Irasshai! Sonic Practice as Commercial Enterprise in Urban Japan

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Abstract:
Street music in Japan is often associated with the performance of one’s shōbai, translated as one’s trade, business, or occupation. An examination of sonic practices in the public performance of retail work in Japan traces the links and departures between pre-modern, modern, and postmodern expressions, focusing on the affective interpretation of work songs and chants through the notion of gambaru (striving for achievement). While recorded music has mostly replaced live performances of street music in contemporary urban Japan, recordings that sell certain everyday products still reference traditional practices, creating a sense of nostalgia and renewed longing for these products. This strategy, however, can also fail when consumer expectations do not match the nostalgic vision. These sonic expressions (yobikomi, the “calling in” of customers) can serve as an index for the workers’ sense of engagement with their trade, but in post-recessional Japanese society, the sound of customer service can also be linked to the workers’ relationship to the workplace, and consumers’ expectations about value for money.

According to the critic Nakajima Yoshimichi, Japanese society is one of the world’s most sonically intense. Much of its population resides in complex urban areas, and in these cities Nakajima notes the ubiquitous use of loudspeaker recordings to promote a variety of public social sentiments and behaviors.¹ While Nakajima refers to both the spoken word and music in his description of these amplified recordings, this article focuses on the ways that both live and

¹ See Yoshimichi Nakajima, Urusai nihon no watashi: “oto-zuke shakai” to no hateshinaki tatakai [Noisy Japan and I: fighting against the creation of a “noise-addicted” society] (Tokyo: Yōsensha, 1996). This is a recurring theme throughout Nakajima’s book, and the basis for many of his arguments. All translations, unless otherwise noted, are by the author.
recorded chants and music are used in the public performance of retail work in Japan, tracing the links and departures between historical and contemporary expressions and understandings of sound and music in business promotion. While recordings have mostly replaced live performances in contemporary urban Japan, some recordings used to sell certain everyday products reference traditional sonic practices, creating a sense of nostalgia and renewed longing for these products. On the one hand, therefore, recorded nostalgia makes for an effective sales strategy in Japan’s crowded consumer landscape. On the other hand, changes in the economy and consumer expectations have had a rather negative impact on some vendors’ business and public image. The traditional practice of live *yobikomi* (calling out to potential customers) through vocal chants and the use of instrumental music may be seen as an endangered custom, increasingly drowned out in this sonically intense society. *Yobikomi* is both verbal and musical. Some *yobikomi* are sung; others are chanted or even shouted. Spoken *yobikomi* often has a musical accompaniment, and today this is frequently a recorded jingle, although live music is used on occasion. The examples used in this discussion include all kinds of *yobikomi*: spoken, chanted, or sung (both solo or against background music), and all are considered equivalent contributors to the overall sonic landscape in urban Japan.

Current ethnographic examples from Tokyo and Kyoto, two of Japan’s major urban cultural centers, show that *yobikomi* is still an important representation of social and economic transactions between customers and salespeople, and the street serves as a crucial spatial mitigator between retailers and consumers. The street divides the space between the retailing and consuming spheres, and sound is used to draw customers into the retail space. The street, however, is not a neutral place, and many stakeholders are involved in regulating activity in this

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2 *Yobikomi* [呼込み] is a compound word consisting of the ideographs to “call out” and to “come in.”
public site. Interestingly, busking or the amateur performance of music in public in contemporary Japan is not as common as in other countries, for a number of reasons. First, the intensity of the existing sonic landscape (per Nakajima’s theory) can make it difficult for amateur and semi-professional artists to be heard properly over a cacophonous ambient soundscape. Another reason is fairly strict sound control regulation. Relevant laws include the Sōon kisei-hō [Noise Regulation Law] of 1968, Shōgyō senden nado no kakuseiki hōsō ni kakaru sōon no bōshi taisaku no kijun ni tsuite [Preventative measures relating to noise from broadcasting via megaphones for advertising purposes] of 1989, and the Sōon ni kakaru kankyō kijun ni tsuite [Environmental standards relating to noise] of 1998. All of these regulate individuals’ and groups’ use of sound for any purpose, such as promoting political parties using loudspeakers, and loud music in nightclubs; these regulations are also applicable to street performers, limiting the performance of music by musicians as artistic expression. However, sonic performances for commercial purposes is allowed, I would argue, because of its long history. As Japanese cities developed during the postwar period, and consumer expectations have shifted within the current climate of ongoing recession, the limits of social acceptance of this sonic intervention into people’s lives are now being tested.

**Sonic Work As Bodily Commitment In Japan**

To demonstrate the intersection of work, sound, public space and corporeality in Japan, here is an example of an interaction with a tuna sashimi salesman in Tsukiji, Tokyo’s large fish market. This enviable space, currently embedded in a high-rent section of central Tokyo, has been in place since the market was re-built after the 1923 Kanto Earthquake.³ Internationally renowned

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for its high quality seafood, sold wholesale in a limited-access inner market and retail in the adjacent outer market, it has become, of late, a gourmet tourist site. In late 2013, I went to the outer market to make recordings of these world famous culinary *yobikomi*.

Close to 3 pm, these sellers were in high gear, working hard to move their perishable goods before the market closed for the day. The tuna salesman’s voice was quite ragged after being in use for many hours (the market is generally open to visitors from 9 am to 2 pm, but the inner market opens at 5 am).

After making some recordings, I approached the seller to buy a piece of fish at the mid-afternoon discount, and asked him how his voice was holding up. I could see he was exhausted but single-minded in his desire to clear the day’s stock. He didn’t have much energy or time at this point of the day to engage in jocular banter, but he responding to the query with a croaked “*hai koe wa shōbai da ne*” [“Yes, my voice is what brings in the money”].

This seller’s determination to run his voice ragged on a daily basis might be seen as an example of the physical and emotional work ethic which has long been mythologized by both Japanese and foreign scholars. For centuries, observers have categorized Japan as having a “unique” work ethic, a view that has not been entirely distasteful to Japanese. These views of the uniqueness of Japanese culture came to be known as a set of ethnocentric and nationalistic ideas known as *Nihonjinron* (“theories of the Japanese”), which have been more or less discarded by scholars for some time, because every culture has its distinct characteristics, and claims to uniqueness usually arise from instrumentalist and nationalist motives. Notions of some kind of Japanese-ness have influenced the understanding by English-language scholars of Japan’s prewar

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4 To listen to this recording featuring the experienced male fishmonger and his younger female assistant’s *yobikomi* in tandem, visit https://soundcloud.com/sonicjapan/tsukiji-2. For more information on sonic practice in Tsukiji, see http://sonicjapan.clab.org.au/place/Tsukiji.
rise and postwar “economic miracle.” These ideas were purported to be part of Japan’s work culture carried over from the feudal and early modern period, and the emotional values behind this culture could be summarized in the contemporary term *gambaru*, an intransitive verb that is used frequently in private and public contexts today. This single word in Japanese refers to a physical, intellectual, and even affective commitment to work, training, or any pursuit of value: in common terms, “enduring obstacles and using all one’s effort to achieve or complete something.” First used in the Edo Period (1600–1867), the term is thought to have come from a homophone that meant looking closely at something, implying that one did not move from the spot until the job was finished. Another explanation is that the term arose from the phrase *ga o haru*, meaning “stretch oneself” (the above example of the tuna salesman “stretching” his voice every day certainly aligns with this interpretation). Regardless of its etymology, the word has embedded itself in many work contexts. This idea is relevant to both individual and collective efforts: one digs down deep inside of oneself to find the perseverance to complete a task well, as well as feeling a sense of responsibility to a team to fulfill the roles to the collective’s expectations.

The Tsukiji tuna seller’s ragged voice was evidence of his expression of *gambaru*; he was no “slacker” (which would be a comparable antonym to one who “stretches” him- or herself). In

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his acknowledgement of his performance, the salesman used the word *shōbai*, which refers to one’s profession, industry or trade. It is a category of activity rather than the activity itself, and contributes to an individual’s identity, along with other attributes such as gender, age status, and institutional or geographic affiliation. *Shōbai* is the category of activity from which one derives an income as well as one’s identity. The term *shōbajin*, used in the Edo Period, refers to members of the mercantile class, which thrived in this period despite being associated with the lower rungs of the period’s social class structure. Today, however, the term refers to any kind of commercial activity, including service, retail, or manufacturing industries.

*Yobikomi*—the sonic expression of the human voice, in solo or accompanied by musical instruments—was and still is a crucial part of Japan’s streetscapes and retail culture. Japanese workers have used chanting and singing as part of their practice of *shōbai* for centuries, and as we have seen in the fishmonger’s case, this sonic expression was then as it is now a fully embodied one, expressing the entrepreneurial spirit through *gambaru*. Mobile merchants providing goods and services throughout residential areas used sound to signal their entrance to a neighborhood. Lafcadio Hearn, a nineteenth-century American who wrote about Japan after it opened to the West in the 1860s, described

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9 *Shigoto* is often translated more generally as “work” or “job,” generally thought to be full time (part time work is called *arubaito*). *Shigoto* can mean a set of intellectual and/or physical tasks, and is most often used in contrast to the term *asobi* (play).

10 Sheldon writes that the merchants accepted the lowest rung of the social ladder in exchange for allowances such as developing their markets without competition from the aristocratic elite, who were legally barred from engaging in these kinds of businesses. See Charles D. Sheldon, “Merchants and Society in Tokugawa Japan,” *Modern Asian Studies* 17/3 (1983), 479.

11 Street cries as commercial activity is an urban phenomenon seen across cultures and over time. Interestingly, *yobikomi* has persisted in Japanese urban settings while in the European context, this practice has died out due to regulation. Kreutzfeld argues, however, that the absence of contemporary street cries in European cities has been replaced by other kinds of “urban refrains” that emanate from public loudspeakers and mobile phones. Jakob Kreutzfeld, “Street Cries and the Urban Refrain: a methodological investigation of street cries,” *Sound Effects* 2/1 (2012), 79.
A woman’s voice ringing through the night, chanting in a tone of singular sweetness words of which each syllable comes through my open window like a wavelet of flute-sound…. “Amma-kamishimo-go-hyakumon!”

And always between these long, sweet calls I hear a plaintive whistle, one long note first, then two short ones in another key. It is the whistle of the amma, the poor blind woman who earns her living by shampooing the sick or the weary, and whose whistle warns pedestrians and drivers of vehicles to take heed for her sake, as she cannot see. And she sings also that the weary and sick may call her in….

The saddest melody but the sweetest voice.¹²

Hearn notes the safety function of her song as a warning to others using the busy streets, but the sonic advertisement—“so that the weary and sick may call her in”—is practiced by a wide variety of mobile vendors, not unlike ice cream trucks equipped with a loudspeaker emitting a tinkling melody that make their way slowly through residential neighborhoods on a seasonal basis, using a gentle but distinctive sound to draw children out of their homes on summer afternoons.

In the case of shops in fixed locations, songs and chants were used at store fronts to lure customers inside (we will see below that both of these patterns of performance are still practiced in contemporary Japan). Chanting and singing was also used to coordinate laborer collectives in construction, agricultural, and fishing industries. These laboring songs made an impression on another American observer, Edward Morse, an American scientist and writer who first travelled to Japan in 1877. Morse’s two volumes of observations, written after several trips to Japan, capture some of the musical practices of nineteenth-century physical laborers. In volume one,

Morse describes Japanese workmen as inefficient, for “nine-tenths of the[ir] time was devoted to singing!” In another section, he notes that workmen “would all sing lustily, one man standing out from the crowd singing a chanty, and when they all joined in the chorus a simultaneous effort would move the clumsy affair about six inches … no musical notation of ours would render the weird music.”

Hearn’s and Morse’s Orientalist descriptions suggest that these musical laborers struck the Americans as curious: unusually beautiful in the case of Hearn, and unusually counterproductive for Morse. The prevalence of these descriptions, though, implies that work chants were a prominent part of the Japanese soundscape. With contextualization, Morse’s descriptions of nineteenth-century work songs can also be read as the careful coordination of collective physical effort, and laborers’ animated performances might well have been an expression of emotional investment and corporeal perseverance in their work.

For many years, Japanese people sang to coordinate their labor, to advertise their wares, and to beckon customers to make purchases. Others used it for more conceptual means. Today’s Japanese ethnomusicologists see these workers’ chants as an important part of the nation’s cultural history, and work songs such as those described by Morse are thought to be the musical basis of Japan’s min’yō (folk song) tradition, strongly associated with regional and national identity. Many of these min’yō are about work, such as the Sōran Bushi, a famous song sung by fishermen in the Hokkaido region for many years. First sung by herring fishermen slinging fish from nets into the boats, the lyrics are punctuated with calls of “dokkoisha,” which can be

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14 Morse, Japan Day by Day, 77.
considered the equivalent of “heave ho!” The folk song, once associated with physical labor, now brings to mind images of children singing at summer festivals and schools, where it is performed as an expression of Japan’s cultural heritage.

Min’yō like the Sōran Bushi tend to be associated with regional areas rather than crowded urban centers, but there are also urban min’yō. One example is the Oedo Nihonbashi (The Nihonbashi Bridge of Edo, the former name for Tokyo, the nation’s capital), named after the first of the 53 stations on the old Tōkaidō (the Tokai Road), which connected the old capital of Kyoto to the new capital Edo, established by the first Tokugawa shogun in 1600. Today’s Tōkaidōsen, the Japan Railways route that connects the two cities via super speed “bullet” trains and other commuter trains, takes its name from this old highway. While, unlike the Sōran Bushi, the lyrics of the Oedo Nihonbashi are not about work, this urban folk song demonstrates another function of street music; it focuses on the Tōkai Road itself. The first verse traces the travelers’ steps leaving the city early in the morning.

お江戸日本橋七つ立ち 初のぼり
行列そろえて あれわいさのさ
こちゃえ 高輪夜明けて 提灯消す こちゃえ こちゃえ

Oedo Nihombashi nanatsutachi hatsunobori
Gyōretsu soroete arewaisanosa
Kochae Takanawa yoyakete chōchin keshu Kochae Kochae

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Edo’s Nihonbashi—the first stage, just before dawn

Get in line, arewaisanosa

*Kochae* The sun comes up over Takanawa [Gate, which marks the entrance and exit to the city], put out the lanterns *Kochae Kochae*  

The rest of the verses list the landmarks between stages of the Tōkai Road, moving south to Kyoto. People from many backgrounds travelled the Tōkai Road between Edo and Kyoto for many reasons, including trade and to maintain political alliances. The focus on the places in this song, however, demonstrates a functional aspect of street music, not unlike the warning system of the blind *amma*: to create mental maps in travelers’ minds. *Oedo Nihonbashi* is thought to be one of the precursors to the Yamanote Train line songs, popular in the modern era, which are created from the names of the stations in order.

The transport infrastructure in urban Japan (and along routes that connected cities) developed relatively early, considering the need for frequent travel between the new and old capitals. This infrastructure was furthered by Japan’s modernization project in the Meiji Period (1868–1912), which focused on economic development to support military strength. This resulted in many changes in Japanese society, including increasing urbanization as sectors of the regional population migrated to the city, for what Carol Gluck calls motives centering on “social

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18 *World Folksong*, “Oedo Nihombashi,” http://www.worldfolksong.com/songbook/japan/oedo-nihonbashi.htm. Syllables sung for lyrical effect are left in Japanese in the translation. *Kochae* is an Edo expression that was used to punctuate a verse in song. *Arewaisanosa* is similarly an archaic expression thought to mean “well now, let us celebrate/pray/give good wishes.”

19 Allen writes that the Edo Period *sankai kōtai seido* [alternate attendance system], put in place to prevent regional daimyo from gaining too much military strength in their homelands, “led to a marked improvement in the roads.” G. C. Allen, *A Short Economic History of Modern Japan* [1946], facsimile ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003), 15.

success and economic survival.”

Continuing into the Meiji period (1868–1911), street chants not only served commercial purposes, they also created what Barak Kushner calls “an aural trope of the era.”

Some of these peddlers’ chants were integrated into rakugo (comedic story telling) performances, demonstrating how street singing crossed genre boundaries in Japanese popular culture.

As noted above, Japanese work and folk songs always had strong local affinities. Another form of retail related street music, chindon music, is thought to have originated in Osaka, although as noted by historian Barak Kushner, the practice of using “colorful street performers … [and] music to draw crowds—to boost sales or announce a new product” soon spread to other cities. Chindon musicians were used by candy makers in the early twentieth century in Tokyo as well, with Kushner noting that the still profitable confectionary company “Morinaga also started a band … to publicize its products, building on the chindonya practice.”

Chindon music is still used today by retail outlets such as pachinko parlors, for example, with musicians employed on a casual, variable basis. These performers parade through the streets, not to sell products themselves, but to draw customers to an establishment by playing an assortment of instruments. The typical instrumentation includes Japanese percussions and Western melody instruments, such as clarinet, trumpet, or saxophone. There is no singing or playing jingles; usually the leader of the group delivers advertising speeches between tunes, while others hand out flyers to the passersby and chat with them about whatever client they are advertising that day.

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23 Kushner, “Sweetness and Empire: Sugar Consumption in Imperial Japan,” 135.
24 Kushner, “Sweetness and Empire: Sugar Consumption in Imperial Japan,” 138.
The sonic interaction between sellers and customers on Japanese streets is both musical and verbal, and includes set phrases that called out, with or without musical backing. Known as kyakuhiki, it is heard when a shop employee stands at the entrance of the shop calling out to potential customers to entice them into entering the store and making purchases. Many readers may have heard a basic form of yobikomi when entering a Japanese restaurant in overseas locations—the calling out of various honorific versions of the verb “to enter,” as in irasshai or irasshaimase. Anthropologist Theodore Bestor refers to this as a “roaring chorus,” always heard when a customer enters a restaurant, a “guttural greeting” that is part of their workplace training and culture, arising “automatically from the throats of the apprentice chefs.” Kyakuhiki and yobikomi can include more specific information such as details about the quality of the wares on offer, special prices, and so on. These practices are still visible, and audible, on major shopping streets in large cities such as Tokyo, Osaka and Kyoto.

**Contemporary Yobikomi**

Street music is played in a variety of environments, but not all streets are considered equal in Japan’s cities; some are more important than others. Music, labor, and consumerism all come together in public urban places like the sakariba and shōtengai. Sakariba is translated as “bustling places,” where commerce and social activity create a soundscape that is lively, and for the most part pleasant, as those visiting the area are usually seeking stimulation and entertainment. Elise Tipton describes Tokyo’s Asakusa in the interwar period as a place full of

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26 Kyakuhiki 客引き is “pulling in customers.”
28 Bestor, Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World, 1.
activity as well as notoriety, as sakariba were areas filled with “brothels … popular theatres, street performers (animal and human), temple, eateries and stalls.”  

This area continued as a sakariba in the immediate postwar period with the establishment of a black market known as Ameyokochō in the adjacent Ueno area. Edward Seidensticker, a historian of Tokyo, notes that “as after the [1923] earthquake, huts began going up almost immediately…. Street stalls were back in the bustling places where they had always been—Shinjuku, Ginza, Ueno and the like. They offered food and drink before less flimsy shops were doing so.”

After the war, Tokoyoites’ focus shifted from Asakusa to Ginza, where many of Asakusa’s leisures were recast in a “modern” light in the new district; however, much of the street life of the prewar sakariba was taken indoors after the war, in line with a preconceived image held by Japanese of European city streets as cleaner, quieter, and more refined. Other leisure spots rose in prominence during the latter half of the twentieth century; Shun’ya Yoshimi’s seminal book Toshi no Doramaturugi: Tōkyō Sakariba no Shakashi [The Dramaturgy of a City: A Social History of Tokyo’s Sakariba], first published in 1987, regards the shifts in location of Tokyo’s sakariba as indicative of the consumers’ preference for different kinds of public culture. Older sakariba still maintained a profile in the city, but communicated a more traditionally Japanese (as in Asakusa) or even an early “modern” image (as in Ginza), while newer hotspots like Shinjuku and Shibuya represented a more “postmodern” image.

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31 Paris, in particular, was viewed as “the urban ideal for many Japanese planners.” André Sorenson, The Making of Urban Japan: Cities and Planning from Edo to the Twenty First Century (London: Routledge, 2002), 50.
Sakariba as described by these authors remain important as high profile areas where the leisure business was concentrated, but not all commercial activity was limited to these areas as the city spread out in the twentieth century. Urban commerce, with its attendant soundscape, expanded to suburban areas around the growing metropolitan area, connected by railways. Train stations, often associated with department stores rather than temples or shrines, became the locus of these activities. Streets that led to these train stations or that connected residential areas, known as shōtengai, were often covered with full or partial roofing, encouraging customers in these commercial districts to move leisurely from shop to shop. However, these areas are now considered in decline due to the rise of franchise supermarkets and other retailers in large-scale shopping malls. The survival of the shōtengai seems to lie in offering small household goods that can be bought at the last minute while on foot. Despite the decline of the shōtengai, the sakariba as “hot spots” still thrive in central urban areas, and barkers both live and recorded still make major contributions to the sonic landscape of these retail and leisure centers. The examples listed below come from Ochanomizu, Harajuku, Shibuya, and Shinjuku, all of which are areas of Tokyo considered famous for their retail culture. Shibuya and Shinjuku are contemporary sakariba, with Harajuku as another vital adjacent district to Shibuya.

Contemporary examples of yobikomi use a mix of recordings and human voices; photographs and recordings are featured in our Sonic Digital Repository. The first example is drawn from the Tokyo neighborhood of Ochanomizu, where retailers cater to young people, given its proximity to many universities such as Meiji University and Ochanomizu University.

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33 Examples of these would be the Tōkyū Line and department store in Tokyo, or the Hankyū Line and department store in Osaka.
Recordings were made along the locale’s two main avenues, which intersect near the JR train station that takes its name from the town. These streets are filled with shops that sell new and used musical equipment: electric and acoustic guitars, amps and other guitar accessories, keyboards, sheet music, and drum kits. The recording here was taken outside one of the larger shops in this area, a store that is associated with a major Japanese guitar brand, ESP. While this yobikomi practice is not uncommon, this particular store’s sonic presence was very loud: justifiably so, as it was closely bound to their products. ESP’s rock and roll lifestyle was represented by the music playing at that moment (by Black Sabbath, loudly projected both outside and inside the store), and by salesmen wearing the rock and roll “uniform” of black T-shirts and jeans, shaggy hair, and chunky silver chain accessories (see Figure 1). While the music was recorded, their yobikomi was performed live.36 Inside the store, potential buyers crouched over practice amps, plucking out lines on aspirational guitars, some with amateur hesitation, some with professional ease. Between the recorded background music and the sampling of guitars, the store’s sonic atmosphere was thick with electrical vibrations. The staff members inside the store were exemplary in their customer service—their choruses of irasshaimase were rehearsed, and they used polite language to address their customers. Even though they looked rough-mannered, they were courteous and their attention focused; however, to interact with them one had to speak quite loudly and repeat oneself frequently to be heard over the background noise.

<<insert file Stevens.Fig1.jpg>>
Figure 1. Instrument shop in Ochanomizu, Tokyo (photograph by the author).

36 https://soundcloud.com/sonicjapan/guitar-shop.
Given that this shop’s business is selling instruments, it is not unexpected that sound plays a large part in their sales pitch, but this is not always the case: we also took recordings in an elite guitar shop that caters to professional musicians in Shibuya. The stock here was of much higher quality and price. This store’s staff was dressed in the same “uniform” and provided faultless service, but with one striking difference: the store was completely silent.37 This was in part because there were no customers there during the visit; as a high-end store, there seemed to be very few walk-in browsers. When I commented to the salesman that his store was very nice, but so quiet compared to others I had attended, he replied coolly, “Of course. How else can we hear the customers’ requests? And how can we discern the quality of the products’ sounds?” Clearly, the Ochanomizu store used sound to create an atmosphere that beckoned amateurs to purchase a part of the rock and roll lifestyle; at the Shibuya store, silence was essential to allow the professional to make refined distinctions between products.

Here silence reflected refinement and professionalism, but in everyday retail life, the absence of sound may, in contrast, signal absence of interest. The photograph in Figure 2 was taken in the Harajuku district, where a young woman, dressed in costume and holding a sign advertising the store, was performing yobikomi in front of a Sanrio shop, which holds the Hello Kitty franchise. We were unable to make a good recording of her yobikomi because her voice was so soft, unlike the more emphatic workmen described by Morse, and other more vigorously sonic efforts we recorded, such as those at the central fish market at Tsukiji. Passersby mostly ignored her, a reaction that most likely fed into her own lackluster performance.

<<insert file Stevens.Fig2.jpg>>
Figure 2. A Sanrio shop in Harajuku (photograph by the author).

Nevertheless, this example shows the diversity of *yobikomi* practice. This mild Hello Kitty example may explain why, increasingly, stores no longer employ live *yobikomi* and instead rely solely on recordings. Unlike the ESP store, which used both recordings and live human voices, some use entirely recorded expressions. The large-scale electronics chain store Bic Camera, ubiquitous in many large cities in Japan, presents a *yobikomi* that is both musical and spoken but it is entirely recorded. It is loud, with the speakers fixed to the entrance of the store on the street. In the recording, you can hear the approach and the fade away as the pedestrian holding the recording device moves through the crowded Shinjuku street.$^{38}$ You can hear other passers-by speak over the *yobikomi*, oblivious to its message. This recording demonstrates both the potential pros (such as saving money by cutting staff, and maintaining control over quality and volume) and potential cons (the depersonalization of the contact with potential customers, and lack of impact) of the shift from live to recorded *yobikomi*.

One might ask where the work ethic of *gambaru* sits in these latter two recordings: the Hello Kitty girl appears blasé amongst her pink accoutrements, compared to the ragged voice of the tuna seller, or the manic cheerfulness of the recorded Bic Camera jingle. However, it would be oversimplifying matters to rely on standard generational differences between the young woman in her twenties and the fishmonger in his sixties (though some Japanese might believe this commonly expressed criticism). The sonic difference between the fishmonger and the Hello Kitty girl arises primarily from their personal view of their *shōbai*: the young woman posing passively in front of the shop is almost certainly a casual worker, part of the new “precariat” class. These Japanese casual workers, called “freeters,” are those whose career prospects in the

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retail industry (and many other industries, in fact) seem less likely to offer any security, given the country’s ongoing recession. Even though the fishmonger is also working class, in Japan he is considered part of the world of shitamachi (an area of Tokyo associated with the “old middle class,” distinct from the university-educated “salary man,” but not destitute by any means). His connection to his shōbai is evidenced in his yobikomi in the same way that the young woman’s disenfranchisement is demonstrated through her silence.

**Nostalgic Yobikomi**

Japanese society from the 1990s to the present has been marked by continuing recession, deflation, and low wages, bringing with it changes to consumer behavior over the years across various social groups. In the current economic climate, emphasis on value for money is important, which might be prioritized over personal relationships or convenience. The next few examples are illustrative of the ways recorded yobikomi have been used recently with very different results.

One of the most famous examples of street song as advertisement is the sale of roasted potatoes by mobile vendors (idōhanbai). Sweet potatoes are called satsuma imo in Japan. A humble root vegetable, these potatoes were considered a staple source of calories nutrition during food shortages up to the 1940s. Eaten frequently at home, these potatoes are often boiled or steamed as side dishes. When slow roasted, however, the potatoes take on a different texture and are considered more of a treat rather than a part of a mundane meal, because of the time and energy it takes to prepare them properly. In the early prewar period, roasted potatoes began to be sold outdoors by mobile sales people, and were especially popular during colder months, when

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the hot potatoes also warmed the fingers. The roasting apparatus—a covered wood- or charcoal-burning fire with stones—was first pulled in a cart manually, by bicycle, or later by minivan. In our recordings on the Sonic Japan website, vendors play the following recorded chant, which is rolled out across a playback loop as they move slowly through pleasure districts, parks, or even suburban areas.

焼き芋焼き芋石焼き芋焼き芋
ふっくらとして香ばしい、石焼き芋はいかがですか
さあ、いらっしゃい

(sung) yaki imo, yaki imo
ishi yaki imo, yaki imo
(sung) 焼き芋、焼き芋、石焼き芋、焼き芋
(sung) Roast potato, roast potato, stone roasted potato, roast potato.
(spoken) Fukkura toshite kōbashii ishiyaki imo wa ikaga desu ka. Saa, irasshai.

(spoken) Fluffy and fragrant, how about a stone roasted potato? Come on over!

The sound is loud enough to cut through competing noise, and is repeated over and over, just in case you didn’t hear the message the first time. Like the tinkling jingle of the ice cream truck drifting through the air on a summer day, the chant of the potato seller may transport people back to times when the treat was enjoyed as children or in their student days.

Despite the example of the roasted potato seller, we might say the more traditional yobikomi landscape is diminishing, especially when consumer expectations clash with tradition.

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40 Mobile food vendors have been in business since the Edo Period, selling yakisoba noodles and sushi, considered the fast food of that era. Today, ramen noodles, crepes, and ice cream are common mobile vendor products, and these units tend to gather at temporary or recurring events rather than roaming the streets. Nihon Kētārinku Kōkai [Japan Catering Car Association], “Idōhanbai no rekishi” [History of (the) Catering Car], https://www.jcca.gr.jp/idouhanbai/history/history.html, accessed 25 November 2014.

gone wrong. One example of this is the laundry pole business. Even in today’s technologically advanced lifestyle, the majority of Japanese hang their laundry outside to dry rather than use electric clothes dryers. Unlike Australia, the Japanese mostly do not use rope or wire clotheslines with clothespins, but instead drape clothes, towels, and bedding over racks of various sizes. If one has a backyard, several racks may be kept outside—some in the sun and some under an awning for rainy days. Poles called saodake are held by these racks and wiped down between uses. The sleeves of shirts or the legs of pants are threaded through the poles, obviating the need for pins, although clamps can be bought to hold the clothes in place on windy days. The rounded shape of the poles prevents lines from being pressed into the clothing or bedding when draped. Even though these lightweight poles can be bought in shops, their length makes them awkward to carry, and so for many years people often bought them from mobile vendors who drove vans slowly through suburban streets. Such vendors are called saodakeya, and year-round they circumnavigate the narrow streets of Japan’s streets and towns selling laundry poles.

When I lived in Japan in the 1990s, the recording I remember most often hearing explicitly referenced nostalgia:

たーけや～～～ さーーおだけ～～
たーけや～～～ さーーおだけ～～
もーのほし～～～ さーーおだけ～～
物干し竿 竹はいかがでしょうか
物干し竿の下取り販売も 致しております
20年前と変わらないお値段
20年に一度の 大安売り

(sung) takeya --- saodake
takeya --- saodake Bamboo seller, laundry poles
mono hoshi saodake Drying [clothes], laundry poles
While this particular chant seems charming in its nostalgia, the future of mobile saodakeya is in jeopardy due to a backlash against these kinds of sales. Unlike the roast potato truck, which sells a relatively low cost product that is consumed on the spot, the laundry pole truck sells goods for daily and frequent use. If the product does not meet the consumer’s expectations, it is difficult to return the faulty product. In recent years the Japanese mass media has exposed some of these businesses for pushing expensive, unwanted products on customers in front of their homes.

While sellers claimed that their prices hadn’t changed in 20 years, customers knew this wasn’t true; sellers might advertise, for example, that they would sell two poles for ¥2000 yen, but when a customer approached the truck, only more expensive items were for sale. As a result of customer dissatisfaction, the consumer protection group Kokumin Seikatsu Sentā issued several warnings to the industry about fraudulent advertising and other problems reported when customers made purchases from laundry pole mobile vendors.²² Public opinion of these mobile

vendors has eroded; one resident has posted a video on YouTube capturing an argument between a woman and a laundry pole seller over his excessive noise and poor service; he reacts by suggesting that the woman has invaded his privacy by filming him without his permission.\(^\text{43}\)

Here, the relationship between resident and vendor has completely broken down, and no one is respected for their work ethic or customer relations. The recorded chant becomes an irritant in the background of conflict, rather than a nostalgic reference to the past. While no one would support a vendor’s right to continue cheating and intimidating customers, an unintended outcome of the saodake scandal might be that this form of street song is being eradicated: the residential streets of Japan are becoming quieter, and public respect for the work conducted by one form of sonic street sellers has been diminished.

Sound is used in a variety of ways to express connection and disconnection between consumers and retailers, and retailers and society at large. Parallel to the example of the Sanrio saleswoman, who expresses her disillusion with her career opportunities through silence, a local resident expresses her dissatisfaction with the saodakeya’s product by criticizing his sound as meiwaku—an annoyance, or a sonic disturbance to her private life. The saodakeya responds in defense of his soundmaking by invoking a different level of privacy (that is, through recording his face, even in a public place). Notions of gambaru as part of yobikomi in these two cases have taken on different shades of meaning; customers no longer expect a disenfranchised part-time worker to lose her voice over cheap trinkets, and the laundry pole seller does not try to curry favor with the local resident. Instead, he does not hesitate to raise his voice to defend himself when he is criticized for his work, declaring his own sense of privacy as important as that of the

residents. *Yobikomi* expresses more than just a cheerful physical expression of the Japanese work ethic. From the Tsukiji fishmonger, the guitar shop, the Sanrio saleswoman, the canned jingle of the Bic Camera store, to the argument over the laundry pole salesman’s tactics, *yobikomi* invokes sound—and in some cases, silence—to express actors’ engagement (and disengagement) with the commercial enterprise. Consumers may tune out (as in the Bic Camera example) or fight back (as in the laundry pole example). Sonic practices are thus meaningful expressions of shared notions of structure and personal expressions of agency: in other words, what kinds of sounds are expected and allowed in public space, and how participants in the moment may react (dependent on the socio-economic context and the perceived quality of the service). Given this interpretation, street soundscapes thus offer up an eloquent opportunity to understand the diversity of social life and contribute to our understanding of a contemporary society both connected to the past but also responding to social change.

**Conclusion**

Despite recent changes, street music as a form of *yobikomi* is not necessarily an endangered art form. As part of this research project, we have made recordings of the interiors of Japan’s large and ubiquitous department stores, the hustle and bustle of shoppers at various public markets, the soft background music of various fast food and family restaurants (*fami resu*), and the dignified hush of fashion boutiques, all demonstrating the importance of sound to retail environments, both indoors and outdoors. While the active street life, represented by the *sakariba* of the past and the *shōtengai* of today, is always under negotiation via zoned restrictions and residential association’s demands, the street is still an important conduit to the inner sanctum of the shop, and for representing the work ethic of a variety of professionals, as well as the social and
economic differences between the products and their consumers. From the earnest electric guitar seller to the dishonest laundry poll hawker, their use of sound draws the customer and the scholar in for a closer look. The street is a negotiated space between vendor and customer, and sound can be “occupied” or co-opted by businesses to negotiate the relationship between them. However, mobile vendors such as the laundry pole sellers are now viewed as a nuisance, because of changing uses of space, changing ideas about what sounds are appropriate where, changes in the relationships between vendors and consumers, and people’s shifting expectations about these transactions. Larger department stores and more specialized shopping malls are now the places where these sounds have been co-opted and exuberantly expressed. These are the new places where shopping, spending, and other social activities take place. *Yobikomi* remains both an expression of hard work, customer service, and ongoing localized social relationships, but is changing over time as the consumer landscape undergoes shifts. Its persistence highlights continuities with the past and a re-emphasis on these traditional values in the hope of attracting customers, with—as we have seen—varied results. *Yobikomi*, whether it is live or recorded (or even arising from carefully cultivated silence by high end stores), serves as a marker to point us to ways Japanese people interact with each other in different public spaces and in changing times, and shows us how that space is shared.

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