

Spatial complexity: Musically Urbanized *Kokura Gion* Festival

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Keywords

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Abstract

This paper explores how the musical space of the urban festival *Kokura Gion* manifests as a result of the differing performing practices, through the comparative analysis of rhythmic patterns and choreographic features, illustrating the urban geographic polarity as a reflection of musical disparity. *Kokura Giondaiko*, originally ritual but largely festivatized music, has a unique drumming-featured style that is characterized by valiant choreographic beating sideways from both sides as drummers walk. The ritual with almost four hundred year history has allowed inclusion of women, local institutions, and voluntary associations, and inaugurated processional and drumming competitions prompted by the intended improvement of post-industrial urban depopulation that affects its conservation. Consequently, due largely to the allowance of stationary drumming style without requirement of a float, the performance practiced primarily by emerging youth voluntary troops became increasingly virtuosic that deviates the authentic and designated drumming style. The emergent musical differences between the traditional and arranged in fact parallel their disparate geographic configuration: the former, community-based traditional troops have their own district based on the old demarcation, hence they are named after the no-longer-existent address, and the latter, with no historio-geographic connection with a specific place, are marginalized in open space before the gigantic commercial buildings of the postmodern architecture. In addition, the former with an inherited float have the musical route for their procession as opposed to the latter without float that do not move from the fixed and allotted spot where they engage in the stationary drumming style.

Urbanized *Giondaiko*

Early summer night in July, still rainy and humid due to the rainy season, the town suddenly filled with numerous drumming sounds coming from all over the area. In my first summer in *Kokura*¹, I was struck by this nocturnal sonic assault, but the surprise soon became an occupational excitement that made me involuntarily open all the doors of my car to locate the sources of the resonance. I passed a lot of drumming groups scattered around the town. They were practicing *Kokura Giondaiko* to prepare for the upcoming traditional *Kokura*

Gion festival in which they perform every summer. Depending on their surrounding urban landscape, the steady and persistent pulse like beats sounds either like an ostinato or modern and post-modern minimalist music.

Kokura Giondaiko, largely festivatized music, has a unique drumming style that is characterized by beating the drum sideways, beating from both sides while walking, and valiant choreography. After almost a four hundred year long history, the festival allowed the inclusion of women, local institutions, and voluntary associations, and also inaugurated

processional and drumming competitions largely aimed at urban regeneration in order to grapple with post-industrial urban depopulation. Consequently, new entrants resulted in increasingly virtuosic performance that deviate from the authentic drumming style. The emergent musical differences between the traditional and arranged styles in fact parallel their disparate geographic configuration: the former, community-based traditional groups have their own district based on the old demarcation, and the latter, with no historio-geographic connection with a specific place, are marginalized in open space before gigantic commercial buildings of postmodern architecture. This paper explores how the musical space of this urban traditional festival manifests as a result of the differing performing practices, through the comparative analysis of rhythmic patterns and choreographic features, thereby illustrating the urban geographic polarity.

Early style and practice

People generally refer to this festival as *Kokura Giondaiko*, meaning *Gion's* drum, instead of *Kokura Gion Matsuri*, *Gion's* festival. The more popular synonym for the festival indicates the predominancy of music that was once peripheral to the ritual event. In addition, the musical definition or identification of the festival is further enhanced by the official designations of intangible folk cultural asset under the name of *Kokura Giondaiko*. Nonetheless this festival of medieval origin has principally been a sacred Shinto ritual. Offering a drumming performance in the precincts of the *Yasaka Shrine* still remains one of the ritual procedures, although there is slight religious and sacred recognition among participants. Back in 869 the festival was first conducted at *Gion*, a district located in *Kyoto*, to protect

against an epidemic that was sweeping the city. The festival was aimed at pacifying malevolent spirits believed to be the cause of the epidemic by offering prayers to the deity worshiped at *Yasaka* shrine. Initially the festival consisted of 66 *hoko*, tall spears and 3 *mikoshi*, palanquin-like portable shrines. Despite the interruption of the *Onin* War in the late 15th century (from 1467 to 1477), the festival survived, and by the 17th century *hoko* and *mikoshi* were replaced by wheeled floats of both large and small sizes, and a group of musicians that parade through the city. Each float belonged to a particular *machi*, a sort of neighborhood association consisting of rows of houses facing each other across a street. A more musical version of the festival was adopted in *Kokura* in the early 17th century.

Kokura, a district of *Kita Kyushu* city located in the northernmost part of *Kyushu* Island is a historical castle town known as *jokamachi*, originated in the early *Edo* period. A *daimyo*, a feudal lord of the *Kokura* domain built the *Gionsha*, or a tutelary shrine following the construction of *Kokura* castle, and successively in 1618 began the *Gion* festival to offer prayers for peace and prosperity of the town. Paleography tells that in the year 3 of *Manji*² era, which is 1660, a musical accompanist *Kiyogoro* learned by ear how to perform music at a *Shinto* ritual when he went up to *Edo*, today's *Tokyo*, in attendance on the lord. After returning to *Kokura*, he recruited four children and taught them how to play the music.³ This is believed to be the origin of *Kokura GionDaiko*. The music originally included gong, hand drum, and flute. The parades were gorgeous and spectacular with a highly ornamented float, various decorative carts, dancers, and musicians. However, through the disruption of the *Meiji* Restoration of the late 19th century, many of the items were lost and the parade reduced to a smaller and simpler unit made up of a float,

drums, and small gongs. This is the model for the current musical and percussion centered procession that emerged and formed through the upheavals of Japanese modernization. Since then, the drumming has been highly elaborated and stylized both musically and choreographically.

Socio-economic diversity and Geographical relations after modernization

This process occurred at the turn of the 20th century when the *Kita Kyushu* area was involved heavily in rapid industrialization as the site of Japan's first heavy industries such as iron and steel mills. Neighboring *Chikuho* Coalfield, the industrial zone grew rapidly and hence contributed to military buildup in those days. *Kokura* in fact had a large military arsenal that was initially marked as an atomic bomb target, but cloud cover sent the planes to *Nagasaki* instead. The rapid industrialization and its concomitant urbanization brought in a great influx of factory workers, coal miners, construction laborers, dockworkers, etc. In addition to the variety in the laboring population, the area historically was the port city, closest to the Korean peninsula, and has long been a site of intermingling with foreigners such as traders, artists, and missionaries from neighboring Asia as well as some European countries. The socio-historical diversity of people in fact seems to parallel an inclusion of various participants to the *Kokura Giondaiko* unlike many of the other traditional Japanese festivals that are still restricted to indigenous male participants.

The drumming groups of the *Kokura Gion* perform as small units deeply associated with a local community or neighborhood called *Chonai*: *Cho* is another pronunciation of *Machi* meaning town, and *Nai* literally means inside. The

term *Chonai* has almost the same meaning as *Machi*, a sort of neighborhood association in the premodern urban area. The *chonai* is based on the *Edo* period's administrative divisions that no longer exist. However, the drumming groups of the festival are formed according to the former *Chonai* demarcations, and hence each group's members are inhabitants of the same district. Festival participation as a whole is limited officially to the inhabitants of *Kokura Kita* ward that corresponds geographically to the former *Jokamachi*, a castle town encompassing *Kokura* castle and the tutelary shrine, or current *Yasaka* shrine and has also been a commercial and industrial center especially since modernization. The other half of the *Kokura* area is *Kokura Minami* ward, not germane to the festival, being a more recently developed area. Approximately 150 drumming bands are registered to the festival. Out of 80 of the bands are based on the former *Chonai* units. Regardless of their existence on a current map, many of them still use the old *Chonai* names or slightly altered ones that are evocative of previous geographic affiliations. Other than *Chonai*-based traditional bands, the remaining 70 have names with no connection to a geographic community, past or present. This means their membership is not based on residential proximity and not embedded in the particular place they reside. These bands have newly emerged in the late 20th century, when participants are no longer limited to men and inhabitants of the *Kokura Kita* ward. The inclusion of "profane" people has been prompted also through the introduction of drumming competitions that do not necessarily require the marching that necessitates floats received from ancestors. The open-door policy in fact affects the traditional music making, and the emerging rootless bands have sometimes been regarded as a threat to the authentic drumming style. The supposed threat is

attributed to their slight consciousness of historio-geographical significance of the festival, and of the hierarchical social order activated and manifested in the *Chonai* communities.

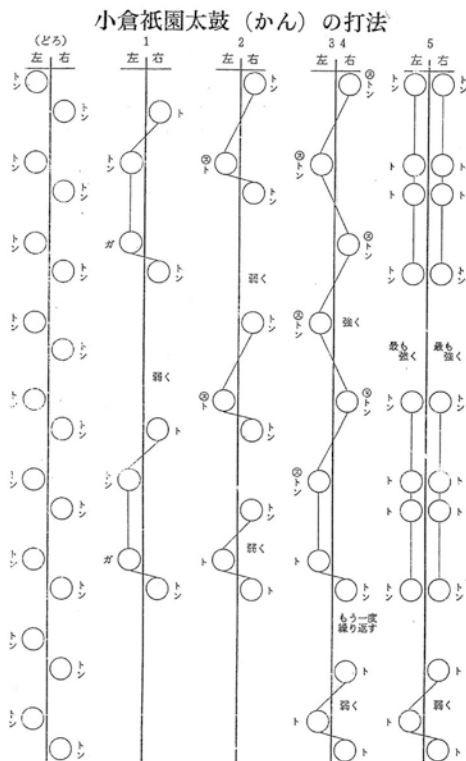
Present style and practice: authentic and unauthentic

Kokura Giondaiko's drumming is unique not only because the drums are beaten by two people on opposite sides of the drum but also because the sideways movements involved. In cases of typical face to face drumming styles, the beating movement goes from up to down in vertical and linear manner. The sideways style in *Kokura*, on the other hand, features beating from right to left in parallel or slightly diagonal manner. The sideways style may perhaps be attributable to *Kokura Giondaiko's* choreographic beating style. While beating, arms move as if drawing circles. Additionally, differing from typical Japanese vertical drumming, *Kokura's* choreographic encircling drumming seems less masculine. This may have something to do with the increasing participation of female percussionists at the festival since the open door policy began about 30 years ago. In addition to drums, each group uses gongs called *Jangara*. Musicians thus consist of two gong performers and four drummers for the two drums. During performance, however drummers frequently rotate. So there are potentially more drummers than four in every band. Gongs are assigned to skilled and experienced percussionists who have accumulated considerable experience as drummers. Performances are led by gongs which establish tempo, usually slow to fast or more traditionally remaining slow, and decide when to start and end each performance. Each side of a drum varies in pitch, timbre, and assigned rhythmic pattern. One side is called *Kan* or *Omote* meaning the front has a higher pitch with a clear sound, and the other is *Doro*

or *Ura* meaning back which has lower pitch and relatively blunt timbre. The basic rhythm underlining the performance is regarded as triple that also sounds like a ceaseless dotted rhythm. Gongs and the lower *Doro* side play this regular ostinato rhythm. The higher *Kan* plays freer and stylized rhythmic pattern precisely within the basic tripled beats. The smallest unit of the rhythm consists of two tones, i.e. a smaller tone followed by a longer doubled tone, if notated for example the combination of an eighth and a fourth, starting with the upbeat. Perhaps a time signature could have 3 as the upper figure and 8 as the lower figure. Especially when the performances get faster, it sounds more like a dotted rhythm, say the combination of a eighth and a dotted fourth and hence the associated time signature could be 2/4(two forth). Another possibility is syncopated rhythm. In either case, the smallest rhythmic unit consists of a shorter upbeat and a following longer downbeat. The triple rhythm, by the way, can neither be observed in neighboring traditional *Gion* festivals nor in Japanese folk music in general. Some Japanese festival musics include triple rhythm, but only partially. As opposed to the general use of duple rhythm in most Japanese musical genres, such an exhaustively triple rhythm is apparently rare. This is only speculation, but due to geographical closeness to the peninsula, the atypical rhythm is suggestive of Korean influence. In addition to the authentic triple rhythm, however, the duple rhythm has appeared along with the emergence of new bands in recent years. The festival authorities have attempted to prohibit this atypical rhythm called '*Yonpaku daiko*' -literally, quadruple drumming, out of fear that it is a threat to the local musical form. However, more recent bands often slip into prohibited duple rhythm while performing. In terms of tempo, also they tend to be unauthentic. They

occasionally perform extremely fast. Since faster tempo is not necessarily prohibited, some bands perform very fast even at the competitions. But they never win no matter how well they perform, is because they authentically incorrect. Hence there practically exist the two versions of drumming: a performance by a traditional *chonai* band, based on the authentic triple rhythm (Figure 1) which has historical and geographical connections to a specific place, and a recent emergent band with intervening duple rhythm having no historical and geographical connection.

Figure 1. Notation of traditional taiko rhythm. It goes from top to down as found in other Japanese notations. Left is *Doro* part, the other lines are variety of *Kan* part.



The intervening duple rhythm is typical of common and professional or commercial Japanese drumming, beaten frontways while

facing each other, and hence the beating becomes vertical and linear. Also the occasional vocal interjections and body movements are exaggerated. Such inclusion of jumping and big motions of limbs cannot be found among traditional *Chonai* musicians. In addition to such musical deviations, the costumes also are not traditional. The approved dress code is a *yukata*, an informal cotton *kimono* for summer wear or a *happi*, a livery coat, and straw sandals with white *tabi*, split-toe socks. Rickshaw attire usually consisting of a heavy black-cloth rubber-soled *tabi* without straw sandals is favored among young people, but not officially permitted. Naked arms and chests are also prohibited, but they are sometimes shown.

Authentic *Chonai* based bands and less authentic emergent bands differ not only in musical performance but also in terms of their place or space making (Solomon 2000) that in turn embodies their spatial identity. *Chonai* bands have a specific toponym that has been used since the early 17th century, while some of them were obliterated and renamed through the post war rezoning of the late 20th century. During the festival as well as the preliminary official practice period inaugurated on the first day of July, most *Chonai* communities including the defunct (as far as maps are concerned) are restored and reimagined through musical performance. *Chonai* bands (Figure 2) have their own place where they stay, practice and take a rest after returning from each procession.

Figure 2. Among other traditional *Chonai* bands, *Tori Machi Yonchome* is proceeding through the main street and returning to their base. Photograph by the author.



Their families, mostly wives and mothers, wait at their base to support them by dressing them before the procession and serving food and drinks between processions. Every three days however, musical parades take place not only in their own *Chonai* community but also in and around the *Uomachi* shopping Arcade, where all *chonai* bands assemble from throughout the *Kokura Kita* ward. While parading around the urban center, each *Chonai* displays their performance and *Chonai* identity. As *Uomachi* shopping Arcade has historically been a merchant area since the *Edo* period, the *chonai* of this area have their own toponym related to merchandise that their distant ancestors dealt in such as *Uo-machi* -- fish town, *Kome-machi* -- rice town, *Tori-machi* -- chicken town, etc. Exciting and deafening sounds produced by various, numerous *Chonai* bands resonate all over and around the arcade as if it were confining the authentic sounds within the authentic area and differentiating from the unauthentic sounds produced by new bands that are located outside the arcade. New bands on the other hand are placed in isolated open spaces outside the arcade before the gigantic commercial modern and post modern architectures. They perform with the drums

stationed on the ground, because they do not have floats to which the drums are fixed. Despite the fact that they are more distant from the center, apparently more spectators come to see their performances perhaps to enjoy their more virtuosic, flashy, and hence entertaining performances. While *Chonai* bands deeply embedded in the places of both their home districts and the urban center traveling between and links the two, the emerging bands have no relation to their geography. There are two open spaces in which new bands with stationary drums are permitted to perform: one is located in front of the twelve story department store building, and the other is before the gigantic geometric multiplex commercial building called River Walk *Kitakyushu* designed by two post modern architects Jon Jerde and Michael Graves. These two huge modern and postmodern buildings were constructed as urban regeneration projects over the past twenty years, and both are located or marginalized outside the arcade: the arcade is in between the two monstrosities. However the shopping building located east (Figure 3) and the River Walk to the west (Figure 4) are separated from the urban center by a railway placed high above a boulevard and a wide river respectively. Spatial disruption or segregation between the historical *chonai* area including the arcade and post modern open space thus reinforces their discrete musical identities: the one is place-based and the other is rootless.

Figure 3. The shopping building before the main Station as opposed to the traditional local area. Spatial complexity consists of monorail railway and walkway. Photograph by the author.



Figure 4. The River Walk (partial) as a postmodern icon. In front, many untraditional bands are performing. Kokura castle can be seen far behind, in contrast. Photograph by the author.



The pre-modern *chonai* bands represent the unchanging sameness of place-based collective identity and musical style as opposed to “post-modern” bands representing a rootless and timeless identity. Regardless of the conflicts and differences, the massive cluster of sounds that enfold the town presents a seamless mosaic totality.

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Notes

1. *Kokura* is an old castle town consists of two wards: *Kokura Kita* and *Kokura Minami*. The festival is held in *Kokura Kita* ward. My first encounter with the festival was in the year 2005.
2. *Manji* era is one of the names of an imperial era, lasted from July 23 in 1658 to April 25 1661.
3. Recitation from *Gion no Rekishi* (<http://plu.jp/gion/history/index.htm>) originated in Gionkai Shinji Shinzan Shidai『祇園会神事神山次第』)

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