplacement, lest they, for instance, risk injury when they cannot hear the engine roar of an oncoming truck.

These practice theories concerning agency have been employed by scholars from a range of disciplines to deal with this uncertain balance between the individual's capacity to act and the social structures that constrain and enable them. In particular, much of my theoretical stance concerning agency and music issues from the work of Tia DeNora, who writes on the agency that contemporary people gain through the use of music in their daily lives. She emphasizes the necessity of considering music not only as a product of social life, but also as providing a resource through which agency and identity are produced. In her estimation, "music's structuring properties [can be] understood as actualized in and through the practices of musical use, through the ways music [is] used and referred to by actors during their ongoing attempts to produce their social situations and themselves as

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<sup>34</sup> Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*.



*selves*” (emphasis in the original).<sup>35</sup> This idea complements the theoretical underpinnings of the soundscape and place studies cited above, by affording people the ability to produce a sense of place through the use of sound in a given environment. In particular, it resonates with the concept of musikscape, where the emphasis is on the agency of the individual(s) who is key into the structuring acoustical reality of a space, thereby determining which audible sounds do, and which do not, contribute to their particular experienced sense of place.

Even with this kind of agency, in a bustling urban environment like Asakusa, the experience of immersion rarely can occur as seamlessly as Helmreich suggests is possible. The flow of sound can render the convergence of sensory signals disjointed. As it drifts through the narrow streets of the neighborhood, from one meaningful place to another, sound heard far from its source can disrupt the hearer’s immersive sense of presence rather than reinforce it. These circumstances oblige each individual to make use of their own agency to determine which sounds have their attention, what meanings those sounds have, and how those meanings inflect or even change their understanding of their emplacement. The customer in Waentei-Kikkō, while enjoying the traditional-Japanese-restaurant sense of emplacement that their senses afford them, when no longer able to ignore the sounds of the children playing across the alley, their “sense of effortless presence” is disturbed, if only slightly. They must alter their awareness of their own emplacement to include the significance of those sounds in order to restore a “sense of immersion” that Helmreich describes.<sup>36</sup>

The processes by which people negotiate the layered and juxtaposed soundscapes of

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<sup>35</sup> Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5-6.

<sup>36</sup> Helmreich, “Listening Against Soundscapes.”

cities is the main problem that studies on sound and place have yet to confront. I believe this problem can be meaningfully addressed by considering the overlap of soundscapes and the role of hearing, acting agents in Asakusa in terms of montage. Historian Miriam Silverberg applies the notion of montage as a heuristic device for understanding Japanese modernism of the mid-1920s to early 1940s.<sup>37</sup> She cites the work of Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1949), the Soviet filmmaker who was a pioneer of montage in film, and a theorist of its use and effects. Eisenstein described montage most simply as “the operation of juxtaposing two signifying elements.”<sup>38</sup> In both Silverberg’s and Eisenstein’s application of montage, the spectator of the signifying elements in the montage has agency and is the creator of meaning. According to Eisenstein, “It is precisely the *montage* principle, as distinguished from that of *representation*, which obliges spectators themselves to *create*, and the montage principle, by this means, achieves that great power of inner creative excitement in the *spectator* which distinguishes an emotionally exciting work from one that stops without going further than giving information or recording events.”<sup>39</sup> Silverberg also cites the *Webster’s New World Dictionary’s* definition of montage: “The art or process of making a composite picture or parts of pictures and arranging these, as by superimposing one on another, so that they form a blended whole while remaining distinct.”<sup>40</sup> Taking these descriptions into account, montage offers an illuminating method to understand the effects of overlapping sonic environments in Asakusa and elsewhere.

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<sup>37</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p. 30.

<sup>39</sup> Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory and the Film Sense*, ed. and trans. Jay Leyda (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1957), 28; cited in Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, 30–31. Italics in the original Silverberg text.

<sup>40</sup> Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, 31.

### III. Postulations and Contributions to Sound Studies

Learning from the above theories, I offer four postulations. The first is that soundscapes are not “fixed” or “autonomous” sites, but *places* where human beings experience and manipulate placed and emplacing sounds to negotiate their identities, social realities, and the social realities of others. Assuming that sounds are only socially relevant to the people who are aware of them, soundscapes can be either individual or shared, depending on which sounds in a given environment catch the attention of whom, are ignored by whom, and are agreed upon as meaningful by whom. In addition, sound flows and it is certainly not confined to any fixed location where it might be produced. Ingold contends, though, that its ability to flow neutralizes its potential to afford listeners a sense of place, complicating its role in the immersive experience of emplacement.<sup>41</sup>

As my second postulation I argue, however, that the flow of sound does not fling the listener from their sense of place, but instead provides a wider array of emplacements to experience. If a person is giving any attention to their non-hearing senses, they do not normally, for example, have a sense of traveling from their desk to somewhere in the clouds when they become aware of the sound of an airplane flying over the office building. Instead, hearing the plane engine hum converges with their senses of sight, touch, taste, and smell, to act as an audible reminder that they are not only emplaced in an office, but also near an airport. In my analyses to follow, I will apply Lam’s term *musikscape* to address this process by which agents determine which sounds are given attention, which sounds are meaningful, and in what manner they have meaning.

As my third postulation, I assert that where “soundscape” describes an audibly

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<sup>41</sup> Ingold, “Against Soundscape.”

meaningful sense of place—one which can be manipulated and negotiated among its participating social actors—“musikscape” refers to the sounds that are given attention and ascribed meaning by a particular social actor at any given time. A person’s musikscape might include all or only some sounds that make up a particular soundscape, but it may also include sounds created as a part of two or more soundscapes. Perhaps while listening to a *Tsugaru-jamisen* performance, a diner at Waentei-Kikkō—purposefully participating in the restaurant’s particular sense of place—becomes distracted by children’s shouting and happy voices outside. That person’s musikscape now includes sounds not only from the restaurant’s soundscape, but also from that of the playground. Their immediately experienced sense of place expands to include proximity to a park, whereby their converged senses tell them that they are not only in a restaurant eating delicious food and hearing a musical performance, but also in a family-friendly urban neighborhood. When one’s musikscape shifts, one’s sense of emplacement also shifts and one’s relevant soundscape expands. The diner’s companions deep in conversation next to them might be completely unaware of the young boisterous merry-makers and thus maintain a more constrained experience of sonic emplacement.

As my fourth postulation I underline that the hearer, therefore, has the agency to attend to—or ignore—certain perceivable sounds, determining their own musikscape, thereby shifting or transforming the audible sense of place they are experiencing. It is in these actions that the processes of sonic montage play out. Like Silverberg, I find “the tension between the ‘blended whole’ and the superimposed images which remain ‘distinct’” useful as a way of understanding the cultural processes I aim to describe. I posit, however, that not just image but sound and music are an integral part of how the montage process

plays out in Asakusa. When soundscapes converge with one another, two (or more) meaningfully *audible* elements become juxtaposed, and the spectator—or here, more appropriately, the hearer—determines the meaning of that juxtaposition for themselves. Due to sound's unbounded nature, and as the result of individuals' agency in perceiving and ascribing meaning to it, acoustical contact between otherwise conceptually separate places within the neighborhood contribute to the way that the larger place of Asakusa is understood both as a conglomeration of its variety of parts, and as a cohesive and discrete whole within larger Tokyo. Sounds from social environments that are normally separate and distinct from one another come in contact with each other; the sounds of the Buddhist temple commingle with the sounds of the touristic shopping district, which also can commingle with the sounds of Waentei-Kikkō. Differently situated hearers—each with their own *habitus*—will interpret, interact with, and respond to those overlapping soundscapes in different ways, but the overlap of meaningful soundscapes uniquely possible within Asakusa plays an integral role in how the neighborhood maintains its particular cultural identity.

## Chapter 2

# Asakusa's Soundscape: Its Historical Roots and Shifting Identities

"Back in the day, Asakusa was the most popular place. People in Asakusa called people in Shibuya 'bumpkins.' They were the people from the west, the boonies. [Asakusa] was called "*shigashi*." That's how they said "*higashi*" [east] in Edo. This is where kabuki and *rakugo* were. This is where everything was..."

- Oshow

### I. Introduction

The diversity of sounds heard in Asakusa's soundscape montage today is the product of centuries of human activity. Shaped by interconnected economic, political, religious, and artistic forces over the past millennium or more, the local identity of Asakusa (and its soundscape) today are continually (re)constructed as people manipulate memories of the neighborhood in contemporary perspectives and practice. This chapter provides an overview of Asakusa's history, ranging from myths that predate written records, through contemporary studies by Japanese and international scholars and artists whose names include Takeuchi Makoto (history), Horikiri Naoto (literary criticism), Noishiki Mikio (essayist), Suzuki Toshio and Shirahama Ken-ichirō (cultural research of Asakusa [*Asakusa bunka kenkyū*]) Gonda Yasunosuke (sociology and film theory), Soeda Azembō (early-twentieth-century singer-songwriter), Donald Richie and Edward Seidensticker (Japanology), Miriam Silverberg and Nam Lin Hur (history), Theodore Bestor (anthropology), and Steven Mansfield (photojournalism).

## II. Asakusa's History—A Brief Overview

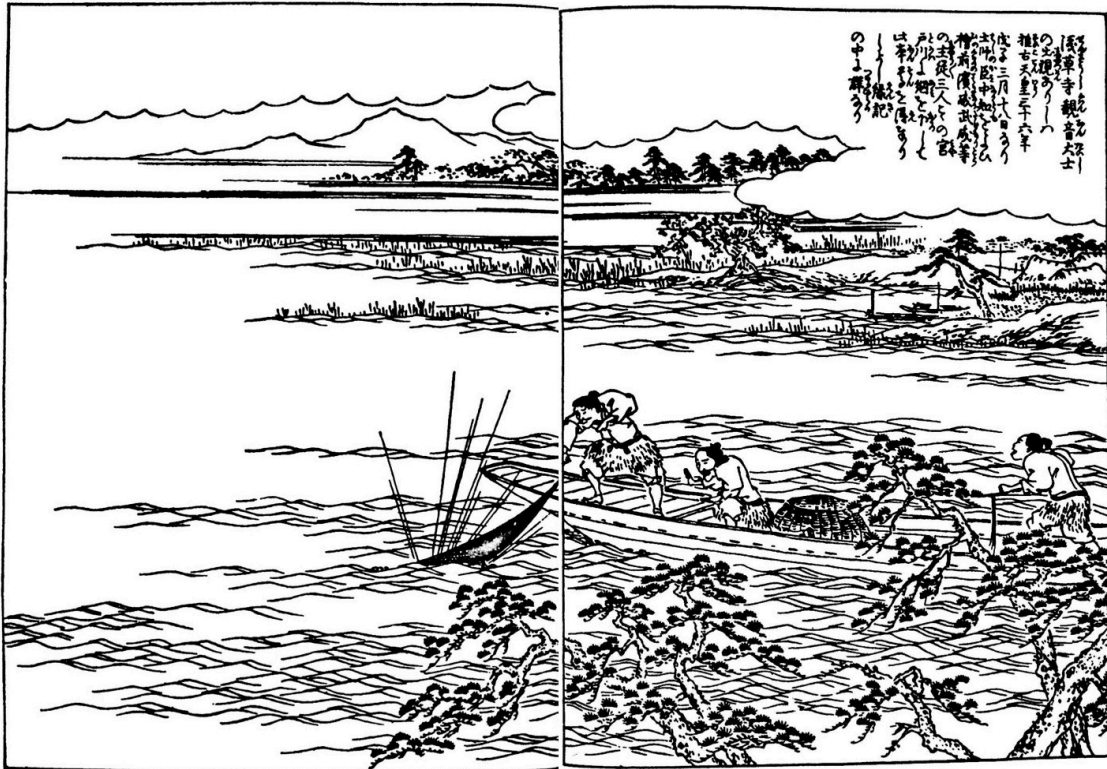
### *i. Early Asakusa: the site of an acclaimed Buddhist temple*

Although the earliest surviving written record of Asakusa is from 1181 C.E. in the historical chronicle *Azuma Kagami*, the origins of the place that is today known as “Asakusa” can be traced in legend back a millennium and a half.<sup>1</sup> At that time, Asakusa was only a lowly fishing village along the Miyato River (now called the Sumida), an estuary of the body of water that is today called Tokyo Bay. The small settlement was built on marshy land that would one day exist as part of a giant global metropolis, Japan’s capital city of Tokyo. In this place, according to local lore, on the early morning of the eighteenth day of the third month of 628 C.E., two fishermen brothers, Hinokuma no Hamanari and Hinokuma no Takenari, were fishing in the Miyato River. They tried seven different places to catch fish, but every time they threw in their nets, they were disappointed to only draw up a small statue, tangled in their mesh ropes again and again. When they finally looked at the object with something other than dismay and frustration, they realized that this was an unusual figurine, sparkling and golden (Image 29). They placed it carefully under a Japanese pagoda tree and bowed respectfully before it. Thereafter, their nets were always heavy with fish. When the leader of the village, Haji no Nakatomo, heard about the brothers’ unusual catch and came to examine it, he immediately recognized that the object was an incarnation of the revered Buddhist deity of compassion and mercy, the Bodhisattva Kannon.<sup>2</sup> He was so

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<sup>1</sup> *Azuma Kagami* (literally “Mirror of the East”) is a medieval Japanese text that chronicles the events of the Kamakura shogunate from the years 1180 to 1266 C.E. A detailed and diverse record with almost daily entries—mainly concerning matters related to the *shōgun*—the item entered on the third day of the seventh month of 1181 C.E. reads, “Shōkan is commissioned to bring the carpenter Kyōshi of Asakusa, Musashi Province, to Kamakura” [Minoru Shinoda, *The Founding of the Kamakura Shogunate, 1180-1185 with Selected Translations from the Azuma Kagami* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 220].

<sup>2</sup> Kannon is the Japanese pronunciation of the Sanskrit Avalokitesvara; Guanshiyin in Chinese. She is said to embody the compassion of all Buddhas, and is one of the more widely venerated bodhisattvas in mainstream Mahayana Buddhism throughout all parts of Asia.



**Image 29. Fishermen pull in their nets, ensnaring the small glittering statue of Kannon. (Image from Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, citing Saitō, *Edo Meisho Zue*).**

moved by the unexpected and awe-inspiring presence of the goddess's figure in his village that he took vows as a Buddhist priest, remade his home into a temple, and spent the rest of his life in devotion to the bodhisattva.<sup>3</sup>

A few years later, another Buddhist priest visiting the area, Shōkai Shōnin, built a larger, more distinguished hall to house the statue and, following a revelation he received in a dream, concealed the statue from human view within the new temple building. Eventually the village began to flourish as the word of the Bodhisattva Kannon's mercy and beneficence spread. People came in growing numbers to worship, praying for the compassion of the goddess. The occasion and circumstances of naming the temple are lost

<sup>3</sup> Sensōji Hinamiki Kenkyū-kai, ed., *Sensō-ji Nikki*, 18 vols. (Tokyo: Kinryūsan Sensō-ji, 1978) cited in Nam-Lin Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2000), 5.



to history, but we know that as early as 1181, it was referred to as Sensō-ji, and the community it was located within was called Asakusa.<sup>4</sup> The Chinese characters spelling “Asakusa” and the “Sensō” of Sensō-ji are one in the same, 浅草, essentially meaning “marshland with short grass.” The “ji” (寺) of Sensō-ji simply means “temple.”<sup>5</sup> For this reason, since at least the twelfth century, the identity of the temple and the locale of its emplacement have been conceptually tied.

As the centuries progressed, the power of the deity at Asakusa became more and more renowned. In the Kamakura period, Sensō-ji garnered the attention of the *shōgun*, the militaristic leaders who, despite the symbolic authority of the emperor, held the greatest power in Japan. As the Kamakura *shōgun* began showing great devotion to Kannon at Asakusa, other influential people began following their example. With such positive and significant attention, Sensō-ji was able to thrive, and temple buildings were expanded and refined.<sup>6</sup> Centuries later, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), the man who would become the first of the Tokugawa shogun, was advised that his military strength needed divine protection.<sup>7</sup> When he took control of the settlement of Edo (now called Tokyo) in 1590, he chose two temples to protect him and his family: Zōjō-ji, in southwestern Edo, as a site to honor his ancestors, and Sensō-ji, just north of Edo, as a prayer hall to safeguard the

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<sup>4</sup> This early reference to Asakusa and Sensō-ji is from the *Azuma Kagami*, a medieval text that chronicles the events from a period of the Kamakura Shōgunate [Junzaburō Hayakawa, ed., *Azumakagami: Yoshikawa-Bon* (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankōkai, 1915)].

<sup>5</sup> “Sensō” (浅草) is the Sino-Japanese pronunciation of the characters, while “Asakusa” is the native Japanese pronunciation. In other words, with the added suffix of “ji,” Sensō-ji simply means “Asakusa Temple.”

<sup>6</sup> “Sensō-Ji: Asakusa Kannon,” accessed April 4, 2013, <http://www.senso-ji.jp/>.

<sup>7</sup> The rule of the Tokugawa clan (1603-1868), beginning with Tokugawa Ieyasu and ending with Tokugawa Yoshinobu, is commonly referred to as the Tokugawa period or the Edo period, denoting the capital city of Edo around which the shōgunate’s power was centered. This period was characterized by political unification, relative peace, strict social order, isolationist foreign policies, and popular access to arts and entertainment.

fortune and security of his family.<sup>8</sup> After Ieyasu was named shogun and his shogunate had established Edo as the *de facto* capital of Japan, Sensō-ji was able to secure a stable income through generous governmental support. The shogunate provided funds to repair and keep up temple buildings, and the government also granted a considerable tract of surrounding land to the temple, which was able to be cultivated and accrue income through rice and other farming.<sup>9</sup> Initially Sensō-ji's affiliation with the Tokugawa family gave the temple a lofty image that discouraged ordinary people from participating freely in its spiritual culture. In 1625, however, it ceased to be the shogunal family's prayer hall, when it was replaced in that regard by the new grand Buddhist hall Kan-ei-ji, a short distance to the west in Ueno. Then Sensō-ji transformed into a popular urban Buddhist temple, winning a wide base of support from ordinary worshippers and visitors, and cultivating an interconnected secular culture in the community surrounding it.<sup>10</sup>

By the latter half of the Edo period, much of Asakusa's once tranquil farmland—still under Sensō-ji's ownership—had been developed. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, much of the land was filled with commercial enterprises and urban residential buildings. These enabled the temple to become quite financially stable, as it collected income in the form of rent from merchants and entertainers engaging in business on its grounds, and land taxes paid by residents. Sensō-ji also amassed profits from the sale of Buddhist amulets and talismans. Furthermore, it collected a great deal of money through offertory coins tossed into altar boxes by the throngs of ordinary worshippers visiting daily

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<sup>8</sup> Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> The land granted to Sensō-ji was 500-*koku*, roughly equivalent to the amount of land given to lower-ranking shōgunal bannermen (*hatamoto*) (Hur 2000, 10-11).

<sup>10</sup> Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*, 13. Naoto Horikiri, *Asakusa: Edo Meiji Hen* (Yūbun Shoin, 2005), 68-75.

at the Main Hall as well as at numerous less prominent shrines scattered throughout the inner precinct. Among these less prominent shrines was Benten-dō, the temple of Benzaiten, who is the goddess of everything that flows: water, words, speech, eloquence, music, and knowledge. A noteworthy sonic addition to the neighborhood, a belfry holding a giant bronze bell has stood in front of Benten-dō since the bell was cast in 1692, and, to the present day, is still rung daily in Asakusa.

By the late Edo period, businesses and entertainment diversions had established themselves in the vicinity to take advantage of Sensō-ji's popularity, hoping to attract the attention of the crowds of prayerful and pleasure-seeking pilgrims.<sup>11</sup>

Businesses that do not seem to bear directly on Buddhism, or any spirituality for that matter, [were] ubiquitous throughout the precincts of Sensō-ji and attract[ed] large crowds. Leisure activities [were] so intermingled with spiritual activities that it [was] almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. People who [had] just paid homage to the Asakusa Kannon or some other deity easily [became] fun-seekers, spectators, game players, travelers, or shoppers.<sup>12</sup>

In his monograph *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society* (2000), Nam-lin Hur gives significant evidence that the magnitude and vitality of non-prayer activities in Asakusa were almost equivalent to that of the spiritual activities. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the culture of Asakusa and of Sensō-ji Buddhism was one of both “prayer” (*kitō*) and “play” (*asobi*).<sup>13</sup> In addition to participating in wide-ranging devotional activities, in Edo-period Asakusa, visitors congregated around storytelling halls, vendor stalls, teahouses, theaters, archery booths and other games,

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<sup>11</sup> For a study on Edo entertainment districts, including Asakusa, see Makoto Takeuchi, *Edo No Sakariba Kō: Asakusa Ryōgoku No Sei to Zoku* (Tokyo: Kyōiku Shuppan, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*, 12. In this passage, Hur was citing the observations of Seiken Terakado (1796-1868) in his series of essays, *Edo hanjōki* (A Record of Edo's Prosperity). Seiken Terakado, *Edo Hanjō Ki*, trans. Haruhiko Asakura and Kikuji Andō, 3 vols. (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1974).

<sup>13</sup> This was not necessarily the case at other Buddhist temples in Japan. While there may be other temples at which *asobi* plays as great a role as *kitō*, they are by far in the minority.



Image 30. Toothpick shops on the grounds of Sensō-ji in the Edo period. (from Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan*, citing Saitō, *Edo meisho zue*.)

sideshows, street spectacles, and street circuses in an area directly behind the Main Hall known as Okuyama (literally “deep mountain”—in theory it was a sacrosanct retreat for Buddhist monks).<sup>14</sup> There were market streets offering toothpicks, tobacco, tobacco pipes, combs, ornaments, toys, candies, cookies, artificial flowers, and sandals.<sup>15</sup> Some people just visited the area on a day off, strolling around the crowded streets and engaging in all kinds of *asobi*, a word that means: “(1) playing, amusement, or pleasure; (2) to play music; (3)

<sup>14</sup> Horikiri, *Asakusa: Edo Meiji Hen*, 100–108. Takeuchi, *Edo No Sakariba Kō*, 95–102.

<sup>15</sup> Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*, 12-14, 47-71.

hunting; (4) gambling; (5) ‘play girls’ (*asobime*); and (6) prostitutes, as a slang term used in the brothel quarters.”<sup>16</sup>

The prosperity of entertainment activities in the area was partly the result of the shogunate’s earlier dictates. As the city of Edo expanded, the conservative Tokugawa government in 1656 had ordered the pleasure quarter of Yoshiwara to be moved from its original location—near Nihonbashi and the encroaching, seducible samurai—to the land just north of Asakusa, at that time still outside of Edo’s city limits.<sup>17</sup> This was a conscious move to place the pleasure quarter away from the upper-class section of the city known as Yamanote, even past the bounds of the lower-class section of Edo, Shitamachi, to land outside of Edo’s official perimeter. Asakusa is a part of Shitamachi, which literally means “Low City.” Shitamachi is, roughly, the eastern half of Edo/Tokyo, and it is known as such because it was built on the marshy lowlands that were still accessed by boat throughout the Edo period, quite reminiscent of Venice’s gondola-crowded canals. The “low” of Shitamachi also refers to the kind of people who historically have lived in the area—the lower classes, the commoners. Shitamachi exists in contrast to the western side of Tokyo, Yamanote or “Foothills,” which was the home of the vassals and warrior castes in Edo-period Japan. While it is indeed physically higher above sea level than the Shitamachi, the Yamanote also was—and continues to be—associated with affluence and higher social status, whereas Shitamachi has remained, for the most part, steadfastly working class.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24. Hur cites the *Kadokawa kogo dai-jiten* (The Kadokawa Comprehensive Dictionary of Old Terms; 1982) in offering these definitions.

<sup>17</sup> Cecilia Segawa Seigle, *Yoshiwara: The Glittering World of the Japanese Courtesan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1993), 48-50; Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World’s Greatest City* (Rutland, Vermont: Tuttle Publishing, 2010).

From the time that Yoshiwara was moved north of Asakusa, people who came to engage in the spiritual and entertainment activities there could easily take advantage of the offerings of the new Yoshiwara, and vice versa. Since both destinations were so far outside of the center of the city, it would have been advantageous to enjoy both on the same excursion from home, and indeed many men of leisure did. And despite the Buddhist behavioral guidelines that strictly prohibited sexual contact within Buddhist sanghas, the Yoshiwara prostitutes were given permission in many instances to set up business temporarily on Sensō-ji's lands when their own district had been ruined by fire. In doing so, the temple profited economically from the rent paid by the prostitutes, and the temporary brothels and their clients alike could benefit from the convenience of intermingling with Asakusa's other attractions.<sup>18</sup>

In 1842, the city's kabuki theaters were also moved to the Asakusa area by shogunal edict. Beyond merely expelling this activity that they found unsavory, the shogunate sought to ease its own economic difficulties by encouraging the townspeople to spend money more cautiously. They thought that making access to the then immensely popular kabuki less convenient would achieve that goal. More than anything else, however, that decision arguably just cemented Asakusa's status as the greatest entertainment district of Edo.<sup>19</sup>

## ***ii. The rise and fall of Asakusa as a modern entertainment center***

Japan's political upheaval in the mid-nineteenth century did little to rattle the culture of Asakusa. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate and the reinstatement of imperial rule in Japan, when the emperor was moved

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<sup>18</sup> Hur, *Prayer and Play in Late Tokugawa Japan: Asakusa Sensōji and Edo Society*, 104-107.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World's Greatest City*, 38-9.

from Kyoto to Tokyo, as Edo was renamed that year. Despite the significant changes occurring throughout Tokyo—and indeed throughout Japan—Asakusa prevailed as the most boisterous pleasure center of the city. Sensō-ji remained a popular pilgrimage destination for many pious Buddhists and indulgent entertainment-seekers. Though some kabuki theaters moved to Ginza and elsewhere, many remained in Asakusa well into the modern Meiji period. And rather than relocating, in 1886, the geisha (musicians and performers) who had once entertained visitors near the gate of Yoshiwara formed a union and reinvigorated their business in Asakusa, where clients continued to enjoy all of the sights, sounds, and sensations that the neighborhood had to offer.<sup>20</sup>

By the early 1890s, Hanayashiki—a public flower garden that had been planted in Asakusa in 1853—had been converted into an amusement park. A five-story pavilion called Ozankaku was moved to Hanayashiki from elsewhere in Tokyo in 1887, and was opened to



**Image 31. The main gate of Yoshiwara around the turn of the twentieth century (from <http://www.oldphotosjapan.com/>).**

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<sup>20</sup> Tokyo Asakusa Kumiai, "Asakusa Kenban Enkaku - Asakusa Kenban History," *Tokyo Asakusa Kumiai/Asakusa Kenban Official Homepage*, 2010.



**Image 32. The entrance to Hanayashiki in the first decades of the twentieth century, with the Asakusa Twelve Stories in the background (from Kinouya.com).**

the public the following year. At such a height, it was extremely popular among sightseers, and in 1890, a gramophone was installed in the building to attract even more customers to the park. A merry-go-round was built in the the 1890s, a Ferris wheel in 1907, and rare animals from overseas were imported to entertain visitors. Considered Japan’s first modern amusement park, it has been said that Hanayashiki was the most popular entertainment spot in Asakusa in the late Meiji period.<sup>21</sup> Also in 1890, adjacent to Hanayashiki, the Ryōunkaku (literally the “Cloud-Surpassing Tower”) was built. Japan’s first skyscraper, it became popularly referred to as the Asakusa Jūnikai or the “Asakusa Twelve Stories.” An octagonal tower of red brick, the Twelve Stories was the tallest building in the city at the time and contained the first elevator in Japan, an observation lounge and deck, as well as various interesting and amusing things to see and buy.

<sup>21</sup> National Diet Library, “Asakusa Hanayashiki: Transformation from a Park to an Amusement Park,” *The Meiji and Taisho Eras in Photographs*, accessed May 13, 2013, <http://www.ndl.go.jp/scenery/e/column/asakusa-hanayashiki.html>.



Demolished after the Great Kantō Earthquake of 1923, the Twelve Stories soared over the neighborhood for thirty-three years and became an icon of Asakusa, but also “the great symbol of the masses and their pleasures.”<sup>22</sup>

A testament to its prominence as a popular recreation area, Asakusa was declared a public park in 1873. As part of the project of “Civilization and Enlightenment” (*bunmei kaika*) of the Meiji period, areas of Tokyo were designated as public parks that year so that Tokyo might appear on par with other world capitals. The closest equivalent to Western-style parks previous to that time were shrine and temple grounds, and the “park system of 1873” capitalized on that fact by simply designating those same spaces with a more “civilized” label. The grounds of Sensō-ji were a part of this project, legally becoming one of Tokyo’s first five public parks. Unlike some of the city’s other more pastoral parks, however,



**Image 33. Rokku in Asakusa Park, ca. 1920**  
(from <http://www.oldtokyo.com/asakusa-district.php>).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Mansfield, *Tokyo: A Cultural and Literary History, Cities of the Imagination* (Oxford: Signal Books, 2009). Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World’s Greatest City*, 84-6.

Asakusa retained its already rowdy, urban ambience. Its area was divided into seven districts, and in addition to the green temple garden retained from the Edo period, the park grew to include reclaimed wetlands to the west, which were designated Rokku (“the Sixth District”).<sup>23</sup> Seidensticker describes what Rokku became:

In the Meiji and Taishō periods, and indeed down to Pearl Harbor, [Rokku] meant the music halls and the movie palaces and the other things that drew mass audiences. [Rokku] had its first theater in 1886, and, in 1903, Electricity Hall, the first permanent movie theater in the land. Among the other things were a miniature Mount Fuji, sixty eight feet high, for the ascent of which a small fee was charged, and a rope bridge across the lakes, to give a sense of deep mountains. The Fuji was damaged in a typhoon and torn down the year the Twelve Storys (*sic*), much higher, was completed, on the land just north of the park limits.<sup>24</sup>

Asakusa’s Rokku was the noisiest, brightest, gaudiest swarm of entertainment and pleasure in modern Tokyo.



**Image 34. An Asakusa revue, ca. 1930, likely at the Casino Folies (from Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa*).**

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<sup>23</sup> Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World’s Greatest City*, 126-9.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 128-9.

By the 1920s, though the area retained a well-attended kabuki theater, “the most popular of popular amusements” to be sought in Asakusa were the “moving pictures” in Rokku.<sup>25</sup> In the fourth district was an aquarium open for public viewing, and in 1929, the *Casino Follies*—presenting a musical, dance, and satirical stage production modeled on Parisian revues—opened in the aquarium building, showcasing the first erotic revue (Image 34) performed in Tokyo.<sup>26</sup> In addition were the fourth district’s music halls, burlesque houses, and very popular European and domestic operas. Asakusa was still *the* pleasure center in the city, and its pleasures had modernized along with so many other things in Tokyo and Japan at large.<sup>27</sup>

The dynamism of Asakusa’s entertainment culture did not last, however. The Asakusa operas faded in popularity after the 1923 earthquake, and the theaters that

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<sup>25</sup> Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 178. For Silverberg’s total comments on and analysis of Asakusa’s popular culture in the early twentieth century in this source, see Part III, “Asakusa: Honky-Tonk Tempo.”

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-7; Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World’s Greatest City*, 352-67.

<sup>27</sup> Balladeer and political activist Soeda Azenbō, and his son Soeda Tomomichi, wrote their impressions of Asakusa during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Azenbō Soeda and Tomomichi Soeda, *Asakusa Teiryūki* (Tokyo: Tōsui Shobō, 1982).

For more recent Japanese scholarship on Asakusa, with particular attention given to its entertainment activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Naoto Horikiri, *Asakusa* (Tokyo: Yoshitachi Akihiro, 2004). Norikiri’s volume on Taishō-period Asakusa also addresses the neighborhood’s culture during that era specifically. Naoto Horikiri, *Asakusa. Taishō Hen* (Tokyo: Yūbun Shoin, 2005).

Sociologist and film theorist Gonda Yasunosuke (1887-1951) wrote about Asakusa during this time, and his work is particularly significant to the present study concerned with soundscape montage. His article on the neighborhood was published in 1921, and it detailed the daily life and activities there during the early decades of the twentieth century. Gonda described Asakusa as a quarter of the city that was “in constant motion,” and whose “constitutive parts could not be isolated.” He went on to name the principal sites associated with Asakusa in the years just prior to the Great Kanto Earthquake (1923): Nakamise Street lined with shops leading to Sensō-ji, movie theaters, small eateries, and well-known play sites like the Asakusa Twelve Stories. He explained that these “all had meaning because they were in and of Asakusa;” where in the past the area had been seen as the location of Sensō-ji, but that by his time, even the temple was defined largely due to its presence in Asakusa [Yasunosuke Gonda, “Postaa no Chimata: Asakusa no Minshū Goraku,” *GYS* 1 (1921): 268–78; cited in Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times*, 179]. Gonda’s analysis of the neighborhood is much in line with my theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1; he, too, saw Asakusa as a composite of many parts superimposed, forming a blended whole while also remaining distinct.



**Image 35. An aerial view of Asakusa shortly following the air raids by American forces on March 9-10, 1945. While Sensō-ji appears to still be standing, it had sustained irreparable damage from fire and required a complete rebuilding (from The National Archives, RG-342-FH-289979, <http://www.japanairraids.org/>).**

housed the revues that succeeded them were torn down by the late 1930s. The end of the revues, Seidensticker writes, was the end of Asakusa as a leader of popular culture.<sup>28</sup> In an even harder blow, the area was hit heavily on the night of March 9-10, 1945 by the most intense air raids by American forces on Tokyo (Image 35). In that single event, roughly 100,000 people were killed in Shitamachi. The attack snuffed out any semblance of “normal life” in Asakusa and necessitated extensive reconstruction.<sup>29</sup> Sensō-ji was destroyed in the

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World's Greatest City*, 392.

<sup>29</sup> On the night of March 9-10, three hundred thirty-four B-29 Super Fortress bombers dropped “thousands of tons of incendiary and fragmentation bombs” onto Tokyo’s most densely populated, blue-collar districts. Each plane was loaded with up to six tons of oil, napalm, jellied gasoline, and phosphorus, sweeping over Asakusa and focusing mainly on the areas just east of the Sumida River. “Some 2,000 tons of incendiaries were dropped on [Asakusa], a twelve square-mile area where the population density was 103,000 per square mile. Residents recall that the gasoline-filled bombs were dropped concentrically to make sure there were no avenues of escape” (Mansfield, 192). Death toll estimates rank March 9-10 in Tokyo as the deadliest air raid of

carpet-bombing and was not completely rebuilt until 1958. Elements of Asakusa's entertainment district, however, were rebuilt with incredible speed, perhaps, as Stephen Mansfield comments, in Tokyoites' need for "escapist performances and titillation" in the aftermath of the bombing.<sup>30</sup> But from the 1940s on, in terms of popular culture, the attention of Tokyo's middle and upper classes had shifted, at first to Ginza to the southwest, and later even farther west to Shinjuku and Shibuya.

The geisha's "flower and willow world" (*karyūkai*) north of Sensō-ji was devastated by the war, but was reestablished by 1950. Their arts were becoming less popular in Westernized Japan, however, and their community has now waned in number dramatically, particularly in recent decades.<sup>31</sup> Yoshiwara was also destroyed by the 1945 bombing and rebuilt within a half-dozen years to a grandeur coming close to its former glory. In the late 1950s, however, prostitution was outlawed in Japan. Many of the more renowned houses in Yoshiwara closed in quiet pride, while others were converted into "Turkish baths"—today referred to as "soaplands"—and essentially continue to operate as brothels in everything but name.<sup>32</sup> No longer a licensed pleasure quarter, the prominence of Yoshiwara faded as public attitudes and mores shifted, and it acted less and less as a partner in drawing crowds from central Tokyo toward Asakusa. In Asakusa's entertainment district, as the revues' popularity waned and they eventually closed, strip houses and burlesques came and took their place. The manmade lakes in Asakusa Park turned rancid in neglect and were filled in. Eventually the park itself was done away with, its land returned to Sensō-ji, whose

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World War II history, and even above Hiroshima and Nagasaki in terms of casualties from the initial blast itself (Tony Long, "March 9, 1945: Burning the Heart Out of the Enemy | This Day In Tech | Wired.com," *This Day In Tech*, accessed May 9, 2013, <http://www.wired.com/thisdayintech/2011/03/0309incendiary-bombs-kill-100000-tokyo/>).

<sup>30</sup> Mansfield, *Tokyo: A Cultural and Literary History*, 207.

<sup>31</sup> Tokyo Asakusa Kumiai, "Asakusa Kenban Enkaku - Asakusa Kenban History."

<sup>32</sup> Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World's Greatest City*, 530-1.

administrators immediately sold portions of it to a movie company and a syndicate who both excavated their newly acquired property and built more amusement establishments in place of the former green spaces.<sup>33</sup> Many theaters—film and stage—remained or had been rebuilt, but fewer and fewer of the urbane and sophisticated spectators were coming to Asakusa from the city center, and it was held in general low esteem compared with other up and coming districts.<sup>34</sup>

### ***iii. Rebuilding Asakusa, the 1960s on***

In the 1960s, Japan's economy improved dramatically from its immediate post-war circumstances—accruing an average growth of 10%—and grew stronger through the '70s and '80s. Through the 1970s, Japan had the world's second highest GNP, following only the United States. In the 1990s, it had reached number one among major industrialized nations in per capita GNP. Japan's burgeoning economy coincided, in the 1980s and beyond, with increased transnational interaction and exchange on a global scale. Furthermore, the national growth afforded the average Japanese citizen increased consumer power for products and travel. In this context, in the 1970s and '80s, the wards of Shitamachi began developing cultural organizations and events to reinvigorate their local prospects.<sup>35</sup> Taitō Ward established a number of museums devoted to Shitamachi local history, and reintroduced kabuki to Asakusa, the neighborhood where it had once flourished.<sup>36</sup> A

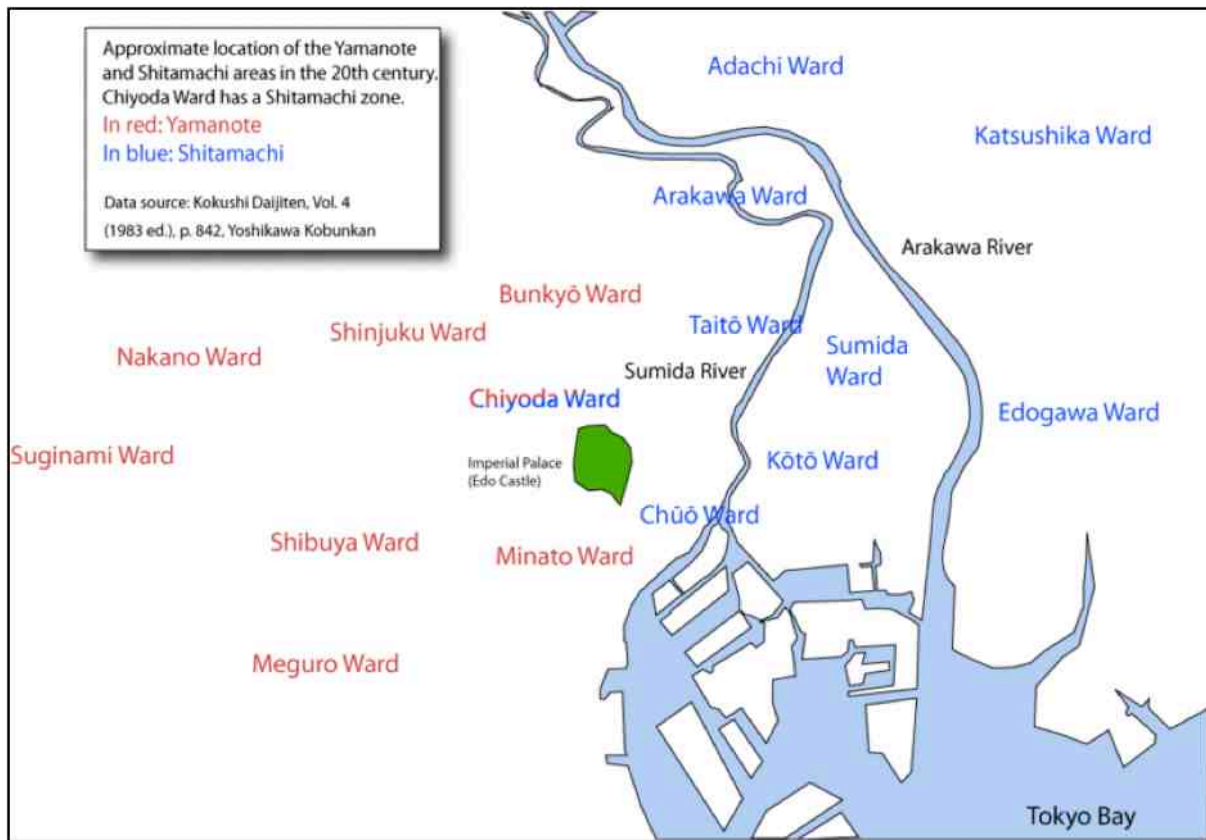
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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 456. Mikio Noishiki, *Asakusa: Sengo Sanjūnen* (Tōkyō: Chōryūsha, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> For extensive commentary on Asakusa's post-war decades, see Mikio Noishiki, *Asakusa: Sengo Sanjūnen* (Tokyo: Chōryūsha, 1976). Horikiri Naoto also has an entire volume in which he provides an immediate post-war history of the neighborhood. Naoto Horikiri, *Asakusa: Sengo Hen* (Tokyo: Yūbun Shoin, 2005).

<sup>35</sup> Theodore C. Bestor, "Rediscovering Shitamachi: Subculture, Class, and Tokyo's 'Traditional' Urbanism," in *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space*, ed. Robert Rotenberg and Gary McDonogh (Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey, 1993), 49.

<sup>36</sup> In 1947, under the Local Autonomy Law, the former legal ward (*ku*) of Asakusa had become integrated with its neighboring Shitaya Ward. Together they become one of the twenty-three new special wards (*tokubetsu ku*) of Tokyo, Taitō.



**Map 4. Contemporary Tokyo, with rough delineation of Yamanote areas (in red) and Shitamachi areas (in blue).**

scouring and renovation followed. By the 1990s and early 2000s, shop fronts had been redesigned and refurbished, a local tourism federation had been established to encourage cultural events and performances in the area, small shopping districts had organized to promote themselves and draw in customers, and local events were marketed outside of the area to draw in tourists from other parts of the city, the country, and abroad.

In 1978, the annual Sumida River Fireworks Convention (*Sumida-gawa Hanabi-taikai*) was launched at the river next to Asakusa. There had been a tradition of fireworks displays on the Sumida River—historically held farther south near Ryōgoku—since the early eighteenth century, but the custom had ceased after 1961 due to traffic problems caused by crowds traveling to and from the river using the city’s then insufficient



**Image 36. Participants in Asakusa's 2012 Samba Carnival. This team's theme was Tokyo Skytree; the front of their headdresses feature silver a silhouette of the tower**

infrastructure. The re-launch of the event next to Asakusa brought many visitors to the area, and in recent years nearly one million spectators annually have gathered at the river's edge to eat, drink, and celebrate under the festive colorful explosions.<sup>37</sup> Since 1981, the enormous Asakusa Samba Carnival (*Sanba Kaanibaru*) has also been held in the neighborhood annually. That year, Taitō Ward invited the winning troupe from the Rio Carnival in Brazil to put on an exhibition in Asakusa. Held in late August, the event has grown since then to include a parade of dozens of samba teams from Brazil and around Japan, the more serious of whom compete for prizes, though many simply join for more lighthearted fun. It has become a major event for the neighborhood, and the event has

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<sup>37</sup> "Rekishi Hanabi Shiryō," Organization Homepage, *Sumida River Fireworks Festival - Sumida-gawa Hanabi-taikai*, (2012), <http://sumidagawa-hanabi.com/untiku.html>.



attracted up to five hundred thousand visitors in recent years, making it the largest samba festival in Japan.<sup>38</sup>

In 2012, the Tokyo Skytree (*Tōkyō Sukaitsurii*), a broadcasting, restaurant, and observation tower, opened in neighboring Sumida Ward. The structure is currently the tallest tower in the world at 634 (*mu-sa-shi*) meters, and is easily visible from the Asakusa area. A visual and architectural marvel, the Skytree opened to the public in May 2012 and is the focus of a large commercial development that includes a shopping mall, marketplace,



**Image 37. View of Tokyo Skytree from Asakusa, with the precincts and pagoda of Sensō-ji prominent in the foreground.**

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<sup>38</sup> Asakusa Samba Carnival Executive Committee, “About Asakusa Samba (*Asakusa Sanba ni Tsuite*),” Organization Homepage, *Asakusa Samba Carnival*, accessed May 10, 2013, <http://www.asakusa-samba.org/about.html> (footnote continued on next page).

There is a significant population of ethnically Japanese people living in Brazil (over 1.2 million people, Brazil’s oldest and largest Asian minority), a community that has had a presence in that part of the world since the early decades of the twentieth century. When Japanese Brazilians migrate back to Japan, one way that they enact their Brazilian nationalist identities in Japan is by organizing and participating in samba parades [Takeyuki “Gaku” Tsuda, “Crossing Ethnic Boundaries: Japanese Brazilian Return Migrants and the Ethnic Challenge of Japan’s Newest Immigrant Minority,” in *Multiculturalism in the New Japan: Crossing the Boundaries Within*, ed. Nelson H. H. Graburn, John Ertl, and R. Kenji Tierney (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008), 119–124]. While the Asakusa Samba Carnival is the country’s largest, there are others elsewhere in Tokyo, and in communities large and small, including Hamamatsu, Shizuoka Prefecture; Kobe, Hyogo Prefecture; Fukuoka, Fukuoka Prefecture; Ōmiya, Sōka, and Tsurugashima, Saitama Prefecture; Matsudo, Chiba Prefecture; Kawasaki, Kanagawa Prefecture; Iwaki, Fukushima Prefecture; Nagoya, Aichi Prefecture; Towada, Aomori Prefecture; among many others.

interactive corporate PR space, and aquarium. The Skytree complex is an unparalleled tourist draw in contemporary Tokyo. It is promoted extensively, often in conjunction with the older tourist attractions at Asakusa. With the soaring tower just east of the Sumida River, any Tokyoite traveling by train or subway to the Skytree from central or western Tokyo must pass through Asakusa just to its west, making an excursion to one easily incorporate a visit to the other. Existing in a mutually beneficial relationship, Tokyo Skytree arguably functions similarly to the way Yoshiwara did in relation to Edo-period Asakusa: attracting amusement-seekers from central Tokyo (and elsewhere) to an area where they can conveniently enjoy—and spend money at—both destinations.

For the most part, however, the western Yamanote districts of Tokyo still have the cosmopolitan, economic, and trend-setting upper hand, and Asakusa and the rest of Shitamachi, with its pervading aura of yesteryear, might easily be described as the cultural underdog of the city today.<sup>39</sup> The greater Asakusa area is still largely a blue-collar residential neighborhood where ordinary Tokyoites carry out their day-to-day lives, and the Buddhist activities at Sensō-ji still reside at the heart of a bustling—if rather passé, or even crass—amusement and entertainment district. Yet there is an unmistakable refreshed vitality of Asakusa in recent decades due mainly to the success of local urban renewal efforts and tourist campaigns; the district is now one of the major tourist attractions in contemporary Tokyo. People here are creating and experiencing a particular diverse cacophony that sonically concretizes what “Asakusa” signifies in the early twenty-first century.

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<sup>39</sup> Donald Richie and Ben Simmons, *Tokyo: Megacity* (Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 34. Richie notes the cultural shift in the twentieth century from Asakusa to districts in western Tokyo, in addition to a brief overview of the neighborhood’s history since the late sixteenth century.

## Chapter 3

# Asakusa as a Sonic Montage of Tropes

“[Asakusa] burned down once. It burned in the war, and then different types of people started moving in. It was pretty diverse. It was like chaos, and it still is today. The land has been well ordered, things are put into place—Sensō-ji and the *yakuza* have done that—but it is still chaotic, there are still a lot of different people living here. It’s still a mish-mash.”

- Oshow

### I. Place-Making in Asakusa

With such an extraordinary history and vibrant present day, contemporary Asakusa is well-known within Tokyo, across Japan, and even beyond. Its character is constructed as people manipulate various memories of and ideas about Asakusa, building the neighborhood as a certain kind of physical place, and acting within it in certain kinds of ways. Sounds are integral to these physical and non-physical elements and operations, and the neighborhood’s soundscape, both physically heard and imagined, is the product of this place-making process.

There are countless visual representations displayed in the neighborhood that illustrate many of the popular notions about Asakusa’s local identity, and which often demonstrate real and imagined elements of the neighborhood’s soundscape. There are, for instance, decorative sidewalk tiles that depict the Samba Carnival and the Sumida Fireworks Convention. There are large placards—written in both Japanese and English—



Image 38. A mural, funded by Taitō Ward, depicting the legend of Sensō-ji's origins.



Image 39. A large mural on a building façade near Kokusai Street depicting “Tokyo’s Three Great Towers,” showing the Asakusa Twelve Stories, Tokyo Tower, and the Tokyo Skytree.

posted throughout Asakusa that educate pedestrians about the historical significance of the neighborhood’s various sites. There are also a number of murals in Sensō-ji’s precinct that

depict and describe the legend of the founding of the temple (Image 38), and images of the Asakusa Twelve Stories tower can still be seen on recently-created murals in the Rokku area (Image 39). In a remarkably comprehensive and centralized effort to depict the contemporary identity of Asakusa, the metal shutters of Nakamise's shops, which are pulled down and locked when the shops are closed, have been painted with an impressive array of panoramic murals illustrating a range of historical and contemporary events,



**Images 40 and 41. A few of the numerous panels of murals painted on shop blockades on Nakamise, here depicting Shirasagi no Mai at Sensō-ji (top) and Sanja Matsuri of Asakusa Shrine (bottom).**

figures, and landmarks of the Neighborhood (Images 40 and 41).<sup>1</sup> These include various ritual dances and festivals at Sensō-ji, scenes from nō theater, exploding fireworks over the Sumida, cherry trees in bloom, pigeons flying in silhouette past the Asakusa Twelve Stories, gondolas being rowed upon the river, traditional acrobats doing stunts, and massive crowds participating in Sanja Matsuri of Asakusa Shrine. Technically simple, yet spatially complex and dramatic, the murals are exhibited on the primary pedestrian thoroughfare of the neighborhood—the entry avenue to Sensō-ji—and convey a wealth of details about what kind of place Asakusa is thought to be.

These representations and the efforts behind them are driven by what Lawrence Kramer refers to as “structural tropes,” ways-of-doing-things that are normalized and often taken for granted. Diverse and flexible, these ways-of-doing-things also function as conventional expressive acts in a given cultural field, which are not limited by specific “styles, scopes, and contexts,” but instead are defined by “shared ways of proceeding, of valuing, of presenting.”<sup>2</sup> For instance, the concept of spirituality operates as such a trope. It is typically limited to certain cultural assumptions about what people are doing and why they are doing it—usually concerning matters of existential belief, activities related to devotional and ritual observances, codes of morality, etc.—while also accounting for a wide

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<sup>1</sup> The project to create the paintings on Nakamise’s shop shutter doors—the Asakusa Picture Scrolls (*Asakusa Emaki*)—was conducted by the Nakamise Shopkeepers’ Association, the Bunka Shutter Company of Tokyo, and the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts (*Tokyo Geijutsu Daigaku*). This project was part of the efforts to revitalize Asakusa after its popularity was surpassed by districts in western areas of Tokyo such as Ginza, Shibuya, and Shinjuku. It was carried out in 1988, the one hundredth anniversary of the Nakamise Shopkeepers’ Association, and the thirtieth anniversary of the reconstruction of Sensō-ji. The production and supervision of the scrolls was conducted by sixteen members of the faculty at the National University of Fine Arts: Sawato Fukui led the group, Ikuo Hirayama supervised, and respected artists such as Yukio Umehara, Hiratsuka Yuji, Katsumi Kitami, and Sasaki Tadashi contributed original paintings ([http://www.dentsu-pr.com/case\\_studies/case01.html](http://www.dentsu-pr.com/case_studies/case01.html), accessed 1 December 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 10–12.

variety of activities and behaviors that manifest differently in diverse contexts. Spirituality can be evoked in an expressive act by referencing a specific incarnation of the trope, such as the image of a temple or a church, or the sound of spiritual music. In doing so, meanings about the category of spirituality as a whole can be clearly accessed. For instance, hearing the tune “Amazing Grace” issuing from a building’s open door will, for the multitudes of people with knowledge of that song as an emblem of Christianity, bring up an array of spiritual assumptions about the activities that are taking place inside.

The popular identity of contemporary Asakusa intersects with six tropes that I have identified as particularly salient and meaningful to Tokyoites and across much of Japanese society.<sup>3</sup> These tropes are: spirituality, tradition, entertainment, Shitamachi, late-modern *roman*, and tourism.<sup>4</sup> Diverse and perhaps seemingly incongruous, each is essential to Asakusa’s identity as a certain kind of *place* within Tokyo, and how its identity is wielded as a meaningful cultural symbol. There is significant evidence for the centrality of these tropes, not only in the ways that people act in and talk about Asakusa, but also in the ways that institutions and individuals refer to Asakusa in consistent and not-so-consistent ways. Each of these references are often used as a kinds of double synecdoches—symbols that represent not only one of the neighborhood’s six tropes, but Asakusa as a whole as well.

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer Robertson also discusses tropes in Japanese urban place-making in her analysis of *furusato-zukuri* [Jennifer Robertson, *Native and Newcomer – Making and Remaking a Japanese City*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994)].

<sup>4</sup> It bears being noted that the tropes that inform the popular image of Asakusa have not been the same over time, and the media and local public relations efforts have had roles to play in homogenizing and popularizing those that are central to the image of the neighborhood today. Ideas about spirituality have morphed over the centuries, particularly since the Meiji Restoration; “tradition” has a particular resonance, and is wielded in particular ways, in contemporary Japan, as noted in earlier chapters; the types of entertainment that have been associated with the neighborhood have come and gone over the years; Asakusa was not even a part of Edo, let alone Shitamachi, until the later part of the Edo period; the nostalgia that defines late-modern *roman* would have had no meaning until at least the years following WWII; and tourism in globalized capitalist society is certainly not of the same form that may have influenced the neighborhood in earlier decades and centuries. The six tropes that I identify here are the ones that inform the contemporary character of Asakusa.

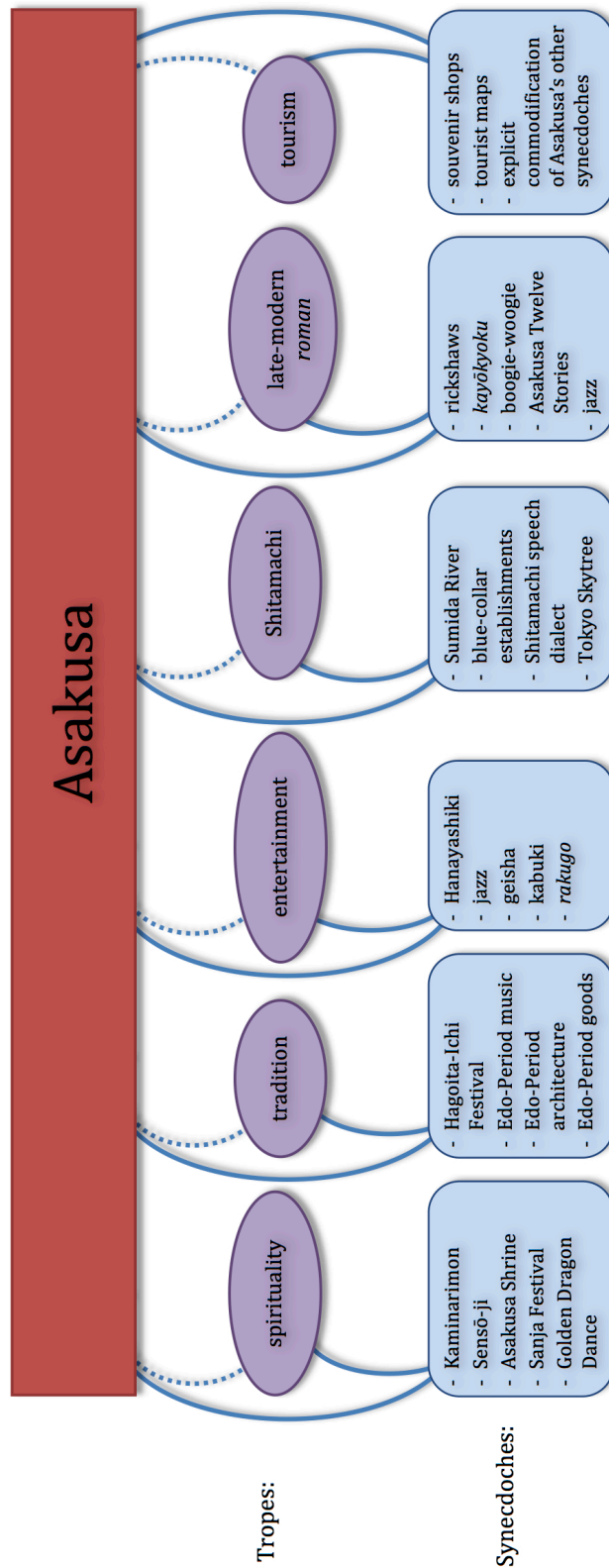


Figure 2. Examples of images, events, or sounds used as double synecdoches, referring both to Asakusa as a whole, and to cultural tropes that are significant to the neighborhood's local identity.



Based on my analyses of hundreds of depictions of Asakusa from across many media—festivals’ promotional materials, retail and restaurant advertisements, businesses’ homepages, blogs, tourist maps, guidebooks, public artwork, and many others—I posit that repeated synecdochical references to Asakusa point to the centrality of these six cultural tropes in the collective identity of the neighborhood. I will, in the following sections, explain the ways that each of the tropes has a significant presence in the contemporary happenings of Asakusa, and go on to demonstrate that many incarnations of each trope are used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa visually and sonically in numerous media depictions. Repeated uses of synecdoches within one specific trope to represent a particular entity—in this case, Asakusa—is evidence of a secondary synecdochical relationship, wherein the trope also denotes the entity (indicated by the dotted lines in Figure 2). Repeated uses of various spiritual synecdoches to represent Asakusa, for instance, are evidence that the broader notion of spirituality itself is also correlated with the neighborhood.

The cultural implications behind each of Asakusa’s six tropes are often independent from one another, and indeed may seem incompatible. For instance, a place, activity, or object need not be considered touristic to be seen as spiritual, or be considered traditional to be seen as entertainment, and vice versa. These cultural categories are usually thought of as separate, or at least not mutually dependent. In other locations throughout Japan, and even other locations within Tokyo, this is certainly the case.<sup>5</sup> Even within Asakusa, many—

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<sup>5</sup> For instance, the Zen temple of Sōji-ji in Yokohama—located about twenty miles south of Asakusa—is a site of devout spiritual practice, and is typically not associated with entertainment, late-modern *roman*, or Shitamachi (a category specific to Tokyo geography and culture). Likewise, Kabuki-chō, the entertainment and red-light district in western Tokyo, has no strong associations to any spiritual institutions, does not typically carry connotations of traditional Japan, it is in Yamanote rather than Shitamachi, and though established as an entertainment district in the decades following World War II, its origins in decades past are

if not most—activities are seen as more strongly correlated to one of these tropes than the others, and people ordinarily talk about and interact with activities and places in Asakusa according to their understanding of these tropes. Even so, all six are habitually equated with Asakusa as a whole despite the fact that each of them represents only a portion of the social activities actually taking place there. Most importantly, more than simply visual images or sonic depictions, such representations perpetuate the neighborhood’s identity as they encourage people to think about, perceive, and act in Asakusa within the logic of each trope.

Asakusa’s six tropes are each a conceptually isolated reduction of diverse sounding activities taking place at both permanent and temporary sites throughout the neighborhood. For the convenience of discussion, I have organized the sites into sound maps, each defined from the data I collected through my time spent observing life in the neighborhood and learning from its inhabitants. Each sound map is color coded to demonstrate the locations of meaningful sounding activities. Each color represents the activities and the sounds produced and negotiated according to one of Asakusa’s six tropes.

Asakusa’s sounding activities and their tropes are conceptual and cannot be practically separated. To illustrate this, I will close with a seventh sound map that is a composite of the preceding six. Each trope represents the main categories of cultural activities that are associated with the neighborhood as a whole. They are simplified ways of understanding the contradictions present in Asakusa’s living diversity. It is their confluence that makes the neighborhood so distinctive, and that makes Asakusa the particular *place*

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not particularly evident in the space itself, nor are they ordinarily emphasized in representations of the neighborhood.

that it is within greater Tokyo. Identifying and establishing each of the tropes that contribute to the local identity and social life of Asakusa in the discussions to follow will allow me to more clearly demonstrate the work of social actors in making sense of, navigating, and participating in Asakusa's soundscape montage in the chapters to come.

## II. Asakusa's Six Tropes

### *i. Spirituality*

I use the word "spiritual" instead of "religious" to refer to the great number of Shinto and Buddhist practices that are central to life in Asakusa, and indeed to Japan at large.<sup>6</sup> This is because a commonly cited conundrum concerning the country's religious adherents says that 84% of Japanese are Shinto, and 71% are Buddhist, while another 2% are Christian and 8% claim another religion.<sup>7</sup> As these numbers imply, many people adhere to both Shintoism and Buddhism, which tend to be syncretic traditions in Japan.<sup>8</sup> The centrality of Shinto and Buddhist practice in contemporary Japan is, however, ambiguous and controversial. The high numbers in these statistics come primarily from birth records, which still associate family lines with local Buddhist temples or Shinto shrines. When asked, however, around two thirds of Japanese people claim *no religious* membership.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> It bears mentioning, however, that the large Buddhist and Shinto bodies in Asakusa (Sensō-ji and Asakusa Shrine, respectively) certainly have the authority of large organized religious institutions. I use the term "spiritual" in spite of this in order to take into account the great presence of spiritual practice by people who do not engage formally—through membership to those institutions, or consistent participation in their rituals—with the institutional practices that the temple and shrine promote.

<sup>7</sup> These numbers are current as of 2005 (Central Intelligence Agency, "East & Southeast Asia: Japan," *The World Factbook*, 2014, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ja.html>.)

<sup>8</sup> There was no formal separation between Buddhism and Shinto until the Shinto Buddhist Separation Order in 1886, in which the Japanese government sought to purge Shinto, which had been made the state spirituality, of Buddhist elements. The government ceased official affiliation with Shinto after the Second World War, but significant syncretism remains in practice today.

<sup>9</sup> See John Quaid, "A View of of Spirituality in Japan," *Japan Society*, New York, accessed August 24, 2014, [http://www.japansociety.org/a\\_view\\_of\\_spirituality\\_in\\_japan](http://www.japansociety.org/a_view_of_spirituality_in_japan); Edwin W. Reischauer, *The Japanese Today: Change and Continuity* (Cambridge: Harvard College, 1977); Craig Lockhard, *Societies, Networks, and Transitions, Volume 2: Since 1450*, 2nd edition (Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2010).



**Sound Map 1. Mapping of spirituality sounds in Asakusa in red overlay (map generated by Google and modified by the author).**

Furthermore, as Japanologists John Breen and Mark Teeuwen point out, the word “Shinto” has no meaning at all for nearly all Japanese, despite the extraordinary ubiquity of shrines devoted to *kami* (Shinto deities) throughout the country. The ambiguity exists in both theory and practice, as the vast majority of Japanese people attend Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, pray to Shinto deities at festivals and weddings, and will bid farewell to this life with a Buddhist funeral.<sup>10</sup>

The Buddhist temple Sensō-ji has been the anchor of Asakusa’s vitality from the very beginning of its existence. An imposing structure with its white and vermilion façade, the Main Hall (located in E3-F3 on Sound Map 1) is a striking sight to behold, and Kaminarimon, the temple’s outer gate with its distinctive oversized red paper lantern (E6-F6), is an indelible landmark within Tokyo. Directly next to Sensō-ji’s Main Hall is Asakusa Shrine (also known as *Sanja-Sama*, or “Shrine of the Three Gods,” F3), the neighborhood’s primary Shinto establishment, which is said to house the three protector deities of Asakusa: the two Hinokuma fishermen brothers who discovered the statue of Kannon in their nets so many centuries ago, and Haji no Nakatomo, who first enshrined the bodhisattva’s statue in a small temple nearby. The Buddhist Sensō-ji and the Shinto Asakusa Shrine constitute an axis for much activity in the neighborhood, as hundreds of people—both locals and visitors—come daily to pay devotion at their altars. In Sound Map 1, Sensō-ji’s Main Hall is bathed in red to represent the sounds of Buddhist ceremonies and prayers, offertory coins being thrown, ceremonial drumbeats, and so on. The adjacent Asakusa Shrine is in red to indicate its many Shinto ceremonial and devotional sounds. These two contiguous holy places are also the site of many festivals and events throughout

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<sup>10</sup> John Breen and Mark Teeuwen, *Shinto in History: Ways of the Kami* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

the year that draw large crowds to pray and/or celebrate. The open plaza of the precinct—surrounding the Main Hall to the east, south, and west (E3-4 and F3-4)—is also overlaid in red mainly to denote not only the sounds and music of such festival activities that take place throughout the area, but also the almost constant sounds of *omikuji* cans.

The most important and well known of Asakusa's spiritual festivals is Sanja Matsuri—the event honoring the three deities of Asakusa Shrine—which is held on the third weekend of May every year and is considered one of the largest and rowdiest of the numerous Shinto festivals celebrated in Tokyo. These events typically involve outdoor food stalls, folk music performances, and spiritual and traditional dancing. But the main events of Shinto festivals are the parades of *mikoshi* (portable shrines) through the neighborhood around the celebrated shrine. These parades are roisterous and lively affairs, as they involve troupes of community members who shoulder the heavy *mikoshi* through the streets in an energetic and sometimes frenzied march. Sanja Matsuri attracts an estimated one to two million people to Asakusa every year, and is arguably the most important event in the neighborhood. In Sound Map 1, the red lines that extend throughout the neighborhood on a great number of city streets and alleyways represent the routes of Sanja Matsuri's *mikoshi*. However, the raucous sounds of those parades are more expansive than such lines might suggest, as the joyful and thunderous noise for the *kami* on parade cannot be contained to the neighborhood's narrow streets.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to Sanja Matsuri, there are a significant number of other spiritual events held in the Sensō-ji precinct annually. These include the large-scale New Years festival, Kinryū no Mai (The Golden Dragon Dance), Shirasagi no Mai (The White Heron Dance), a

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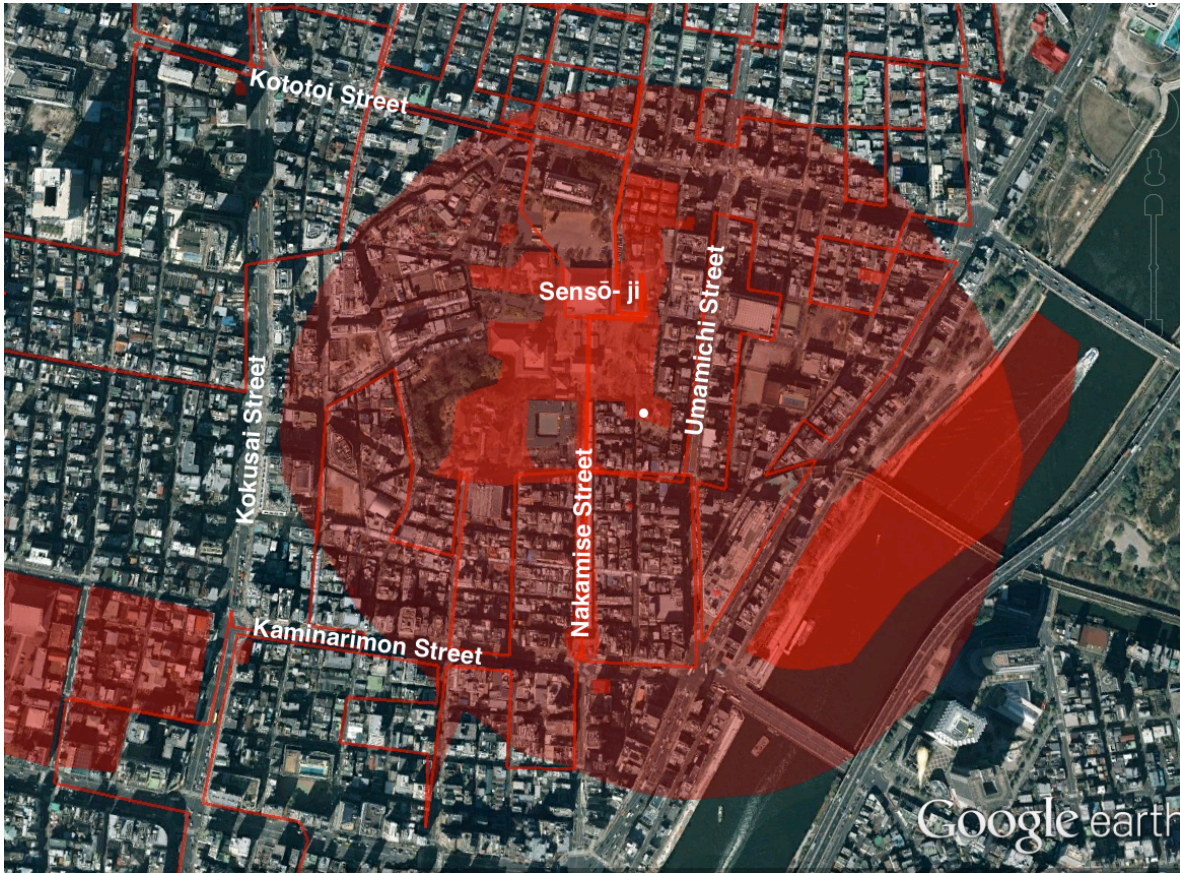
<sup>11</sup> More on Sanja Matsuri and its sounds in the case study of Asakusa resident Okuzawa in Chapter 6.

commemoration of the birthday of the Buddha, ceremonies memorializing the deceased, observances of children's rites of passage, as well as a great number of other smaller devotional ceremonies.<sup>12</sup> Several of these festivals also have components that take place on boats on the Sumida River (colored red at H4, G5, F5). Besides its Main Hall and its precinct's central square where the core actions of these events occur, Sensō-ji also comprises several other Buddhist halls that enshrine other bodhisattvas and deities, provide residence for the head priest, and so on. Locals and visitors also interact on a daily basis with a great number of other lesser-known Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines throughout Asakusa. The locations of all of these are also colored red on Sound Map 1.

One important sound that is not included on Sound Map 1 is Sensō-ji's temple bell at Benten Yama (E4). This is because its range is so extensive that the visual representation of it would take over the image and obfuscate the subtleties that are otherwise apparent, and because its sound, while far-reaching in space, is very limited in duration. It is struck eight times every morning, in reference to the auspiciousness of the number eight in Buddhist thought, and 108 times at the stroke of midnight on New Years Day, to dispel from the temple's congregation the 108 earthly desires believed to cause human suffering. In this way, the toll of the bell acts as a sonic marker for the beginning of each new day and year at Sensō-ji, respectively, and it is a significant spiritual sonic component of Asakusa. A massive bell with a clear and resonant sound, it can be heard for many blocks from its source in all directions, depending on other ambient sounds, as well as wind strength and direction. The smaller Sound Map 1.2, below, includes an additional red overlay

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<sup>12</sup> The full schedule of Sensō-ji's annual events can be seen at Sensō-ji, "Nenjū Gyōji," *Asakusa Kannon Sensō-ji*, 2008, [http://www.senso-ji.jp/annual\\_event/index.html](http://www.senso-ji.jp/annual_event/index.html).



**Sound Map 1.2. The spiritual sounds in Asakusa, including a representation of the toll of Sensō-ji's temple bell. Benten Yama, where the bell is located, is marked with a white dot (map generated by Google and modified by the author).**

representing the general range of the sound of the temple bell, with the location of Benten Yama, the source of the sound, indicated by a white dot.

Asakusa's spiritual landscape as outlined above is used in otherwise secular contexts—both outside of the neighborhood in order to refer to the neighborhood, but also within the neighborhood as well—as synecdoches, associating those contexts with the larger idea of Asakusa, and *placing* them in Asakusa through a reference to its prominent spiritual elements. For instance, the outside gate of Sensō-ji, the bright red Kaminarimon with its distinctive giant paper lantern, is one of the most recognizable landmarks in Tokyo and has become a symbol of Asakusa. Images of it are used heavily by organizations and businesses who wish to identify with the neighborhood at large. There are dozens of





**Image 42. The Hanayashiki publicity poster in 2012. In addition to the colorful and visually dramatic, action-packed depiction of the park on the left, the right side of the poster reads “Welcome to Asakusa Hanayashiki (*Yōkoso Asakusa Hanayashiki*),” with the words superimposed on the silhouettes of several of Hanayashiki’s rides, generic urban buildings, and the unmistakable Kaminarimon and Sensō-ji pagoda.**

**Photo taken in the Asakusa Station of the Tokyo Metro.**

webpages—for restaurants, inns, hotels, tourist associations, federations of restaurants, a railway company, and many more—that forefront imagery of Kaminarimon and Sensō-ji, as well as Sanja Matsuri’s *mikoshi*, to emphasize their association with, or location within, Asakusa.<sup>13</sup> Further illustrating this practice, in 2012, the year of my fieldwork, the publicity poster for Hanayashiki amusement park—posted in subway and train stations in the

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<sup>13</sup> See more examples of this practice at the homepage of Asakusa Umaimono-kai (<http://www.asakusa-umai.ne.jp/>), of the Asakusa Retail Federation (<http://www.asakusa-kankou.com/>), of the Ryōkan Asakusa Komagawa (<http://www.f-kamogawa.jp/home/top/>), of K’s House Tokyo Oasis Hostel (<http://kshouse.jp/tokyo-oasis-e/>), of the Ryōkan Asakusa Shigetsu (<http://shigetsu.com/index.html>), of the Tobu Railway Company (<http://www.tobu.co.jp/>), the English-language Wikitravel page (<http://wikitravel.org/en/Tokyo/Asakusa>), the and Asakusa page on the webpage of the Japan National Tourism Organization (<http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/tokyo/asakusa.html>). All sites accessed on 1 November 2013.

vicinity of Asakusa—featured the silhouettes of Kaminarimon and Sensō-ji’s pagoda next to a carousel and the park’s signature “Bee Tower” ride, *placing* the park by tying it conceptually to Asakusa’s most famous spiritual institution (Image 42).

Many other secular businesses and organizations within the neighborhood make clear use of Asakusa-related spiritual imagery and ideas to connect themselves with Asakusa. There is an *onsen* (hot springs spa) dating from at least the 1950s, located just off of Sensō-ji’s precinct to the west (D3), called the “Asakusa Kannon Onsen.” The onsen’s founders, in naming their business, went so far as to associate their bath facility with the bodhisattva of Sensō-ji in addition to the neighborhood at large. Further, an off-track horserace betting facility—WINS Asakusa, run by the Japan Racing Association (JRA)—is housed in a large but fairly nondescript white building between Hanayashiki and Rokku Broadway (C3, Image 43). Among the only adornments on the structure, besides the green JRA logo, are large murals depicting Sanja Matsuri and Kinryū no Mai (Images 44 and 45);



**Image 43. The Asakusa WINS building. The murals of Asakusa’s spiritual festivals can be seen at the bottom.**  
**([http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WINS\\_Asakusa\\_Building.JPG#filelinks](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:WINS_Asakusa_Building.JPG#filelinks)).**



**Images 44 and 45. Murals on the Asakusa WINS building.**

**Left: A depiction of Sanja Matsuri**  
**(<http://blogs.yahoo.co.jp/gulliverbros/59982706.html>).**

**Right: A depiction of Kinryū no Mai.**

Asakusa’s spiritual festivals are used to characterize the building rather than the horse racing that is central to its actual business concerns.

The Tokiwa-dō Company, a souvenir confectionary shop with a two-hundred-year history, makes even stronger connections to Asakusa’s spiritual imagery in their company branding. The company’s primary and original location is directly adjacent to Kaminarimon (E6), and it sells a snack that they market as “*Kaminari Okoshi*” (Thunder Confectionaries)—a clear reference to the landmark just outside its doors.<sup>14</sup> Today, Tokiwa-dō owns eight other business locations, four of which are in Asakusa. Three of these have names that further tie the company to the Buddhist temple gate: the Kaminari 5656 Kaikan (Thunder 5656 Meeting Hall, E2), the Kaminari 5656 Chaya (Thunder 5656

<sup>14</sup> Tokiwado Kaminariokoshi Honpo Co., “Amari O-Hanashi,” Retail, *Tokiwa-dō Kaminari Okoshi Honpo*, accessed November 4, 2013, [www.tokiwado.com](http://www.tokiwado.com).

Tea House, D3), and the Kaminari 5656 Tei (Thunder 5656 Pavillion, C6). Like the Tokiwadō Company's main location next to Kaminarimon, all of these provide purely secular services: the meeting hall is a seven-story facility housing a souvenir shop, spaces for dining gatherings, as well as a small performance hall where variety shows are presented



**Image 46. Kaminarimon, with statues of Raijin-sama (left) and Fūjin-sama (right) visible on either side of the red lantern. (<http://blogs.yahoo.co.jp/shigesanshiro/32061334.html>).**



**Image 47. Promotional image for Thunder Confectioneries, with a table spread with Tokiwa-dō's logo (<http://www.tokiwado.com/>).**



**Image 48. The east-facing wall of the Tokiwa-dō Company's Kaminari 5656 Chaya location, with their logo of Raijin-sama and Fūjin-sama shown prominently.**

weekly; the smaller “tea house” and “pavillion” also contain souvenir and confectionary shops, as well as small dining spaces. These establishments further associate themselves with spiritual Asakusa imagery through their names. In addition to the “thunder” reference to Kaminarimon, “5656” can be pronounced “*gorogoro*” in Japanese, an onomatopoeitic word for the rumble of thunder. Throughout all of the company’s locations, its logo—stylized images of Fūjin-sama (the Shinto-Buddhist god of the wind) and Raijin-sama (the Shinto-Buddhist god of thunder), the same deities on display in Kaminarimon (Images 46-48)—is given a place of prominence.<sup>15</sup> Far from referencing any concrete associations with Buddhism, Shintoism, or Sensō-ji, the Tokiwa-dō’s company branding uses images of and ideas about Asakusa’s spiritual elements to *place* itself conceptually in the neighborhood.

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<sup>15</sup> This logo appears to have been derived from the Edo-Era painting *Fūjin Raijin-zu* by Tawaraya Sōtatsu Kyoto National Museum, “Kyoto National Museum,” *Masterpieces of KNM*, accessed October 28, 2015, <http://www.kyohaku.go.jp/eng/syuzou/meihin/kinsei/item10.html>.

These are a limited but representative selection of incarnations of spirituality being used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa as a whole, connecting spirituality and Asakusa in the nation's cultural imagination.

## ***ii. Tradition***

Asakusa gained its national renown when it became a hub of popular culture in the Edo period. This history of Asakusa shapes the widespread image of present-day Asakusa as a traditional neighborhood.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, festivals with centuries-long histories continue to be held there, permanent and temporary “Edo” shopping streets are constructed, and the neighborhood is depicted as a place where feudal commoners can be seen strolling down alleys in their simple kimono and clacking wooden *geta*.

Throughout Japan, the notion of “traditional Japanese” refers to objects or cultural practices with perceived origins in Japan, usually prior to the end of the Edo period. The trope of tradition in Asakusa is defined specifically by objects and practices during the Edo period. Today, however, Asakusa of the Edo period, and indeed almost all of the city of Edo itself, exists only in memory; the Great Kantō Earthquake in 1923 and the American air raids during WWII destroyed most traditional structures in the city. The imagined notion of traditional Asakusa is therefore unique: there are practically no neighborhoods in Tokyo that are broadly defined by their ties to a sense of traditional Japan or their history in the

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<sup>16</sup> To reiterate the matter first presented in Chapter 1, I use the terms “traditional” and “traditional Japanese” in line with the way Bestor defines “traditionalism,” which he describes as “the interpretation, creation, or manipulation of contemporary ideas about the past to bestow an aura of venerability on contemporary social relations” [Theodore C. Bestor, *Neighborhood Tokyo* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989)]. See also discussions by Marilyn Ivy and Christine Yano on the construction of “Japan” as contrasted with “the West,” [Marilyn Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity Phantasm Japan* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995], 1-2; Christine Yano, *Tears of Longing: Nostalgia and the Nation in Japanese Popular Song* [Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 2002], 13-14).



Sound Map 2. Mapping of traditional sounds in Asakusa in blue overlay (map generated by Google and modified by the author).

Edo period. No other neighborhoods in the city actively cultivate themselves as traditional areas where Edo can still be felt.

A significant number of Asakusa events and activities have their roots in the Edo period, and I have visually marked them in blue on Sound Map 2. For instance, the contemporary iterations of the neighborhood's Buddhist and Shinto festivals, held on the grounds of Sensō-ji and Asakusa Shrine, derive mainly from the Edo period. Their festival musics are typically regarded as traditional since they feature traditional and historical melodies, rhythms, and instruments. Asakusa Shrine is also a site of Shinto wedding ceremonies, and so *gagaku*, the ancient music of Japan's imperial court and Shintoism, is regularly played there. Along Nakamise Street and other nearby shopping streets (D5-6, E4-6, F4-6), shops sell traditional objects and souvenirs, some of which—such as toys and noise makers—create sounds.

Of the many traditional objects and practices in Asakusa, the Hagoita-Ichi is prominent. Held in Asakusa every mid-December, Hagoita-Ichi is a fair where craftspeople and merchants set up temporary shops in the Sensō-ji precinct to sell *hagoita*, or ornamental battledores. *Hagoita* are rackets that were originally used in a badminton-like game, called *hanetsuki*, which originated in the Muromachi period (Image 49). The *hagoita* were decorated with various natural and seasonal designs, and in the Edo period, the craftsmen began fashioning these designs with raised silk work, making them more and more sophisticated and colorful. Many featured kabuki actors, which were in high demand in Asakusa as it was then the home of the city's wildly popular kabuki theaters. Nowadays, *hagoita* are no longer used to play *hanetsuki* and are strictly purchased as good-luck





**Image 49. Hagoita for sale at Asakusa in December 2011. These are in the traditional style, depicting kabuki actors, though some today take a more modern spin with images of popular anime characters and the like.**

charms and for ornamental purposes. This symbolic and traditional practice sustains the image of Asakusa as a traditional and historical place in the popular imagination.

If Hagoita-Ichi physically and socially continues an Edo-period practice, Denbō-in Street is a newly fashioned historical simulation. Denbō-in Street is a section of the neighborhood that has been constructed to look, sound, taste, and feel like “Old Edo” for contemporary visitors (E4-5), who are encouraged to engage with traditional trades and activities there. Along the street, storefronts are built with vertical wooden slats; their roofs are made of tile; their signboards are made of carved wood; and shops sell second-hand kimonos, kimono fabrics and accessories, second-hand books, traditional hairpins, festival goods, leather goods, tea, and other traditional objects. Edo-period music (mainly *kouta* [literally, “small songs,” accompanied by *shamisen*], *nagauta* [literally, “long song,” accompanied by *shamisen*], and *danmono* [instrumental repertoire for *koto*, a 13-stringed zither]) are piped down onto the street from speakers mounted high on lampposts.

The tourist brochure for Denbō-in Street produced by the Asakusa Tourism Association emphasizes the Edo experience one can have there. It includes a map adorned with cartoon human figures wearing kimono and old-fashioned hairstyles. There are written accounts on the backside describing various aspects of the street, some related to Asakusa’s history specifically, and some related to urban Edo more generally. Among them are explanations of certain features of Denbō-in Street, including the wooden signboards on storefronts and their origins in the Edo period, and its streetlamps with comical pictures and puns painted on them (*jiguchi andon*, see Image 6 on page 11). The brochure even dramatizes Edo personalities, explaining that young troublemakers were common in the old city, and draws the tourist’s attention to a symbolic figure installed on the roof of one of Denbō-in Street’s shops. A plastic or fiberglass statue, it is a “rat urchin” [*nezumi kozō*], a nimble, creeping hooligan with a moneybox on his shoulder who has just taken advantage of one of the local shopkeepers (Image 50). Denbō-in Street offers visitors a Disney-esque version of Old Edo, playing on and perpetuating Asakusa’s reputation as an historical neighborhood.



**Image 50. A statue of a “rat urchin” perched atop a Denbō-in Street shop.**

In another example of undisguised manipulation of the traditional trope, the Asakusa Tourism Association organizes the Okuyama Fūkei (“Okuyama Scene” or “Okuyama-scape”), an event held each spring in the northwestern section of of Sensō-ji’s precinct (D3-E3). “Okuyama” (literally “Deep Mountain”) is the name of the area to the rear of Sensō-ji’s Main Hall, which was, in Edo times, the amusement quarter. It was the place where visitors came to see street performances and spectacles, and to shop and spend money. The area disappeared in the Meiji period when Rokku to the west became the main entertainment draw of the neighborhood. Today, however, an imagined version of Edo’s Okuyama is reconstructed. From early March through early May, temporary rows of shops are erected in what is normally an open plaza between Sensō-ji’s Main Hall and the covered shopping street of Omotesandō-dōri. Marketed as an “Edo neighborhood” (*Edo machi*), most of the shop spaces are rented by businesses from the area that sell traditional products appropriate to the event’s Edo theme. These include traditional handicrafts,



**Image 51. The entrance to Okuyama Fūkei**  
(<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/1walker/e/fa6ed3e5143ccf0295a94941fd2b116d>).



**Image 52. Promotional poster for Heisei Asakusa Koban.**



**Image 53. Folk musicians and dancers at the Okuyama Fūkei stage in 2012.**

artwork, antiques, old maps, brushes, glassworks, decorative paper, kites, fabric dyes, kitchen knives, and many others. Some stalls are dedicated to Edo-related entertainment and social activities such as archery and fire-fighting practices. To sonically evoke the the Okuyama amusement quarter of Edo, a temporary stage is set on the west side of the Okuyama Fūkei streetscape, where traditional and folk music, as well as comedy performances, are presented every afternoon for the event’s duration by a variety of amateur and semi-professional performers.

In 2012, the Asakusa Tourism Federation, an organization that manages the image and marketing of the neighborhood on a large scale, celebrated the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sanja Matsuri by issuing Edo-period-style coins, “Heisei Asakusa Koban,” which shoppers could purchase for 500 yen during the Okuyama Fūkei event. They could either take the

unusual coin home as a souvenir, or spend it on goods or services of that value in the shops of Okuyama Fūkei or on Nakamise Street, thereby gaining a personal experience of Edo life. The publicity materials for Asakusa Okuyama Fūkei emphasize—both through wording and graphic images—that the coins and the rest of the event allow visitors to undergo a “time slip” (*taimu surippu*) and “enjoy a taste of Edo” (*Edo fuzei wo otanoshimi kudasai*).

Another site of traditional sound in Asakusa is the Asakusa Public Hall (D5-E5). It is the venue for many traditional Japanese music concerts and theatrical performances, by kabuki and nō actors, geisha entertainers, and various instrumental and vocal musicians. The main stage for Asakusa geisha—a group of women who actively study Japanese traditional music and/or dance within their community of teachers—however, is in the blocks north of Kototoi Street. Referred to as a *karyūkai* (literally “the flower and willow world”), that area is home to the geisha’s *kenban* (union and call-office, E1), where they go to study, practice, and sometimes perform their traditional music and dance forms. They also go to work on a daily/nightly basis, singing, dancing, and conversing for hire, mainly at dinner parties at nearby *ryōtei* (high-end traditional restaurants with small performance spaces).<sup>17</sup> These are also marked in blue on Sound Map 2 (D1, E1, F1-2) to indicate their significance as traditional sounding spaces.

The blue lines that run through several of Asakusa’s streets and alleyways on Sound Map 2 denote rickshaw tour routes. While rickshaws were invented in the late 1860s after

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<sup>17</sup> Though the word “geisha” has been and continues to be used very liberally at different times and in various contexts, Asakusa’s geisha are very specifically and institutionally defined. Those in Asakusa are of the category of geisha that was the focus of Kelly Foreman’s monograph, *The Gei of Geisha*, for which she researched specifically the “women who are officially registered as geisha, *geiko*, or *geigi* through a central *kumiai* office affiliated with each separate . . . geisha district. Furthermore,” she writes, “geisha are defined as those actively studying music and/or dance within the community of teachers associated with that [geisha district] and its group of teachers.” See Kelly Foreman, *The Gei of Geisha: Music, Identity and Meaning* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008), 3.

the fall of the Tokugawa shogunate, and are therefore newer than most other products and practices that are typically considered to be traditional Japanese, they are definitely regarded today as a relic of the past.<sup>18</sup> They lie somewhere in the borderland, in the cultural imagination today, between traditional and late modern—pre-combustion engine, yet after the Meiji Revolution. In contemporary Japan, whose streets are overrun with Toyotas and Hondas, rickshaws and rickshaw runners' shouts are phenomena limited to “traditional” tourist destinations, such as Kyoto’s Gion district and the town of Kawagoe in Saitama prefecture (which is marketed to sightseers as “Little Edo”). In Asakusa, rickshaw runners hawk for customers on Kaminarimon Street, from the corner near Azuma Bashi (F6) to the area in front of Kaminarimon itself (E6). The rickshaw company offers a number of different routes through the neighborhood, varying in length and cost. During the trips, the runners explain the significance of the sites and recommend specific shops and restaurants, avoiding those streets, such as Nakamise, that are almost always clogged by pedestrians.

Sound Map 2 also includes Denbō-in Garden (D4 and D5), where natural sounds can be heard. The garden is said to have been created in the seventeenth century, and its features are characteristic of traditional Japanese gardens, with miniature idealized landscapes, and complete with a pond of *koi* (Japanese carp). This ambience of quiet

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Seidensticker, *Tokyo from Edo to Showa 1867-1989: The Emergence of the World's Greatest City* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2010), 58–9. Seidensticker writes of the sounds created by Tokyo’s early rickshaws: “The most widely accepted theory offers the names of three inventors, and gives 1869 as the date of the invention. The very first rickshaw is thought to have operated in Nihombashi (*sic*). Within the next few years there were as many as fifty thousand in the city. The iron wheels made a fine clatter on rough streets and bridges, and the runners had their distinctive cries among all the other street cries” (59). Today’s rickshaws have pneumatic tires and make no such clatter as they roll through city streets, though the runners maintain a certain characteristic cry and provide explanations of the neighborhood as they pull tourists through its streets.

contemplation and reverence for the refined is, in the context of a Japanese garden, a remembered and desired soundworld of traditional Japan.

Asakusa's traditional landscape as outlined above is used in otherwise non-traditional contexts—both outside of the neighborhood in order to refer to the neighborhood, but also within the neighborhood as well—as synecdoches, associating those contexts with the larger idea of Asakusa, and *placing* them in Asakusa through a reference to its prominent traditional elements. For instance, in 2010, the Asakusa Shopping Association (*Asakusa Shōten Rengōkai*) teamed up with the Sanrio Co., Ltd.—the company that designs and produces pop-culture characters and products, most notably Hello Kitty—to stimulate local revitalization in the neighborhood. With a campaign that



Image 54. The webpage header for the Hello Asakusa campaign ([www.hello-asakusa.com](http://www.hello-asakusa.com)).



Image 55. The Hello Asakusa emblem displayed at participating retailers, and examples of the Hello Kitty currency offered for sale.

featured a distinctly Edo-traditional flavor, the coalition of organizations recruited a Hello Kitty actor to wear a kimono, stand on the streets of Asakusa, and have their picture taken with any interested passersby. In conjunction with the event, the organizers produced and sold “Asaksua” Hello Kitty souvenirs, such as metal keychains and mobile phone charms in the shape of Edo-period currency embellished with kimono-Hello Kitty’s image. The two organizations also designed a Hello Kitty currency, again in the form of imitation Edo-period money, namely the large oblong *ōban* as well as smaller, circular *mon* coinage. Visitors could purchase the currency at a discounted rate (5% off) and spend it at any of the 500 participating Asakusa businesses who displayed the official “Hello Asakusa” emblem in their store windows. In spending the money, the shoppers experienced a Hello Kitty version of Asakusa in an Edo imaginary.

Notions of traditional Japan permeate Asakusa in a number of ways. A prominent example is the Asakusa Tourism Federation logo (Image 56). It is comprised of two circles, each containing two Chinese characters that together read “*Asakusa Kanren*”—an abbreviation of *Asakusa Kankō Renmei*, “Asakusa Tourism Federation.” The characters are written right to left, in the manner most conventional prior to the Meiji Restoration.



**Image 56. The Asakusa Tourism Federation logo.**





Image 57. Red paper lanterns reading *shokuji-tokoro* (eating place), *yakitori*, and *izakaya* in Edo-moji script (From <http://gokujyou-umaimono.seesaa.net/article/105512802.html>).

(Today, the left-to-right horizontal configuration is standard due to the influence of European writing systems and the use of typewriters and computerized typesetting and word-processing software that did/do not support the traditional layout of East Asian languages.) The right-to-left vertical configuration can still be found, however, as it is occasionally used to simulate archaic writing, as seen in the Asakusa Tourism Federation logo. Its lettering is also in a script style known as *Edo-moji* (Edo lettering).<sup>19</sup> Of the various subdivisions of *Edo-moji*, the logo's script most closely resembles one of two related styles. The first is *chōchin-moji*, the lettering used on hanging paper lanterns, which are commonly seen hanging outside of *yakitori* (grilled chicken) stands, *izakaya* (pubs), or other supposedly traditional restaurants (Image 57). The other is *yose-moji*, that is, lettering for *yose* (Japanese vaudeville theater), which was commonly used for posters and flyers in the Edo Period. The Asakusa Tourism Federation obviously adopted the script style to evoke

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<sup>19</sup> Donald Richie, *A Lateral View: Essays on Culture and Style in Contemporary Japan* (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1992), 90.

staged entertainment and eating and drinking establishments, which are both a part of Asakusa's past and present. The lettering of the federation's logo is black, printed against a red background: the red paper lanterns signalled izakaya and yakitori shops in traditional Japan.

The two circles of the logo resemble imprints made by *hanko* signature stamps. Such stamps have at least a two-thousand-year history in Japan, and are used to acknowledge authorship and signal authenticity. Printed here in Edo-moji, the suggestion of hanko stamps in the organization's logo imparts a traditional authority of the Asakusa Tourism Federation. Furthermore, the circumference of the two hanko circles appear as extensions of the brush strokes of each's component letters. These "painted" circles taper as the "ink" on the calligrapher's brush dwindled, much like an *ensō*, a calligraphic circle created as part of Zen Buddhist practice. Although it is also a reference to the trope of spirituality, the *ensō* is partly a reference to tradition since the convention of drawing the shape in Zen Buddhist practice far predates the Meiji Period, and today is mainly performed by monks who lead a lifestyle outside of typical modern Japanese society.<sup>20</sup> The Asakusa Tourism Federation, therefore, establishes a clear relationship to Asakusa, made explicit in its name and spelled



**Image 58. A *hanko*, the surname "Tajima" is printed in *Edo-moji*.**



**Image 59. An *ensō*, painted in a single, tapering brush stroke.**

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<sup>20</sup> Zen Buddhism has practically no presence in Asakusa, however, as the Buddhism practiced at Sensō-ji is related to the Tendai Sect, where the practice of drawing the *ensō* does not occur.

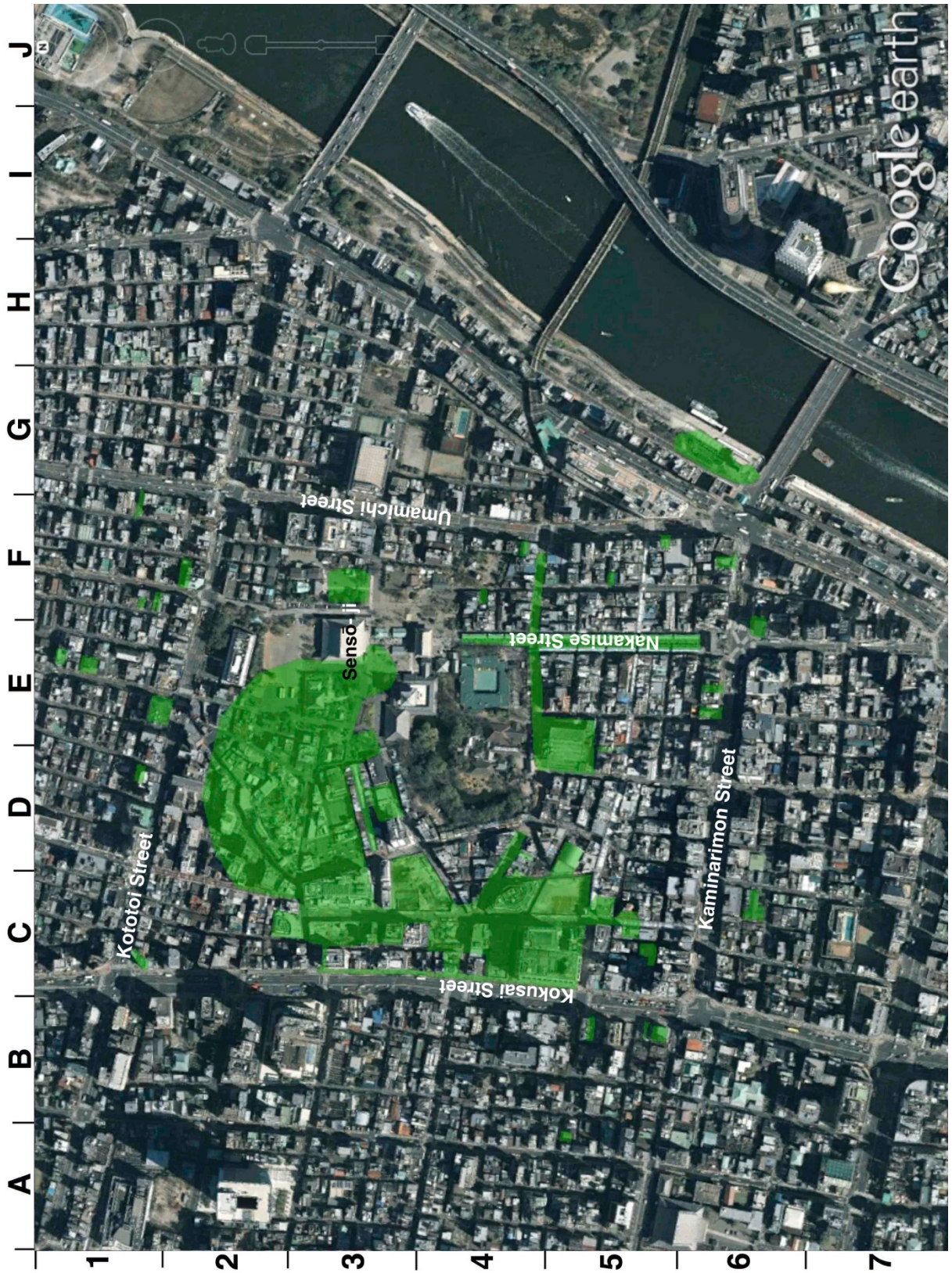
out, literally, in its logo design. Although the federation has a history of only a few decades, its logo design carves deeper conceptual connections to the neighborhood, *placing* the federation in Asakusa through its references to Edo-period cultural practice.

These are a limited but representative selection of incarnations of tradition being used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa as a whole, connecting tradition and Asakusa in the nation's cultural imagination.

### ***iii. Entertainment***

As Edo/Tokyo's main entertainment hub from the mid-seventeenth until the early twentieth century, Asakusa was home to a variety of establishments and activities designed to attract and entertain people seeking recreation and amusement. While the neighborhood has lost the distinction of being the city's foremost entertainment district, it does maintain many entertainment venues, activities, and events. Some of these are well known, surviving from Asakusa's heyday, while others were established more recently, springing from new leisure industries. Sound Map 3 demonstrates the sonic range of entertainment activities in Asakusa, where the color overlay of green indicates the location of entertainment sounds, or sounds produced as the result of entertainment activities.

Hanayashiki, established as a public flower garden in 1853, became an amusement park in the early 1890s, and continues to operate today (D2-3, Image 60). Located in the northwest corner of the neighborhood's hub, the park is nestled among residential buildings, hotels, and hostels. Hanayashiki is an entertainment venue complete with small staged music and dance productions, cantinas, and a range of rides, including a merry-go-round, a drop tower, a rollercoaster, a haunted house, a mini Ferris wheel, and the park's iconic Bee Tower. It is open to merry-makers from ten a.m. until six p.m. every day,



Sound Map 3. Mapping of entertainment sounds in Asakusa in green overlay (map generated by Google and modified by the author).



**Image 60. Hanayashiki amusement park, with its iconic Bee Tower in the foreground (<http://www.360navi.com/index.html>).**

weather permitting, during which time the calliope music of the merry-go-round, the clatter of the rollercoaster, and the shouts of riders on the drop tower are heard throughout the park's vicinity, carrying beyond its official borders to the residential blocks around it, and onto Sensō -ji's precinct to the east.

Carrying on Asakusa's tradition as the home of performing arts, Asakusa Public Hall is the neighborhood's largest and most comprehensive performance space (Image 61). Located two blocks west of Nakamise Street, at the corner of Denbō-in Street and Orange Street (D5-E5), the Asakusa Public Hall offers a schedule of diverse performances, including concerts of *enka*, Japanese and European folk music, Japanese traditional and Western classical music, jazz, ballads (*kayō*), and global fusion music; variety shows; stage revues; and more. There are numerous other performance venues in the neighborhood, varying in size and scope. Notable among them is Asakusa Engei (Entertainment/Variety Show/Vaudeville) Hall, located one block east of Kokusai Street, directly on Rokku Broadway (C4, Image 62). Best known as a major hub of *rakugo*, Engei Hall also hosts



**Image 61. Asakusa Public Hall as seen from the southwest.**



**Image 62. The façade of Asakusa Engei Hall.**

*manzai* (group stand-up comedy), magic and acrobatic performances, and *kōdan* (dramatic storytelling). It is well known for being the venue where now-famous comedians and actors such as Kinichi Hagimoto and Beat Takeshi were discovered.

In a seedier vein, north from Engei Hall on Rokku Broadway (C3-5), in the area that was once Edo's Okuyama district, there are several *pachinko* parlors, as well as Asakusa WINS, the horse-race gambling venue. In the same vicinity there are a number of strip clubs and movie theaters that advertise their screenings with X-rated posters on exterior walls facing the street (C3). For quirkier plebian entertainment, head south of Hanayashiki and closer to Sensō-ji's precinct to the Mokubakan (Rocking Horse Theater, D3, Image 63),



**Image 63. Mokubakan with posters advertising actors and upcoming shows.**



**Image 64. A street lined entirely with *izakaya*.**

which stages *taishū engeki* (popular theater/theater of the masses) on a regular basis. *Taishū engeki* is a type of small-scale itinerant variety theater that flourished in Japan's interwar years, and whose repertoire features plays set in the Edo period, song shows, and dance segments.<sup>21</sup> Opened as a theater in 1977, Mokubakan is one of two remaining *taishū engeki* theaters in Tokyo, and its 300-seat Western-style auditorium and elevated stage is among the grandest of such venues in all of Japan. Not far from Mokubakan is an opportunity for a different sort of entertainment: a street lined entirely with *izakaya*, where customers can come to spend a leisurely time drinking beer (or Asakusa's local specialty, Denki Bran) and eating snacks with friends after work or a day of sightseeing (D4-5, Image 64).

Farther north still is the Asakusa *hanamachi* (geisha district) with its *kenban*, where the geisha can be heard practicing their traditional music and dance forms, and the *ryōtei*,



**Image 65. A placard on a street lamp in the Asakusa *karyūkai* indicating the local shopping association (the *Hana no Tsuji* [Flower Street Corner Shopping Association]), and decorated with a dancing geisha and a small hand drum (*kotsudzumī*).**

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<sup>21</sup> For an in-depth discussion of *taishū engeki*, see Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing: Modernity Phantasm Japan*, 192–247.



where they are hired nightly to converse and perform at parties (D1-F1, F2). At certain times, they also perform outside of the *hanamachi*. In May they perform their secular music and dance at the Asakusa Shrine during Sanja Matsuri (F3). And although their typical performances at *ryōtei* are quite expensive, the geisha periodically stage a large-scale music and dance performance at the Asakusa Public Hall (D4-5, E4-5), which is open to the general public for a more affordable price. Other less sophisticated and exclusive entertainment spots throughout the neighborhood include in the game centers and theaters on Rokku Broadway (C2-5), jazz clubs (C5, F4), karaoke boxes (E6, F6), CD stores (E6, B5), a drum museum (B5), and a square in Sumida Park where street musicians frequently perform (F6-G6).

There are a number of events connected to popular entertainment that take place in Asakusa each year. The Sumida River Fireworks Convention (described in Chapter 3) is one such event, dating from 1978 in this location. It is an opportunity for summer recreation and for fireworks artists to show off their work, much like the many fireworks displays that take place across the country in the hot months of the year. The Asakusa Samba Carnival (also described in Chapter 3) is another. Dating from 1981, it is an international dance and music parade involving dozens of samba teams from around the world. The event has attracted half a million spectators in recent years who gather on Asakusa's streets and sidewalks to revel in the booming beats of amplified samba music, and to take in the vibrant creative costumes and moves of the dancers as they pass through the neighborhood streets. Both of these events have a booming but very brief impact on the sonic space of the neighborhood, and so I have left visual representations of them off of the main Sound Map 3 for the sake of readability. Sound Map 3.2 below, however, gives a rough approximation



**Sound Map 3.2. The entertainment sounds in Asakusa, including a representation of the sounds of exploding fireworks during the Sumida River Fireworks Convention (map generated by Google and modified by the author).**

of the sonic impact of the Sumida River Fireworks Convention on the neighborhood for the few hours that it is in full swing. The parade of the Samba Carnival runs south from just north of the Asakusa train station on Umamichi Street (F4), turns right on Kaminarimon Street, and ends just before that street meets Kokusai Street (C6). Its sounds also carry far beyond those main streets during the afternoon of the festival.

With such an abundance of entertainment and leisure events, it is no accident that Asakusa is known as a land of many pleasures. This imagery spreads into otherwise non-entertainment contexts—both outside of the neighborhood in order to refer to the neighborhood, but also within it as well—as synecdoches, associating those contexts with the larger idea of Asakusa, and *placing* them in Asakusa through a reference to its



**Image 66. Placard posted on Denbō-in Street describing the kabuki play, “Shiranami Gonin Otoko.”**



**Image 67. Bronze statue of kabuki actor Danjūrō IX, with Sensō-ji Hospital in the background (<http://www.flickr.com/photos/bangbangboogie/3941589782/>).**

prominent entertainment elements. For instance, on the western end of Denbō-in Street, the metal blockades that restrict access to the loading docks of Asakusa Public Hall are painted with scenes from the kabuki theater (D4-E4). On the east end of the same street, far from the Public Hall or any other stage space, a number of plaques are posted on lamp posts describing and depicting kabuki plays that were first performed in Asakusa during the Edo and Meiji periods. Among them is the play “Shiranami Gonin Otoko” (“Five Men of the White Waves”), in which the actor Gonjūrū Kawarasaki, who later earned the stage name Danjūrō Ichikawa IX, performed in Asakusa in 1862. That same actor is memorialized with a large bronze statue in the area where the Edo and Meiji-period’s kabuki theaters were located (E2), today situated between a tourbus parking lot and the Sensō-ji Hospital.

Kabuki is a prominent synecdoche of pleasurable Asakusa, and so kabuki imagery is used by Khaosan Tokyo Kabuki in its marketing and physical design (E6, Image 68). An



**Image 68. Poster for the Khaosan Tokyo Kabuki Guesthouse (hostel), adorned with the figure of a kabuki actor, and bordered by the tri-colored kabuki curtain pattern.**



**Image 69. Nishi-Sandō, with the tri-colored kabuki curtain pattern on its roof awning.**

otherwise typical hostel, Khaosan Tokyo Kabuki has no direct relationship to kabuki companies, actors, or the like, and so its reference to the theater tradition is strategic rather than inherent.<sup>22</sup> In a similar example, Nishi-Sandō also references kabuki to symbolically place itself in Asakusa. A street whose name means “West Road that Approaches a Shrine,” Nishi-Sandō is a short covered walkway and market that leads up to the courtyard on the west side of Sensō-ji’s precinct (C3-D3), and is filled with kabuki imagery. The west end of the awning that covers the street is decorated with the tri-colored stripes of the kabuki curtain.<sup>23</sup> Hanging down from the awning for the entire length of the street are large

<sup>22</sup> The name Khaosan likely references Khaosan Road in Bangkok, Thailand, an area popular among backpackers and foreign tourists.

<sup>23</sup> For an explanation of the kabuki tri-colored curtain, see Earle Ernst, *The Kabuki Theater* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1974), 27.

posters in woodblock-print style depicting various scenes from kabuki plays.<sup>24</sup> This referencing of Edo- and Meiji-period kabuki Asakusa therefore works with new attractions and sites as well.

Images of other traditional entertainers are used in a similar manner. In a promotional poster for the Tokyo Skytree, for instance, the Tōbu Railway Corporation created a collage of images evoking the setting of the Skytree in the Shitamachi/ Asakusa area, including a *hangyoku* (an apprentice geisha, called a *maiko* in Western Japan) in the foreground (Image 70). Also featured in the collage are Kaminarimon, a rickshaw runner pulling two riders, the Asahi Beer Brewery buildings (located directly across the Sumida River from Asakusa), and Mount Fuji (which can be seen, on a clear day, from the Skytree



**Image 70. Poster promoting the Tokyo Skytree and Asakusa. The apprentice geisha appears in the foreground**

<sup>24</sup> Since the time of my fieldwork, the façade of the western end of Nishi-Sandō has been remodeled to resemble Kabuki-za, the current primary kabuki theater of Tokyo, located in Ginza.

observation decks). The entertainer is visually unmistakable, her colorful kimono pulled down in back, wearing a long *obi* (decorative kimono sash), coiffed hair, and pure white makeup.

Referencing more recent forms of entertainment, Kokusai Street, on the western side of Asakusa, is named for an entertainment venue, the Asakusa Kokusai Gekijō (Asakusa International Theater). The Asakusa Kokusai Gekijō was located on that thoroughfare from 1937 until 1982, and staged modern musical and theatrical performances. Kokusai Street is also known by the nickname “Beat Street.” The nickname further ties the street to Asakusa’s identity as an entertainment neighborhood since, according to its homepage, “Beat Street” is an acronym for “Best Entertainment Authentic Town.”<sup>25</sup> The Asakusa Kokusai Street organization, which represents and promotes the street, also actively reinforces that association. For instance, it has sponsored the placement of a large tile depicting Asakusa’s Samba Carnival on the sidewalk by the corner of Kokusai and Kaminarimon Streets (C6, Image 72). The image on the tile features a samba dancer in her costume, giant white feathers flowering from behind her, and parade spectators watching and taking photographs in the background. The tile also indicates the location of Kaminarimon, Sensō-ji, and Azuma Bridge from its location, and is stamped with the endorsement of “*Asakusa Kokusai Street – Beat Street*” (my emphasis on “Asakusa”). Acting mainly as a street decoration and point of reference for local landmarks, the tile uses the entertainment-related imagery of the Samba Carnival to tie Kokusai Street with larger ideas about the entertainment identity of the neighborhood.

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<sup>25</sup> See “*Asakusa Kokusai Dōri*,” <http://asakusa-kokusaidori.jp/>. The name “Beat Street” also bears associations to Beat Takeshi (the stage name of Takeshi Kitano), the acclaimed multi-talented entertainer who made his start in Asakusa.



**Image 71. A placard posted on Kokusai Street depicting 20<sup>th</sup>-century entertainers and describing Asakusa's role in developing popular/mass entertainment.**



**Image 72. A tile installed in the sidewalk of Kokusai Street depicting a Samba Carnival dancer and indicating the location of Asakusa landmarks.**

Farther north on Kokusai Street, there is a colorful placard adorned with the cartoon images of many entertainers from the early and mid-twentieth century posted on a lamppost (C4, Image 70). “Asakusa,” it reads in large bubble Japanese script across the top, and in English farther down, “Welcome to Asakusa,” “Best Entertainment Authentic Town: Asakusa, Beat Street,” and “Asakusa Entertainer.” It includes a textual inset that explains that Asakusa played a major role in the development of mass/popular entertainment culture in Japan. Also sponsored by the Asakusa Kokusai Street organization, a group that has no direct connection to performance or entertainment activities, the poster uses twentieth-century mass/popular entertainment imagery exclusively to characterize Asakusa and *place* Kokusai Street in the neighborhood.

These are a limited but representative selection of incarnations of entertainment being used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa as a whole, connecting entertainment and Asakusa in the nation's cultural imagination.

#### ***iv. Shitamachi***

Two historically delineated districts define contemporary Tokyo. Yamanote, or "Foothills," is the western half of the capital, and was historically home to Edo's vassals and warrior castes. It is topographically higher, and continues to be associated more with affluence and social statuses higher than that of Shitamachi, or "Low City," which lies on the eastern side of the city. In the Edo period, Shitamachi was home to the city's merchants and commoners, and was built on marshy lowlands nearer the ocean that were accessed by boat until the mid-nineteenth century. As Theodore C. Bestor wrote in 1989:

Shitamachi, . . . the old merchant quarter, is a crowded, old-fashioned place, noted for the role self-employed entrepreneurs play in open and informal community life. Yamanote . . . comprises the largely residential areas of western Tokyo, characterized by middle-class, white-collar sarariiman ["salaryman"] households and their more "modern," "rational," outwardly affluent, and less community-oriented lifestyles. The distinction between shitamachi and yamanote remains among the most fundamental social, subcultural, and geographic demarcations in contemporary Tokyo.<sup>26</sup>

In the first decades of the twenty-first century, the cultural distinctions between the two sections of the city have become less apparent, but the legacy of the division continues to be highlighted. Where Yamanote's image has mostly dissolved to become the default image of Tokyo as a hyper-modern, global megacity, Shitamachi has become its contrast. Its image specifically highlights notions of traditional and old-fashioned practices, and the community and lifestyle of a blue-collar citizenry.

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<sup>26</sup> Bestor, *Neighborhood Tokyo*, 31. R. P. Dore, in his 1958 monograph *City Life in Japan*, provides a descriptive list of the various stereotypes associated with the character of Shitamachi, Yamanote, and the people of each [Ronald P. Dore, *City Life in Japan: A Study of a Tokyo Ward* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958), 11–13.].



This image is fostered in a similar manner and with similar motivations as notions of *furusato* (literally “old village,” but closer in meaning to the English “home” or “native place”) have been employed throughout Japan since the 1970s. While *furusato* connotes rural landscapes and rustic simplicity, Shitamachi is decidedly urban. Both, however, evoke ideas of “authenticity” by connecting present-day activities and interpretations about a given place with past events. As Jennifer Robertson notes, *furusato-zukuri*, or “native place”-making processes, work to “regulate the imagination of the nation and contain the local” through nostalgia.<sup>27</sup> With both *furusato* and Shitamachi, nostalgia is harnessed to define a place in terms of a community with a purported shared history. This kind of nostalgic place-making also works to encourage tourism. Certainly Asakusa, with an economy that continued to be relatively depressed into the late twentieth century, has had good reason to cultivate a Shitamachi image to attract visitors.

Today, the precise physical border between Shitamachi and Yamanote is not always clearly drawn or perceived, but Taitō Ward, in which Asakusa is located, is never an area of contention (See Map 4 on page 76). Geographically uncontested, Asakusa has a great number of features, and is the result of place-making practices, that place it squarely in Shitamachi in the public imagination. Besides its proximity to the Sumida River, which is strongly associated with the Shitamachi life that surrounds it, Asakusa is home to relatively few new high-rise buildings, which stand tall in Shinjuku, Shibuya, Marunouchi, Ikebukuro, and other hubs of activity in Tokyo. Despite significant renovation and revitalization efforts in recent decades, Asakusa continues to have a relatively high concentration of structures

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<sup>27</sup> Robertson, *Native and Newcomer*, 15.

built in the years and decades immediately following WWII.<sup>28</sup> Despite its being a tourist destination of expensive eateries, Asakusa still features an abundance of working-class establishments—relatively inexpensive *izakaya*, *karaoke* boxes, and restaurants, all bearing



**Image 73. Façade of an antique shop and residences on the north side of Sensō-ji's precinct. Such mid-twentieth-century constructions are more common in Shitamachi areas, such as Asakusa.**



**Image 74. View of Sensō-ji and central Asakusa as seen from the highest floor of the Asakusa Culture Tourism Center. With relatively few high-rise buildings and practically no “skyscrapers,” Asakusa is typical of Shitamachi.**

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<sup>28</sup> The area was heavily damaged in intense air raids, mainly on March 9-10, 1945, after which nearly all of Asakusa's structures required rebuilding.



**Image 75. View of the skyline of Shinjuku. Skyscrapers, newer constructions, and modern architecture and engineering are more common in Yamanote areas like Shinjuku, and are relatively lacking in Shitamachi areas ([http://photos.thenews.com.pk/e\\_image\\_detail.asp?picId=89256&catId=3](http://photos.thenews.com.pk/e_image_detail.asp?picId=89256&catId=3)).**

witness to the demographic of commoners that have historically been the primary residents of the area. In fact, even tourist establishments tend to uphold the neighborhood's popular Shitamachi image, eschewing upscale grand appearances. As Seidensticker wrote, Shitamachi at large "produced most of what was the original culture of Edo." It is this Shitamachi image that contemporary Asakusa actively promotes. Asakusa is now home to the Edo Shitamachi Traditional Handicrafts Museum (C2), for instance, where age-old building techniques and craftworks of past Shitamachi residents are celebrated and put on display.

The Tokyo Skytree is located a few blocks east of the Sumida River, directly across from Asakusa, and stands as a tall symbol of Shitamachi. An architectural marvel and Shitamachi's most significant construction project in perhaps a century, the design and proportional scope of the Skytree evoke the Asakusa Twelve Stories built in 1890. As the Skytree homepage describes, the tower was designed and built with the legacy of Shitamachi's culture of craftsmanship, manufacturing, community-mindedness, spirit (*iki*),

and creativity. It was conceived with the aim of becoming a symbol of—and leading the region into—a new era of local participation in the global community, conveying Shitamachi values to visitors from around the world.<sup>29</sup> Built with not only the latest technology, but also the techniques of ancient Japan, the tower is also colored according to Shitamachi values. According to the Skytree webpage, the tower’s daytime color is based on *aiiro*, the lightest shade of Japanese traditional indigo blue, and “the colors created by indigo dyers represent the legacy of Japanese traditional craftsmanship as conserved in the [Shitamachi] area housing the tower.” The tower’s nighttime blue lighting represents “*iki*,” the “straightforward down-to-earth spirit of Edo commoners,” and its purple lighting represents “*miyabi*,” Edo’s aesthetics. It goes on to say that “the incorporation of designs inheriting (*sic*) Edo scenery reflects the history of and culture of Shitamachi, the downtown area.”<sup>30</sup> These design concepts are successful, and images of the tower have become a common index of Shitamachi sites, events, and activities.

Sound Map 4 represents the sonic range of Shitamachi activities in Asakusa, wherein the location of Shitamachi sounds, or sounds produced as the result of activities characterized as related to Shitamachi, are marked in orange. The range of the color overlay is quite limited compared with those of the other tropes, but in truth, the whole of the neighborhood’s public space, and much of its private space, could be said to have a Shitamachi soundscape due to the presence of certain sounds and the marked lack of

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<sup>29</sup> Tōbu Railway Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Tower Skytree Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Town Solamachi Co., Ltd., “Tōkyō Sukai Tsurii Taun ni Tsuite: Konseputo to Bijon,” *Tokyo Skytree Town*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.tokyo-skytreetown.jp/project/concept.html>.

<sup>30</sup> Tōbu Railway Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Tower Skytree Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Town Solamachi Co., Ltd., “Tōkyō Sukai Tsurii Taun ni Tsuite: Konseputo to Bijon,” *Tokyo Skytree*, August 15, 2014, <http://www.tokyo-skytree.jp/archive/design/>; Tōbu Railway Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Tower Skytree Co., Ltd. & Tōbu Town Solamachi Co., Ltd., “Design: Lighting Design,” *Tokyo Skytree*, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.tokyo-skytree.jp/en/archive/design/lighting.html>.



Sound Map 4. Mapping of Shitamachi sounds in Asakusa in orange overlay (map generated by Google and modified by the author).

others. Firstly, many people in the neighborhood speak in Shitamachi dialect (*Shitamachi kotoba*).<sup>31</sup> The distinction between the Shitamachi dialect and the Yamanote dialect (*Yamanote kotoba*) originally arose as the result of the two regions of the city acting as home to different classes of people during the Edo period. The Yamanote way of speaking is today considered standard Japanese. It has been spoken in public schools since the Meiji Restoration and is the new official language spoken on television and in other media. It is, however, a relatively newly constructed manner of speech, a result of the continuous influx of soldiers to Yamanote from the provinces during the Edo period. Where Edo's *daimyō* and their vassals were of a higher class and regularly traveled back and forth to their home provinces, the people of Shitamachi were merchants and artisans based mainly in Edo, without significant population flows from elsewhere.<sup>32</sup>

As a contrast, the Shitamachi dialect is a historical and localized manner of speech that is frank and rough. Distinctions between the two can be heard in pitch accents which fall on different syllables in a number of words. There is also a lack of distinction in the Shitamachi dialect between the two phonemes *hi* and *shi*, so that, for example, *hitotsu* (one) is pronounced *shitotsu*. Another distinctive feature of the Shitamachi way of speaking is the pronunciation of the syllable “-ai” as “-ee,” so that, for example, *shiranai* (I do not know) is pronounced *shirane*.<sup>33</sup> Speaking in this manner is still broadly considered to be uncouth, coarse, and masculine. Shitamachi speakers are also supposedly less likely to use elaborate

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<sup>31</sup> The Shitamachi dialect is used less and less among families living in Tokyo, as more people use standard Japanese. It is more common among older generations, and it is certainly more common in the eastern wards of the city, in which Asakusa is located, than those in the west.

<sup>32</sup> Robert J. Smith, “Pre-Industrial Urbanism in Japan: A Consideration of Multiple Traditions in Feudal Society,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Part 2: City and Village in Japan, 9, no. 1 (October 1960): 241–257.

<sup>33</sup> <https://kotobank.jp/word/%E4%B8%8B%E7%94%BA%E8%A8%80%E8%91%89-282835>, accessed December 3, 2014.

grammatical forms heard more commonly in the Yamanote dialect (i.e. standard Japanese).<sup>34</sup> In addition to being heard on the streets, in shops, and in homes, the Shitamachi dialect is also often heard in the Tokyo style of *rakugo*. For these reasons, Engei Hall (C4) and covered markets with shops catering to older locals (C5, D5, E5, F5-6, and C2) are marked in orange on Sound Map 4.

Asakusa's Shitamachi soundscape is also marked by the presence of the sounds of its waterway. There are the rumble of boat motors and calls from seagulls, sounds seldom heard in most of the the western side of Tokyo, farther from large rivers and the ocean. It is also characterized by a noticeable lack of certain sounds and sights. In the daytime, Asakusa has a comparable lack of heavy traffic, noisy digital billboards, and computerized voice announcements inside and outside of stores, and in the nighttime, the neighborhood as a whole is relatively quiet. Although its grounds are always open, Sensō-ji closes its doors at five o'clock in the evening, and the souvenir shops on Nakamise Street pull down their shutters by seven o'clock. Tourists cease to swarm the sidewalks, and the public spaces of the street become remarkably subdued.

The Shitamachi features of Asakusa are often isolated and used as synecdoches, which present Asakusa and Shitamachi as two sides of the same coin. Alternatively, events or activities that are related somehow to Shitamachi are regularly *placed* in Asakusa by using the neighborhood as a symbol of Shitamachi as a whole. For instance, the Shitamachi Comedy Film Festival, broadly sponsored by Taitō Ward, has been at least partially held in Asakusa every year since it began its annual events in 2008. Promotional posters for that

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<sup>34</sup> Dorinne K. Kondo, *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 346.

festival use imagery that tie notions of Asakusa with notions of Shitamachi, juxtaposing, for example, representations of Hanayashiki with the Tokyo Skytree, and images of the Sumida River and Kaminarimon with those of old-timey entertainers in bowties and top hats. Similarly, the promotional materials for the 2012 Great Asakusa Sightseeing Festival (*Ō-Asakusa Kankō Matsuri*)—which tied together a number of events such as the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sanja Matsuri, the Heisei Asakusa Koban promotion, and the Okuyama Fūkei—made use of imagery that connected ideas about Asakusa with ideas about the greater Shitamachi. The main poster for that event placed side by side images depicting three of Sensō-ji’s most unique festivals—Kinryū no Mai, Shichifuku-jin no Mai (The Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods), and Shirasagi no Mai with the Tokyo Skytree, above an idealized Okuyama Fūkei streetscape (Image 76).

祝 東京スカイツリー 開業記念  
江戸のこころ  
大浅草観光祭



Image 76. The poster for the 2012 Great Asakusa Sightseeing Festival.



Some establishments in the neighborhood use notions and imagery associated with Shitamachi to conceptually *place* themselves in Asakusa. One such establishment is Agora Place, such as Agora Place Asakusa, a chic hotel with a contemporary design and business concept. On its homepage, images of Sensō-ji, Kaminarimon, and snacks and souvenirs sold on Nakamise Street, are shown next to typical more generic images associated with Shitamachi such as the Skytree, whimsical old-fashioned wind chimes, traditional sandals placed by a doorstep, humble *izakaya*, and fireworks over the Sumida River.<sup>35</sup> In another example, one short section of street, just a block north of Kaminarimon Street and coming to an end at Kokusai Street, is conceptually *placed* in Asakusa and Shitamachi by way of several lighted signs on posts high above the street declaring the “Shitamachi taste” of its restaurants (Image 77). Although the food served there is by and large standard fare found anywhere in Tokyo or throughout Japan—hot and cold noodles, curry rice, tempura, and the like—the posted street signs suggest that customers who eat there will have a culinary



**Image 77. A sign posted above a street filled mainly with restaurants, reading “Gourmets’ Street: Flavor Scene of Shitamachi” (*Shokutsū Machi: Shitamachi no Ajiko*).**

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<sup>35</sup> Agora Hospitarities Co. Ltd., “Agora Place Asakusa,” *Agora Place Asakusa*, accessed August 15, 2014, <http://www.agoraplace-asakusa.com/>.

experience that is unique to Shitamachi, only to be found in this Asakusa street and its environs.

These are a limited but representative selection of incarnations of Shitamachi being used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa as a whole, connecting notions of Shitamachi and Asakusa in the nation's cultural imagination.

#### **v. *Late-modern roman***

Late-modern *roman* refers to certain aspects of Japanese culture during the Meiji, Taishō, and Shōwa periods that are now nostalgically evoked. The term *Taishō roman* is used in common parlance in Japanese today to describe the process of evoking the trends of thought and cultural circumstances of the Taishō and early Shōwa periods.<sup>36</sup> Those were the years when industrialization and Western cultural practices achieved a broad acceptance in Japan, generating a new urban culture.<sup>37</sup> *Taishō roman* inspires a nostalgic sense of excitement for objects and practices that were state-of-the-art, and symbols of sophistication. These include telegraphs and telephones, “moving pictures” (*katsudō shashin*), sound recordings, the aesthetics of art deco and art nouveau, colorful clothing, high-energy Western music and dance, and an urban and indulgent lifestyle, in which young people “congregated in the dance halls and cafes of Tōkyō and Ōsaka, smoking cigarettes, drinking beer, and dancing cheek-to-cheek.”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The Japanese word *roman* is a loan word from the English word “Romanticism” (the Euro-American artistic, literary, and intellectual movement of the late eighteenth through the nineteenth century). It was used during the Taishō period to refer to the then “new awareness of a modern sense of self and individuality and a recognition of free love which threw off the yoke of traditional relationships” facilitated by the broad acceptance of Western thought and cultural practice [Kazuo Usui, *Marketing and Consumption in Japan* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 17].

<sup>37</sup> Machiko Kusahara, “The ‘Baby Talkie,’ Domestic Media, and the Japanese Modern,” in *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, ed. Erkki Huhtamo (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011), 123–47.

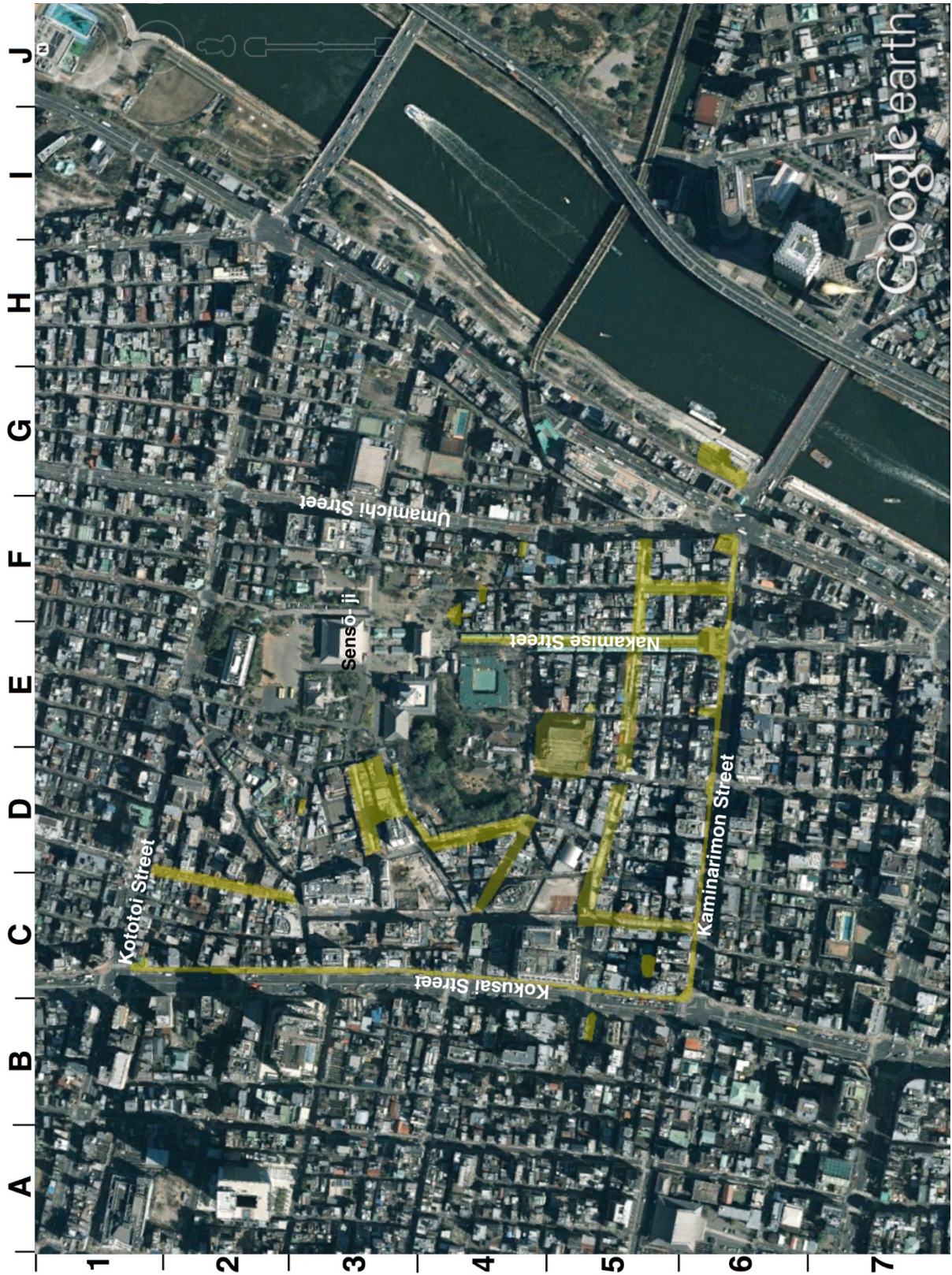
<sup>38</sup> Linda K. Menton et al., *The Rise of Modern Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 108.

The late-modern *roman* trope in Asakusa is different from *Taishō roman* in that it is not limited to the practices of the early twentieth century, but extends back to the second half of the nineteenth century and forward into the early post-war decades of the Shōwa period. It does, however, tend to skip over references to Japan's extreme patriotism in the 1930s and '40s in favor of a rosily imagined version of the late 1940s through the '60s, the time in which many of the institutions and practices present in contemporary Asakusa were (re)built and (re)developed, generating sites for the Japanese to relive their recent past.

Sound Map 5 represents the sonic range of late-modern *roman* activities in Asakusa, wherein the location of late-modern *roman* sounds, or sounds produced as the result of late-modern *roman* activities, are marked in yellow. For instance, rickshaw runners give



**Image 78. Streetlights on a street in Asakusa, created or maintained in an old-fashioned style and evoking an aura of the past.**



Sound Map 5. Mapping of late-modern *roman* sounds in Asakusa in yellow overlay (map generated by Google and modified by the author).



**Image 79. The façade of Kamiya Bar. The current building dates to 1921 (Taishō 10) and bears art deco architectural features.**

tours for visitors in those vehicles that date back to the late nineteenth century (based in F6).<sup>39</sup> Many entertainment forms are performed there that were most popular in the early decades of the twentieth century or before.<sup>40</sup> A number of businesses publicize and commodify their decades- or even century-long histories in the neighborhood, emphasizing that Asakusa is a place to experience the past. Kamiya Bar is a notable example of this.

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<sup>39</sup> Rickshaws are believed to have been invented in 1869 at the very cusp of the Meiji period, just after the Tokugawa government's ban on wheeled vehicles was lifted. As discussed in the section on the tradition trope above, in the contemporary cultural imagination, rickshaws lie somewhere in the borderland between traditional and modern—they were created before the advent of the combustion engine, yet technically after the Meiji Revolution.

<sup>40</sup> There is also a notable lack of performers/styles that have developed more recently or have a broad popularity among younger contemporary audiences. Not only are such youthful and up-to-the-minute musical groups unaccustomed to seeking out Asakusa for concerts, but the neighborhood lacks a large enough performance venue to accommodate the massive audiences attracted by such “hip” acts.



**Image 80. Promotional image for Denki Bran, drawing heavily on *Taishō roman* aesthetics.**



**Image 81. Kamiya Bar's logo. Beneath the hand holding a glass of Denki Bran it reads "Kamiya Bar, Established in Meiji 13 (1880), always in Asakusa."**

Located at the corner of Kaminarimon and Umamichi Streets (F6), Kamiya Bar was opened in 1880 and was Japan's first Western-style bar. The institution flaunts its age and heritage, and it is especially proud of its original liqueur, Denki Bran (Electric Brandy), which was invented there in the Meiji period, when "electric" was the popular expression for all things "exciting" and "new."

Another example of late-modern *roman* is a display posted near the sidewalk next to Hanayashiki, which gives an account of the amusement park's early years in the Meiji period (D3). Not far from there, plaques posted in the northwest corner of the neighborhood memorialize the location and one-time prominence of the Asakusa Twelve Stories that stood in that spot in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century (C3). And on Rokku Broadway, a small Shinto shrine holds the bronze statues of the Six Gods of the Performing Arts (*Roku Gei-Shin*, their movable shrine is usually placed near C4). These figures depict six different types of performing artists whose apparent artistic specialties and appearance evoke the entertainment scene in Asakusa in the early decades of the twentieth century. Their names are listed on a wooden plaque on their shrine. In the order



**Image 82. The small shrine dedicated to the Six Gods of the Performing Arts on Rokku Broadway**  
 (<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/58317886>).



**Image 83. A closer view of the Six Gods of the Performing Arts**  
 (<http://blog.goo.ne.jp/kima2goo/e/bebaaa5944816625e8eda261365b11f1>).

of their positioning, left to right in Image 83, they are the God of Song (*Utai-Gami*), the God of Playing Musical Instruments (*Kanade-Gami*), the God of Storytelling (*Hanashi-Gami*), the God of Comedy (*Odoke-Gami*), the God of Acting/the Stage (*Enji-Gami*), and the God of Dance (*Odori-Gami*). It is fairly common knowledge that each of them was created in the image of real entertainers who had deep ties to the neighborhood that these gods now keep watch over. The God of Song was modeled on Shōji Tarō, a singer of *ryūkōka* (popular song) who was brought to fame in the 1930s, and regained popularity in the 1960s through a wave of nostalgia for early-Shōwa songs. He performed at the Asakusa International Theater in 1957. The God of Playing Musical Instruments is depicted playing an accordion while singing, and was likely modeled on Taya Rikizō, a star tenor in the Asakusa opera during the Taishō period, and Fujiyama Ichirō, a singer of *ryūkōka* who gained popularity in

the 1920s and '30s and frequently sang while accompanying himself on the accordion. The God of Storytelling depicts a *rakugo* artist, and is said to be modeled on a number of prominent artists (namely Kokontei Shinshō V, San'yūtei Kinba III, and Yanagiya Kosan V) who performed in Asakusa and who were born in the Meiji or Taishō periods. The God of Comedy is depicted in a clown's hat and round nose, balancing on a large ball, and said to be modeled on Egawa Masuton II, an acrobat and contortionist who was born in Asakusa in 1910 and performed there until the Great Kantō Earthquake. The God of Acting/the Stage was modeled on Enomoto Ken-ichi, a famous actor of the Asakusa Opera and other stage and film scenes beginning in the Taishō Period. The God of Dance was modeled on Mizunoe Takiko, an actress, film producer, and dancer who performed in Asakusa beginning in the 1920s. The sign posted above these bronze figures gives a brief history of the performing arts in Asakusa, strongly emphasizing the years relevant to late-modern *roman*, and explaining that these six deities watch over and protect the performers and performance venues of Rokku Broadway today.

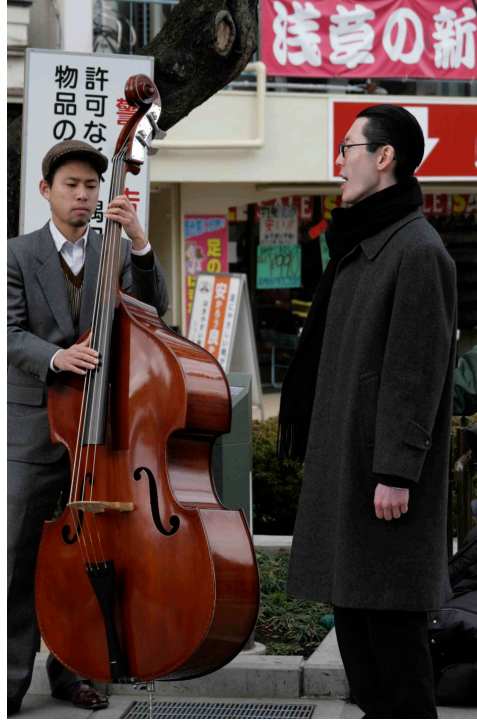
A number of shopping streets, including Shin Nakamise (C-G5) and Kokusai Street (C1-6), are colored yellow on Sound Map 5. They feature background music from the early and middle of the twentieth century, which very much works to evoke a nostalgic atmosphere. Similarly, Kasagi Shizuko's (1914-1985) "Tokyo Boogie Woogie" (1947) and Misora Hibari's (1937-1989) *kayōkyoku* (Japanese popular song from the early twentieth century) and *enka* are also actively used at the noodle shop, Kagetsu-dō (E4), to cultivate a late-modern *roman* character in and around its dining space. The noodle shop also boasts its 1945 opening on its front awning, and its interior is decorated with post-war advertisements and toys. Likewise, the Asakusa Public Hall (E5) is overlaid in yellow



because it hosts many musical and stage performances that were born out of or evoke the late-modern years, such as *enka*, Dixieland jazz, *kayōkyoku*, and twentieth-century styles of Japanese dance (*shin-buyō*). The Mokubakan (D3) and its surroundings are also highlighted since that hall hosts performances of many late-modern dramatic and musical styles, most notably *taishū engeki*; the nature of its construction allows for the louder sounds of those performances to swell to the streets around it. *Taishū engeki* actors also regularly come out to the street in front of the theater, still in their elaborate costumes and makeup, to meet audience members after their shows.

There are at least three CD shops (E5, E6, and B5) in the neighborhood that have been in business for many decades, and that maintain a distinctly antiquated ambience. Each of them also sells a great deal of music from the mid-twentieth century and have a relatively scant selection of newer, popular music, for which reasons I have highlighted them in yellow as well. There are also a number of live bars in the neighborhood, including HUB Asakusa (C5) and Darling (F4), that feature live performances of music of decades past. HUB Asakusa is decorated with photographs of jazz greats such as Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald, and regularly features groups playing swing, Dixieland, and the blues. The interior of Darling is designed to evoke the cabin of a luxury ocean liner, and the owners advertise their musical sets as “Jazz and Oldies.” In addition to Bossa Nova, samba, and Latin jazz, their stage regularly features performances of repertoire from the Great American Songbook of the early and mid-twentieth century.

A few areas are also colored yellow on Sound Map 5 because they are sometimes the site of late-modern musical performances. For instance, the Tōkyō Taishū Kayō Gakudan, a small ensemble consisting of an accordion, a bassist, and a singer, sometimes perform their



**Image 84. Tōkyō Taishū Kayō Gakudan performing *ryūkōka*, wearing clothing and hairstyles of Taishō-period, in Sumida Park in March 2012.**

*ryūkōka* on the street in Sumida Park near the foot of Azuma Bridge (G6), on Nakamise Street (E5), and in a coffee and tea shop on the western end of Denbō-in Street (D4).

Similarly, *chindon-ya* can occasionally be heard marching through the neighborhood's streets, such as on the north sidewalk of Kaminarimon Street (C-F6) where I encountered them during my fieldwork, playing music to draw attention to their clients' campaigns. Finally, I have marked a strip of *izakaya* (D4), as well as Kamiya Bar (F6), because they are home to activities that seem to have changed very little since the late-modern years, and sound (including background music) is a significant part of how they construct their late-modern *roman* ambience.

With such an abundance of late-modern *roman* sights and sounds, it is no accident that Asakusa is known as a place of decades past. This imagery spreads into otherwise non-historical contexts—both outside of the neighborhood in order to refer to the

neighborhood, but also within it as well—as synecdoches, associating those contexts with the larger idea of Asakusa, and *placing* them in Asakusa through a reference to its prominent late-modern *roman* elements. For instance, in the 1980s, the Taitō Ward conducted a campaign to reinvigorate and develop its local economy and culture. The promotional image for this campaign (Image 85) used the European clothing fashions and Art Nouveau aesthetics that were in vogue in Japan in the early twentieth century. These were combined in a scene with images of Kaminarimon, Sensō-ji’s pagoda, and a tightrope walker dressed in a tutu. A 1986 poster carried this image and the words, “That is old newness—this is new oldness (*Are wa furui atarashi-sa desu—kore wa atarashii furu-sa desu*).” This imagery and slogan pointed to a time when the trend in Japan was to seek being “modern” by adopting fashionable European ways. An explicit example of *Taishō*



**Image 85. The Taitō Ward’s renewal campaign poster from 1986.**

*roman*, the campaign elicited a sense of excitement and nostalgia for the “old-new” Asakusa of the 1910s and ‘20s.

Buzzwords, slang, and imagery from the Taishō period are also sometimes used to characterize Asakusa businesses or spaces with late-modern *roman*. The awning of a covered street in the southwest corner of Asakusa (C5) is decorated with the cartoon image of man with a 1920s hairstyle, the Asakusa Twelve Stories in the background, and embellished with the words “Asakusa is always modern” (*Asakusa wa itsumo modan*). Not far from there, an antique store (D5) displays a sign at its door reading that it is a “purveyor of *mobo/moga* (*Mobo moga oyōtatsu*).” *Mobo* and *moga* are nicknames for so-called “modern boys” and “modern girls,” that is, people who followed Westernized fashions and lifestyles in Japan in the 1920s and ‘30s.<sup>41</sup> The music store Oto no Yōrō-dō (E6) uses imagery of semi-obsolete music technology (a phonograph and LP records) in its company packaging. Juxtaposing them with depictions of Hanayashiki, Kaminarimon, and the Skytree, the shop conceptually *places* itself in Asakusa through a multifaceted reference that includes the late-modern *roman* past.

A number of other businesses make connections to the trope through their marketing images. The header on the homepage for the Asakusa Departure and Arrival Guide (*Asakusa Hacchaku Gaido*)—a company that provides bicycle rentals, maps, and information about Asakusa’s attractions—depicts two men dressed in kimono in an archaic three-wheeled vehicle (Image 86). This is counterbalanced by an image of Kaminarimon taken from a woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige (1856). Evoking the Meiji period with

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<sup>41</sup> For an in-depth discussion of *mobo* and *moga*, see Miriam Silverberg, *Erotic Grotesque Nonsense: The Mass Culture of Japanese Modern Times* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).



Image 86. The header for the homepage of Asakusa Departure and Arrival Guide (<http://asakusaguide.jp/index.html>).

its aesthetics and modern subject matter, the image also unites the theme of the bicycle rental company with Asakusa's late-modern *roman* trope. Lastly, the drawing that dominates the homepage for the Asakusa Kokusai Street *Shōtengai* (commercial district) makes significant references to Asakusa's late-modern years. It is a streetscape of Kokusai and Kaminarimon Streets that incorporates several famous landmarks of Asakusa's past and present (Image 87). Notable among them are the Asakusa Kokusai Theater, which stood on Kokusai Street from 1937 until 1989. It also features the Jintan Tower, a structure that stood at the intersection of Kokusai and Kaminarimon Streets from 1932 to 1986. Made as a replica of the Asakusa Twelve Stories, it was sponsored by the Morishita Jintan pharmaceuticals corporation, and it can be seen emblazoned with that company's name. Juxtaposing elements of Asakusa's past and present, the image capitalizes on Asakusa's late-modern *roman* nostalgia. It promotes Kokusai Street as a segment of an Asakusa where past decades are still alive and coexisting with the contemporary.

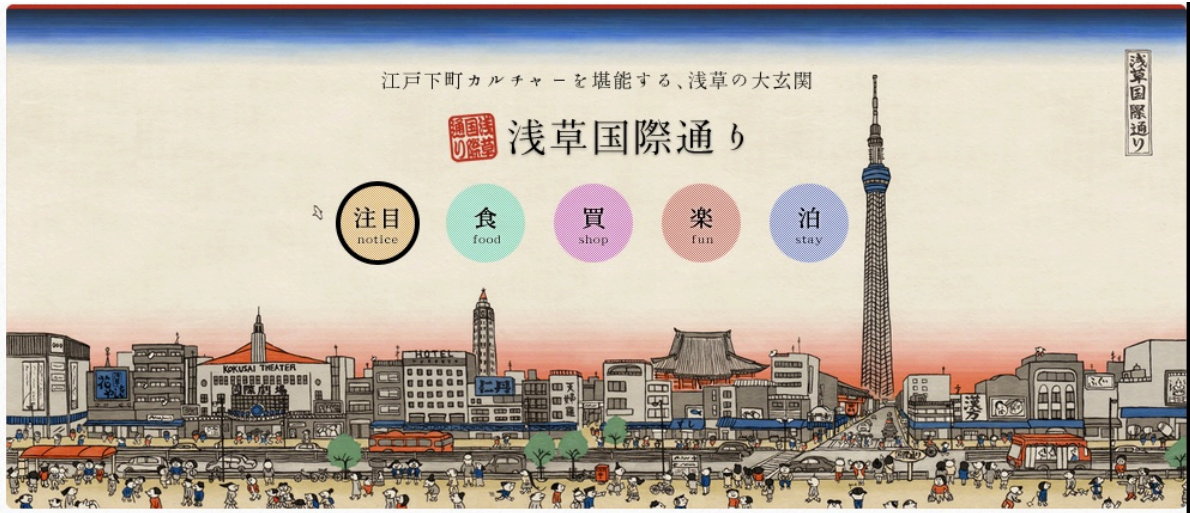


Image 87. The header for the homepage of Asakusa Kokusai Street Shōtengai (<http://asakusa-kokusaidori.jp/>).

These are a limited but representative selection of incarnations of late-modern *roman* being used as synecdoches to represent Asakusa as a whole, connecting notions of late-modern *roman* and Asakusa in the nation's cultural imagination.

## vi. Tourism

Asakusa has been a popular destination for sightseers for centuries. In the twenty-first-century culture of global commercial tourism, Asakusa's status as an attraction for travelers and sightseers is reified in particular ways, and reiterated almost incessantly.<sup>42</sup> The neighborhood is popularly seen as a tourist attraction in the public imagination, and it is treated as a place to be marketed, sold, and consumed.<sup>43</sup> The neighborhood is filled with businesses providing goods and services to fulfill the demands of visitors, and its local

<sup>42</sup> The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) defines tourism as "a social, cultural and economic phenomenon which entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes" (World Tourism Organization, "Understanding Tourism: Basic Glossary," *World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)*, accessed August 20, 2014, <http://www2.unwto.org/>).

<sup>43</sup> Several of my Japanese informants said that they learned about Asakusa in school mainly as a famous place for sightseeing, and were taught little to nothing about its role in the history of Tokyo.

features (sites, events, and activities) are explicitly offered as commodities; many are maintained primarily for the economic profit that tourists bring.

Sound Map 6 represents the sonic range of tourism activities in Asakusa, wherein the location of tourism sounds, or sounds produced as the result of tourism activities, are marked in magenta. There are, for instance, an incredible abundance of souvenir shops in Asakusa with scores on Nakamise Street alone (E4-6). Rickshaw runners loudly hawk their services on the sidewalk of Kaminarimon Street (E6-F6), and their tours trace through the neighborhood's streets. The new facility for the Asakusa Culture and Tourism Center (*Asakusa Bunka Kankō Sentā*, E6-F6, Image 88) was opened in 2012 on Kaminarimon Street, where it stands prominently in the heart of the neighborhood's tourist activity. It is directly across the thoroughfare from Kaminarimon, arguably the primary tourist attraction in the neighborhood. The facility is an eight-story structure with a striking contemporary design. Sponsored by Taitō Ward, the center offers tourist information in Japanese, English, Korean, and Chinese, and houses a series of conference rooms, a multi-purpose hall, an exhibition space, and an observation terrace.

There are also many informational guideposts and signs planted throughout the area for the benefit of tourists, often with English translations. Maps explicitly labeled for the purposes of "tourism" or "sightseeing" (*kankō*) are amply posted throughout the neighborhood highlighting famous sites and recommended restaurants for visitors. English-language signage and menus in restaurants and pubs are also in relative abundance.

Tourists from around the world pass through Asakusa speaking their foreign languages and regional dialects of Japanese. The streets that attract the most tourists are



Sound Map 6. Mapping of tourism sounds in Asakusa overlaid in magenta (map generated by Google and modified by the author).





**Image 88. The Asakusa Culture and Tourism Center as seen from the north side of Kaminarimon Street (<http://www.archdaily.com/251370/asakusa-culture-and-tourism-center-kengo-kuma-associates/>).**

marked in magenta on Sound Map 6, namely those to the south and west of Sensō-ji's Main Hall that are full of souvenir shops and restaurants. The temple precinct and yard of Asakusa Shrine (E2-4 and F3-4) are the primary attractions in the area for most visitors, and many also visit nearby Hanayashiki (D2-3 and E2). Tourists can also enter the Denbō-in garden (D4 and E4) during the periods it is open to the public. Many tourists arrive on tour buses, which park in the parking lot behind Sensō-ji's Main Hall (E2-3 and F2-3), stop by the Asakusa Culture and Tourism Center (E6), and stay at the well-known Asakusa View Hotel (B2-3) or other hostels and hotels in the area. Those that do not arrive on buses mainly pass through Asakusa Station (F5-6 and G5) or through the two Tokyo Metro station tunnels (E7 and F6). Rickshaw tours, who cater to visitors, have routes that run throughout the neighborhood (indicated with bold magenta lines on Sound Map 6), originating from the east end of Kaminarimon Street (E6 and F6). Just across the street near the Azuma Bridge, tourists also flock to the Water Bus (*Suijō Basu*) station in Sumida

Park (G5-6), and ride tour boats up and down the Sumida River (J2-3, I3-4, H5, G5-7, and F7).

There are a number of organizations that promote tourism in the neighborhood. The Asakusa Tourism Federation advertises the neighborhood's annual events, mainly via posters within Asakusa and in nearby train lines and rail hubs, but also with a growing presence online.<sup>44</sup> Another similar organization, the Asakusa Business Cooperative Association (*Kyōdō Kumiai Asakusa Shōten Rengō-kai*) publishes a periodical promotional magazine that provides information about the neighborhood and its various tourism-related businesses (restaurants, souvenir shops, etc.). The group also manages an online homepage that publicizes the area's annual events and details about its member businesses.<sup>45</sup> Likewise, there are several organizations that manage the images and themes of Asakusa's numerous *shōtengai* (commercial districts). The one that manages Denbō-in Street (D4-E4) works with each of its shops to help them foster the theme of traditional Japan there. It oversees, for instance, the recordings of traditional music that plays onto Denbō-in Street, coordinates certain aspects of the shops' appearance, and the like. Similar organizations exist for Asakusa's other *shōtengai*, such as Rokku Broadway (C3-5), Nakamise Street (E4-6), Shin-Nakamise Street (C5-F5), and Kokusai Street (C1-6).<sup>46</sup> These

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<sup>44</sup> See the homepage for the Asakusa Tourism Federation at <http://www.e-asakusa.jp/>.

<sup>45</sup> See the homepage for the Asakusa Business Cooperative Association at <http://www.asakusa-kankou.com/>.

<sup>46</sup> These groups all have their own online homepages, and several (Shin-Nakamise Shopkeepers' Promotional Association, Asakusa Kokusai Street Shopkeepers' Association, and Rokku Broadway Shopkeepers' Association) are active on social media as well. For the homepage of Denbō-in Street, see <http://www.denbouin-dori.com/>; for the homepage of Rokku Broadway Shopkeepers' Association, see <http://6kubroadway.jp/>; for the homepage of Asakusa Nakamise Shopkeepers' Promotion Association, see <http://www.asakusa-nakamise.jp/>; for the homepage of Shin-Nakamise Shopkeepers' Association, see <http://www.asakusa-shinnaka.com/>; for the homepage of Asakusa Kokusai Street Shopkeepers' Association, see <http://asakusa-kokusaidori.jp/>.

promotional associations also help to market Asakusa events, such as Sanja Matsuri and the Asakusa Samba Carnival, as tourist attractions.

In many cases, tourism promotions tie an object of advertising—be it an event; a particular segment of the neighborhood, such as shopping district; a restaurant or *izakaya*; or a landmark or historical site—to Asakusa as a whole. For instance, the Denbō-in Street website, whose subtitle is “New Famous Places of Asakusa” (*Asakusa no Shin-Meisho*), features information about the shop Hanten-ya, which sells goods made for use at Shinto festivals. There, the storeowner identifies himself as born and raised in Asakusa, and promotes his goods as appropriate for and inspired by Sanja Matsuri. He describes that festival as essential to Asakusa, and he encourages people to visit Hanten-ya when they visit the neighborhood.<sup>47</sup> In another example, the promotional posters produced by the Asakusa Tourism Federation for the 2012 Great Asakusa Sightseeing Festival (See Image 76 on page 132 above) contain imagery of Kinryū no Mai, Shichifuku-jin no Mai, and Shirasagi no Mai, all of which are organized and presented by Sensō-ji and are therefore ostensibly spiritual in nature. Through that poster, however, such spiritual events are equated with sightseeing/tourism, as well as larger notions of Asakusa as a whole.

The synecdoche of tourism is somewhat different from the other tropes described above. It is not typically used in non-tourism contexts to represent Asakusa as a whole. Rather, the equation of Asakusa with tourism is inescapable and almost constant, wherein

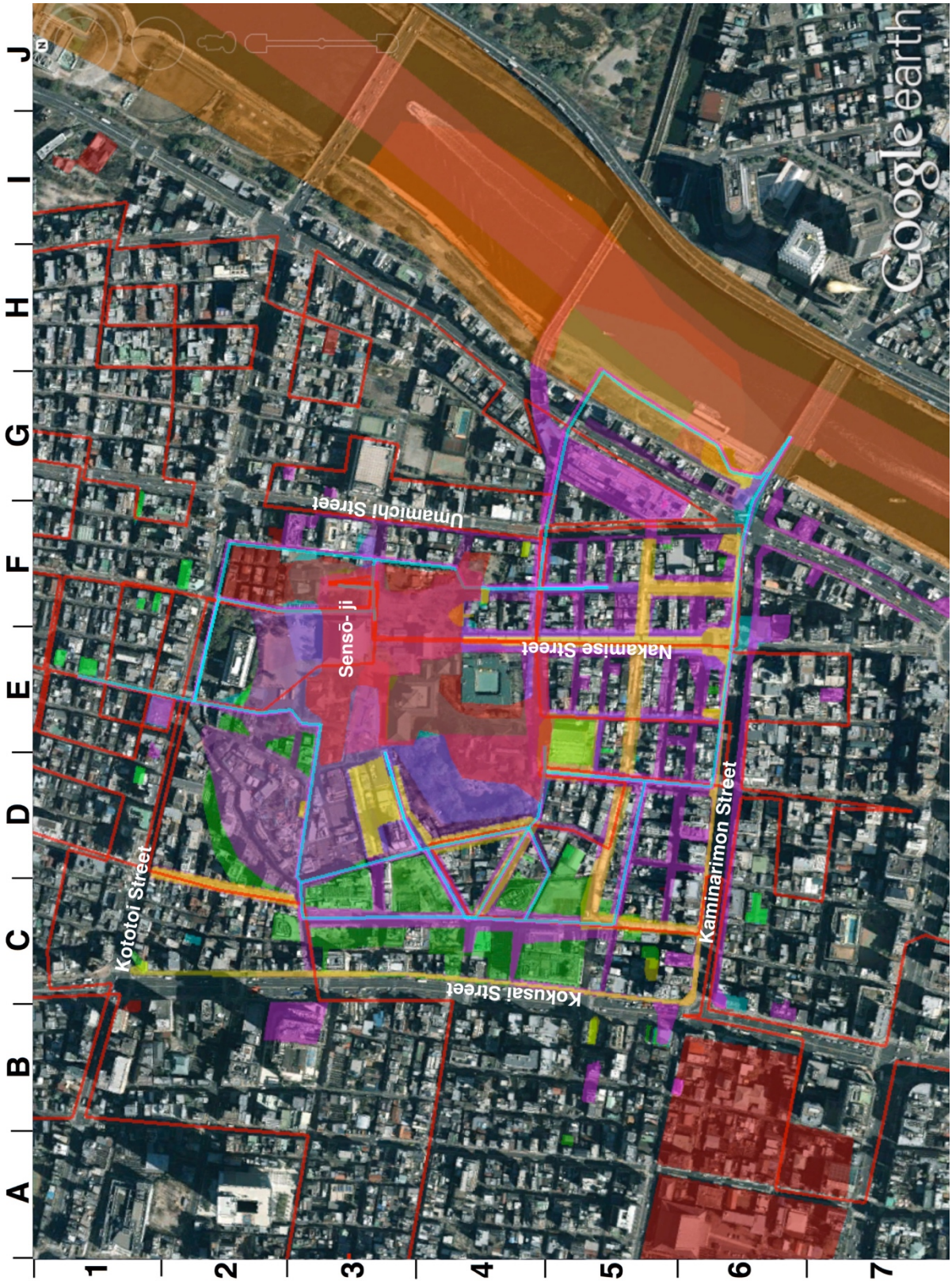
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<sup>47</sup> The store owner writes: 「東京下町浅草の名物といえば三社祭！！そんな浅草で生まれ育った私は、絆纏屋という屋号のオリジナル商品を中心とした祭用品の専門店を営んでいます。浅草にお越しの際は是非お立ち寄りください。」 [“*Tōkyō Shitamachi Asakusa no meibutsu to ieba Sanja Matsuri!! Sonna Asakusa de umare sodatta watashi wa, Hanten-ya to iu yagō no orijinaru shōhin wo chūshin to shita matsuri yōhin no senmonten wo itonande imasu. Asakusa ni okoshi no sai wa o-tachiyori kudasai.*”] (<http://www.denbouin-dori.com/shop/hantenya/index.htm>).

each of the other tropes described here are employed to promote Asakusa to tourists. Furthermore, the many famous sites and events in Asakusa are well-known not only as “spiritual” or “traditional” or “Shitamachi,” but also as tourist attractions, and many of them are likely to be found in any tourist guidebook that details Tokyo. More than simply a trope, tourism can be regarded as a filter through which Asakusa is often experienced in the public imagination. The double synecdoche concerning tourism exists in the marketing of Asakusa. The act of marketing and commodifying Asakusa’s features as tourist attractions works first to equate them with tourism operations, but very often also works to define Asakusa as a whole through those same features. Tourist attractions in the neighborhood are continually equated with Asakusa in advertising, and the concepts of tourism and sightseeing are often used explicitly to define sites and events, as well as the neighborhood as a whole.

### **III. The Sonic Overlap of Asakusa’s Tropes**

Sound Map 7 is the composite of the preceding six. The six colored overlays are presented simultaneously, demonstrating the irregular overlap of sounding activities relating to the six tropes within Asakusa’s identity. Some areas of the neighborhood are dominated by one trope or another, while other segments are a muddy blend of several or all six. For instance, in the area of the Sumida River bordered by Sumida Park on Asakusa’s eastern edge (I4-5, H4-5, and G5-6), red, blue, orange, and magenta all overlap, indicating the coincidence of spiritual, traditional, Shitamachi, and tourist sounds in that space. Boat motors rumble on the river almost constantly, the languages of tourists and guides issue from the park and float across the water in tour boats, chants from Buddhist ceremonies sometimes fill the park and emanate across the river, and horses’ hoofs thump and arrows



Sound Map 7. Composite sound map of Asakusa  
(map generated by Google and modified by the author).

whiz through the air at the traditional Yabusame horseback archery event each April.

The overlap of these sounds in space and time results in a multifaceted montage of meanings and senses of place. As I will demonstrate in the case studies to follow, different people at different moments will interpret the space and its sounds in different ways, constructing their own Asakusa musikscape. In this way, each human actor hears and knows their own version of Asakusa, composed and sculpted by their own values, motives, and priorities as they encounter the colorful sonic montage of the neighborhood. Infinite in number, interpretations of Asakusa's soundscape are still limited by the particular combination of sounds unique to the neighborhood, defined by the six tropes that are central to its larger cultural identity.

The case studies in the following chapters pair six individuals with one of Asakusa's six tropes: Tanaka the monk with spirituality, Seiko the geisha with entertainment, Lu the tourist with tourism, Fukui the *Tsugaru-jamisen* player with tradition, Ōno the jazz singer with late-modern *roman*, and Okuzawa the *chōkai* officer with Shitamachi. In the same way that each of those individuals uses their agency to construct their own Asakusa musikscape, they also determined which trope I used to analyze each of their experiences in the neighborhood; I considered their statements in characterizing Asakusa and their role within it to establish which trope was most important to each of them.<sup>48</sup>

I have also paired two of these six case studies in each of the following three chapters. While part of what I have demonstrated in this chapter is that all six of Asakusa's tropes have some degree of overlap, the pairings in each of the following chapters are the

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<sup>48</sup> I interviewed a number of other individuals with the intention of writing case studies for each of them. The ones I profile here are those whose experiences in the neighborhood are fairly typical, and thus meaningfully correspond to one or more of Asakusa's six tropes.

ones which I believe have the greatest degree of historical precedence. As described in Chapter 2, the relationship between spirituality and entertainment (of prayer [*kitō*] and play [*asobi*]) in Asakusa goes back centuries, and so they are presented together in Chapter 4. The notion of “traditional Japan” and its cultivation in Asakusa is arguably the most significant tourist draw to the neighborhood, and so those two tropes are presented together in Chapter 5. And much of what distinguishes the greater Shitamachi area of the city from Yamanote today is its abundance of older structures and the old-fashioned ways of its people, and so Shitamachi and late-modern *roman* are presented together in Chapter 6. Thus, it is my intention that the following three chapters not only demonstrate how my consultants construct their Asakusa musikscapes, but also reinforce ideas about the historical and cultural composition of the neighborhood by way of their organization.