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The Coevolution of the Six Ancient Kilns and Japanese Postwar Local Identity

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Abstract: *The arts have long been tools used to prop up political visions, and Japan's traditional crafts are no exception to this trend. Japanese ceramics in particular have enjoyed, or perhaps endured, era after era of patronage by successive governments and movements over their more than a millennium of history. Appropriated by a wave of nationalism in the Meiji period, the rokkoyō (six ancient kilns), long famous for their rustic style and acclaimed tea wares, were converted along with many other traditional crafts into symbols of the Japanese national spirit. In the postwar period, however, without necessarily losing their national importance, these traditional ceramics have built for themselves a new niche as symbols of local pride, with the help of a busy convergence of economic and community interests. This paper aims to uncover the process by which the tea-taste wares of the rokkoyō became symbols of local and prefectural identity in a postwar Japan often falsely characterized as culturally homogenous.*

Fig. 1: Nunobiki
Unknown Creator
Momoyama Period (14th c)
Museum of Ceramic Art, Hyogo
Tamba-Sasayama, Japan
Photo taken by author

The jar called *Nunobiki* (fig. 1) displayed in the Museum of Ceramic Art in Hyōgo, Japan shows many of the aesthetic characteristics that have been typical of *Tamba-yaki* (Tamba-style stoneware; 'yaki' as a suffix means 'ceramics of…') for centuries. Baked in a *noborigama* (traditional climbing kiln) without any manmade glaze, the jar collected ash from the kiln's wood fire, which at the kiln's high temperatures melted into a natural glaze that ran down the sides of the container, leaving green and white streaks. Where the natural glaze did not fall can be seen the exposed clay, flecked with particulates and beads of fused ash, and baked to a vibrant golden brown. Though they first gained fame as producers of tea ware, the rokkoyō produced a diverse array of products, applying what would come to be the standard aesthetic principles of the tea ceremony (simplicity, asymmetry, and imperfection) to jars, bottles, and decorative objects.[1] Of these six towns: Bizen, Echizen, Seto, Shigaraki, Tamba, and Tokoname, Seto is perhaps exceptional for the worldwide fame of its non-tea-taste wares, including porcelains,[2] so I will specify here that when I refer to the Six Ancient Kilns, I refer chiefly to their status as centers of tea-taste stoneware production for roughly the last millennium. The term "tea-taste" overlaps somewhat with the broader term *yakishime* (baked and fused), referring to woodfired stonewares which are loaded into a kiln unglazed and become marked or coated in natural glaze by the chaotic conditions of the kiln fire, though this aesthetic is not limited to the rokkoyō.[3]

Subjected as the arts often are to varying political influences, the rokkoyō and other ceramic production sites in pre-Meiji Japan survived largely through the patronage of Japan's landowning class, the *daimyō*. Following the forceful opening of Japan to Western trade in 1854, the Meiji Restoration in 1868 saw the return of the Emperor to power, the dissolution of Japan's

[1] Lee, Sherman E, "Some Japanese Tea Taste Ceramics," *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 60, no. 9 (1973): 269.
[2] Itani, Yoshie, *Export Porcelain from Seto in the Meiji Era: The Development of Noritake Porcelain in the Context of the Japanese Ceramics of the Meiji Period*, 1. Vol. 1, (Oxford: University of Oxford, 2005), 1-2.
[3] Seattle Art Museum, *Ceramic Art of Japan: One Hundred Masterpieces from Japanese Collections*, (Seattle, WA: Seattle Art Museum, 1972), 167.

feudal military government, and most importantly for the pottery world, the abolition of feudal domains, which left potters around the country without their largest source of income.[4] What followed was a revolution of ceramic production, in which pottery studios were industrialized, techniques imported from the West, and aesthetic principles all but standardized around Japan's emergent national image. Fearing that Japan might might be carved up into spheres of influence like China after the Opium Wars, the new national government needed to quickly consolidate power, which they would accomplish in part by inventing and disseminating a national identity, demonstrating their cultural sophistication to foreign powers, and exporting goods to finance Japan's development and modernization.[5] They made heavy use of the so-called applied arts in pursuit of all of these goals: "Through careful planning and extensive use of government funds, they hoped to shape foreign opinion of Japan, but more importantly boost their international export trade."[6] Lacking the "Oriental" ornamentation popular among export markets, rokkoyō tea-taste stonewares suffered greatly during this period,[7] but soon they too came under heavy government influence as tools to prop up Japan's national prestige.[8] Perhaps the most shocking example of their nationalization was their use for the national defense. In the final months of World War II, with Japan facing a shortage of iron, some of the master potters of Bizen were ordered to create ceramic shells for hand grenades.[9] After the war ended, the efforts of ceramists, tea enthusiasts, and archaeologists revived the Six Ancient Kilns as important historic, cultural,

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[4] Pollard, Clare, "Gorgeous with Glitter and Gold: Miyagawa Kōzan and the Role of Satsuma Export Ware in the Early Meiji Ceramic Industry," In *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, edited by Ellen P. Conant, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 133.
[5] Yusem Meyers, Elizabeth H., "Meiji Craft and Japonisme: The Japanese Exhibits at the Philadelphia and Chicago World's Fairs and the Structuring of American Taste," Thesis, (Brooklyn, NY: Pratt Institute, 2013), 19-20.
[6] Ibid., 6.
[7] Winther-Tamaki, Bert, "Earth Flavor (Tsuchi Aji) in Postwar Japanese Ceramics," *Japan Review*, no. 32 (2019), 154.
[8] The Six Ancient Kilns Japan Heritage Utilization Council, "Tokoname: Journey. One Thousand Years. The Six Ancient Kilns.," The Six Ancient Kilns Official Website, 2019, https://en.sixancientkilns.jp/.
[9] Matsumoto, Shimpei, "Ceramic WWII Grenades Show Sorrowful Mixing of Art and War," Asia News Network, 2022, https://asianews.network/ceramic-wwii-grenades-show-sorrowful-mixing-of-art-and-war.

and economic sites.[10] As a consequence of this revival, as this paper will demonstrate, their wares were transformed into symbols of local and prefectural identity.

This is not to say that other narratives of identity do not exist among these potteries, nor does this work presume to guess at the internal narratives of personal and collective self felt by the people of these six municipalities and five prefectures. Ultimately it cannot truly be determined how all individuals within a given group identify themselves, and that is not the focus of this research. This is, first and foremost, a paper about the symbiotic relationship between art, institutions, and community. What is meant by the term "identity" in this text, then, must be made clear. Identity is chiefly a form, or rather a collection of forms, of discourse, not an intrinsic character. Wrapped up in social construction and propaganda, regional identity, like its sibling national identity, is an imaginary designation based on a conception of community between a great many people who are, for the most part, complete strangers to one another.[11] As a form of discourse, it is subject to the opinions of myriad actors with varying amounts of power over and stakes in how people define themselves in relation to each other.[12] By limiting the term in this application to discourse status, I hope to liberate this paper from problematic discussions of validity or reliance on data that can never possibly be exhaustive. Rather than attempt to describe what the people of the rokkoyō and their surrounding communities, prefectures, and regions think, it will describe the vast amount of political and economic capital that has, deliberately or not, gone into the systematic resurrection of these traditional tea-taste ceramics as symbols of regional culture.

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[10] Winther-Tamaki, "Earth Flavor in Postwar Japanese Ceramics," 155.
[11] Anderson, Benedict, "Imagined Communities," In *Nations and Nationalism: A Reader*, edited by Philip Spencer and Howard Wollman, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 49.
[12] Brubaker, Rogers, and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 2.

In general, postwar Japan has seen an intensifying interest in promoting and adopting region-ness through a variety of cultural symbols, with regional dialects making an especially spirited comeback from prewar nationalization.[13] The creations of the Six Ancient Kilns will also be viewed in this context, as commodities, as art, as useful objects, as historic artifacts, and as amalgamations of materials, to demonstrate that they are a productive component of this modern trend, and that by latching onto it, they have enabled themselves to travel along the path from objects to icons. Through a marrying of history education, tourism, trade, and cultural preservation, the Six Ancient Kilns of Japan have been turned into a cultural lifeline for the rural and suburban communities that host them, serving as seeds for the crystallization of community and prefectural identity.

Fig. 2: Bizen Map Signage
Bizen Ceramics Village
Imbe, Japan
Photo taken by author

The photo of a sign in Imbe (fig. 2) is an ideal example of the amount of effort and coordination that has gone into using ancient ceramics to promote tourism to the small town.

[13] Okumura, Nao, "Japanese Dialect Ideology from Meiji to the Present," Dissertation, (Portland, OR: Portland State University, 2016), 1.

Shaped like a vase, the map advertises its contents as "The village of Bizen-yaki," and marks the many places around town where tourists can find kilns, pottery studios, shops, historic sites, lodging, and restaurants. Beside it can be seen one of the hundreds of banners lining the roads of the village advertising an upcoming Bizen-yaki fair, and behind it on the left is a two-story Bizen-yaki museum and gallery. On the right side of the background is quite possibly a perfect metaphor: a chimney, either from a traditional kiln or modeled after one that is, has been put to new use as a signpost, holding a sign that I unfortunately did not have the foresight to read while I was there, but appears to advertise the area's history to visitors. Occupying the center of a small town in which such chimneys dominate the skyline, this image illustrates the extent to which the town of Imbe has come to be defined by cultural tourism oriented entirely around traditional ceramics.

The connection between tourism and place identity here is by no means exceptional. Tourism, as an activity that brings together the lives of people who would ordinarily never have crossed paths, necessarily entails what John Urry called the "tourist gaze," through which the visitor makes sense of the locale: "The gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of signs. When tourists see two people kissing in Paris what they capture in the gaze is 'timeless, romantic Paris.'"[14] Everything the tourist sees and does as a part of their tourism is incorporated into their view of the place and its people, to be added on to existing essentializations from what the tourist heard about the place before they arrived. In order to create a successful industry out of tourism, then, the locale must put on a performance that emphasizes what is so unique and special about it that visitors should flock to it to experience this "different" reality for themselves. Tourist industries that specialize in the production of "authentic" place symbols and narratives thus prosper and live on in the competitive natural

[14] Urry, John, *The Tourist Gaze*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), 3.

selection dynamic of rural economies: "Each centre of attraction involves complex processes of production in order that regular, meaningful and profitable tourist gazes can be generated and sustained. Such gazes cannot be left to chance."[15] In the back-and-forth of place creation between tourist and locale, objects, landscapes, and practices that might otherwise be innocuous become blaring symbols of place identity and take on much greater meaning. A kiln firing technique that was once valued because it created beautiful tea bowls is now valued because it represents "us:" our history, our culture, our collective self. Towns and cities that depend on tourism of course play an active role in this self-essentializing because of its effectiveness as a public relations move. In Japan:

> *With many municipalities already on fiscal life-support, the only alternative to public works projects are traditionally underrated service industries such as tourism. The attraction of a regional brand to local political campaigns becomes clear when viewed in this climate of depopulation and fiscal deficit.*[16]

Completely dependent as they are on income from tourism, naturally the rokkoyō use what is at their disposal to generate more of such income, to create a brand that will draw in visitors. What is at their disposal to create this brand is a millennium of history making some of the most highly prized ceramics in Japan.[17] The viewer-viewed dynamic inherent to the objectifying gaze of tourism then solidifies the objects as part of the objectified place. Tourism is thus a key component of this investigation into the process by which place identity for these six locales has become so closely tied to their tea-taste ceramics: it is a performance that unites place and object as one.

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[15] Ibid., 10.
[16] Jones, T., Nagata, S., Nakajima, M. et al, "Prefectural branding in Japan: Tourism, National Parks and the Shinshu Brand," *Place Brand Public Dipl*. 5, (2009), 194.
[17] Lee, "Some Japanese Tea Taste Ceramics," 267

Fig. 3: Tambayaki Oldest Kiln
Tambayaki Village
Tachikui, Japan
Photo taken by author

At the center of the rokkoyō tourism industry has been the conversion of the kilns themselves into tourist sites. The image of the oldest continuously-operating Tamba-yaki kiln (fig. 3) shows what that has entailed for Tamba. The kiln's protective structure proudly displays a sign declaring it Tamba-yaki's oldest climbing kiln to all who visit the structure. On the left side is a panel describing how the kiln was made, and on the right side is a panel describing its history dating back to 1895, including its recent restoration completed in 2016. Not visible in this photograph is a similar panel describing the same history in English. It is clear from the tourist infrastructure that has been put in place that this kiln is meant to attract tourists with representations of the area's history, culture, and traditions. During my stay in Tamba, I observed that firings of these traditional kilns, which occur only once to a few times a year because of the intensity of the labor and high material costs, are major events, drawing in people both from the local area and from as far away as the United States. Tamba, however, is by no means unique in its elevation of kilns to the status of tourist sites. Echizen's official tourism website, for example, lists Echizen-yaki as one of the "seven wonders" of Echizen, and makes sure to advertise the

local pottery festival in May, where visitors can visit to purchase tablewares, decorative objects, and tools from any of the town's artisans all in one place.[18] It would seem that wherever there is a history to exploit that history is exploited for the economic benefit of each town.

Not only does it make perfect sense that a town's reputation vis-a-vis tourists, on which it is fiscally dependent, needs some interesting material-cultural background on which to build itself, but in the case of the Six Ancient Kilns, such a reputation feeds into existing narratives, and thus basically builds itself. Though Western tourism to Japan has long been fueled by an orientalist longing for some innocent and pure past,[19] more recently, as Japan has modernized, a similar longing can be found within its domestic tourism. It is to this nostalgia that the offering up of kiln sites to the objectifying tourist gaze appeals. A key player in the 20th-century revival of tea-taste ceramics, including at the six kiln sites, Yanagi Muneyoshi, was primarily motivated in his efforts by a distaste for industrialism, which he saw as a threat to artistry and the ideal village ecosystem of the past in which he imagined it would thrive.[20] It was this view which inspired him to travel around Japan seeking out folk pottery (called *mingei*) which he could piece together into his and his contemporaries' narrative of a simpler time. The modern day kiln-tourism of the rokkoyō can thus be viewed as a logical continuation of this nostalgia-driven travel, bearing heavily on the relationship between the six towns' status as aesthetic tourist destinations and sense of self.

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[18] Echizen Town Tourism Federation, "The 7 Wonders of Echizen Town," Echizen Kankounavi, 2024, https://www.town-echizen.jp/en/.
[19] Jansen, Marius B., "Cultural Change in Nineteenth-Century Japan," In *Challenging Past and Present: The Metamorphosis of Nineteenth-Century Japanese Art*, edited by Ellen P. Conant, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006), 52.
[20] Winther-Tamaki, "Earth Flavor in Postwar Japanese Ceramics," 154-5.

Fig. 4: Tokoname Pottery Footpath
Dokan Zaka
Tokoname, Japan
Aichi Now: Official Site for Tourism Aichi

Perhaps more impressive than the kilns themselves, however, is the amount of effort that has been put, through the coordination of residents and city and prefectural governments, into creating new tourist sites that draw in visitors with a pottery theme, and which have come to dominate, conceptually or spatially, their host cities. In Tokoname, for example, a path known as the Dokan Zaka is paved with ceramic pipes and jars that represent the area's specialty (fig. 4). This path leads to another lined with *maneki neko* (beckoning cats), another product associated with the town, including a large statue of the town's maneki neko-themed mascot.[21] Echizen's Ceramic Art Park is filled with ceramic sculptures by local artists and hosts its annual ceramics festival, attracting "100,000 visitors from within and outside the prefecture every year."[22] Tamba's craft park features a gallery space for local artists and artisans to display their work, as well as an outdoor gathering space for pottery events with sidewalks paved in ceramic shards, so

[21] Aichi Prefecture, "Tokoname Pottery Footpath (Pottery Trails)," Aichi Now: Official Site for Tourism Aichi, 2024. https://www.aichi-now.jp/en/spots/detail/33/.
[22] Fukui Ceramics Museum, "Echizen Ceramics Park," Fukui Prefectural Museum of Ceramics, 2014. https://www.tougeikan.jp/about-park.html.

that in walking through this part of Tamba one literally treads upon the history of the local craft. Near the city's oldest climbing kiln, the streets are set with ceramic tiles created by local artisans, each showcasing their own unique style. These sites follow a larger trend in Japan recently, in which local products and crafts have been actively and deliberately utilized by town and prefectural governments in "soft power diplomacy" campaigns to boost the locale's national profile while bringing in visitors.[23] Mascots like Tokoname's Tokonyan are just one way in which objects or narratives that might bring a city prestige are converted into pop-culture icons. In the case of the rokkoyō, clearly literal place creation plays a role in this figurative solidification of place identity. These places are contact points between the local culture and outside visitors, essentially forcing a traditional ceramics theme onto the tourist gaze, which then comes to define the locale, both for the tourist and for the local resident, in terms of its history of craft production. In this way, pottery-themed tourist spaces, including both restored production sites and newly-built attractions, act as public relations copy through which the ceramics themselves are transformed into iconic representations of the area's history, culture, and unique character.

[23] Fearn, Hannah, "Lessons from Japan: Investing in Local Identities," The Guardian, August 8, 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/local-government-network/2011/aug/08/lessons-from-japan-local-identities.

Fig. 5: Tambayaki Jars
Museum of Ceramic Art, Hyogo
Tamba-Sasayama, Japan
Photo taken by author

Each of the Six Ancient Kiln sites has benefited from heavy investment in museums and public education campaigns and materials that have served to reify their ceramic products in the public imagination as symbols of a local history that remains largely unchanged. This pattern is not surprising, given that public museums as a concept emerged as nationalist ideas were taking hold of Europe, and in Japan, where they were not adopted until after the country began to modernize, they were from the very beginning tools of identity construction:

> *Japanese modernity took shape in relation to an outside audience that was envisioned as being present to see and evaluate the Asian nation. In an age when the world's fairs and museums were central to how the world knew Japan, exhibiting and being seen played a defining role in its modern development*.[24]

Art museums in Japan historically functioned and continue to function as sites of place-making propaganda designed to portray Japan favorably to outsiders. Playing into Urry's tourist gaze, museums create an environment in which the visitor is the viewer and the objects housed in the museum are the viewed, in many cases literally separated by panes of glass. The viewer, a visitor who has come to the museum specifically to see "the ceramic art of Tamba," is already prepared for the task of narrative creation regarding the objects, which they have the authority to evaluate and judge, and which are difficult to view outside of the context of the museum's theme, around which the entire experience is structured. This social positioning between visitor and object, as well as the narratives that museums choose to include about the works in artifact descriptions and informational panels, transforms the museum collection into a single collective thing, representing a continuous, pure, and unspoiled past. Though this self-orientalism was initially

[24] Foxwell, Chelsea, "Japan as Museum? Encapsulating Change and Loss in Late-Nineteenth-Century Japan," Getty Research Journal, no. 1 (2009): 39.

intended to appeal to foreign Japanophiles as symbols of Japan's national cultural enlightenment, it was easily adapted for Japanese audiences:

> *The understanding of the historian's pursuit as infused with voyeuristic longing helps us to comprehend how what was originally a foreign stance toward the Japanese past could eventually be taken up within Japan as a source of pure, immutable Japanese identity and the ideological companion of wartime nationalism*.[25]

The task of the curator or collector, then, can be viewed as the task of a storyteller who uses physical objects in combination with words. The story that is told is one of identity and belonging, and it employs as its structural support the supposed aesthetic unity of art associated with the identity being defined, conflating with that art canon a sort of moral unity associated with an idealized past. Though this method of storytelling began as a nation building exercise, it has in the postwar period been adapted yet again, this time to the task of constructing local and regional identity.

The Museum of Ceramic Art in Hyōgo (fig. 5), for example, showcases a body of work that includes pieces dating back to the Heian period as well as pieces made by modern day artists. Collections, as well as groupings of similar wares, are showcased together regardless of when they were produced, which, intentionally or not, has the side effect of implying a continuity across the centuries in what is characteristically Tamba-yaki. This is not to say that there is not a great variety of stylistic choices in the work shown; rather, it seems that the variety is what allows for a sense of what Tamba-yaki is to coalesce without being interrupted by the inconvenience of individual choice or change over time. Typical of art museums, the visual narrative is helped along by a written narrative that emphasizes what viewers are supposed to take away from the experience. In the case of Tamba-yaki:

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[25] Ibid., 50.

> *Morisada Manko (Morisada's Manual on Customs of the Edo Period) of 1853 contains the line "In Kyoto and Osaka bottles made in Tamba are used to hold a five go measure (c 900 mL) of sake. The sake bottles, loaned by the liquor seller, have a colour just like a chestnut," indicating the chestnut glaze was frequently used on Tamba sake bottles transported to the Kyoto-Osaka region in the late 18-19c. This brown chestnut glaze which emerged in the first house of the 18c produced a range of shades from russet and light brown to dark brown, and is considered to be a variety of iron glaze evolved from the red slip akadobe*.[26]

A number of descriptions and informational panels at the museum engage in a similar compiling of historical narratives that would seem to pick Tamba-yaki out from the crowd of ceramic crafts and emphasize what is special about it. Whether people in past eras really saw any of these six styles of pottery as distinct or particularly special cannot be proven one way or another, but regardless of whether this narrative is based on legitimate historical modes of thought or merely on cherry-picked examples, the effect is the same. Visitors to the museum leave with the impression of a "Tamba-yaki": a style of pottery that is unified yet diverse, eternal and inevitable yet rooted in a particular set of moments in history, and a core component of Tamba's mythology of self.

Like other tourist sites, these museums benefit from past and present government intervention, which carries the intent of using them as public relations copy to provide much-needed economic attention to otherwise struggling rural and suburban areas. The narrative crystallization that occurs within the rokkoyō museums thus cannot be studied without examining the more recent political interests that connect it to the rest of the local economy. While prefectural and local governments manage the museums and collections and maintain the tourist spaces, which in turn maintain the image of the rokkoyō, the national government handles much of the narrative building that goes on before the visitor ever arrives, and this has been the

[26] Museum of Ceramic Art, Hyōgo, Japan

state of things from the beginning. Fujio Koyama, the ceramics historian who first coined the term ‘rokkoyō’ in the 1940s,[27] was, at the same time, heavily involved in the nationwide postwar designation of cultural properties, and the founding of the Japan Ceramics Promotion Association. The association aimed to revive Japan's ruined economy by investing in traditional craft production, which would provide the surplus of agricultural workers with employment opportunities.[28] This overlap of both personnel and interests links government economic policy to the very establishment of the rokkoyō as a concept. Paradoxically, Japan's national government, in an attempt to bolster the national economy and national exports, created symbols around which local identities were able to form: as mentioned above, often in contrast to an outsider-perceived national unity, given the Japanese nationality of many visitors to these tourist sites. This local-national relationship continues into the present day. Today, the Six Ancient Kilns are classified by the Japan National Tourism Organization as Japan Heritage sites.[29] Perhaps more unusual, though certainly an encouraging step in the revival of local economies, “the Japanese national government has recently emphasized the potential of place branding as a means by which Japan as a national brand can promote its local traditional products, thereby contributing to revitalisation of regions within Japan.”[30] It cannot be said to be particularly surprising that national and local interests align in this case, given that any national economy is an amalgamation of local economies, and thus benefits from their success and stability. However, given Japan’s previous foray into hypernationalism, the velocity and long-term continuation of its sudden advocacy for traditional crafts as connected to a local and culturally distinct place is

[27] Tatsujinstyle, “Oldest Japanese Pottery Are Called Six Ancient Kilns,” August 31, 2023, https://www.tatsujin-style.com/oldest-japanese-pottery-six-ancient-kilns/.
[28] Kida, Takuya, “Japanese Crafts and Cultural Exchange with the USA in the 1950s: Soft Power and John D. Rockefeller III during the Cold War,” Journal of Design History 25, no. 4 (2012): 383.
[29] Japan National Tourism Organization, “Japan Heritage Full List: Stories and Travel Information,” Japan Heritage Official Site, https://www.japan.travel/japan-heritage/full_list.
[30] Rausch, A., “Place Branding in Rural Japan: Cultural Commodities as Local Brands,” Place Brand Public Dipl 4, (2008), 138.

notable. Local place branding is an entirely recent phenomenon born out of the postwar era's unique combination of nostalgia, democratic government, and capitalism. Sponsorship of these piecemeal branding campaigns at all levels of government has contributed to the creation of the rokkoyō and their products, from scratch, as objects, economic goods, and intangible cultural heritage intrinsically attached to locale.

Fig. 6: Akebono Gama
Tachikui, Japan
Photo taken by author

Fig. 7: Bizen Ware

Bizen Pottery Association
Imbe, Japan
Photo taken by author

Education also plays a role in locals' association of home and craft. While to chronicle place identity as it has navigated the nebulous array of institutions, businesses, and associations that constitute childhood and adult education would be an endeavor far too ambitious for this project, the above examples, at least, provide a glance into how education has helped to facilitate the evolution of craft into a symbol that inspires local pride. The small, one-segment-long noborigama called *Akebono Gama* (fig. 6) is notable, not because it is particularly impressive, but because it is on the grounds of a public school. Based on the spiel I received when I was given a tour of the site, it was originally built with help from a non-profit organization as an educational aid to teach students in the school's art classes about the traditional culture of their local area. As such, it imparts students not only with the techniques associated with their hometown's crafts, but also with a sense of collective self that is wrapped up in the history of those crafts. While it is not unusual that a school should teach its students about their local history, in a town like Tachikui, where the children grow up already surrounded by reminders of what makes their town, and therefore them, so special, it would be absurd to deny that this education does not serve to hammer that point home. At the very least it contributes to the pile-on of economic, political, and societal interests which coalesce to produce a popular narrative of unique local identity.

Informal education also clearly contributes to narratives of a distinctive local character grounded in a mythology-like recounting of the history of local ceramics. In each of these towns, stores and other public spaces are filled with pamphlets and educational signage created by local cultural preservation organizations to educate the public about this feature of town history. One

such pamphlet produced by the Okayama Prefecture Bizen Pottery Association (fig. 7), of which I was handed multiple copies in multiple languages over the course of the day I spent in Imbe, uses familiar language to depict Bizen-yaki, and consequently Bizen itself, as the heir to an ancient history enveloping all of Japan yet inherently distinct, particularly innovative, and remarkably unchanging from its ancient roots. This mix of auto-orientalism with local pride is ubiquitous. One pamphlet I acquired in Tamba proclaims:

> *Time flows more slowly in Tamba. It's a place where the people live together with the blessings of nature, and work to protect that same nature. Despite the quiet appearance of the hamlets here, they contain a powerful passion for Tambayaki pottery, which, since the beginning of the Heian period, has continued for more than 800 years.*[31]

Again the association of local pottery with an ancient, unchanging tradition and a distinct local spirit is present, reducing Tamba to its canonical mythology of place. While this particular pamphlet is clearly targeted toward foreign tourists, I am including it here as an educational material, firstly because it is, given the significant overlap between the tourism and informal education, but also because it, like many other pamphlets, was so ubiquitously available at stores and public recreational facilities that its consumption could not possibly have been bounded by the act of tourism alone. Of course, the obvious specter of orientalism lurking in this piece of writing cannot be responsibly considered without also considering that its target audience is composed largely of English-speaking foreign tourists. However, when viewed within the larger body of work, as well as within the body of cultural preservation organizations which frequently publish these pamphlets, this and other similar works seem to be as much a part of local place formation as tourist-directed exoticism. The associations that print these materials are composed

[31] Committee for Restoration of World's Oldest Noborigama & Village of Tambayaki Revitalization, *Tamba*, (Sasayama, Hyogo, Japan: Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2015).

of local potters and store owners, are responsible to their local communities,[32] and produce plenty of Japanese-language educational content and signage that are clearly intended for domestic readers. If local residents and craftspeople of the rokkoyō do not to some extent view themselves as carrying on, and resultantly defined by, a timeless tradition, then at the very least that is how they seem to wish to be viewed by outsiders. The former, however, is more likely, as the "tacit knowledge" of a collective history spread by these materials is often what enables rural populations to develop their locale into an economically viable cultural district in the first place.[33] Regardless, the effect is that narratives of the Six Ancient Kilns are flooded with copy that seamlessly blends craft and place into a sort of chimera: a hybrid creature invented and sustained by mythology.

Fig. 8: Tanuki
ca. 2007

[32] Touyuukai, "陶友会について - 協同組合岡山県備前焼陶友会," 協同組合岡山県備前焼陶友会, March 10, 2020, https://touyuukai.jp/about.html.
[33] Santagata, Walter, "Potential Cultural Districts and the Production of Material Culture," *Économie Appliquée* 67, no. 4 (2014): 151.

Koka, Japan
"Was a bee": Wikimedia Commons

In the complex web I have so far described of local and national governments, economic modernization, cultural institutions, and tourism, one key component is missing: that being the ways in which the ceramics of the rokkoyō themselves are distinctly suited—as commodities, as constructed physical objects, and as media for personal or cultural expression—to being symbols of local heritage. The divergence, both historical and modern, of ancient kilns into niche products that act very literally as symbols to both local and tourist markets is one example. One such niche product is the *tanuki* of Shigaraki ware (fig. 8). A common sight at the entrances to homes and businesses all over Japan, these cartoonishly proportioned statues of Japanese raccoon dogs are instantly recognizable for their *kasa* (conical straw hats), cherubine cheeks, and comically large testicles. Their recognizability for their distinctive appearance is exactly what makes them so memorable that they could become symbolic of Shigaraki ware and Shiga Prefecture itself. Their resulting popularity contributes to a positive feedback loop. Though they are associated with the ancient craft of traditional Shigaraki pottery, they date back less than a century, to statues of raccoon dogs holding the Japanese flag which were displayed to welcome the Shōwa Emperor on his visit to the area. He was reportedly so impressed by this show of patriotism and goodwill that the statues became an instant hit all across Japan, which they remain to this day.[34] In their own way, iconic products like the tanuki have become a sort of *meibutsu* ("famous product"): a product associated with a certain locale often purchased as a souvenir. Often describing varieties of produce that each require a specific set of conditions and skills to cultivate, meibutsu enjoy a special status as goods that are accessible to all travelers to an area while being limited in production to that area, making them both ubiquitous and "special," and

[34] SAKJHUC, "Shigaraki. Journey. One Thousand Years. The Six Ancient Kilns," 2019.

facilitating their popularity. Far from just being souvenirs, however, "The economic importance of meibutsu lies primarily in their ability to create identity and branding for local goods, thus allowing for comparably higher pricing, the creation of derivative industries, and direct contribution to regional tourism."[35] Meibutsu are not merely easily brandable goods; rather, they are the brand, blurring the lines between object and place, and turning tourism even further into a consumerist venture in which the item being consumed is not just reminiscent of its locale, but is regarded as a piece of the locale itself. Viewing the traditional ceramics of the Six Ancient Kilns as meibutsu—celebrated products associated with a certain limited area because of the unique conditions and skills required to produce them, and often marketed to visitors as souvenirs—then, reveals how they can so easily transcend the status of art objects, becoming instead so iconic of their birthplace that there can be no distinguishing of the two. The products themselves and the market they have created for themselves make up a core component of the process by which the ceramics of the rokkoyō have become symbols of local identity.

[35] Staff, Knowledge at Wharton. "Meibutsu: The Economic and Cultural Significance of Traditional Japanese Products." Knowledge at Wharton, January 26, 2011. https://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/meibutsu-the-economic-and-cultural-significance-of-traditional-japanese-products/#:~:text=Japan's%20diverse%20cultural%20traditions%2C%20business,various%20regional%20products%20and%20goods.

Fig. 9: Sashimi on Tambayaki
甚九郎 (JinQro)
Yodogawa, Japan
Photo taken by author

While I was living and working in Tamba-Sasayama, my boss' friends Took me and one of my coworkers out to dinner at a restaurant in the Ōsaka area called "JinQro." There, I was surprised to find that our food was being served on plates and bowls that had clearly been created at Tanbungama, the Tamba-yaki studio where I worked. One of the courses, sashimi nestled into a rugged wood-fired piece, is pictured above (fig. 9). This was no coincidence, as my boss and his friends had a working relationship with the restaurant's owner and head chef, which accounts for the large collection of Tamba-yaki at a restaurant so far away from Tamba. Had the restaurant been closer to my workplace, I would not have been surprised in the least. In Tamba, as in at least several of the other rokkoyō, a burgeoning secondary culture economy has developed, using the reputation and aesthetic of Tamba ware to support industries besides ceramic production. This phenomenon is by no means unique:

> *It is possible that the brand created for the cultural commodity may be applied to other local products, both other cultural commodities and agricultural and aqua-cultural products, as well as services and performances that characterize the place. This obviously lends itself to tourism, but also contributes to other place-specific activities and events based on the specific historical and geographic characteristics*.[36]

It makes perfect sense that in the competitive economic environment of cultural districts, local businesses in other industries such as restaurants, hotels, and, in Tamba, even grocery stores, sweet shops, and hot springs would associate themselves with the area's most successful industry to draw in more patrons. More than merely a collection of individual business decisions, however, the relationship between cultural commodity and these secondary industries is systemic, arising from the sense of community that these cultural commodities bring about:

[36] Rausch,"Place Branding in Rural Japan," 145.

> *Beyond the level of the individual, cultural capital is convertible into economic capital through interactions within the business sphere and between that and the regulatory function of the state and supra-state. Thus, the actors of a culture economy feed on the cultural capital as a collective resource and thereby assist in its accumulation. This is a crucial point: 'conversion' is possibly something of a misnomer, rather, cultural capital enables other capital to come into being while the stock of capital in its pre-transaction form is not diminished; in fact, the act of conversion works to add to the stock of the original form of capital, just as financial capital, for example, can be used to buy the means of production and thereby earn interest*.[37]

When culture is viewed as a collective resource to be utilized by industry, its benefits become clear. Not only is it inexhaustible and completely free to use, but its use by various industries contributes even further to the wealth it contains. Every performer, producer, and exploiter of culture adds to that culture their own set of experiences, ideas, and products. At a locale-wide level, the nature of a culture-based economy forces, or at least strongly encourages, participation in that culture by local businesses, so that a culture given monetary value is institutionally self-propagating.

As a result of this dynamic, local identity also becomes self-propagating. One cannot visit Tamba-Sasayama, for example, without seeing Tamba-yaki everywhere. Every restaurant, inn, and café serves food on local ceramics. Many local businesses at the very least keep stacks of business cards of various local potters, and at one grocery store I visited, there was a selection of local ceramics on a shelf behind the bin of plums. A positive feedback loop is born. The fame of traditional ceramics as the town's key industry increases the reliance of other local businesses on that key industry, its reputation, and its mythology in order to attract customers, which only further projects the fame of the ceramics. Moreover, caught up in the cycle, the town becomes more and more ceramic-flavored, soaked as it is in a brine of cultural industry driven by those

[37] Ray, Christopher, *Culture Economies*, (Newcastle: Centre for Rural Economy, 2001), 44-5.

ceramics. It becomes so impossible, wherever one ventures in the town, to escape out from under pottery's shadow, that the town and its craft industry cannot be experienced separately. Thus, the importance of the entire diverse economy of the rokkoyō to their uniform representations as 'the town of ___-yaki' cannot be ignored. In each of these towns, the entire local economy is hard-wired to make identification with locale and identification with local traditional pottery one and the same.

Fig. 10: Bizen-yaki for Sale
備前焼椿苑 (Bizenyaki Tsubaki-en)
Imbe, Japan
Photo taken by author

Another trait that has lent itself well to symbolism is the relative uniformity of each town's aesthetic style. While the visual standardization of rokkoyō wares is by no means new, dating back to the Muromachi period,[38] in the modern tourist economy that these wares occupy, the standardization is ever more pronounced. This is not to say that individual potters or studios do not have their own unique styles, or that there is no innovation, but rather that all of these unique styles and innovations fit together into a discursive aesthetic that remains reminiscent of classic works, and can be seen as representative of each town's essential character. In Bizen, for

[38] Seattle Art Museum, *Ceramic Art of Japan*, 26.

example, every shop I visited had its own niche that it occupied, whether that be certain shapes, motifs, or uses. However, everywhere I went, except for some avant-garde pieces at one particular gallery, the surface decoration was surprisingly uniform between creators, following the same four or five phenotypes, as seen in fig. 10, and which one pamphlet I was handed describes in detail.[39] *Hidasuki* ("fire marks") are made by beating straw with a mallet and wrapping it around unglazed pottery. In the kiln, the straw burns away, causing a chemical reaction that leaves bright reddish-brown ribbon-like marks on an otherwise beige or white ceramic. This is the most well-known and iconic patterning for Bizen-ware, but others including *Goma*, named for its sesame seed-like flecks of ash glaze, and *Sangiri* and *Ao-Bizen*, both known for their blue and gunmetal gray hues caused by reduction reactions that occur in the low-oxygen areas of the kiln, are also standard patterns for Bizen ware. Another common occurrence in Bizen-yaki are circular bare patches like those seen on the top-center vessel above (fig. 10), called *botamochi*, and caused by the pots' close proximity to each other in the kiln resulting in uneven firing. This, too, is an iconic feature of modern standardized Bizen-yaki that calls to mind an essentialized Bizen.

Looking at the photograph, the economic incentives to follow along with the standardization are clear. The most expensive piece shown, the jug on the top left, cost ¥400,000, or about $2,760 using the exchange rate at the time the photograph was taken. Participants in tourist markets come looking for products that fit in with their view of what Bizen ware, for example, is supposed to look like. The unique local expertise required to produce works like this, as well as the high costs of operating a traditional wood-fired kiln, allow producers to charge such a high sum, but the high demand for works that evoke a sense of an ancient, unchanging locale do so as well, and certainly encourage some level of consistency with what has entered the

[39] Konishi Touko Bizen Ware Company, *About Konishi Touko*, Bizen, n.d.

public consciousness as ‘classic Bizen,’ even as artists still show significant creativity bounded by those core features. All six of the ancient kilns have their own features that differentiate them from each other, and which have become symbolic of all they are capable of, and of their long history of ceramic production. Seto ware is especially exceptional, with its multiple distinct styles and often elaborate patterns, but Tamba is known for its thick coating of ash glaze which pours down the sides of the pieces, and also well-known are “the rich textural surfaces of Shigaraki ware with its clay containing quantities of sand and gravel.”[40] The consistency of visual forms across dozens of independent studios in each of these towns allows for a sense of cohesion, real or imagined, to form. Though the tradition is carried on by many different practitioners, it remains one tradition for one town.

It is a testament to how effective this traditional symbolism has been that in nearly a millennium, only Seto is known for more than one style of ceramic. Instead, each of the other communities collectively practices, at least to the public, one single tradition that can be traced back to the middle ages. Even in Seto, the separate styles of stoneware each claim a part of a branching lineage resulting from Seto potters’ local interpretation of ancient Sue ware.[41] Furthermore, that each town’s aesthetic can be so clearly identified with its place of origin, much like the meibutsu wares, allows the association of one set of visual features with one locale to spread and become canonical in the public imagination as well as the imaginations of practitioners. If what one is looking to buy is Bizen-yaki, then one will look for what they know Bizen-yaki is supposed to look like. If what one is looking to produce is Bizen-yaki, then one will follow the unspoken guidelines left by their forebears defining what Bizen-yaki is supposed to look like. Thus a habit of identification is maintained. In the complicated web of economic

[40] Seattle Art Museum, *Ceramic Art of Japan*, 26.
[41] Ibid., 23-24.

factors with which the cultural-district art-object industry is entangled, the standardization of the aesthetic styles of each of the Six Ancient Kilns both results from and further contributes to the association of artistic form and spirit of place, and the conversion of artworks into symbols of local identity.

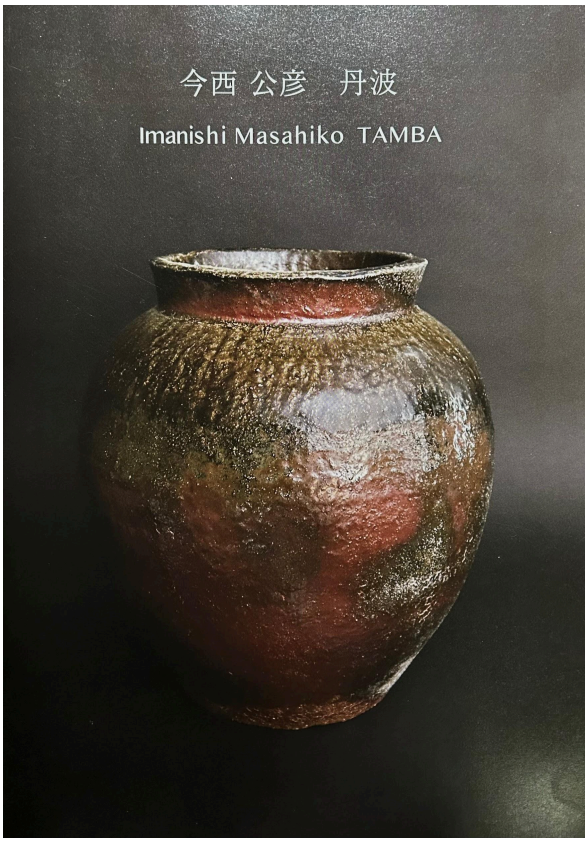

Fig. 11: Tamba Vessel
Masahiko Imanishi
ca. 2022
ArtSalon Yamaki
Ōsaka, Japan
Imanishi Masahiko - Tamba
Photo taken by George Yamaki

Fig. 12: Himegozen
Muromachi Period (ca. 15th c)
Kitamura Museum of Art Collection
Kyōto, Japan
Rokukoyō o Tazuneru ("Visit the Six Ancient Kilns"), The Sun
Photo taken by Takeshi Fujimori

The physical feature that most distinguishes the works of the rokkoyō as unique symbols of the character of their locale, however, is the clay itself. The works of five of the six kilns (and some from Seto) utilize what is often called *tsuchi aji* ("earth flavor"), in which:

> *The aesthetic effects of these wares derive entirely from the clay, its color and texture, and the attractiveness of the shapes, where the accidental irregularities of the forms, punctuated by colorful bursts or rivulets of ash glaze, invest these rustic wares with a dynamic energy and unpretentious beauty*.[42]

All traditional Japanese kilns have some history of tsuchi aji in their works. Not only did the aesthetic of the tea ceremony prioritize vessels that were simple, imperfect, and reminiscent of

[42] Seattle Art Museum, *Ceramic Art of Japan*, 25.

nature, but even in more elaborate styles like those of Seto, "the properties of the available clay were a major factor in determining the pottery that could be produced."[43] For example, the hidasuki that have become iconic of Bizen ware occur because of the high iron content of the clay, which oxidizes to a reddish color as the straw burns away.[44] Additionally, "Shigaraki clay is known for its reddish-brown color, often stippled with small bits of white feldspar, while one of the most famous types of Seto clay retains a pithy look and light buff tone, even when fired at high temperatures."[45] These are inherent features of each kiln site, and a byproduct of the spread out and diverse culture of ceramics in Japan. However, there is more than one way to represent the unique features of local clay. The use of tsuchi aji today, following the tradition of ancient tea-taste wares, is only one, but it has singularly enjoyed a major comeback and has become a defining feature of the pottery of all six sites starting in the late 1940s, following the swell of previously-mentioned postwar nostalgia within Japan's art community.[46] With the standardization of traditional styles to form a distinctly modern canon, the image of a raw, rough-grained, and unevenly-colored vessel full of naturally-occuring cracks and small stones and grains of sand, as seen in the Shigaraki vessel above (fig. 12) has become the model representation of the rokkoyō.

Perhaps by sheer coincidence, the display of naturalistic unglazed clay in these types of works allows the distinct features of local clay to shine through and connect the visual character of the ceramics quite concretely to a specific place. Even among the works of contemporary artist Masahiko Imanishi, who has found new, innovative ways to represent traditional Tamba ware, many of his vessels can be immediately identified as Tamba ware by the rich brown of the exposed clay (fig. 11), and the 600-year-old *Himegozen* (fig. 12) shares with both the oldest and

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[43] Winther-Tamaki, Bert, "Ceramics: Earth Flavor in Fired Clay," In *Tsuchi: Earthy Materials in Contemporary Japanese Art*, (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 20.
[44] SAKJHUC, "Shigaraki. Journey. One Thousand Years. The Six Ancient Kilns," 2019.
[45] Winther-Tamaki, "Ceramics," 20.
[46] Ibid., 21.

newest Shigaraki works a rough, sandy clay that splits like a dry riverbed in the heat of the kiln. Despite differences over time and between craftspeople at each kiln site, the consistency of material binds these six traditions and their accompanying mythologies together: "the distinctive materiality of local clay was a key component of the social and cultural identity of each place. Moreover, the names of these famous kiln sites (and many others) signify specific kinds of earth flavors in ceramic objects."[47] The result is that each modern style of pottery is connected tangibly to the place where its clay was dug out of the ground, and to the entire body of work, dating back to the Heian period, that used the same clay. Thus, local place identity and the association of modern place brands with an idealized historical narrative, as seen in the legacy of the Six Ancient Kilns, are wrapped up in material considerations from the moment a chunk of clay hits the wheel.

Subject to a mythology that weaves its way through every facet of life in these rural and suburban areas, from the economy to tourism to government intervention to education to the nostalgia of artists and their resulting innovation, the Six Ancient Kilns are, in the public consciousness, a mix of many different things. They are destinations to be visited to learn about the past and experience the art of the present. They are centers of production. They are remnants of a long-lost history from which all of Japan continues to draw inspiration. They are individual locales, each with a unique spirit that is represented in the imperfections and material characteristics of their ceramics. Most of all, they are "the town of ___-yaki," for in this mythology, product and place are one. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, as Japan was rebuilding not only its physical infrastructure but also its sense of self, six towns and their ancient artistic traditions were plucked from the crowd to represent the absolute best, most distinct, and oldest of a Japanese pottery that captured exactly the humility and care for nature

[47] Ibid., 20.

that had been missing from wartime Japan, and which artists and art historians were keen to see revived. Through the combined and likely coincidental efforts of many different individuals and institutions, these six towns came to be defined by their traditional ceramics, so that today vessel and place are inseparable. More than merely a symbol or brand, craft is how the people of the rokkoyō have come to be what they are.

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