

**A “man's festival”?: an interview study of gender dynamics in Kantō Matsuri,
Japan**

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Abstract

Matsuri are festivals in Japan which typically welcome and appease spirits known as *kami*. Matsuri are organised by hierarchically-structured associations, but also have a heightened atmosphere which differentiates them from everyday life. This thesis investigates the idea of Akita's Kantō Matsuri as a “man's festival”, despite the participation of women since the mid-twentieth century as ritual musicians (*ohayashi*). The research methodology involved a thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with participants from Akita International University's Kantō team. This draws on anthropological studies of matsuri, as well as Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory.

By critically examining the religious rationale for women's exclusion and the renegotiation of gender boundaries in the twentieth century, this thesis finds that the sacred space around the central pole has been redrawn. It argues that Kantō Matsuri continues to be reproduced as a “man's festival”, analysing the continued impact of religious taboo on this university team, and the proliferation of visual and sonic aesthetics considered masculine or androgynous. However, by analysing Kantō Matsuri as a site of socialisation, it also argues that women are also able to claim “mature social being” through their participation. Thus, it finds women are able to belong to, pass on and, in some ways, transform a tradition geared towards male bonding, finding personal fulfilment in doing so.

As the first in-depth study of gender dynamics in Kantō Matsuri, this thesis contributes to an emergent body of research on women's increasingly active participation in matsuri. In particular, it provides the field with qualitative research which interviews women themselves. More generally, this thesis shows how women are beginning to access male-centred traditions, networks and modes of belonging. This is important for the succession of traditions in depopulated areas of Japan, many of which have had to rely on women's involvement to survive.

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Glossary of Key Terms

<u>Romanised Word</u>	<u>Original Japanese</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Matsuri	祭「り」	Festivals which seek to welcome and appease <i>kami</i> . An important part of community life, they are social as well as religious phenomena, and can also bring in money from tourism. See introduction for further discussion
Kami	神	Spirits, often connected to the natural world, but may also be figures of myth or the dead. See introduction for further detail
Ohayashi	お囃子	Musicians who play flute or drums to create a lively, heightened atmosphere which accompanies the <i>sashite</i> performance. This has a ritual function; see chapter three
Sashite	差し手	Male performers who artistically balance tall, heavy <i>kantō</i> structures made up of bamboo poles and paper lanterns
Taiko	太鼓	A type of large drum
Furusato	ふるさと、故郷	The nostalgic concept of an imagined native place or hometown which has been lost or left behind during urbanisation. This concept is often used to attract tourists to rural localities; see chapter two
Kantō	竿燈、竿灯	A pole structure made of bamboo with paper lanterns attached to it, carried during Kantō Matsuri
Neburi-nagashi	眠り流し	Lit. “wash sleep away”; a type of matsuri of which Kantō Matsuri is an example
Senpai	先輩	Senior; an older student, who younger students are expected to speak to formally and treat with respect
Kōhai	後輩	Junior; the younger student in the dynamic described above
Nyonin kinsei	女人禁制	The tradition of excluding women from sacred areas or settings, also called <i>nyonin kekkai</i> . See the introduction for further discussion
Namahage	ナマハゲ	A monster-like figure with a costume made of straw and a red or blue mask, which visits houses in the traditional

		new year to scare children into behaving well
Kegare	汚れ	The concept of ritual pollution, or something which is seen as ritually polluted. For a more in-depth discussion of this concept, see chapter two
Sao	竿	A term for the central pole of the <i>kantō</i> pole-structure, and also a colloquial term for penis
Tanabata	七夕	A tradition originating in China and celebrated around the Seventh of July, by attaching wishes to bamboo poles. It is based on a legend in which the Cowherd Star and the Weaver Star are separated by the heavenly river of the Milky Way
Kigyō	企業	Commercial; pertaining to companies. It refers in this context to the newer commercial <i>Kantō</i> teams, such as for universities, companies or hospitals
Chōnai	町内	Meaning town or neighbourhood. It refers in this context to the original local <i>Kantō</i> teams, which are the only teams represented in official decision-making
Zentai daihyō	全体代表	The whole-team leader or representative (in this case, of a <i>Kantō</i> team)
Hanten	半纏	A type of jacket. This term often refers to a thicker, winter jacket but is more comparable in this context with the <i>happi</i> jacket commonly worn at matsuri
Kimono	着物	Formal clothing typically worn by women
Yukata	浴衣	A lighter, more casual form of kimono, worn in the summertime
Ichininmae (ni naru)	一人前「になる」	Maturity or adulthood, as conceptualised in relation to one's place in society. See chapter four for further discussion
Hare	晴れ	Unusual time; the pure, the sacred, the ceremonial
Ke	褻	Usual time; the mundane, the everyday, the profane

List of Abbreviations

<u>Abbreviation</u>	<u>Meaning</u>
AIU	Akita International University
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
ICH	Intangible cultural heritage

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Chapter One: Introduction

In August 2018, I played the flute in Kantō Matsuri, an annual festival in Akita prefecture, Japan. Over five years on, I remember the heat, the overwhelming noise, and the long days and nights that meant I was exhausted all the time. Yet, when I would start playing I would get a sudden rush of energy, and I felt then that I was having some sort of transcendent experience. The matsuri marked the end of my year abroad, a pivotal time in my life which was filled with many lows as well as highs. Throughout that year, preparing for the matsuri was a consistent and stabilising force in my life, which demanded lots of work but was also very rewarding.

While studying abroad for a year at Akita International University, I had been able to become part of their Kantō team, who practised six hours a week for a year in the lead up to the matsuri. In each team, there are *sashite* performers: men who artistically balance tall, heavy structures made up of bamboo poles and paper lanterns. Playing lively music to encourage and accompany these performances are *ohayashi*, who play side-blown bamboo flutes or beat large, tilted *taiko* drums. My choice had been between flute and drums, as women are not allowed to be *sashite* performers. As chapter two will discuss, for many years it was only men who were allowed to participate as ritual actors for religious reasons, although women likely provided some of the background labour which kept it running. Due largely to rural depopulation in Akita prefecture, women now participate as *ohayashi* musicians. However, there are still deeper questions regarding who gets to participate as ritual actors and how, and who is able to learn from and pass on this tradition.

This thesis was inspired by my undergraduate dissertation on Kantō Matsuri, which I wrote in the final year of my BA in Asia Pacific Studies, at University of Leeds. This focused on how cultural forms are resignified to reconcile women's participation in the festival with its traditional ritual and social functions. It was, in turn, inspired by my own participation in Kantō Matsuri. During this time, I felt I was able to get a rare insight into a tradition that most people outside of Akita prefecture cannot participate in, although, as this thesis will discuss in chapters three and four, the AIU Kantō team operates quite differently to older, local teams in Akita City. At times, I struggled with culture shock, like the other international students interviewed by Negishi et al. (2021, p. 69). This drove me to ask lots of questions at the time about the aspects of Kantō's culture that confused me, many of which were related to gender. What is more, asking these questions made me reflect on my own biases and my positionality as a white, British woman entering this tradition. I later reflected further on these experiences when writing my undergraduate dissertation and this thesis.

This thesis critically examines the religious rationale for women's exclusion from Kantō Matsuri, and the renegotiation of gender boundaries in the twentieth century, particularly the redrawing of the sacred space around the central pole. It analyses the reproduction of Kantō Matsuri as a “man's festival”, examining the impact of religious taboo on this university team, and the proliferation of masculine aesthetics. It then analyses Kantō Matsuri as a site of socialisation, focusing first on drinking parties, then discussing graduates' connection to Kantō. In this way, it explores how women are able to claim a form of “mature social being” historically conferred to men, become part of the Kantō community, and find personal fulfilment.



Figure 1. A Kantō performance (photo by author)

1.1 Review of the Literature

In general, the role of women in matsuri is under-researched, although ethnographers such as Dolores Martinez (2004, p. 99) and Satsuki Kawano (2005, p. 105) acknowledge there is a gendered division of

labour, with men participating in ritual roles and women doing much of the background work. Due to their historical prevalence, gender-based studies of matsuri tended to focus on male participants until recently. For example, John Traphagan (2000) analyses the reproduction of elder male power in matsuri through symbolic capital. In addition, Michael Roemer (2007) notes that this paternalistic nature has allowed men to form communal bonds which provide them with social support, while women have traditionally been excluded. In contrast, Tim Cross (2007) uses a fictocritical approach to explore what it feels like to perform masculinity in the chaos of Hakata Yamakasa Matsuri, investigating apparent contradictions of fear and pleasure, hierarchy, competition and collectivity.

Increasingly, however, women's participation in matsuri seems to be of interest to anthropologists. For example, Shunsaku Komori (2016) investigates women's exclusion from and, later, participation in a festival in Yokosuka, Kanagawa. By doing fieldwork in the area, Komori (2016) observes that women's historic exclusion from the festival is typically explained as religious custom, just as Sayaka Hashimoto (2006, p. 193) finds in Kantō Matsuri. This belief, that women pollute sacred contexts, will be explored in chapter two of this thesis. In addition, however, Komori (2016) finds that many women avoided the matsuri of their own accord, for reasons of safety, as it became very rowdy when it was first revived after the war and lacked organisation (p. 65). What is more, Komori (2016) notes that when women later started participating — when the festival was remade by young people as a subdued, formalised cultural asset — they developed strong social networks, giving guidance to younger women, for example (p. 66).

Furthermore, the work of Helga Janse (2019; 2020; 2021; 2023) questions static notions of gender and heritage in relation to women's participation in matsuri. Janse has a background in heritage management and governance and her work deals with issues such as gender parity that arise in the management of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) properties. Her 2019 quantitative study analyses the results from questionnaires sent to 36 *yama hoko yatai* float festivals, identifying a broader pattern of women participating in festivals due to declining birthrates. Investigating the trend in further detail, Janse (2021) follows this up with a qualitative study, interviewing the preservation associations of seven float festivals. This study focuses on attitudes and opinions regarding women's participation. In addition, Janse (2021) finds that even when women are allowed to participate in festivals, there is a gendered division of roles, much like in Kantō Matsuri, and women are still expected to take on much of the background work. Janse's (2021) interviewees suggest that women's participation is appealing in terms of visual appeal and encourages men to join too, leading to heterosexual romantic relationships and even marriage (pp. 58-59).

Moreover, Janse (2020; 2021) situates this study within a larger discussion about heritage and gender equality, arguing that women's historical exclusion from sacred contexts (*nyonin kinsei*) is actually an invented tradition.

Most recently, Janse (2023) analyses the impact of lingering societal structures on transmission and participation in 14 traditions across Nara. She first analyses them quantitatively, grouping them into categories regarding their gender restrictions. Then, the article analyses her interview study, which provides insight into the societal structures contextualising these patterns of participation. For example, she notes that the common expectation for women to move away for marriage impacts their participation in matsuri. Many of these matsuri are traditionally led by men who are able to participate continuously in these traditions and thus are considered their successors (Janse, 2023, pp. 130-131). Throughout her work, Janse challenges beliefs about women's exclusion which have been taken for granted in the literature, although her work does not yet analyse the actual performances of women in matsuri.

In addition, the literature on Kantō Matsuri is often concerned with its direction and its succession. The works of Shōji Hotta, a former president of the Kantō society, provide oft-cited historical background on Kantō Matsuri. For example, Hashimoto (2006) references Book of Kantō (Hotta, 1990) in her history of Kantō's progression into a formalised sport, illustrating the tension between Kantō's basis in folk religious tradition and its desire to appeal to tourists with dramatic, visual displays. Similarly, William Lee (2013) analyses Kantō Matsuri as an example of a matsuri that has had to adapt to the needs of its community, such as by broadening its participation to fill a lack of successors. This is further investigated by Negishi et al. (2020), who synthesise historical research on the widening of the geographical area of participation, and the introduction of women, also making a case for the involvement of foreign participants. Furthermore, Negishi et al. (2021) carry out a questionnaire and interview study with international exchange students in the Akita International University (AIU) Kantō team, exploring cultural differences that have caused conflict, like the gendered division of roles. Finally, Negishi and Narisawa (2022) actively propose “external participants” such as international students and migrant workers as the solution to the lack of successors, in the case of Kanto Matsuri and the Namahage tradition found around Akita prefecture's Oga peninsula. They suggest that participating in these traditions may encourage performers to migrate to Akita, and advocate for the value of multicultural coexistence. This shows that the issue of who gets to participate in Kantō is still a relevant and ongoing discussion.

In conclusion, the literature on matsuri often deals with issues of participation, but the ramifications of women's partial inclusion on the gender dynamics of Kantō Matsuri have never fully been investigated.

This thesis attempts to address this disparity by analysing how the young people involved in Akita International University's Kantō team navigate gender. What is more, this thesis will contribute to a blossoming field of study, regarding women's participation in matsuri. As Janse (2021) implies, there is a need for research which interviews female participants themselves about their experience with gender roles (p. 59). This is another way in which this thesis fills a gap in the literature.

1.2 Methodology

1.2.1 Research methods

The primary research method for this thesis was semi-structured ethnographic interviews with members of AIU's Kantō Team, and I also re-analysed the transcripts from the interviews I conducted for my undergraduate dissertation. Interviews were particularly important as there is a need for research on gender dynamics in matsuri which interviews female participants, as Janse (2021, p. 59) suggests. In addition, I analysed online sources created by relevant organisations such as the Kantō Festival Executive Committee, which construct narratives about Kantō Matsuri's history and symbolism. These sources also provide important contextual information which is useful for interpreting the interviews.

This thesis also draws a lot on my own experiences participating in the AIU Kantō team, which seems harder to categorise as a methodology. According to Martinez (2004), the anthropological “field” can be thought of as a “frame of mind”, rather than a physical place (p. 11). During my study abroad, I was not in the frame of mind of fieldwork. For this reason, I did not take any field notes, or engage in conversations with the purpose of writing up a research project. However, I did try to learn as much as I could about Kantō Matsuri while I was there, driven by the same curiosity that has led me to now carry out research on Kantō. What is more, studying abroad is a transformative rite of passage (Grabowski et al., 2017), similar to how Martinez (2004) describes anthropological fieldwork (p. 11). Regardless, my interviews with other participants are the main data source.

1.2.2 Interview design

I contacted ten members of Akita International University's team via private message, out of which six ended up participating in my interviews. Of these six, two were women and four were men, as I had

interviewed five women already for my undergraduate dissertation, and was also interested in men's experiences in navigating gender dynamics. This also helped me gain insight into the male-only *sashite* section of the team, which I could not participate in myself. Two of the four men had also been international exchange students, and had their own perspectives and experiences with culture shock. Participants were chosen if they had at least a year's experience in the team, including participating in the matsuri. I tried to get a balance of demographics and experiences, and chose some participants due to their particularly extensive knowledge.

All six participants were interviewed remotely, over Zoom, as they were located overseas. Each interview was roughly an hour long, but they varied in length. Participants were interviewed mostly in English, switching to Japanese terminology where relevant. I made this decision firstly because my Japanese is at an intermediate level, whereas all students who attend Akita International University are required to have a very high proficiency in English, whether they are full-time students or exchange students. Secondly, English is one of the languages of the field, being used concurrently with Japanese during the team's practices. In fact, interviewing these students in English is a natural extension of their role translating between cultures. As chapter three explores, many of the full-time students in the AIU Kantō team act in mediating roles, not only translating speeches into English for exchange students, but also explaining cultural differences that are causing tension or confusion. At times, interviewees whose first language was Japanese would switch to using Japanese to convey their thoughts in more detail.

The interviews were semi-structured, and the questions I asked were informed by my previous experiences in the festival, my previous interviews, and my readings on matsuri and gender. They tended to focus on the relational dynamics within the team, the transmission of knowledge and social capital, and how participants navigate these structures. However, interviews went in unexpected directions too, which often led to the most interesting insights. At the time, the intention was to perform a comparative analysis with Gaina Mantō, a tradition inspired by Kantō, but I decided to focus on Kantō due to the richness of the data I had on it, and the limited time span.

I recorded the interviews, with prior consent, and transcribed them. I stored the interviewees' data securely in the University One-Drive, and anonymised the interview transcripts. Interviewees had already been informed about the project aims in writing, but I also talked them through the aims briefly at the beginning of the interview and assured them that they were welcome to leave the interview, take a break, or skip any questions they didn't want to answer. In addition, I gave them time to ask any questions at the beginning of the interview, and then to add anything else they wished to at the end of the interview.

1.2.3 Other ethical considerations

I chose not to recruit any teammates who would be considered my *kōhai* (junior), in case they might feel pressured into joining. This is because there is a power imbalance inherent in the age-related hierarchical relationships between teammates in the AIU Kantō team. In addition, I made sure to clarify that I would not be offended if anyone chose not to participate in my interviews. This was important as I have friendships with many of the teammates I recruited.

Another impact of my existing relationship with the teammates was that I did not ask explicitly or systematically about their gender identity, although they did express this in their interviews. On reflection, I would instead gather this information before the interviews even began, in case they had a different gender identity compared to how I knew them as teammates.

There were times when interviewees felt self-conscious about their English skills, as for some, it had been a few years since they had graduated from Akita International University, and they had had less experience speaking English since then. I made sure to reassure them, and encouraged them to speak in Japanese if that was more comfortable.

1.2.4 Data analysis

I carried out a reflexic thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, using NVivo and following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework:

- 1) Familiarise yourself with the data
- 2) Generate initial codes
- 3) Search for themes
- 4) Review themes
- 5) Define and name themes
- 6) Write the report

I coded in a way which was theoretically driven, but which allowed the themes to develop from the codes, as opposed to using a predetermined code-book. My analysis was informed by a constructivist epistemology, seeing knowledge as socially constructed rather than objective (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Having a theoretically driven approach to coding helped me to examine the latent, “*underlying* ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations — and ideologies — that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

1.2.5 Limitations

As this particular project had a one-year time-frame, I made the decision not to return to Akita to do fieldwork, anticipating how long it might take to secure funding and process the visa. Fortunately, I already had good relationships with members of the AIU Kantō team, who I could interview over Zoom. However, I do think that further research into Kantō Matsuri would benefit from a return visit, including structured fieldwork and interviews with new contacts, in Japanese.

1.3 Matsuri, Practice Theory, and Gender

The theoretical framework of this thesis is predicated on an understanding of matsuri as a type of performance in which social norms such as gender dynamics are both reproduced and unsettled. This draws on Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory, on the one hand, in which agents such as ritual actors embody and then reproduce their environment. At the same time, it conceives of matsuri as a break from everyday life, in which existing structures can be briefly overturned, similar to Victor Turner's (1977) theory of anti-structure. In particular, this thesis applies a gender analysis in line with practice theory, noting how symbolic power structures are gendered and how ritual actors impact gender dynamics.

1.3.1 Matsuri

Matsuri are festivals which traditionally have a religious basis, involving rituals which seek to welcome and appease *kami* (Ashkenazi, 1993, pp. 7-22). *Kami* are spirits, sometimes connected to the natural world; there may be *kami* of particular places, mountains, rivers, or forces such as the wind, for example (Hardacre, 2017, p. 1). In addition, there is a subsection of *kami* which are figures of myth, such as Amaterasu, the sun goddess (Hardacre, 2017, p. 1). Significant figures such as martyrs or those who died in the Second World War are also deified and worshipped as *kami* (Hardacre, 2017, p. 1). In matsuri, the welcoming of the *kami* is aided by the creation of a heightened atmosphere, made in part by matsuri music, known as *ohayashi* (Giolai, 2020, p. 218). This makes the matsuri a sensory pleasure, which gives

participants and audience the feeling that their daily life has been briefly suspended (Yanagawa, 1988). They are also associated with the pleasure-based culture created in cities like Edo during the late Tokugawa period (Hur, 2000, p. 88).

As a result, matsuri also act as public entertainment for the local community, and may attract tourists who bring in money (Ashkenazi, 1993, p. 9). Indeed, matsuri should be understood as social phenomena as well as religious phenomena. Larger matsuri involve a lot of organisation and planning, and these committees also provide opportunities to socialise (Ashkenazi, 1993, p. 10). As matsuri and other rituals are such an important part of community life in Japan, scholars like Martinez (2004, p. 72) may refer to Émile Durkheim's (1915) concept of religion as a social institution. This suggests that matsuri, like other ritual forms, enable people to come together as a community for a shared practice, and thus play a role in the production of social norms.

1.3.2 Habitus

One could use Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory to analyse how participants reproduce the social conditions of ritual contexts like matsuri, while also using ritual forms strategically to fulfil material goals (Kawano, 2005, p. 7). Bourdieu (1977) explains the continuous reproduction of social conditions using the concept of the *habitus*: the lasting habits individuals learn from their social environment, leading them to then recreate their environment. This means that “each agent, wittingly or unwittingly, [...] is a producer and reproducer of objective meaning” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 79). Moreover, Bourdieu (1977) argues that agents come to embody their social conditions through gesture, speech and bodily movements. Bourdieu (1977) has been criticised by Margaret Archer (2010) for being too deterministic, due to the potential implication that social actors are fated to reproduce their conditions endlessly. However, Bourdieu (1977) does attempt to clarify that the *habitus* is not a “mechanical assembly” (p. 218). Instead, an interpretation of his work might be that what we think of individual dispositions are *also* products of history and culture. On the one hand, Mariano Croce (1988) argues that the extent to which the reproduction of conditions is determined has not been fully addressed by Bourdieu (1977). On the other hand, he suggests that the theory of *habitus* can still be useful in historicising the social world, and in showing the active role that individuals play in reproduction of social conditions.

Applying this theory to matsuri in some ways risks universalising specific historical and cultural phenomena. According to Edward Said (2003), in knowledge-production, the West has historically been pre-conceptualised as the norm; the reference point compared to which the East, or the Orient, is seen as

the other (p. 3). As a result, Mark Gibson (1994) is critical of the way western cultural theories are assumed to map onto Japanese contexts. After all, Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory is influenced by his ethnographic research in Algeria, as he makes clear, so some aspects may not apply to every cultural context. However, this is not to say that it cannot be useful at all. After all, insisting upon Japan's uniqueness could also risk othering it. Instead, this theoretical framework utilises theories such as Bourdieu's (1977), but also analyses matsuri in terms of their historic relationships with power, which may vary.

In the case of matsuri, it does seem that the *habitus* is reproduced and embodied by ritual actors (Kawano, 2005, p. 7, p. 101; Gilday, 1990, p. 263). In fact, matsuri come to represent particular localities and communities, and are often connected with particular occupations or class identities. For example, the young men who balance the *kantō* poles in Kantō Matsuri were traditionally from craftsman and merchant (rice-monger or fishmonger) families, who competed to show off their physical strength and artistic skill (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 114). In doing so, they embodied their locality, class and gender, as chapter three explores further. For outsiders to the community, matsuri can also be a form of acculturation. For example, Yoshiko Yamamoto (1978) notes that the *Namahage* custom of the Oga peninsula helps accustom newcomers to the unfamiliar ways of the community by scaring them with monstrous *namahage* wearing masks (p. 7). In addition, in matsuri, ritual actors play out the “complex relationships of interest and power” that exist locally, and cosmically, in the belief system (Gilday, 1990, p. 263). Bourdieu (1977) theorises that power structures are maintained and legitimated by the symbolic order. Indeed, matsuri have historically consolidated the authority of the local state (Schnell, 1995, p. 310).

1.3.3 Anti-structure

However, matsuri do not simply reinforce structures and norms, they also engage with them by challenging them. According to Turner (1977), rites can be a way for people to uproot existing structures by experimenting with new ones; something he refers to as “antistructur[e]” (vii). Drawing on Turner's (1977) idea, Keiichi Yanagawa (1988) argues that the sensory excess and revelry of matsuri creates a feeling of ecstasy which feels liberatory, which is what may allow this anti-structure to emerge. In addition, many matsuri have a basis in fertility rites, and therefore have sexual symbolism, sometimes involving cross-dressing (Setoguchi, 2006, p. 134). For example, Elaine Gerbert (1996) describes the scenes in Onbashira Matsuri of young men cross-dressing, dancing half-naked or wearing wooden phalluses, as “social propriety is thrown aboard” (p. 344). She notes also that the same matsuri maintains

a sense of “rough masculinity” (p. 357). As this thesis will later address, similar patterns of masculinity are prevalent in many matsuri.

Furthermore, matsuri function as a way to contest power structures in a contained setting. For example, Scott Schnell (1995) argues that Furukawa's matsuri enabled the townspeople to express their discontent at the sociopolitical and economic conditions caused by rapid modernisation. Here, Schnell (1995) builds upon Catherine Bell's (1992) idea of ritual as a “culturally strategic way of acting” (p. 72). He argues that the young men who manoeuvred the large drum structure around would strategically crash into certain buildings as “a form of retribution” against their owners (Schnell, 1995, p. 319). These acts were seen as part of a system of karmic justice, and explained away by the heaviness and unpredictability of the drum structure and the copious amounts of alcohol being drunk (Schnell, 1995, p. 319). This illustrates the way that matsuri act as a break from the norms of everyday life. By participating in a significant role in a ritual occasion, these young men are able to subvert power structures for a brief time, meting out a form of justice to the wealthy who might have wronged them.

1.3.4 Gender

In terms of gender, matsuri help maintain gender roles and hierarchies, as only men have typically been permitted to perform ritual roles, while women have been consigned to background work (Martinez, 2004, p. 99). Traphagan (2000) notes that elder males are able to gain symbolic capital from their prestigious ritual roles, which consolidates their position at the top of hierarchies. This idea of symbolic capital was put forward by Bourdieu (1977; 1984), who argues that individuals can accrue not only economic capital but also symbolic, social and cultural capital — symbolic capital referring to the prestige which can be gained from privileged or honourable positions; social capital referring to the value gained from social networks and connections; cultural capital referring to cultural competencies such as etiquette, accent, qualifications or personal taste which distinguish one's social class and upbringing. These types of capital can enable individuals to gain influence and pursue material goals in different aspects of their life. Thus, the symbolic power structures of matsuri can come to reinforce, as well as reflect, the power structures of everyday life. As Bourdieu (1977) argues, “there is no need to insist on the function of legitimation of the division of labour and power between the sexes that is fulfilled by a mythico-ritual system entirely dominated by male values” (p. 165). This mythico-ritual system naturalises the division of labour, so that it comes to appear obvious, just part of the world (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164). As such, gender roles become like unwritten rules.

Indeed, Judith Butler (1999) theorises that gender is a “construction that regularly conceals its genesis”, meaning that it is socially constructed but made to appear natural (p. 522). Similarly, they argue that biological sex is a “cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies”. Butler (1999) refutes the idea that gender is inherent or essential — instead, they see both gender and sex as socially constructed. They argue that the repeated social performance of gender creates it as reality (Butler, 1999). For this reason, they have faced similar criticisms to Bourdieu (1977); that their theory of gender performativity is too deterministic and does not allow for individuals’ agency (Benhabib et al, 2010). However, Butler (1988) does note that there are “nuanced and individual ways of doing one's gender” (p. 522). Their argument is that gender identity — an individual's self-conception of their gender — cannot completely be separated from cultural prescriptions, and those who divert from normative expectations are often punished, making gender a matter of survival (Butler, 1988, p. 522). That is not the same as saying one's gender is simply determined by society. Rather, “doing one's gender” involves negotiating these expectations, consciously and subconsciously (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Thus, Butler (1999) sees gender as an "ongoing discursive process[...] open to intervention and resignification", and each individual has a part to play in this process (p. 43).

1.3.5 Learning gender

While young men are able to contest power structures in matsuri, it is indeed typically only the men who have licence to act this way. In fact, Mitsuhiro Yoshida (1998) points out this gender imbalance in the case of the matsuri in a hot spring town which depends upon a complex system of water distribution. In this town, there has long been a hierarchy of businesses — the original inn families receiving the most water — and this issue often causes conflict among townspeople. As a result, Yoshida (1998) argues that navigating the system of water distribution is necessary for young men to “claim mature social being” (p. 44). As the annual matsuri passes through the long stone steps where the original inn families are based, it has become the place for young men to shout angrily and crash the portable shrine into the inns and shops nearby (Yoshida, 1998, p. 43). Applying Bourdieu's (1977) theory of symbolic power, Yoshida (1998) argues that this display of “ritualized aggression” reinforces the stone steps — and therefore the inn families — position at the symbolic centre of the town (p. 52). However, it also allows the male participants to learn how to contest these power structures appropriately (Yoshida, 1998, p. 56). As such, the matsuri acts as a form of socialisation; a rite of passage to adulthood. This is not available to women, who are not able to express frustration about these issues even during the matsuri (Yoshida, 1998, p. 56).

However, this discrepancy suggests that matsuri do function as a way of socialising men and women in terms of gender roles. The idea of “learning” gender has been applied to sports clubs in Japan, which have similar types of hierarchies, such as the *senpai-kōhai* (elder and younger student) dynamic (Light, 2008, p. 163). In these clubs, patterns of masculinity are transmitted and reinforced through hierarchical relationships, masculinity rites such as drinking, and sport-specific conceptions of pain and hardship (Light, 2008; Manzenreiter, 2013; McDonald and Hallinan, 2005). As a result, McDonald and Hallinan (2005) argue that participating in these clubs allows young men to gain a sense of belonging, and a masculine-gendered cultural capital which allows them to prove themselves as highly disciplined and socialised potential salarymen. Similarly, matsuri seem to transmit masculinity through camaraderie, competition and fear, as Cross (2007) discusses, and as a result, men can benefit from a social support system (Roemer, 2007). Although the matsuri itself is an occasion of upheaval, they are supported by a larger structure of organisations and teams which reproduce social structures in a similar way to these sports clubs. There are also more specific parallels here with Akita International University's Kantō team, a type of university club which has a particularly hierarchical structure and a male-only section (*sashite*) in which physical strength and skill is important. These studies are underpinned by Raewyn Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which posits that the dominance of men is legitimated through cultural ideals which privilege particular forms of masculinity. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) clarify, this does not refer to one singular ideal of masculinity, but many, which depend on culture and context and are products of history (pp. 836-838).

Historically, women have been excluded from participating in matsuri due to a religious taboo (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193), which will be explored in chapter two. This has allowed men to have men-only spaces. What is more, the same rowdy yet revelrous atmosphere which allows men to shed off propriety has conversely deterred women from being involved for reasons of safety, as Komori (2016, p. 65) notes. Instead, women have been involved in the background work that allows matsuri to run smoothly (Traphagan, 2000, p. 89; Kawano, 2005, p. 105). It is also possible that women were involved in decision-making without being designated official roles. Bourdieu (1977) refers to behind-the-scenes decision-making as *éminence grise*, the unrecognised power behind official leadership, which women may strategically make do with in order to have some power (pp. 164-165). However, women are now more heavily involved in matsuri, and it has been so far unclear to what extent they benefit from the support system and “mature social body”-producing socialisation that men have historically received. Thus, analysing the intricacies of gender dynamics and *habitus* in Kantō Matsuri can begin to facilitate an understanding of how young men and women navigate these structures, and what they may gain from doing so.

1.4 A Brief History of Kantō Matsuri

Kantō Matsuri's history seems to have originated in the Hōreki era (1751-1764) of the Edo period as the *Neburi-nagashi* festival, which had incorporated aspects of *Tanabata*, *Obon* and harvest traditions (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113). According to Lee (2013), the *Neburi-nagashi* (wash away sleep) festival aimed to get rid of the drowsiness and disease of the summer months through ritual purification (p. 170). It was part of a loose belief system, now known as Shintōism, in which pollution (*kegare*) from death or disease, for example, is thought to spread and cause more misfortune, unless purified (Namihira, 1987). For this purpose, the *kantō* pole is paraded around the city, allowing the sacred paper on top to collect the ritual pollution, which is then cast off into the river at the end of the festival (Lee, 2013, p. 170). In fact, this ritual was even carried out in 2020, when the rest of the festival was cancelled, with the hope that it would expel the Covid-19 virus (Akita Sakigake Shinpo, 2020). The *Neburi-nagashi* tradition is also recognised in the name of the Kantō museum, which is called the *Neburi-nagashi-kan*, and the song *Nagashi* which drum and flute players play when the pole is being paraded around. This style of festival can also be found in neighbouring Aomori prefecture, most notably as Hirosaki Neputa Matsuri (Lee, 2013, p. 170).

In addition, this festival is said to have agricultural and fertility connections, being a type of *honen-sai* or harvest festival (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 187). For this reason, the *kantō* pole is said to resemble an ear of rice (Kantō Executive Committee, 2022). In addition, the central pole of the *kantō* is commonly referred to as the *sao*, which is a slang term for penis, and is acknowledged as a phallic symbol by several of the participants interviewed for this thesis. Moreover, the lanterns are supposed to look like bags of rice, and the candles within them are given as amulets to expectant mothers to ease their childbirth (Kantō Executive Committee, 2022). On the one hand, Taichi Sugiura (2017) claims that Kantō Matsuri originally worshipped fire as a deity (*kami*), and uses the rice symbolism as an example of how its true meaning has been lost (p. 47). However, this ignores the polysemous nature of religion in Japan, which Martinez (2004, p. 13) notes as having often having many layered meanings. After all, many agricultural communities use fire to expel harmful influences before the harvest season (Foster and Ogano, 2020, pp. 288-297). What is more, Kantō Matsuri seems to have always been a hybrid tradition, incorporating elements of other festivals.



Figure 2. The lanterns in the night sky, resembling ears of rice (photo by author)

By the early eighteenth century, Hotta (1995, cited in Lee, 2013, p. 171) argues, the *Neburi-nagashi* festival in Akita had integrated aspects of the *Tanabata* tradition, which involves writing wishes on paper and attaching them to bamboo. The *Tanabata* legend, which originated in China, tells of the Weaver Star and the Cowherd Star; lovers who were separated by a heavenly river — the Milky Way — and could only meet on the seventh day of the seventh month, if there was no rain (Lee, 2013, p. 171). In fact, to this day, people say that the lights of Kantō Matsuri's night parade flowing down the main street look like the Milky Way. In addition, this tradition seems to have incorporated lanterns from the *Obon* tradition, a “festival for the repose of ancestral spirits” (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 187). Hotta (1995, cited in Hashimoto, 2006, p. 187) theorises that the lanterns that traditionally guide spirits home began to be hung on bamboo poles — which feature in *Tanabata* — to make them more portable. Over time, the lanterns became longer and residents added more lanterns, making them heavier, as they vied to show off their strength (Hotta, 1995, cited in Hashimoto, 2006, p. 188).

Initially, this festival seems to have started in Ōtomachi, the merchant district of the Kubota castle town, in modern-day Akita City (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113). Its main participants were craftsmen and merchants like fishmongers and rice-mongers, who tended to be physically strong (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 114). It was the eldest sons from these families, rather than the samurai families found in the neighbouring part of town, who participated then (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 114). However, in 1751, wax candles were made available to townspeople, which enabled the festival's popularity to spread further (Hotta, 1995, cited in Hashimoto, 2006, p. 188). In 1789, it was mentioned in Shoan Tsumura's travelogue *Yuki no Furu Michi (Road where the Snow Falls)*, described as a festival with bamboo poles in the shape of crosses with lanterns on them, with drums

played to accompany them (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113). In fact, Akita's *Neburi-nagashi* festival became so popular that it started to attract the attention of the feudal lords, and even the Emperor Meiji, who visited it in 1881 (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113). It is around this time that the term “Kantō” was first used (Hotta, 1995, Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113).

In 1931, the Kantō Society was founded and the first official skills contest was held, allowing different neighbourhood teams to compete against each other (Hotta, 1995, cited in Hashimoto, 2006, p. 189). Although the festival was suspended from 1938 to 1945, due to the Second World War, it was revived in 1946 by the Akita City Tourism Association (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 113). However, there was a lack of successors to the tradition in the post-war period, when rural areas like Akita prefecture were facing depopulation and economic decline (Lee, 2013, p. 169). “Workplace” (*kigyō*) teams were introduced in 1955, allowing companies, and later, schools and universities, to have their own Kantō teams (Negishi et al., 2020, p. 115). However, these are considered subordinate to the local (*chōnai*) teams, and have to follow the rules that *chōnai* teams make (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 189). Teams also began to be sponsored at this time, with their lanterns now embellished with adverts as well as their team crest (Negishi et al., 2020, p. 115). These decisions helped the festival grow and bring in revenue, but were controversial, as some believed Kantō had become too commercialised (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193).

In 1966, the Kantō Festival Executive Committee was formed, and the scale of the festival was expanded, drawing in more tourism and publicity (Negishi et al., 2020, p. 111). According to Hashimoto (2006, p. 193), women first participated as accompanying musicians (*hayashi-kata*) from 1967, as part of a *kigyō* team, although Negishi et al. (2020, p. 117) notes that they were only officially allowed to participate from 1975, having long been banned due to religious reasons. However, there was outrage after a performance in the US in 1976 when women balanced the poles upon the audience's insistence (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193). Later, in 1980, the year when Kantō Matsuri was designated an important intangible folk cultural property, women's participation as musicians was blamed for rainy weather, as it was said to have provoked the *kami*. This led to a well-publicised debate about female participants, as it coincided with the International Year of Women. Due to these factors, and the worsening demographics of Akita prefecture, women began to participate as musicians, and are now officially accepted (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 194). To fully understand the initial controversy and how it has been navigated, this thesis will examine the history of women's exclusion from sacred contexts, known as *nyonin kinsei*.

Chapter Two: Women's Exclusion Examined

2.1 The Religious Rationale for Women's Exclusion

Historically, women's exclusion from ritual roles in matsuri has been explained in relation to a religious taboo, and as chapter three will discuss, this taboo is still salient knowledge today. According to Hashimoto (2006), women were traditionally excluded from participating in Kantō Matsuri because of their association with blood from menstruation and childbirth, which was considered unclean. Likewise, many of the AIU students I interviewed came up with the same explanation, referring to the concept of *kegare* (impurity or pollution). In addition, many other matsuri have prohibited women from participating for the same reason (Janse, 2021, p. 50). There are also other situations where the concept of *kegare* affects participation in matsuri. For example, in Hakata Gion Yamakasa Matsuri, runners who are injured and bleeding are not allowed to enter the floats' headquarters due to "concerns of purity" (Cross, 2009, p. 5).

2.1.1 The nyonin kinsei custom

As Namihira (1987) explains, states of pollution, such as illness or death, are traditionally thought to anger gods and cause more misfortune, unless purified. Blood from menstruation and childbirth is also referred to as *chi no kegare*, or more specifically as "'the red uncleanness' (*aka fujō*)" (Namihira, 1987, p. 68). In particular, women are thought to anger goddesses associated with boats and construction sites who protect workers, either because they are jealous of other women or because these goddesses are particularly sensitive to this type of pollution (Namihira, 1987, pp. 67-68). This is used to explain why women are prohibited from these sites (Namihira, 1987, pp. 67-68). Women were also prohibited from climbing certain sacred mountains in the Shugendō or Yamabushi (mountain ascetic) sect (DeWitt, 2015, p. 1). The tradition of women's exclusion was known as "*nyonin kinsei*" or "*nyonin kekkai*" (DeWitt, 2015, p. 1). However, *nyonin kinsei* customs "[manifest] in multiple forms and [perform] multiple functions, dependent on context and agency" (DeWitt, 2015, p. 7).

In addition, the belief that women were impure has been at times connected to concepts of damnation and salvation. Hank Glassman (2017) examines the history of the Blood Pool Hell (*chi no ike jigoku*) sutra, a Buddhist text popularised in Japan by the Soto Zen sect. This sutra describes a hell made from the blood women produce — menstrual blood and/or blood from childbirth, depending on interpretation — in which women fall into after death (Glassman, 2017, pp. 176-177). It is generally thought to have been composed

in China in the late twelfth or early thirteen century, and introduced to Japan from the mid-Muromachi period (around the fifteenth century) (Glassman 2017, pp. 176-177). According to Glassman (2017), it can be interpreted as “threaten[ing] damnation for the sin of female biology”, with the menstrual/childbirth blood said to anger the gods (p. 177). However, it also suggests women can be saved from this hell, and so, from the fifteenth century, women would recite the sutra to save themselves from damnation (Glassman, 2017, p. 180). Nonetheless, Glassman (2017) argues that this shows the progression from viewing menstrual and birth blood as impure to assigning personal responsibility to women to avoid the Blood Pool Hell (p. 180).

As Yuko Nakano (1998) notes, there is some debate as to the origin of the *nyonin kinsei* custom. Nakano (1998) herself argues that *nyonin kinsei* and the Blood Pool Hell sutra are examples of the sexual discrimination that women have been subjected to throughout the history of Japanese Buddhism (p. 65). However, as Bernard Faure (2003) points out, Buddhism is not monolithic and does not have a unified ideology (pp. 2-3). For example, Nakano (1998) notes that the Blood Pool Hell sutra “was formed from folk religious beliefs by a section of Buddhist priests and ordinary people” (p. 70). In addition, Nakano (1998) considers the idea that the custom arose in the folk belief system and spread to Buddhism, or was reinforced by existing beliefs around divination (p. 76).

Similarly, there is a discussion around the history of *nyonin kinsei* customs in matsuri, which is having an impact on women's participation. For example, Janse (2021) finds that one matsuri has since allowed women to participate after consulting a Shintō scholar, who argued that “there were no grounds for ostracising women in Shintōism itself”, and that the *nyonin kinsei* custom had originated with the Shugendō/Yamabushi sect and later influenced matsuri customs (p. 54). The latter argument seems to be supported by Wakita's historical research, which suggests that women rode on top of matsuri floats at least in the early Edo period, if not earlier, and were only prohibited from taking part when the custom of *nyonin kinsei* was popularised in the late Edo period (around the 18th or 19th century) (Wakita, 2016, cited in Janse, 2021, p. 50). As such, the exclusion of women from these types of matsuri can be thought of as an “invented tradition” (Suzuki, 2002, p. 12, cited in Janse, 2021, p. 50).

However, arguing that matsuri are Shintō and *nyonin kinsei* is not misunderstands the historic relationships between belief systems in Japan. According to Allan Grapard (1984), there has long been a history of Shintō-Buddhist syncretism (*shinbutsu-shū*) in Japan, in which the two belief systems have developed alongside each other and become intertwined. In addition, Daoism and Confucianism have also influenced this syncretism (Grapard, 1984, p. 242). For example, the Shugendō/Yamabushi sect, which

applies the *nyonin kinsei* custom to sacred mountains, is understood to be highly syncretic, influenced by Shintō, Buddhist, and Daoist beliefs (Carter, 2022). Moreover, the idea of Shintō as its own separate religion was only constructed in the Meiji Restoration of 1868, when Japan was attempting to formulate a national identity, and thus rejected Buddhism, which was introduced to Japan from Korea (Grapard, 1984). This led to the systematic separation of Shintō and Buddhism (*shinbutsu-bunri*), and the creation of State Shintō, a nationalistic religion which reified the folk traditions thought to be indigenous to Japan (Grapard, 1984).

As a result, folk traditions in Japan are still referred to as Shintō, but should be understood as part of a loose belief system, not an organised religion. This is perhaps why Emiko Namihira (1987) refers to *kegare* as part of Japan's "folk belief system", rather than as Shintō (p. 65). Similarly, matsuri are generally considered Shintō, and are often held by Shintō shrines (Ashkenazi, 1993, pp. 16-22). However, they may have more complex roots than this suggests. For example, I have only ever heard Kantō Matsuri referred to as Shintō, and it involves ceremonies which take place at Shintō shrines. Yet, it has also been influenced by the Obon tradition, which is more so associated with Buddhism. So, while Kantō Matsuri functions as a Shintō matsuri, it is not wholly Shintō in its history, as is typical of the syncretic nature of Japanese religious tradition.

Instead, what the debate about the origin of *nyonin kinsei* reveals is how religious tradition can be interpreted or reinterpreted to fulfil particular goals. In this way, tradition — and its reinterpretation — are tools for change or continuity, as Bourdieu (1977) suggests; producing and reproducing social conditions. For example, Lindsey DeWitt (2015) points to how the term "religious tradition" (*shūkyōteki dentō*) is used to justify women's exclusion from sacred mountains in the present (p. 1). Similarly, many of the people I interviewed for this thesis used terms like "tradition" to explain why women were still not allowed to participate in *sashite*, balancing the *kantō* pole. On the other hand, in Janse's (2021) example, a reinterpretation of the tradition of *nyonin kinsei* in matsuri has allowed women to participate in one where they were not allowed to before (p. 54). This shows that tradition is neither static nor unbiased; it can be and is used strategically.

What is more, women's role in *nyonin kinsei* customs is often more complicated than the word "exclusion" suggests. On the one hand, Faure (2003, p. 68) and Namihira (1987, p. 68) refer to the custom of pregnant and menstruating women spending time in secluded birthing huts as an example of women being relegated to outer boundaries due to the taboo around menstrual and birth blood. This suggests sympathy at their isolation and assumed misery. However, Hitomi Tonomura's (2007) historical research

provides further context to this custom, dispelling these popular assumptions and drawing focus to the agency of the women involved. Tonomura (2007) notes women would typically go to these huts while menstruating or giving birth to rest in solitude, away from the sphere of domestic labour (pp. 4-5). In the case of matsuri, Komori's (2016) research shows that women have sometimes chosen not to participate, or even urged other women not to participate, to avoid the rowdy, sometimes dangerous, behaviour of drunk men (p. 65). This shows that traditions of women's exclusion cannot be grouped together; they occur in different ways and for different reasons depending on context, locality and time period, and women's role within them also vary, from actively choosing to remove themselves from a situation, to transgressing the tradition.

2.1.2 Maintaining sacred boundaries

Indeed, Faure (2003) interprets the history of *nyonin kinsei* as a power struggle in which gender boundaries are continuously being renegotiated (p. 7). He argues women were not passive recipients of the “patriarchal ideology” transmitted by Buddhism (and Shintōism, and Confucianism) (Faure, 2003, p. 7). For example, he points out that women would try to cross the boundaries of sacred mountains (Faure, 2003, p. 224). On the other hand, Faure (2003) theorises there is a “logic of transgression” in which the transgression of sacred boundaries actually helps to maintain them (p. 245). To illustrate, legends tell of women who were turned into a rock after defying warnings from the mountain god and climbing a sacred mountain (Faure, 2003, p. 224). Consequently, these rocks become “marker[s] of sacredness”, shifting the boundary line slightly (Faure, 2003, p. 233). Faure (2003) interprets the rocks simultaneously as an invitation to cross the boundary and a warning not to (p. 224). So, while women's transgression helped move the boundary lines, it also was a “structural prerequisite of the site's sacredness” (p. 245). This highlights the dialectical nature of this power struggle, as Faure (2003, p. 7) sees it.

Similarly, matsuri make and remake sacred boundaries. According to Martinez (2004), matsuri reinforce the boundaries of a town, noting that “paradoxically, the shoring up [of boundaries] involved the inviting in of the very forces that might destroy it” such as *kami*, the dead, or guests like government officials (p. 69). In Kantō Matsuri, performers circulate around Akita City, parading the *kantō* poles with the sacred paper markers on top, which is said to be inhabited by a female *kami*. This parade is believed to sweep up the pollution from the city, which is cast into the river at the end of the festival (Lee, 2013, p. 170). This has also the effect of clearing a sacred space, which is demarcated in relation to the physical boundary of the river. As women are associated with pollution, they are prohibited from getting too close to the *kantō*, especially its central pole, the *sao*. However, these sacred boundaries are more complicated than an

inner/outer dichotomy. Referring to sacred mountains, Faure (2003) notes “there were also graduations in terms of purity and defilement, defining concentric rings of *kekkaï*” (p. 223). Women may be allowed to enter some of these zones, but be banned from others (Faure, 2003, pp. 222-223). A similar concept applies for Kantō Matsuri, which allows women to participate as *ohayashi* musicians but not as *sashite* (the men who balance the *kantō*).

In Kantō Matsuri, the taboo centres around the *sao*, which is the central pole of the *kantō* pole structure. In particular, the paper streamer on the top of the *sao* is a powerful signifier for sacrality. According to one interviewee, this is what connects this pole to the *kami* who inhabits it. For this reason, it must be especially protected from touching the ground, women, or the audience. Moreover, the *kami* is thought to be a jealous female *kami*, who does not like the presence of women. For this reason, some of the women in *ohayashi* are warned against touching, crossing over, or even getting close to the *sao*, for fear of the *kami*'s wrath. One woman I interviewed was warned crossing over the *sao* would make her pregnant; another was warned she would become infertile. Though contradictory, both warnings link the transgression of sacred boundaries with the reproductive capacity of women, and therefore the capacity to pollute. They also refer to Kantō Matsuri's history as a fertility festival, with the *sao* said to represent a penis. What is more, these warnings reinforce the sacred boundary around the *sao* through “horror and ardor”, as Marshall (2010, p. 65) theorises the sacred evokes. As such, they are reminiscent of the legends which warn women not to cross the boundaries of sacred mountains, and support Faure's (2003, p. 245) theory that the threat — and punishment — of female transgression reinforces sacred boundaries.

2.1.3 Maintaining the gendered division of labour

Furthermore, Namihira (1987) argues that the concept of pollution “clarifies the division of labour by sex or the categories of male and female” (p. 67). This accords with Bourdieu's (1977) theory that the mythico-ritual system — in this case, the belief system of ritual pollution — legitimates the gendered division of labour by reflecting it, without having to insist upon it (p. 165). According to Namihira (1987), the pollution taboo draws clear lines between “women's reproductive activity and men's productive activity” (p. 69). In addition, she argues it differentiates between female humans and female *kami*; the former helping men with reproduction and the latter helping men with their work (Namihira, 1987, p. 69). In this way, Namihira (1987) sees this belief system as cementing the idea that human survival is predicated on a relationship of mutual aid, in which men and women have complementary roles (p. 69). To illustrate, Namihira (1987) gives the example of women being warned not to enter construction sites for fear an accident will happen, as the *kami* who protect workers are believed to be

female, and jealous of other women (pp. 67-68). There is a clear parallel here with the jealous female *kami* in Kantō Matsuri, whose threat clarifies the distinction between men's ritual roles and women's background labour (and now their roles as musicians). This background labour — such as preparing food and drinks — enables the matsuri itself to take place, as well as the socialising which male-only social circles rely on.

In conclusion, women have historically been excluded from matsuri, and other sacred spaces and contexts; a custom known as *nyonin kinsei*. This is connected to a belief system which sees menstrual and birth blood as polluted. There has been debate as to whether these beliefs originate in Shintōism or Buddhism, but this belies the fact that the two religions have developed in an intertwined manner in Japan, and the Shintōism as referred to as an institutional religion is, in fact, a modern creation. However, this debate illustrates how tradition is invoked and resignified strategically. According to Faure (2003), gender boundaries are constantly renegotiated (p. 7). In particular, he argues women's transgression of sacred boundaries reinforces their sacrality. The same can be argued for the sacred boundary surrounding the *sao* in Kantō Matsuri, which is reinforced through the threat of a jealous female *kami*. Furthermore, this threat — and the concept of pollution in general — also legitimates the gendered division of labour, in which women provide the behind-the-scenes labour which allows the matsuri to run smoothly.

2.2 Renegotiating Gender Boundaries in the Twentieth Century

During the twentieth century, these gender boundaries in Kantō Matsuri had to be renegotiated, when demographic issues led to the introduction of female *hayashi-kata* (accompanying musicians). Defying the long tradition of women's exclusion provoked anxieties related to authenticity and change. However, there were also attempts to satisfy traditionalists. As this thesis has already argued, what is considered as and invoked as religious tradition is strategic, rather than unbiased. Similarly, the reconfiguration of tradition is strategic. This is obvious in the case of Kantō Matsuri, where the sacred boundaries were remapped and potential omens resignified to alleviate controversy. This has allowed women to participate in Kantō Matsuri for over fifty years, something which is generally accepted nowadays.

2.2.1 Filling a lack of successors

The eventual participation of women as musicians, first recorded in 1967 and officially accepted from 1975, seems to be at least partially due to demographic issues (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193; Negishi et al., 2020, p. 117). Negishi et al. (2020) argue Kantō Matsuri had been lacking successors for the tradition since around 1953 (p. 115). After the Second World War, rural areas of Japan were left in economic and population decline, as a result of the nation's economic and political centralization (Thompson, 2004, p. 136). This meant some folk traditions died out due to a lack of funding and successors to pass on the tradition, especially in the northeastern Tōhoku region (Thompson, 2004, p. 136). What is more, these issues intensified when more and more young people had to move out of the declining rural areas to find work, especially from the 1970s onwards, which exacerbated existing population issues and left these regions with ageing populations. In particular, Akita prefecture has suffered from these demographic problems, as its population has been declining since 1955 (Mock, 2014, p. 4). As a result, Negishi et al. (2020, p. 117) suggest the lack of successors was the primary reason women became accepted as musicians in Kantō Matsuri, although Hashimoto (2006) points to the designation of 1980 as the International Year of Women, which publicised the debate around women's participation (p. 193). Additionally, Hashimoto (2006, p. 193) and Negishi et al. (2020, p. 116) link it to Kantō Matsuri also being designated an important intangible folk cultural property in 1980.

2.2.2 *Appeasing anxieties of authenticity and change*

The anxiety around the lack of successors, on the one hand, and the fear of distorting tradition by including women, on the other, evoke Marilyn Ivy's (1995) central argument in *Discourses of the Vanishing*. According to Ivy (1995), Japan is haunted by its rapid modernisation in the Meiji era (1868-1912), and the subsequent ghosts of an imagined “traditional” Japan, which is perceived to have been lost (p. 10). Consequently, Ivy (1995) argues, this cultural anxiety has produced industries of nostalgia which fetishise “vanishing” folk traditions such as matsuri (p. 25). In the 1970s, there was a resurgence of interest in folk traditions in Japan, which were used to market localities as sites of authenticity to tourists (Ivy, 1995, pp. 100-101). Ivy (1995) suggests this marketing appealed to urban workers’ feeling of loss towards and longing for one's *furusato*, which is an idealised view of the rural hometowns left behind when people moved to cities for work (pp. 103-104).

At the same time, the boom in matsuri for purposes of tourism and local revitalisation provoked new anxieties related to notions of authenticity. According to Jennifer Robertson (1991), regional matsuri were promoted in domestic tourism from the early 1960s onwards, and from the early 1980s, there was a

matsuri boom in cities outside of Tokyo (p. 35). Urban planners used existing and newly-created matsuri to help produce localised identities for regional cities, as well as foster connectedness between citizens, as part of *furusato-zukuri* (hometown- or native-place-making) projects (Robertson, 1991). While these matsuri traded on notions of tradition and authenticity, some were criticised for changing too much in response to tourism, or lacking *kami* altogether (Shen, 2020, p. 14). For example, Inoue et al. (1979) analyse the case study of Kobe Matsuri, which is a citizens' festival aimed at promoting Kobe and creating a positive, community-focused atmosphere. Inoue et al. (1979) conclude that this matsuri uses “the symbol of Kobe” in place of the traditional *kami* (p. 178). This new kind of matsuri prompted the folklorist Kunio Yanagita to create a new distinction between matsuri, which prioritise purification and welcoming *kami*, and “*sairei*”, in which public entertainments such as parades are most prominent (Inoue et al., 1979, p. 166). Similarly, Kazuhiko Komatsu distinguishes matsuri as religious rituals, as opposed to “events” which are overly concerned with profit (Chung and Kim, 2019, p. 113). In contrast, recent scholars such as Michael Dylan Foster (2020) highlight the dynamic nature of matsuri, which may change their form to fit the needs of their community.

What is more, these discussions were complicated by the designation of particular matsuri by UNESCO as important intangible folk cultural properties. Foster (2015) observes that UNESCO designations can be used as “floating signifier[s]” in debates around the future of traditions, not necessarily shaping these discussions, but sometimes intensifying feelings of responsibility (p. 227). Indeed, Akita Kantō's designation as an important intangible folk cultural property in 1980 sparked reflection into the tradition's progression, particularly the increasing role of women (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193). As Foster (2015) finds, a UNESCO designation can have the effect of “freez[ing]” a tradition at that moment, meaning locals may feel more reluctant to change the tradition to adapt to the needs of the community (p. 224). One contributing factor here is that UNESCO designations conflate locally-significant traditions into national heritage (Foster, 2015). Now, Kantō Matsuri is not just symbolic of Akita City — as seen on everything from baked goods to manhole covers — but also symbolic of Japan. For example, this could be seen at the showjumping event of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, where a Kantō-inspired fence featured alongside cherry blossom, Mount Fūji and gong-inspired fences (Elder, 2021). As a result, the fear for Kantō Matsuri's future becomes part of the fear for the future of Japan's imagined national heritage. On the other hand, recognition from such a large, international organisation can invite scrutiny into gender-restricted practices, as Janse (2020) discusses. It provokes debate into whether such practices are discrimination, which UNESCO does not want to be seen to endorse, or just tradition, which must be safeguarded (Janse, 2020). In Kantō Matsuri's case, this was likely heightened by 1980 also being the International Year of Women.

In the case of Kantō Matsuri, there seems to be a tension between adapting the matsuri to fit the needs of the community — such as including women as musicians and adding company teams — and safeguarding what is considered its traditional or authentic qualities. Such was made apparent when Kantō Matsuri was accused of being too commercialised after introducing company teams and sponsorship (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 193). What is more, this is complicated by the fact that Kantō's perceived authenticity is its selling point, as with other long-standing matsuri. As such, Kantō Matsuri includes commercial teams, benefitting from their participation. However, it also limits their impact on the matsuri by assigning them a subordinate status — “*kigyō*” (commercial) versus “*chōnai*” (neighbourhood) teams. This impedes their role in decision-making, as only representatives from the *chōnai* teams are members of the Kantō Society, which makes the rules which the *kigyō* teams then have to follow (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 189). Similarly, Kantō Matsuri includes female participants to an extent, but limits their involvement. For example, women can only participate as musicians, and therefore do not become *daihyō* (association/team leaders); a role which is reserved for (male) *sashite* performers. These compromises appease the twin anxieties around Kantō Matsuri's survival and the preservation of its imagined original state, recruiting a wider demographic of successors while maintaining the authority of the original *chōnai* teams.

In this way, they can also be interpreted as compromises between the different entities which shape the form and direction of Kantō Matsuri. Yujie Shen (2020) proposes analysing matsuri in relation to the influence of stakeholders, who each have varying interests and levels of power. In terms of its organisation, Kantō Matsuri is managed by the Kantō Society and the Kantō Executive Committee (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 189). According to Hashimoto (2006), “the Kantō Society is in charge of the rules for the Kantō Skill Contest and responsible for carrying on the tradition, while the Kantō Festival Executive Committee is in charge of the general operation of the Festival and the management of the spectator seats for the tourist from other prefectures” (p. 189). As stated, the administrative body of the Kantō Society is made up of representatives chosen from some of the *chōnai* teams (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 189). In contrast, the Kantō Festival Executive Committee is under the authority of Akita City's Commerce and Tourism Division, and has typically been made up of representatives from the police, the press, residents of Akita City, and businesses such as hotels, utility companies and the transportation industries (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 190). To a lesser extent, *kigyō* teams may also have some influence, although they are not involved in official decision-making. Evidently, then, Kantō's administration is made up of many different individuals with their own interests. Ultimately, the decision to allow women to participate as musicians was made officially, by the Kantō Society. However, it is actually up to the discretion of the individual teams whether to permit women to participate in their teams as musicians, and

there are still some that don't. This allows the most ardent traditionalists to exercise their power within their team and prohibit women from taking part.

2.2.3 Remapping the sacred boundaries

In addition, renegotiating women's participation involved reconfiguring the belief system that once forbade it completely. For example, during an overseas Kantō performance in San Diego, in 1976, the crowd insisted the female musicians have a go at balancing the *kantō*, which caused outrage, with many reiterating the religious rationale for excluding women (Hashimoto, 2006, pp. 193-194). As discussed previously, women were banned from participating in Kantō Matsuri because of a religious taboo which associates them with ritual pollution, and warns them from going near the sacred *sao* or central pole, which should not be defiled. In addition, the *sao* is believed to be inhabited by a jealous female *kami* who will make women who get too close become pregnant or infertile. As such, I argued earlier in this chapter that these warnings reinforce the sacred boundary surrounding the *sao*, similar to how Faure (2003) theorises the threat of punishment against female transgression reinforces the sacred boundaries around mountains such as Ōmine-san (p. 245). But as Faure (2003) notes, there are gradations, “concentric circles” of sacrality, some of which women may be allowed to enter, and others which they may be banned from (p. 223).

What is more, many of these sacred boundaries have been remapped since the Meiji Restoration of 1868. The Meiji Restoration involved a general reconfiguration of religion, such as the aforementioned separation of Shintō and Buddhist traditions, known as *shinbutsu bunri* (Grapard, 1984). Its rapid modernisation dismantled traditional frameworks of knowledge, redefining folk beliefs according to modern notions of rationality, suppressing them or incorporating them into the newly constructed national culture (Figal, 2000). Legally speaking, the Meiji government abolished *nyonin kinsei* (women's exclusion from sacred spaces) in 1872 for shrine and temple lands and mountain-climbing (DeWitt, 2015, p. 61). However, as DeWitt (2015) discusses, this edict was sometimes ignored by towns such as her case study of Dorogawa, where Mount Ōmine is, where *nyonin kinsei* was considered “religious rule”, as opposed to state rule (p. 69; p. 75). This edict also does not necessarily apply to matsuri, which do not seem to be mentioned specifically. However, it is interesting as an attempt, as DeWitt (2015) sees it, of “redefining Japan's religious realm” (p. 68). Later, in 1970, the bounded realm of Mount Ōmine was remapped to encourage more tourism, and to allow female workers in understaffed industries such as forestry (DeWitt, 2015, p. 28). Thus, it was ultimately practical and economic factors that caused the 1300-year old boundary lines to be redrawn (DeWitt, 2015, pp. 28-31).

Similarly, in Kantō Matsuri, I argue the sacred boundary around the *sao* seems to have been remapped since the introduction of female musicians in the 1960s and 70s. As discussed previously, by circulating around Akita City and sweeping up the ritual pollution, Kantō performers clear a sacred space around the city, which, of course, women could and would not be banned from. However, women were once banned from performing in Kantō Matsuri, meaning that they were not allowed in the vicinity of the *sao*. This was a smaller circle of sacrality which they were excluded from. By becoming *hayashi-kata* — accompanying musicians — they are now allowed in the vicinity of the *sao* by necessity. Yet, they are still not allowed to touch the *sao*, cross over the *sao*, or get too close to it. If the pole falls down, they must jump out of the way. So, the sacred boundary around the *sao* which women are excluded from has not disappeared, it has simply moved closer. In fact, as the boundary has moved closer to the *sao*, its sacrality seems to have been reinforced. Allowing women in the vicinity of the *sao* while warning them not to get too close — bearing in mind the poles move around a lot, especially on windy days — makes them hyper-conscious of the taboo. This is further intensified by the threat of harm if they do not jump out of the way of the falling *sao* in time, whether caused by a jealous *kami* or by the pole itself.

2.2.4 Resignifying superstition

Furthermore, appeasing the negative response to female musicians participating in Kantō Matsuri required a resignification, which gave an alternative explanation to the bad weather that the women were initially blamed for. According to Hashimoto (2006), the introduction of female participants was blamed for rain on the days of the matsuri (pp. 193-194). The implication here is that allowing women to participate angered the *kami*. In fact, blaming female participants for rainy weather evokes the legends of women crossing the boundaries of sacred mountains. As DeWitt (2015) notes, “turbulent weather in the mountains was regarded as a sign a woman had entered into the jealous female god's realm.” (p. 20) Thus, the rainy weather is understood as a form of divine justice; proof that the jealous female *kami* of Kantō Matsuri is displeased by the presence of women, or at least proof that allowing women to participate is polluting, and leads to bad consequences.

In the case of Kantō Matsuri, rainy weather is particularly inconvenient, as it often means performances have to be cancelled. In addition, the reference to rain evokes the story of the Tanabata tradition, which Kantō Matsuri has integrated. According to that myth, the lovers who were separated by the Milky Way could only cross over once a year if there was no rain (Lee, 2013, p. 171). As such, making a reference to rain in this context imbues the argument with added meaning. Instead of dismissing this superstition, an

alternative explanation was found. The rain was instead explained as caused by upsetting the ancestral spirits on Sannō street, who were displeased by a noisy parade passing by what once was their graveyard (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 194). Consequently, the Kantō Society held a special memorial service, and the controversy was allayed (Hashimoto, 2006, p. 194). In this way, resignifying — finding a new meaning for — this issue helped alleviate concerns without putting the traditional belief system in question. If anything, it reinforced the belief in the *kami*, and in divine justice.

2.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, a lack of successors in the postwar period led to Kantō Matsuri allowing women to be accompanying musicians. This had historically been prohibited due to religious reasons; in particular, there was concern about women polluting the sacred *sao*, the central pole of the *kantō*. Introducing women, *kigyō* (company) teams and sponsors provoked fears as to how Kantō Matsuri was changing. In fact, the rapid modernisation Japan went through meant many folk traditions such as matsuri were either disappearing or changing dramatically to fit the changing needs of their communities, which led to widespread cultural anxieties. In the case of Kantō Matsuri, this was exacerbated by its UNESCO designation as an important intangible folk cultural property in 1980, the same year as the International Year of Women, which heightened the controversy about female participants and threw it into the national spotlight. However, the fears from traditionalists were appeased by continuing to prohibit women from balancing the poles, and allowing individual teams to make the decision as to whether to permit female musicians or not. This seemingly involved a redrawing of the sacred boundary surrounding the *sao*, meaning women were allowed in its vicinity but warned all the more of the dangers of getting too close. In addition, the blaming of rainy weather on the introduction of female participants was resignified as to cast blame away from women, instead explaining it as ancestral spirits, annoyed by the noise. In these ways, the gender boundaries were renegotiated as to maintain the belief system underlying Kantō Matsuri and appease the anxieties of those who opposed female participants, while also enabling the continued succession of the tradition.

Chapter Three: Reproducing a “Man's Festival”

Despite the renegotiation of these gender boundaries, the custom of women's exclusion has had lasting impacts on the team structure and aesthetics of Kantō Matsuri. Even nowadays, when many women participate in its *ohayashi* section, Kantō Matsuri is perceived as a “man's festival”, as one female *ohayashi* player attested (UG Interview 1, 2021):

According to them [...] like, *chōnai* Kantō people who grew up with Kantō, they see... especially, like, male members, they see Kantō as a man's festival. Like, you know, it's a summer festival and in Tōhoku area, and men are doing *sashite* a lot as well, so, like, they wanted to make it, like, masculine, kind of thing.

This shows how the conception of Kantō as a man's festival is linked to its position as a summertime matsuri in the Tōhoku area. The region of Tōhoku seems to stand in as a signifier for what is considered traditional, which, in this case, is linked to the historic exclusion of women, and therefore the predominance of men. According to Traphagan (2000), matsuri reproduce the power of elder males through symbolic capital. Similarly, Shawn Bender (2012) argues the historical male dominance of taiko drumming has led to its aesthetic standards being “discursively constructed around male bodies” (pp. 327-328). In making this argument, Bender (2012) builds off of Connell's (1987) theory of hegemonic masculinity, which analyses the patterns of masculinity which become cultural ideals and legitimate the structural predominance of men. For example, male dominance of *taiko* is reproduced through these aesthetic standards, which privilege male bodies. This theory can also be applied to the *sashite* and flute performances of Kantō Matsuri, although there is not the same body of theoretical literature as for *taiko* drumming. As the quotation above suggests, these standards are also locally-specific, and can be interrogated and historicised.

3.1 Structuring a Team around a Taboo

Firstly, the historical religious rationale for women's exclusion from Kantō Matsuri and its eventual renegotiation in the twentieth century has enduring impacts on contemporary Kantō teams. Bourdieu (1977) theorises that mythico-ritual systems which are dominated by male values naturalise gendered divisions of labour and power (pp. 164-165). Similarly, in Kantō teams or associations (*kantō-kai*) such as the Akita International University (AIU) team, the taboo around the *sao* necessitates the distinction

between *sashite* — the men who artistically balance bamboo pole structures laden with paper lanterns — and *ohayashi* — participants of any gender who play flutes and drums to create a lively, heightened atmosphere.

Due to the belief women would pollute the sacred central pole (*sao*) of the structure, they are prohibited from touching it or getting too close to it, although, as the last chapter has discussed, they are now broadly allowed in its vicinity due to demographic necessity. Consequently, the AIU team can be seen to have a kind of schism, necessitated by a taboo which is more readily accepted and understood by the local teams, whose beliefs it has to respect. At times, this leads to divisions between *ohayashi* and *sashite*, women and men, and even Japanese full-time and international exchange students. This has resulted in some students taking on a kind of mediatory role, wherein they translate cultural differences to newer students, to achieve greater understanding and team harmony.

3.1.1 Protecting the sao

As chapter one discussed, the taboo prohibiting women from getting close to the *sao* is reinforced through the invocation of a jealous female *kami*, who is said to punish women who get too close, by either making them pregnant or infertile. Now women are allowed in the vicinity of this *sao*, by virtue of them being *ohayashi*, they have to physically move out of the way of the pole when it falls down, reinforcing the taboo through horror and ardour. Moreover, this taboo is reinforced through an internalised sense of responsibility of those who balance the pole (*sashite*) in protecting *ohayashi* and the audience, and, at the same time, the sacredness of the central pole or *sao* and the paper streamer which is a signifier of this sacredness attached to its top.

As one male drummer noted when discussing the taboo around women touching the *sao*, “it's also like the men's responsibility to protect them from touching the [pole]. So like if it falls, like the men have to, like, go and [...] hold it away from them so it doesn't touch them” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). In particular, when I asked a *sashite* performer how conscious he was of the sacred paper streamer on the pole during Kantō performances, he replied that they don't pay so much attention to it, until the pole starts to fall, and then they try to make sure this does “not touch to the ground or not touch to women or the audience” to protect the streamer and therefore its “*kami-sama*” (MAR Interview 2, 2022). At the same time, ensuring the pole does not hit the women or the audience is also a matter of safety, which is internalised as an important part of a *sashite* performer's role. The same *sashite* performer responded, when asked what they consider cool in a fellow *sashite* performer, “if [...] that *sashite* could pay attention to audience and [...]

make them safe, uh... away from *kantō* poles dropping down... I think he's cool. I think he's not a really, uh... like, personalistic person” (MAR Interview 2, 2022). So, in his eyes, making sure to protect the audience, the *ohayashi* performers, and also the sacredness of the pole is seen not only as *sashite's* responsibility, but reflective of their character.

3.1.2 Legitimizing male leadership

Furthermore, the taboo surrounding the *sao* has an impact on the actual structure of the team.

On the one hand, it bears noting the division between *ohayashi* and *sashite* is partially due to the lack of time AIU students have to learn their roles. The AIU team is distinguished in part by the fast progression of participants in only a few years from outright beginners to proficient team members who teach younger students and may compete in the skills contest or hold positions of responsibility in the team. This is due to the short timescale before students graduate, although alumni may come back to participate in the matsuri in a more peripheral role. In comparison, many members of local *Kantō* teams “have been performing thirty or forty years in their life”, “from elementary school kids or teenagers to sixty or seventy [year old] elderlies” (UG Interview 1, 2021).

Many of the *ohayashi* members have an existing interest and proficiency in playing musical instruments, perhaps even similar instruments like the Western flute, but it is unlikely they will have played the style of music typical to *Kantō* Matsuri unless they grew up in Akita prefecture. For example, it is rare for members to have previously played the *ohayashi no shinobue*, a high-pitched, side-blown bamboo flute commonly used at matsuri, which is not tuned to the Western scale. Likewise, it is very unlikely *sashite* performers will have balanced a *kantō* pole before, unless they are from Akita. As a result, students have limited time to excel as *sashite* or *ohayashi*, meaning they typically limit their involvement to one or the other, and even choose drums or flute to focus on, perhaps practising the other in a more casual manner. For these reasons, regular practices are usually separate, with *ohayashi* practising in a soundproof room and *sashite* practising outside, whereas whole-team practices occur less often.

Nevertheless, the taboo around the *sao* legitimates the male-dominated hierarchical structure of *Kantō* teams, by requiring that the whole-team leader or representative (*zentai daihyō*) is a man. When I asked one female *ohayashi* performer about the impacts of the taboo around the *sao*, she said it meant only men could be the whole-team leader, in case “something happens to the pole or when there is an emergency, you have to have the power to touch the *sao*” (UG Interview 5, 2021). On that account, the decision-making can sometimes be dominated by men. In fact, another *ohayashi* performer noted that

there is a leader for *sashite* and a leader for *ohayashi*, but because the leader of the overall team is always a man, from *sashite*, in the AIU team, “this can mean things are decided or discussed within *sashite* team, then later shared with *ohayashi*, or they consult, but the main leader and the decision makers are mostly men... from my observation” (MAR Interview 1, 2021). As argued earlier, this type of allowance helps appease anxieties around the religious taboo around the *sao* and the perceived authenticity of Kantō Matsuri, which is traditionally male-dominated.

Furthermore, this helps further reproduce this male-dominated structure. As this thesis has discussed, Bourdieu's (1977) practice theory proposes that individuals come to embody and then reproduce their environment: a concept known as *habitus*. In the case of matsuri, cultural forms and norms are reinforced with the help of a hierarchical power structure, in which elder males tend to hold dominant positions (Traphagan, 2000). There are multiple types of hierarchies in Kantō Matsuri, from the hierarchical relationships that exist between local (*chōnai*) and company (*kigyō*) teams, to the *senpai-kōhai* (elder and younger student) relationships that are used to teach *sashite* and *ohayashi* to newer members. In this way, individuals reproduce the forms of *sashite* and *ohayashi*, and other norms, expectations and unwritten rules by passing knowledge down through these hierarchical relationships.

In particular, the team leader (*zentai daihyō*) has a particularly important role in shaping a team's internal culture. When I asked one interviewee how the decision to include or exclude female musicians was made, she replied she was not sure, but the team leader has “pretty strong power, all the time”, giving an example of a decision a local team made to admit graduates from AIU, which had been swayed in large part by their “young” whole-team leader (UG Interview 1, 2021). This illustrates how decision-making in these teams is often top-down. From one perspective, this can give those at the top of this structure the power to transform it, as in the example this interviewee gave.

However, the reproduction of elder male power at the top of the hierarchy can also reproduce long-standing gender roles, dynamics or divisions. For example, when I asked one *sashite* performer why he thinks the team he now participates in was “more divided” between *sashite* and *ohayashi*, compared to the AIU team, he identified it as a result of the leadership, saying their “boss” was “not so good at communication” with *ohayashi* (MAR Interview 2, 2022). In addition, I asked another interviewee, a female drummer, about the influence of more traditionally-minded leaders. She responded that leaders who grew up in the sixties and seventies when gender roles were more traditional, with the women “preparing the meals” and “doing all the [...] work behind everything”, seemed more likely to “try to have

everything done the way that they are used to” (UG Interview 5, 2021). This shows how the reproduction of elder male power in matsuri can lead to the reproduction of gender roles.

In one local team, the taboo around the *sao* also leads to a division of labour regarding childcare. The flute player who joined this local team after graduation took on the role of caring for the children, which she identified as a gendered role. She said the “main role” for women in this team “is looking after children”, “both girls and boys”, although “in terms of technique [...] *sashite* people only are the people who can teach *sashite* boys” (MAR Interview 5, 2022). For greater context, she explained that the matsuri was very chaotic, with lots of teams and lots of poles, and the *sashite* performers had no time to look out for the children, so that was why the *ohayashi* players — who are mainly women — were the ones who focused on making sure the children were okay. So, *sashite* players’ focus on keeping the poles held up safely — a task which *ohayashi* women are not able to help with — leads to a division of labour in which *ohayashi* performers focus on keeping other aspects of the matsuri under control, in this case, looking after the children.

As a result of the reproduction of men's power, some men take advantage by acting superior. For example, a female flute player noted there were “certain power dynamics”, as “some people [in *sashite*] understands or act like they are the main [act] of the festival”, and act like *ohayashi*, which is typically made up of women, are “only the background music or not really significant as *sashite*” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). On the other hand, there are also people who try to bring the two sections together. Another *ohayashi* performer argued “we are doing totally different things, like, we are doing music, they are doing *sashite* performance. But, like, we still have a lot of connection, especially, like, [...] I feel it toward the festival season, like, we are really different but we are trying to make a good thing together” (UG Interview 4, 2021). To illustrate her point, she mentioned one male team member who has made an effort to be part of both *sashite* and *ohayashi*, thereby creating better connection between the sections. There are also many social events in which *ohayashi* and *sashite* can interact, and there are consequently many friendships or even romantic relationships between the two.

3.1.3 Mediating cultural differences

As another consequence, it can sometimes be a matter of conflict for newer students, especially international students, that the rationale around women being prohibited from *sashite* relies on a religious taboo. Negishi et al. (2020) argues securing Kantō Matsuri's legacy long-term may well require cooperation between participants of various genders and backgrounds (pp. 116-119). But in order to

cooperate and coexist, we need to get a deeper understanding of the issues that may cause divisions, and how these can best be mediated.

For one, the protectiveness around religious tradition can be frustrating for international exchange students. According to Bourdieu (1977), the concept of tradition is an important tool in reproducing social conditions (p. 164). In Kantō Matsuri, religious tradition is invoked particularly in the case of gender norms, which are affected by the taboo around the *sao*, thereby granting them a kind of legitimacy. This line of thinking can be seen in some of the interviews I conducted. Even though one female drummer said she initially found it “disappointing” she couldn't do *sashite*, and was aware there were plenty of opinions on the “gender issues” surrounding it, she remarked that “never really was bothered by it”, because of “its long history” and the “religious reasons” (UG Interview 5, 2021). Elaborating on this point, she said “that's not just a Kantō thing, it can be applied to any of the Japanese traditions, so I... if that is applied to something new, that is to be created, I wouldn't like it, but because it has been going on for many years, I was okay *te iuu no ka*” (UG Interview 5, 2021). Along similar lines, another woman said “I don't want to say that's a discrimination [...] or something because it's a kind of tradition. But if [...] such kind of thing happens in my office or something, maybe I would— I will say, uh... it is not fair or something. That... I think it's not the same discussion” (MAR Interview 5, 2022). These women are aware here of the impact of the concept of religious tradition on their thinking, and it is clear different standards apply to customs which are considered traditional.

In contrast, several of the international students struggled to understand why this religious tradition went unquestioned, or, even if questioned, went unchanged. For example, one male international student saw the custom that women could not touch the central pole as “sexist” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). Another male international student revealed he had asked the other *sashite* performers why women could not lift the pole, and had been told about the belief that women would become pregnant or infertile, but said he felt this reason was “all pretend” (MAR Interview 4, 2022). He expressed frustration that “nobody dares to touch the structure”, saying some of the other students said they felt the same way about this taboo, but didn't want to infringe upon the tradition (MAR Interview 4, 2022). This supports Negishi et al.'s (2021) findings that international students in AIU's Kantō team struggled with the gendered division of roles in the team, which they saw as a matter of male dominance (p. 69).

However, some of the Japanese participants I interviewed contextualised this feeling of not wanting to transgress customs with regards to the AIU team's position as newcomers to the tradition. For example, one interviewee said “we need to be respectful to those traditional teams, and also those who doesn't have

females as well, because we are *kigyō* Kantō, as I talked before, and they are *chōnai* Kantō, they are the true Kantō, from our perspective, so we have to be respectful for them, and without them making decision, like without them allowing us to perform, we are not able to perform” (UG Interview 1, 2021). Robertson (1991) sees the citizen's festival in Kodaira as casting its existing “dialectic of native and newcomer” in high relief, referring to the divisions between the native citizens and the long-term tourists who moved there (p. 39). In regard to the AIU Kantō team's relationships with other teams, this dialectic of native and newcomer is hierarchical rather than adverse, and requires respect.

For example, it was explained to me over the course of my year in the team that the AIU team was set up with the support of the Uwakome and Kaminochō Kantō teams, who provided resources and ongoing advice, with some of the most experienced members continuing to visit our practices and give feedback. As a show of respect and appreciation, the AIU team therefore held formal drinking parties with speeches to honour these teams, would speak to their members in very polite, formal Japanese, and provide them with help when asked. The AIU team is considered a commercial (*kigyō*) team, which is set apart from the original (*chōnai*) teams associated with specific districts of the city. As the preceding chapter discussed, these commercial teams were controversial initially and have a subordinate status, not taking part in official decision-making. As a result, AIU Kantō team members often feel a responsibility to maintain relationships with local teams and act with respect towards a tradition they love but are newcomers to.

On the other hand, the AIU Kantō team is made up of students from Akita International University, who come from diverse backgrounds and have diverse views. One Japanese female flute player expressed her hope that the AIU team would be a “pioneer” where it came to gender issues; “I don't know, but... yeah, someday I hope that everyone can do whatever they want in the festival, I don't really care about getting closer to the *kantō* thing” (UG Interview 2, 2021). She thought the image of “men first, women second” which persists in matsuri should be changed, and also argued “it's not really good to divide people into male and female”, referencing people who have non-binary gender identities (UG Interview 2, 2021). When discussing these issues, this interviewee brought up the fact that Akita International University has “a lot of people [...] from various countries” and “various backgrounds”, claiming that, in contrast, the Kantō team was “AIU *rashikunai*” — “not really like [...] AIU” — in that AIU students “don't really [...] admire Japanese culture” (UG Interview 2, 2021). So, the AIU Kantō team's position as somewhat of an outlier could make it more likely to spearhead changes, or it could make it more likely to defer to the local teams who are able to claim more authority over the direction of Kantō Matsuri.

In general, there seems to often be a tension that students feel between questioning tradition yet not wanting to disrespect it, which is complicated by the team's insider/outsider status. As a result, some full-time students take on a kind of mediatory role, explaining cultural differences and expectations to newer students. For example, one female flute player spoke of the challenges her and her peers faced in explaining issues such as the dress code or the elder-younger student relationships, remarking that “for international students, it was very difficult to understand Japanese culture in the Kantō team” (UG Interview 1, 2021). On the one hand, the fast turnover of students and subsequent fast transmission of knowledge in the team helps reproduce these norms and customs.

On the other hand, having to explain these customs repeatedly to young students or international exchange students who ask lots of questions seems to cause the older students to question them too. Another female flute player brought this up when comparing the AIU team to other teams, “when we become in the position to, you know, welcome new students or tell them how it is, we receive a lot of questions like why girls cannot do *sashite* or why is it like this? Why is it like this? Then I think... at least there are a few times during Kantō... [...] that we question what we are doing or [...] what's the reason why we need to do it? While we follow the tradition which we cannot really change... [as a] university student” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). This encapsulates the ambivalence some full-time students feel in explaining norms they did not create and are newcomers to themselves.

3.1.4 *Ohayashi as ritual actors*

As a counterpoint to the historical exclusion of women from ritual roles, I want to reframe the narrative around ritual actors in Kantō Matsuri. For the reasons outlined above, it can often seem like only *sashite* are allowed to be ritual actors in Kantō Matsuri. Knowledge of the sacredness of the central pole or *sao* of the *kantō* pole is particularly salient, perhaps in part because of the taboo, and in general, *ohayashi* are seen as more of a supporting role. However, *ohayashi* — which nowadays includes women — also have an important ritual function. In fact, Andrea Giolai (2020) analyses the matsuri as a sonic event, in which music and other sonic practices “contribute to the transformation of bare spaces into sacralized places” (p. 218). In Kantō Matsuri, the heightened atmosphere is created by the music, as well as the audience and *ohayashi* clapping and shouting the chants *dokkoisho*, *dokkoisho*, and then later, *sore*, *yoisho*. In addition, the flute's high pitch helps people from across the city know there is a matsuri happening. In this way, it marks out a sacred space and a sacred time; a special occasion that can be distinguished by these sonic cues.

Furthermore, the heightened atmosphere created by the music seems to help the matsuri carry out its ritual functions, although this did not seem to be mentioned often during practices. For one, Giolai (2020) notes that, for some, the primary function of matsuri music is to exalt the *kami*, while others just see it as supporting the main performance (pp. 218-219). Indeed, one female drummer I interviewed said during the matsuri she sometimes felt as if she was “performing for the gods” as well as for the audience (UG Interview 4, 2021). However, after having said this, she commented the Japanese equivalent of “that’s a bit strange, though, isn’t it? A bit uncool to say”, suggesting her impression of the matsuri as a religious experience was at odds with her normal way of thinking, or at least conscious it might not seem a rational or sophisticated thing to say (UG Interview 4, 2021). This suggests there is some knowledge of the ritual function of *ohayashi*, yet which is not necessarily as salient as the taboo surrounding the *sao*.

Additionally, there is a sense the music helps dispel evil spirits, or at least creates an atmosphere that feels as if it could, as Giolai (2020, p. 218) observes of matsuri music. In fact, another interviewee described the atmosphere *ohayashi* was supposed to create as helping the matsuri to achieve its religious function: “this atmosphere [...] leads to like, [...] harvest. For good maternity. And people’s health” (MAR Interview 2, 2022). Alternatively, a flute player expressed her belief that their music could help the *sashite* players face the elements: “And when it is windy, it’s very difficult for them to perform, right? So, like, my *senpai* and also other members were, like, thinking, um, let’s stop the wind there, by our *hayashi* [laughs] so we will do our best performance there so our team will win, kind of thing.” (UG Interview 1, 2021). By imagining her playing might affect the elements itself, she could play in a way that would encourage the *sashite* players to better face them. These comments provide a well-needed counterpoint to the prevailing narrative in which women are positioned against sacrality and ritual in Kantō Matsuri.

3.2 Gendered Performances

3.2.1 Creating an atmosphere

Secondly, the atmosphere created by *ohayashi* ties into the expected visual and sonic aesthetics of Kantō Matsuri, which are related to interconnected conceptions of gender and place. Especially during the main part of the performances, the music has a chaotic yet joyful sound, created by the low, booming drums and high-pitched flutes playing different parts of the same tune at the same rhythm as each other. In

particular, the *ohayashi* music is used to mark the beginning of a performance — which starts with a lone flute player — and to set its rhythm and tone. Furthermore, this heightened atmosphere reaches a climax at several points of the performance. *Ohayashi* and *sashite* work together to create this climax, as *sashite* build up the intensity of their performance by adding more and more extension poles and showcasing more difficult forms, perhaps also waving a fan or playing the flute while balancing the pole to create more drama. When the performance builds in intensity, the *ohayashi* players build up the music, for example by playing louder and adding musical flourishes to the basic song. This intensifies an already exciting and tense atmosphere, as all eyes are on the pole, which could break and fall at any time.

Moreover, this atmosphere reinforces the idea of Kantō Matsuri as a “man's festival”. When discussing the importance of keeping Kantō as a “man's festival”, one flute player said she was told by people visiting from local teams that “the flute, and also the drums need to be masculine” (UG Interview 1, 2021). Although she was not fully sure what playing the flute or *taiko* in a masculine way meant, she did suggest it had something to do with the big sound and wild atmosphere *ohayashi* is supposed to create (UG Interview 1, 2021):

One thing *hayashi* have to do is create an atmosphere from how we play, and the way we play is pretty big and sometimes people are being like very... how do I explain that? Like wild, like... wildness, maybe? I don't know. And they have to make bigger sound, especially when we are doing a very big performance with *sashite*, so especially for girls, it was very difficult to find how to make the sound bigger or how to like make their form better... and I think the definition of better is... um... largely depending on masculinity? Because I think the movement is not feminine [laughs] for *taiko* people, so like many— like what is good, what is better is connected to masculinity.

In fact, Deborah Wong (2019) came across a similar concept during a trip to Japan as part of her fieldwork in a North American *taiko* ensemble. She met a renowned musician who taught them to play with a “sternly still, controlled stance”, saying to some of the group “forget you're a woman!” (p. 130). Similarly, Wong (2019) noted, “it wasn't clear (to me, at least) what that might mean. Play more stiffly and less fluidly, more strongly and less softly, more assertively and less gently? Something like that” (p. 130). This illustrates how the gendered associations of particular forms and sounds are not always expressed clearly. However, by interrogating the tradition historically, one can dig deeper into these associations.

3.2.2 Powerful bodies, powerful sounds

In particular, the ideal of a “bigger sound” is connected to the ideal of large and strong bodies, which is rooted in the history of Kantō Matsuri as a display of artisan and merchant strength. The valuation of physical strength, as linked to masculinity, is exemplified in particular by *sashite* performers. After all, Kantō Matsuri is believed to have been originated by craftsmen and merchants such as ironmongers and ricemongers who had strong physical strength (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 114). The distinctive *kantō* pole structure was developed as a result of the eldest sons of these families competing against each other to balance longer and heavier bamboo poles, which one female *ohayashi* player referred to as “a show off competition for men to [...] show how powerful and muscular they are” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). This comment points at the gendered aspects of this competition, which is also tied into occupational identities. Nowadays, it seems there is still a tendency for *sashite* performers to show off their physical strength through a visual display of muscles, for example. As another *ohayashi* player said, “*sashite* people train really hard, and also it's about, like, how they look and how they perform visually, so [...] there are some aspects like the bigger you are and the [...] more muscular you are, [...] you are better at the performance” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). However, a *sashite* performer argued “it's more about balance than [...] physical power”, suggesting the athleticism required for *sashite* goes beyond pure strength (MAR Interview 4, 2022).



Figure 3. A sashite performer balancing the kantō pole on their forehead (photo by author)

What is more, this seems to have been maintained historically by the patterns of participation, as at first, only men who were from the craftsman part of town were allowed to participate (Hotta, 1995, cited in Negishi et al., 2020, p. 114). These conceptions of occupational identity are from the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), around when Kantō Matsuri originated, and when there was a rigid hierarchy of social classes. After the country was unified, the new military government consolidated their power in part by enforcing this hierarchy, which legitimated the tight control of weapons and impeded social mobility (Sheldon, 1983, p. 477). Artisans and merchants were at the bottom of this hierarchy, although as the economy became less agrarian and commerce became more profitable, merchants began to develop more and more financial power (Sheldon, 1983). Since its modernisation and rapid economic growth, Japan has generally been considered to be a middle-class society, and this old social hierarchy does not have the same significance, although recent scholarship suggests new socioeconomic divides (Chiavacci, 2008).

However, Dorinne Kondo (1990) notes that the old merchant and artisan parts of Tokyo (*shitamachi*, the downtown), where artisans, factory workers and small business-owners continue to live, have their own place-based identity, distinguished by direct attitudes and styles of speech, for example (p. 234). In contrast, the former samurai parts of town (*yamanote*, the hills), are known for a more refined but distant style of speech, and are now made up of salaried employees (Kondo, 1990, p. 234). Kondo (1990) notes the “deeply symbolic territory” around the concept of the artisan, which she argues affects the self-images of contemporary artisans and factory workers. As stated, it was typically those from the artisan and merchant neighbourhoods who participated in Kantō Matsuri, and markers of this artisan identity, in particular, are still visible today, as the musical instruments, lanterns and poles are still made by hand. Artisan identity was also something only historically conferred to men, and Kondo (1990) argues the discourse around it in the modern workplace “reveals itself as a way of creating and legitimating hierarchy, by partially excluding younger men and certainly excluding all part-time workers, almost all of whom are women” (p. 231). So, these markers of identity are also gendered.

Furthermore, these connections with gender and occupation seem to carry over into the aesthetics of *taiko*. As Bender (2012) discusses, the physical aesthetics of *taiko* drumming are thought to be rooted in the manual labour performed by workers such as farmers or blacksmiths, who developed the kind of strong arms and legs that allowed them to play *taiko* powerfully (pp. 164-165). This idea, at least, was promoted by Den Tagayasu, the founder of the Ondekoza *taiko* ensemble, who helped popularise ensemble *taiko*,

which compiled a variety of localised traditions into a unified art-form (Shinoda, 1994, p. 33-34, cited in Bender, 2012, pp. 164-165). Den was inspired by romanticised images of farmers and other labourers from times gone by, and therefore encouraged *taiko* drummers to cultivate the muscles, build and strength he believed those who grew up in an industrialised society were lacking (Shinoda, 1994, p. 33-34, cited in Bender, 2012, pp. 164-165). While farmers were historically a distinct social category from artisans and merchants, it seems Den has conflated the two in his valuation of pre-industrialised manual labour. Notably, Bender (2012) points out the masculine nature of such aesthetics, which were shaped by male figures such as Den Tagayasu and inspired by male workers (pp. 326-327). In addition, Bender (2012) notes that Den drew a link between the powerful sound expected from *taiko* drumming and the powerful, strong body which is supposed to make it (p. 154).

Indeed, this ideal of a powerful sound, as connected to a powerful, strong body, seems to be valued in the AIU Kantō team. One man who played *taiko* commented on the “muscular stamina” required for it (MAR Interview 3, 2022). He felt he might have been overly praised as a *taiko* player because of his naturally bigger body and stronger arms, which allowed him to make a bigger sound. However, he was unsure if this was linked to his being a man or if the comments were just intended to encourage him, also pointing out that one of his female *senpai* had strong, muscly arms, and could make a bigger sound than him. These assumptions could also have an impact on team dynamics. For example, a female *taiko* player discussed her observations from a competition where players from different teams were grouped together, saying she noticed that in the teams which had men and women together, the men would attempt to lead the group rather than cooperate, because “if the drummer [...] is a male, then they will naturally have, like, more strength, so [...] the volume is louder than other female players, even if they make a very good sound” (UG Interview 5, 2021). In contrast, this kind of situation did not seem to happen so much in AIU's *ohayashi* section, which was mainly made up of and led by women.

Likewise, there was an assumption that female flute players were more likely to struggle making a loud enough sound because of their smaller bodies and lungs. One woman said (UG Interview 1, 2021):

[...] because I'm a female and I'm smaller, [...] some movements [have] been difficult, due to, like, my lung is not strong enough, compared to male, so there are some techniques I couldn't use, or some people advised me not to use because I'm a woman, or like, I'm female and also small.

Thus, essentialistic notions linked to women's bodies continue to be an obstacle in women's participation in Kantō Matsuri. This parallels Bender's (2012) observation about the pressure on female *taiko*

drummers to overcompensate for the assumed differences between their bodies (p. 363). As a consequence, this flute player said she was told to play in a more “masculine” way (UG Interview 1, 2021). When I asked her what playing in a masculine way would entail, she was unsure, as her time learning in the AIU Kantō team had been interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, reading between the lines of the quotation above, it seems the notion of masculinity in flute within Kantō Matsuri is associated with a louder volume, as in *taiko* drumming, which is why lung strength is relevant.

For drummers, a bigger, more dynamic sound can be achieved through a wider form with dynamic movements. For example, one drummer gave an example of how she would explain to beginners how to make the correct form and movements (UG Interview 5, 2021):

To open your legs to your shoulders. And to bend down a bit. And focus your— put the— make your stomach the core point of the body. And— oh, the wrist thing. Don't have your wrist stiff, try to move it when you're hitting the drum. And— [...] when you have your arm up, don't just keep it straight and smack it down. First, have the elbow lower and then the wrist, and then the fist, [...] and then hit the stick to the surface of the drum.

Drumming according to this ideal style enables learners to gain social capital by being admired by their peers and considered cool. When discussing the “bigger”, “more dynamic” movements she tried to make while drumming, one drummer expressed her desire to “imitat[e] [her] *senpai*” who she admired when she was a first-year student (UG Interview 5, 2021). In turn, she said she wanted to play in a way which would make younger students look up to her and think she was cool. She described this playing style as having a “*manly na kanji*” (a manly feel), saying she wanted to be “strong”, “energetic” and “cool” (UG Interview 5, 2021). This shows how playing in a dynamic style with bigger movements is associated with both coolness and masculinity, allowing for women to access social capital while maintaining a system of values privileging men and masculine aesthetics.

In addition, the loud, wild atmosphere of the matsuri is created through the rhythmic shouting of chants. The chants *dokkoisho* and *yoissho* (a variation of *wasshoi*) are used when one is exerting oneself, such as by lifting or pulling something heavy, and therefore are used in many matsuri, most commonly ones with portable shrines. As a result, the chants evoke the kind of manual labour matsuri participants would have historically made a living from, in this case, tying into the history of Kantō Matsuri as a display of craftsmen and merchants’ physical strength. What is more, they foster a spirit of unity between those who chant it, like other folk songs which are used when working. For these reasons, it is perhaps not surprising

that, just as matsuri have become a form of protest, “in recent history ‘*wasshoi wasshoi*’ has been adopted as the chant of student and labor demonstrations”, as Robertson (1987, p. 134) notes.

In the AIU Kantō team, this type of chanting is considered a way to make a cheerful, lively atmosphere, and was referred to as a form of “cheerleading” to encourage *sashite* (MAR Interview 2, 2022). However, one *sashite* performer also associated this shouting with masculinity, referring to his own experiences shouting chants to encourage other performers. When asked to expand on his suggestion that *sashite* allowed him to show off his masculinity, this performer said (MAR Interview 6, 2022):

Hmm... so... maybe [...] they get closer to *hayashi*, or [...] they’re closer to audiences and they, kind of, like, [shout], like, wah, or something. And, um... if we were not playing, and while other members are [...] playing very well, we get closer to them and do [...] like, *dokkoisho, dokkoisho*, in, like, loud voice. It's like—yeah, to me it's really masculine and it's like a male— male thing. To me.

Once again, there is a connection made between masculinity and the loud, wild and boisterous, albeit one that is difficult for interviewees to pin down in clear terms. There is a certain idea of being visible and taking up space, as linked to masculinity. Likewise, there is a sense of showing off, similar to the heroic drinking which chapter four discusses.

3.2.3 Using clothing to fit in

Another way the aesthetics of Kantō Matsuri are attained is through clothing, which can either facilitate the maintenance or transformation of cultural forms. According to E. Jane Burns (2004), “clothes [...] are seen as social sites that stage gendered identities” (p. 3). In other words, “items of dress are understood to negotiate in a variety of ways among individual desire, perception, and fantasy on the one hand, and cultural demands and conventions on the other” (Burns, 2004, p. 4). Indeed, Seethaler (2011) makes a case for the role of clothing in allowing its wearers to move between cultural realms such as class divides, building on Garber's (2008) theory of cross-dressing as destabilising categories.

Likewise, Wong (2019) argues “clothing is one of the single most public forms of performative identity construction and a central physical means through which taiko bodies speak” (p. 66). Specifically, Wong (2019) is discussing the ensemble *taiko* tradition in the United States of America, in which uniforms are chosen by the *taiko* groups to reflect their group identities, in ways which may evoke national and

transnational aesthetics. For example, a group may wear clothing associated with the samurai — and therefore Japanese identity — or wear clothes associated with immigrant labour (Wong, 2019, pp. 68-69). In contrast, Kantō teams are more limited in how they can construct a performative identity through clothing, as their uniforms are constrained by convention.

Nonetheless, in Kantō Matsuri, clothing enables participants to embody both specific and general histories of identity and work. Despite Wong's (2019) observation that “most taiko players are dressed for industrious labour and sweat” being made in an American *taiko* ensemble, it also holds true for the uniform of *ohayashi* and *sashite* performers in Kantō Matsuri. In particular, teams wear decorated, unpadded jackets — known as *hanten* in this context, but more generally referred to as *happi* — which are emblematic of matsuri, but are also traditional work coats which Lilian Cailleaud (2022, p. 5) notes were once worn by merchants, house servants and firemen, among others. In addition, the crests displayed on these jackets visually represent particular neighbourhoods’ or organisations’ Kantō teams. For example, Uwakome-chō's Kantō team has the crest of a rabbit pounding rice cakes, referring to a belief that there is a rabbit that can be seen pounding rice cakes on the moon (Uwakome-chō Kantō Association, 2020). As the cycles of the moon are related to agricultural cycles, this symbol is associated with a good harvest. As such, this symbol links back to this part of town's history as a district of rice merchants, making visual reference to a rice product and also wishing for prosperity.

Moreover, by wearing clothing in the right way, AIU students are able to camouflage themselves as insiders, to an extent. For example, one *sashite* performer said he preferred to tie the knot of his *obi* belt and his headband in a traditional style, to appear like someone who had been performing for a long time (“*mukashi kara yateiru hito mitai na kanji*”) (MAR Interview 2, 2022). According to Robertson (1991), the citizen's festival in her case study of Kodaira acted as a way to “provok[e] and reinforc[e] sectoral differences” between natives and newcomers (p. 39). So, too, does Kantō Matsuri provoke and reinforce hierarchies between native and newcomer teams, while, at the same time, maintaining a coherent aesthetic. As a *kigyō* (company) team, the AIU team is expected to fit in, rather than stand out. According to one female drummer, AIU team members are not allowed to wear excessive makeup, jewellery or accessories in their hair, because it would make them stand out too much, whereas, in some *chōnai* (local) teams, women are able to wear really “bright and crazy” makeup (UG Interview 5, 2021). Conversely, the expectation for *kigyō* teams such as AIU to tame down their outfits perhaps marks them out further as outsiders. Further, it reveals how teams’ performative identities are constructed in relation to these long-standing hierarchies, with teams therefore having varying levels of licence to express themselves.



Figure 4: An AIU Kantō team uniform (photo by author)

Similarly, women are able to fit into a predominantly male tradition with the help of modest or androgynous clothing. Female performers wear the same clothes as men, including the *hanten* jacket and loose cotton shorts which are spacious around the crotch. As with the men, attention is drawn to the tying of the *obi* belt, which is worn low, around the hips. One female participant commented that the style of tying is specific to “when [men] wear kimono or yukata”, and “is not used for female yukata or kimono” (UG Interview 1, 2021). However, while men have the licence to reveal some of their chest, women bind their whole chests with a length of bleached cotton which is wrapped tightly around the breasts for the purpose of modesty. This seems to create what Robertson (1999) calls “the illusion of an asexual-in effect, a disembodied-identity”, referring to the use of androgyny in Japan to “camouflage ‘unconventional’ sexual practices” (p. 410).

In contrast, men are able to — and sometimes encouraged to — wear this length of bleached cotton lower down their chest, and wear their jacket open, showing some of their bare chest. For example, one male drummer spoke of his female teammates encouraging him to open up his jacket, telling him “oh, you should have it more open because you’re a man” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). Evidently, it is considered more socially acceptable for men to display their body. According to Bender (2012), the involvement of women in *taiko* has historically sparked controversy over the display of female bodies, which either provoke titillation or are concealed to prevent it (pp. 328-329). This has led some *taiko* ensembles to ensure female drummers wear kimono or yukata, which are tighter, more traditionally feminine and

modest types of clothing which would have the effect of restricting their movement (Bender, 2012, p. 351). In Kantō Matsuri, female flute players and drummers do not wear restrictive kimono; they adopt what is traditionally men's clothing but wear it in a way that ensures their modesty. As a male drummer pointed out, wearing a *hanten* jacket in the looser, more open fashion men are able to adopt has the added effect of making it “easier to move in” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). Yet, for women, the importance of modesty seems to supersede this ease of movement. In this way, the potential for undue sexualisation can be avoided.

At the same time, this layering of masculine and feminine signifiers creates a striking effect. Compare with Colleen Lanki's (2010) analysis of Japanese classical dance (*nihon buyō*), a separate art form but one which layers gender signifiers in an interesting way. Lanki (2010) notes the “playful space of liminality” in which these layers blend (p. 102). This is similar to a point Wong (2019) touches on when discussing the way one all-women North American *taiko* ensemble dresses, arguing “forms that draw on essentialized signs challenge the narrow, perilous space between reinscription and social transformation” (p. 127). This suggests that utilising traditional gender signifiers can either reproduce or transform these ideas and structures, and most likely do both at the same time. Wong (2019) sees the ensemble as having “glamour”, “panache” and “charisma”, a deliberate and appealing style in how gender signifiers are layered (p. 127).

Indeed, by dressing well, the women in Kantō Matsuri can feel pride in their appearance and be respected. One woman who played flute said she often felt women in Kantō were not listened to the same way as male *sashite* performers, and remarked upon the power imbalance between men and women in the festival. However, she also added, “I was able to meet a lot of powerful team members from AIU and also from the local teams that they... made me feel that it's— we're just in a different position, different part of the festival, but it doesn't mean that one side is less than the other” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). Expanding on this, she remarked that these *ohayashi* players are “good, they gain respect”, and meeting them made her feel “it's not about men. It's not about only women. It's not only about power, but how they present themselves and participate in the festival with a pride” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). When I asked her what she meant about how they present themselves, she spoke about an older student she looked up to who is knowledgeable and experienced, but also “takes a lot of pride in how she dressed and how she wears the uniform the way she likes” (MAR Interview 1, 2022).

Specifically, this interviewee said the older student wore the same uniform as others, but the differences were perhaps in “choosing the right size”, “wearing the belt really neat”, “wearing the *hachimaki*, like the

head piece, really neat, hair's really slick” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). She remarked, “wearing the uniform was really, um... confident, looked nice and I think other *sashite* member or um, the leader of the other groups also liked how she performed, how she works, how she wears”, commenting that this individual was “really visible” within the group, which the interviewee identified as linked to her “confidence and personality”, which she thought had an impact both on the way the older student dressed and on her tendency to “join, talk to the other leaders, speak up” (MAR Interview 1, 2022). This shows the significance of clothing in the impression one wants to make, which is akin to professionalism here. The neatness in particular seems to signify and embody experience. Dressing in an appropriate manner which signals one's in-status is clearly important to men too, as seen in the example of the male interviewee who wanted to dress as if he had been performing for a long time (MAR Interview 2, 2022). However, it is perhaps even more important for women, who are new to this tradition and thus may have to make an additional effort to prove their confidence and experience. Similarly, wearing traditional *hanten* helps provide them with a visual authority, marking their place in the Kantō tradition.

3.3 Conclusion

To conclude, the idea of Kantō Matsuri as a "man's festival" is reproduced in various ways, although the involvement of women can challenge this. The taboo surrounding the central pole or *sao* requires a distinction between *sashite* and *ohayashi*. It also legitimates male leadership, as only *sashite* members can be whole-team leaders. Knowledge of this taboo is transmitted from older students to younger students, who maintain the sacredness of this boundary by physically moving out of its way or by attempting to protect *ohayashi* and the audience from the *sao*, and vice versa. Protectiveness around this taboo may cause frustration or culture shock for international exchange students, leading to full-time students acting as mediators. On the other hand, women are able to be *ohayashi*, whose roles may not be front and centre but have an important ritual function nonetheless.

In fact, the atmosphere *ohayashi* creates is very important to the matsuri, and is also understood through a gendered lens. The physical and sonic aesthetics of Kantō Matsuri are expected to be “masculine”, and though this is not well-defined, it seems to be associated with liveliness, boisterousness, loud sounds and physical strength, the latter two being intertwined. These have their roots in the history of Kantō Matsuri as a competition to show off merchants’ and artisans’ physical strength. In addition, the traditional aesthetics of Kantō Matsuri are maintained through the use of clothing, which marks one's place within a particular team and within the Kantō tradition more generally. As part of this, women wear traditionally masculine clothing, adapted to better cover up their bodies, and those from better-established teams may

also add flashy makeup and jewellery. In contrast, members of the AIU team tend to try to fit in, being from a newer team. By presenting oneself neatly, or tying one's belt a particular way, they can appear as if they have been performing for a long time, signifying experience and in-status.

Chapter Four: Claiming “Mature Social Being” in the AIU Kantō Team

While the AIU Kantō team reproduces the structures of a hierarchical and male-dominated matsuri, being part of it can also enable members to learn to deal with the structures of the outside world, and gain various skills in doing so. As the introduction discussed, matsuri function as a way both to reinforce social structures and contest them in an appropriate setting (Schnell, 1995). Just as the young men who participate as ritual actors are able to gain symbolic capital (Traphagan, 2000) and social support (Roemer, 2007), they are also able to “claim mature social being” by learning to navigate the complex local power structures that are laid bare during the matsuri (Yoshida, 1998, p. 44). In contrast, women have not historically had access to this type of socialisation, having not been able to contest power structures even in a matsuri setting, as Yoshida (1998, p. 54) observes. However, women now participate as ritual actors in matsuri such as Kantō, and thus have to navigate a minefield of gender roles while attempting to fit into a male-dominated tradition. As challenging as this may be, navigating this minefield enables female participants to build strong relationships with their peers, take pride in their accomplishments, and learn how to navigate similarly male-dominated environments in their working life.

This process of maturation, or *ichininmae (ni naru)* — what Yoshida (1998) seems to refer to as “mature social personhood” — has been studied by David Plath (1980) and Kondo (1990), most notably. Yoshida (1998) analyses the function of a matsuri in a hot spring town as providing members of a young men's association with knowledge and experience navigating both the hierarchical relationships in the organisation and the other social structures that the matsuri interacts with, such as the police or the other neighbourhood associations. This allows these young men to claim a locally-specific form of social maturity which is centred, in particular, around the system of water distribution which the town relies upon. In contrast, university students go through processes of maturation which are not as locally-specific but provide graduates with transferable skills and capital.

Indeed, Plath (1980) observes that the concept of personal maturity in modern Japan has been redefined in relation to paid employment, which provides young people with the “material rewards” and “moral stature” that “validate one's human maturity” (p. 2). To claim this maturity, Plath (1980) argues one must “convince people — ourselves included — that we embody the right history of personal experience” (p. 3). Additionally, Kondo (1998) analyses the notion of mature artisan identity in the contemporary workplace, which makes use of a rhetoric emphasising experience, hardship and knowledge of an imagined traditional national culture. This also a gendered identity, which is only able to be accessed and performed by men. Kondo (1990) notes “part of [t]his claim to legitimacy and dominance lies in cultural

and labor market forces which largely reserve the domain of full-time work for males” (p. 258). Similarly, by participating in a long-historied matsuri with its own hierarchical structure, one can claim knowledge of “traditional culture”, and the entailing cultural capital. This is further validated by the matsuri's distinctiveness and the unique nature of participation in it, which is open to a select few, who have historically been men.

4.1 Drinking Parties and Socialisation

Firstly, drinking parties have a particular role in the socialisation that goes on in matsuri. This analysis is able to make use of the literature on the role of extracurricular clubs in Japan in reproducing a male-dominated *habitus* and providing graduates with forms of social, symbolic and cultural capital. University clubs like AIU's Kantō team are widely recognised to be sites of socialisation, which enable participants to learn about *senpai-kōhai* (elder-younger student) hierarchical relationships, and prove their ability to be part of a team. For example, McDonald and Hallinan (2005) note the role of sports clubs in education since the Meiji era, as an attempt to cultivate particular ideals of “muscular spirituality”, discipline and self-sacrifice (p. 189). Along these lines, McDonald and Hallinan (2005) argue that contemporary rowing clubs in Japan have become places for male students to cultivate what they call spiritual capital, proof of their dedication, self-sacrifice and teamwork which they can use to market themselves to prospective employers. In addition, Richard Light (2008) applies this approach to the learning of masculinities in a Japanese rugby team, whereas Wolfram Manzenreiter (2013) applies a similar analysis to lifestyle sports in Japan such as surfing and climbing, which leave greater space for alternative forms of masculinity.

While the AIU Kantō team is not a typical university sports club, it has a similarly male-dominated culture and allows its members to gain prestige and learn how to socialise in a hierarchical and often formalised environment. In addition, Hwang and Chan (2020) analyse the role of co-operative *ohayashi* learning in teaching social norms as well as musical skills, which supports this argument. However, their case study looks at young children taught by instructors in a more formalised environment, compared to AIU *ohayashi* practices where older students teach younger students.

For the AIU students who participate in Kantō Matsuri, the specific, localised knowledge they accrue of how to navigate the power structures of Akita's Kantō Matsuri may only be useful in the short-term,

although plenty do maintain ties to Kantō after graduation. However, learning to navigate these power structures as outsiders is a transferable skill they can use in their working life. In particular, learning to deal with *senpai-kōhai* (elder-younger student) relationships and drink and socialise appropriately in formal drinking parties (*nomikai*) is an invaluable skill in many workplaces. Historically, these forms of hierarchical relationships have been used to pass down knowledge between men. Sugihara and Katsurada (2002) note it is typically boys and men who have had to be conscious of *senpai-kōhai* relationships, but who can receive respect, status or social support by adhering to them (pp. 450-451).

4.1.1 Developing an embodied knowledge of drinking

In particular, McDonald and Sylvester (2013) argue alcohol has an important role in the “social and cultural education of students” (p. 331). For their research, they draw from their experiences carrying out field research in a rowing club and a martial arts club, respectively. They build on an existing body of literature which claims drinking alcohol has the role in Japanese society of providing people with a space where they can express themselves more openly — allowing for a graduated progression away from formality and towards intimacy — while still being governed by social rules (McDonald and Sylvester, 2013, pp. 331-332). For similar reasons, alcohol has historically had a particular role in *matsuri*, allowing participants to cast off inhibitions and providing them with a certain level of immunity for their actions (Schnell, 2011, p. 314). Following this logic, McDonald and Sylvester (2013) propose that university societies and their drinking parties allow young people to learn the “cultural and embodied knowledge” required to navigate these spaces (p. 332). This enables them to understand how to better play the “drinking game” (McDonald and Sylvester, 2013, p. 343), which becomes especially useful later in life, in “confirming one's place in the new social nexus of the office, company, club or community group” (McDonald and Sylvester, 2013, p. 343). So, too, it seems the AIU Kantō team's drinking parties allow participants to learn this drinking game.

For one, Kantō drinking parties can be a way for men to practise the performance of drinking alcohol, which requires developing the embodied knowledge of drinking. McDonald and Sylvester (2013) point out the performed aspects of drinking, in which one is expected to loosen up and shed off propriety even if not actually drunk (p. 342). Here, they refer to Juha Partanen's (2006) concept of “heroic drinking”, which is characterised not only by a heavy alcohol consumption, but a “behavioural repertoire” which performs and exaggerates this consumption (Partanen, 2006, p. 195, cited in McDonald and Sylvester, 2006, p. 340). According to McDonald and Sylvester (2013), this style of drinking requires one to possess

the “embodied knowledge of one's capacity for drinking”, i.e. knowing how much alcohol they can handle (p. 340). By learning this knowledge, young men are able to navigate drinking scenarios more skillfully, drinking enough to allow them to connect socially and show off their drinking prowess, while also being mindful not to lose control.

Likewise, in Kantō drinking parties, men are able to prove how much alcohol they can drink, which gains them respect from their peers. For example, one male drummer I interviewed observed that *sashite* performers “really want to show off about drinking” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). In particular, drinking alcohol is encouraged through a system of nomination, in which one person — typically, male, typically from *sashite* — will nominate another — again, typically male, typically from *sashite* — while the rest of the room shouts *dokkoisho, dokkoisho*, the same chant shouted in the matsuri to encourage *sashite* performers with their heavy lifting. This is a key part of the repertoire which the participants of this drinking game are expected to use. In this way, the ability to push one's body to drink excessively is equated with the kind of exertion and mind-over-matter mentality required for the *sashite* performance. Both of these are coded as masculine; a way for men to prove their mettle and thus gain social capital.

4.1.2 Learning to navigate hierarchical relationships

What is more, Kantō drinking parties are a site in which young people can learn to act according to hierarchy. When I asked one female flute player how they passed down rules and traditions to their younger students (*kōhai*), she mentioned holding a meeting where some of these rules were explained explicitly. However, she also said there were many “small rules” which they taught “one by one”, “through actually doing them”, referring to drinking parties as the one specific example for this (UG Interview 2, 2021). Indeed, discussing how she taught younger students about Kantō customs, another female flute player compared the rules for drinking parties, of which there were “so many”, to the rules for the actual music practises, which were comparatively few (UG Interview 3, 2021). In particular, there are specific rules about how to pour drinks for older students, including the height and degree to pour at, as this interviewee demonstrated on our video call, by physically gesturing as if she was pouring a drink (UG Interview 3, 2021). Thus, the codified nature of drinking parties helps them function as a useful site for teaching rules pertaining to hierarchy to the younger students.

This is exacerbated by the role of Kantō drinking parties as a site for interaction between *chōnai* (local) and *kigyō* (company) teams, which helps students maintain the team's ties with local people in Akita. In the AIU Kantō team, some drinking parties are set up specifically to pay respect to and strengthen ties

with the local *chōnai* teams who have lent their support to the team. For example, when I was there, there was a particularly formal event set up to honour guests from *chōnai* teams who had provided the AIU team with advice and resources from its beginning. The normal drinking parties which happen at the time of the matsuri and its lead up have similar functions, and also help current students connect with alumni who have returned for the matsuri, who are known colloquially as OBs and OGs (old boys and old girls). Interacting with more senior people, especially from local teams, requires these students to have an added level of awareness of hierarchical relationships. This was indicated by another female flute player, who said she felt teaching younger students and international students how to pour alcohol at drinking parties was “very important” because she didn't want these students “to struggle when they go in front of other teams’ members” (UG Interview 1, 2021).

However, learning how to navigate hierarchical relationships also differs depending on gender. For men, the excessive drinking of alcohol functions as a way to simultaneously maintain and level *senpai-kōhai* (elder-younger student) hierarchies. As one *sashite* performer explained, there can be a “harsh drinking culture” in which *senpai* may “force” students younger than them to drink excessive amounts of alcohol (MAR Interview 6, 2022). At the same time, drinking heavily with one's teammates fosters a sense of camaraderie. Cross (2007) suggests that, during matsuri, “the masculine pleasures of tradition might be the clarity of vertical relationships tempered by camaraderie across the ranks” (p. 586), and some of the men I interviewed seemed to suggest something similar. In fact, that same *sashite* performer spoke positively of his own experiences drinking in drinking parties, saying he “had fun” and had an overall “good memory” of being made to drink by his *senpai*. While he acknowledged the drinking culture was harsh and was not always fun for his peers, who might consider it “harassment”, he personally enjoyed himself (MAR Interview 6, 2022). On the other hand, nominating someone to drink can be a sign of friendship. A male drummer implied the same, having shared a room with a *sashite* performer during a recent matsuri and eventually been nominated by him to drink (MAR Interview 3, 2022). This had not previously been his experience, due to a lack of “ties to *sashite*” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). So, this system of nomination seems to strengthen social ties between men, while maintaining their hierarchical nature. Moreover, this maintains the historical function of matsuri as a space for male bonding.

For the women, hierarchical relationships are more so consolidated through younger students’ close observation and maintenance of the drinking party. In these formal drinking parties, women practise traditionally feminine gender roles, in contrast to their comparatively masculine appearance during the matsuri performance. For example, some of the women I interviewed spoke of the unspoken expectation for women to “pour drinks”, “[clean] up”, “prepare the meals” and cheer on the men's drinking (UG

Interview 2, 2021; MAR Interview 3, 2022; UG Interview 5, 2021). This maintains the existing gendered division of labour in matsuri, in which men do the heavy drinking and women do the behind-the-scenes work. In fact, the female gender role of cheering the men on is expressed in similar ways to their role in matsuri; to “creat[e] a certain [...] atmosphere”, by chanting *dokkoisho* (UG Interview 2, 2021). Thus, women take on a supporting role similar to their supporting role in the matsuri itself, which allows for the men to bond through heavy drinking.

In the AIU Kantō team at least, this custom is not necessarily imposed explicitly, but functions more so as an unsaid and internalised expectation. For example, one male drummer observed, “if the drink is spilt, I think the girls will clean it up”, but clarified it was a “generalisation and not a rule” and “there are definitely boys that will clean it up as well” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). At the same time, not being part of this pressured, heavy drinking can be freeing. As this male drummer reflected, “the girls in my opinion, or at least in my experience, are much less bothered about the drinking than the men are. The men are really bothered about the drinking, like they killed themselves drinking [...] there are plenty of girls that enjoy a drink and will have a good time as well, like generally... to be honest, the drinking in *sashite* is genuinely the most excessive drinking I’ve seen in my life” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). There are benefits to being able to drink at one's own pace without being part of a system of nomination, although taking on a supporting role can also be hard work.

While there is not the same pressure for women as for men to drink heavily, hierarchical relationships are reinforced through the careful pouring of older students’ drinks. One woman described the expectations of how to behave in drinking parties as having to “listen very well”, “give back the right answer”, and “pay attention to [...] *senpai*, or other people”, for example, “watching, like all the glasses... *senpai* have, and when it's getting empty”, “pour[ing] the next one” before they have to ask for it (UG Interview 4). While men also have to look after their seniors, women seem to have more of an unspoken focus on this supporting role.

Learning to keep aware of these hierarchical relationships and nurture them in a drinking party setting seems to have benefits after graduation. As one Japanese female interviewee responded when asked about the benefits of participating in Kantō Matsuri, she learned lots of Japanese customs, which she thought will be important once she “start[s] work in a company in Japan” (UG Interview 2, 2021). As examples of these customs, she mentioned how to “behave in a drinking party” and how to “talk to seniors [and] juniors” (UG Interview 2, 2021). Likewise, the female interviewee who mentioned the expectation to keep aware of the surroundings, including seniors’ drinks, said she “still [does] this” — as in, pays close

attention to who needs their drink refilling — because it is “useful in [her] work” (UG Interview 4, 2021). In addition, a male former international student, who now works in Japan, said becoming accustomed to the “stricter” aspects of Japanese culture such as the importance of “age” through Kantō Matsuri has helped him in his job (MAR Interview 3, 2022). Consequently, it seems that Kantō Matsuri's introduction to a perceived traditional culture aids these young people in learning to navigate the similarly strict culture of workplaces, in which seniority is prized. In particular, the drinking parties are an important site in both settings, with similar rules, and are therefore a place where these skills are easily transferable.

4.1.3 Moderating perceptions

In addition, the drinking parties seem to be a site in which the women in Kantō have to learn to moderate the way they are perceived. Women are expected to maintain a modest, almost professional appearance to avoid being sexualised in the context of the drinking party. In particular, they are not supposed to wear “short” hemlines or “revealing clothes”, because they are supposed to keep the event “official, proper”, or serious (“*majime*”), rather than sexual (UG Interview 4, 2021; UG Interview 5, 2021). These expectations are not usually enforced through disciplinary action; instead, members are made aware that they would be making an uncomfortable situation for the team if they were to continue. As the previous chapter discussed, clothing is a way for individuals to negotiate between individual fantasies, perceptions, and cultural conventions (Burns, 2004, p. 4). On the one hand, the insistence on longer hemlines or trousers is partially a practical matter: as a couple of the women I interviewed pointed out, these drinking parties are held in rooms in which people sit on the floor, underneath low tables, and would therefore reveal too much wearing a short skirt, or even find a longer skirt gets in the way too much (UG Interview 2, 2021; UG Interview 3, 2021). For these reasons, trousers have typically been preferred over skirts (UG Interview 1, 2021).

However, the preference for modest clothing does seem to go beyond convenience. Several women expressed that revealing clothing is avoided so as to not be looked at sexually by drunk men (UG Interview 1, 2021; UG Interview 5, 2021). For example, one woman told me she used to tell her younger students to “be careful of drunk men”, who would sometimes try to touch the women's bodies (UG Interview 1, 2021). She said this was why she would warn international students such as myself to “wear something longer and don't show your skin” (UG Interview 1, 2021). Thus, the clothing choices these women make — and encourage their peers to make — are partially for safety reasons, similar to how Komori (2016) reports women used to avoid the too-wild matsuri of the postwar period, with the potential implication being that they were afraid of sexual assault (p. 65). Perhaps for similar reasons, female

ohayashi players are not usually nominated to drink excessively in the same way as *sashite* performers. One woman suggested this was because of the assumption that women could not or would not want to drink in such an excessive manner, which she saw as an example of them “think[ing] too much about themselves” (UG Interview 5, 2021). Alternatively, it is possible men do not want to abuse their power differentials by pressuring younger women to drink.

Indeed, the perceptions of women who drink excessively or wear less modest clothing can be much harsher. Although these drinking parties are relatively formal environments, historically-speaking, matsuri and the heavy drinking connected to them were associated with licentiousness and the pleasure culture of the late Tokugawa era, as Nam-Lin Hur (2000) notes (p. 88). As a result, the participation of women in these activities was contained through government policy from the 1790s (Hur, 2000, p. 177). In contrast, the drinking parties used for socialising during and in the lead up to Kantō Matsuri are formalised and contained, with socialisation between the men and women but also some degree of separation. One *sashite* performer suggested that even when women had romantic relationships with men who they had met through Kantō Matsuri, they would maintain some distance from them at drinking parties (MAR Interview 4, 2022). For example, he said his girlfriend at the time would avoid even “speaking with [him]” at drinking parties, because she did not want to be “the target of gossip” (MAR Interview 4, 2022). It therefore seems the women in Kantō do not want themselves or their relationships to be caught up in the wild, sexual connotations associated with matsuri and the drinking of alcohol. Consequently, they play a more serious, proper role, which is helped by their modest clothing. This parallels their wearing of androgynous clothing in the matsuri, which similarly avoids sexualisation.

4.1.4 Relaxing gender roles

In addition, women and men do also contest gendered expectations in drinking parties, to various extents. Although trousers had typically been preferred over skirts for practical reasons, one female flute player pointed out that this rule has been looked at more critically in recent years, particularly by the younger students, and since overturned (UG Interview 1, 2021). Other times, it seems that contesting these structures happens more subtly, such as by individuals making an effort not to impose their seniority. On the one hand, a male drummer who I interviewed observed the way some of the men in *sashite* used drinking parties for “showing off their dominance”, for example by monopolising the conversation or bossing around the younger students, including those in *ohayashi* (MAR Interview 3, 2022). However, many other men, such as himself, made an effort not to domineer in this way. For example, one of the more senior AIU participants I interviewed emphasised that he didn’t “make people pour [his] [drinks]”,

and encouraged younger students to speak to him in a more casual manner than they would have been otherwise inclined to use (MAR Interview 2, 2022). Having some form of seniority thus seems to give participants more licence to change the culture around them, at least in regards to how they treat others and how they expect others to treat them.

Moreover, one woman's observations of participating in a local team as well as the AIU team suggest that the focus on age-based hierarchical relationships in AIU's team helps relax the gendered division of labour, regarding the preparations for drinking parties. When I asked her how the drinking parties in the local team compared, she replied “compared to the AIU team, maybe more—women are more expected to [serve] some snacks or food, drinks for men, I guess” (MAR Interview 5, 2021). She suggested there was a stronger expectation for younger students to prepare work for drinking parties in the AIU Kantō team, whereas in her local team, the women are “very willing” to do tasks such as the dishes — “it's not asked directly, but we just do. And I felt it's kind of our work task” (MAR Interview 5, 2021). This suggests this unspoken and internalised gendered division of labour runs deeper in this team than the AIU team, which instead places stronger emphasis on the age-based hierarchical relationships which are characteristic of university sports clubs in Japan. A division of labour according to gender and seniority are present in both teams, but to differing extents. So, while this particular gender dynamic is still present in the AIU team, it is lessened subtly, giving participants a little more room to transform the team's culture.

Evidently, the AIU Kantō team's drinking parties reproduce a male-dominated *habitus*, in which men's excessive, heroic drinking takes centre stage. This allows young men to develop a sense of camaraderie with each other, navigate hierarchical relationships, and cultivate an embodied knowledge of drinking which can be useful in their working lives. The historic division of labour from women doing background work is maintained, albeit more subtly, with women more likely to pour or clean up drinks, without this being a given. In this way, women also learn to manage hierarchical relationships in ways that can be useful in their working life. The style of dress for these drinking parties is also carefully moderated, maintaining a modest, formal atmosphere in which women are not sexualised. However, there are also attempts to soften these dynamics by relaxing the rules around the (unwritten) dress code, individuals making an effort not to act superior, and using the *senpai-kōhai* relationships to lessen the amount of background labour expected of women.

4.2 Beyond Graduation: Kantō, Belonging, and Sense of Self

The second half of this chapter reflects more generally on what it means for students from outside of Akita to become part of Kantō Matsuri, and what the impact is on their self-image. According to Kondo (1990), notions of the self in Japan are constructed in relation to others and our place in society (pp. 14-17). Or as Nancy Rosenberger (2007) remarks, “independence leads to adulthood, but interdependence with others is necessary for full adulthood (*ichininmae*)” (p. 92). Specifically, Rosenberger (2007) is making a point here about the difficulties faced by Japanese women who choose to be single long-term in achieving normative standards of adulthood. Indeed, she notes that “women's maturity is closely measured by their roles as mother, wife, and daughter-in-law” (Rosenberger, 2007, p. 92). In contrast, women seem to be beginning to gain access to what were historically male standards of maturity through their participation in matsuri. At the same time, Rosenberger (2006) highlights the popular discourse among young Japanese women which concerns developing a self (*jibun*) outside of the expectations of motherhood, marriage or work. For example, participating in Kantō Matsuri may be one way for the women I interviewed to be part of a bigger community in Akita, but it is also a way for them to have something unique for themselves, set apart from ordinary life.

4.2.1 Maintaining ties in Kantō

First, becoming part of Kantō Matsuri up to or beyond graduation can be a way to create strong bonds with peers. Roemer (2007) argues, based on his fieldwork in Kyoto's Gion Matsuri, that the time, energy and money the participants put into the matsuri helps them create strong communal bonds, which provide them with social support (p. 185). On one hand, Roemer (2007) notes these bonds “reflect the predominantly paternalistic nature of this traditional festival hierarchy”, which relied on a gendered division of roles (p. 190). However, he argues it is no longer belonging to a particular neighbourhood that establishes the team's communal identity, but the common goal of the matsuri (Roemer, 2007, p. 192). This suggests the communal bonds formed by participating in a matsuri can reach beyond divisions like of neighbourhood or gender. Indeed, in recent years, matsuri have begun to widen their participation, as chapter two analysed. According to Komori (2016), the women who began to participate in the matsuri in Yokosuka set up a women's federation, and would go for drinks after practices to talk about the matsuri, deepen social bonds, and provide advice to the younger members (p. 68). Similarly, the female participants in Kantō Matsuri also socialise and make strong friendships amongst each other and the men.

On that account, continuing to be a participant in Kantō Matsuri after graduating from Akita International University allows graduates to strengthen their bonds in this community. Being part of a Kantō team or association is traditionally a life-long commitment, which is reflected in the eagerness for alumni —

including international exchange students — to come back and participate in the AIU Kantō team. As a result, graduates are able to continue benefiting from the social support networks they built during their time at Akita International University. For example, a former international exchange student who now works in Japan was able to come back and participate, and told a story about getting closer to one of the *sashite* performers who he had known from before (MAR Interview 3, 2022). However, he described being in the position of an alumnus as a bit “uncomfortable” for him, due to his unease occupying a superior status, especially compared to how he perceived his current skill level. Another interviewee — a female flute player — explained her experience of participating as an alumnus as like “an invited guest”, “free from pressure”, compared to the undergraduates who have to worry about whether the matsuri goes as planned (MAR Interview 1, 2022). Instead, she said she focused on “talk[ing] to the younger generations”, telling stories, and creating a bridge between the oldest alumni and the younger generation (MAR Interview 1, 2022). This highlights the important role of alumni in connecting the current students to their forebears.

Alternatively, graduates from Akita International University sometimes join the local (*chōnai*) Kantō teams who have strong links with the AIU team. For example, I interviewed one female flute player who joined a local team after having met some of the members while being part of the AIU Kantō team. She told me she made relationships with the local team by joining their practice every week, where she met a mentor whose flute playing style she wanted to adopt (MAR Interview 5, 2022). She described her subsequently joining the team as a “natural process” resulting from feeling close to the local team members and connecting with them on a personal level (MAR Interview 5, 2022). Comparing this experience to participating in the AIU team as an alumni, this flute player said, “I wanted to play as a main player, not a supporter in the festival. So... and I felt like [...] participating to the festival as a alumnus, is— I felt I need to support the students [...] but I prefer to be the main performer for the festival, so I chose to join the local team” (MAR Interview 5, 2022). So, for this musician, becoming a member of a local team enabled her to continue to be in a more central position in which she could continue to take on the role of a performer.

However, maintaining participation in Kantō Matsuri while living outside of Akita prefecture has its challenges. When asked what was difficult for her about participating in Kantō Matsuri, the aforementioned flute player mentioned having to fly from the Tokyo area, where she lives, to Akita prefecture (MAR Interview 5, 2022). In addition, she brought up the issue of practising flute or drums in Tokyo, saying she went to “karaoke booths” to practise with a friend and fellow flute player from the AIU Kantō team in the lead up to the matsuri the year before (MAR Interview 5, 2022). Even so, she remarked

that it was “very different” to the kind of practice they would typically have, which should include multiple flute players and drummers, noting that the matsuri was not supposed to be a “solo performance” (MAR Interview 5, 2022). As a result, this flute player expressed her frustration that she couldn't play as well or for as long, as she got tired more easily (MAR Interview 5, 2022).

4.2.2 Akita as “home”

As a result of their participation, Akita City becomes like a kind of hometown for graduates to return back to for the annual matsuri. These graduates typically work in urban centres further south, and especially in Tokyo, but return to Akita for the matsuri and its lead-up. As chapter one discussed, the *furusato* is an idealised concept of a native place or hometown which is used to appeal nostalgically to urban workers, who feel they have left behind their own (Ivy, 1995, p. 100-104). Robertson (1991) has analysed how *furusato-zukuri* (native place making) projects use matsuri to create localised identities for greater cohesion between native citizens and newcomers. In particular, matsuri represent an opportunity for a literal, emotional or symbolic return home, whether to one's actual birthplace or another site of nostalgia.

After several years living in the outskirts of Akita City during their time at university, and forming social and emotional ties due to participating in Kantō Matsuri, Akita becomes a place of attachment for graduates, which can be conceptualised as another home. In fact, one *sashite* performer actually used the English word “home” to describe Akita, despite not being originally from there (MAR Interview 2, 2022). He was discussing how he had devoted “all of [his] time” to Kantō Matsuri, both at university and after graduation, when I asked him why he kept coming back to the matsuri (MAR Interview 2, 2022). He replied he “spent a really good time with [his] friends and fellows”, which made him think to himself, “this is my home” whenever he came back to Akita (MAR Interview 2, 2022). This suggests the memories and social bonds help graduates form an attachment with Kantō Matsuri and therefore Akita. These feelings of nostalgia and emotional attachment help attract graduates back to Akita in a type of annual pilgrimage, resembling a return to one's home, which in turn enables them to maintain and develop these bonds. These findings thus seem to support Negishi and Narisawa's (2022) proposition that participating in folk traditions such as Kantō Matsuri could help newcomers such as migrant workers or students from outside the prefecture to develop an attachment to Akita (p. 36). This is particularly important as there was a lack of participants in the twentieth century, which was a key reason why women were allowed to participate as *ohayashi* musicians, as discussed in chapter one.

4.2.3 Becoming successors to the tradition

Moreover, taking on the roles of teaching or helping less experienced team members enables participants to pass on the Kantō tradition, therefore aiding its succession. Members of the AIU Kantō team pass down their knowledge orally to students younger than them, and those who join other teams are able to teach children too. A *sashite* performer who joined a relatively new *kigyō* team after graduating from AIU spoke of his experience having to shoulder much of the burden of lifting up the pole at the matsuri, as most other members were not as experienced as him: “there's [...] many times I have [the] *kantō* pole, so that makes me really exhausted after” (MAR Interview 2, 2022). This shows the level of responsibility that graduates from the AIU team are able to take on, despite not necessarily being from Akita prefecture. In addition, the flute player who joined a local team took on the role of caring for the children, as analysed in chapter two. As seen from the review of the literature on Kantō Matsuri, the issue of its succession is still salient, as for other traditions in rural parts of Japan. Notably, Negishi et al. (2020) make the point that more participants may be needed in the future to secure Kantō Matsuri's succession, suggesting the greater involvement of those not originally from Akita prefecture could lessen these demographic issues (p. 118).

Historically, men's participation in matsuri was meant to secure its succession, whereas women were on the sidelines in part because they were expected to marry out of their hometown (pp. 129-131). Janse (2022) notes there was a focus on continuity, as the expectation was that a participant would learn their particular tradition throughout their entire life (p. 131). As a result, she remarks “as it is men who continuously participate, it is men who progress to the senior roles”, whereas women are more likely to have a break in participating due to childbirth, for example, even if they stay in the same place after marriage (Janse, 2022, p. 131). Similarly, a performer I interviewed observed that the judges of the skills contest and other senior members of Kantō Matsuri are male; “in the past, females have always, um, become, like, mothers, once they get married, they quit their job, they get pregnant, they focus on parenting and things. So males always stayed at the company and they're the ones who got the higher ranks and important people in the company are male, and they represent companies so... those who judge tend to be males, I guess” (UG Interview 5, 2022). In contrast, the gender parity is less clear in my case study as men and women alike tend to move away from Akita prefecture after graduation and return either in the peripheral position of alumni or as newer members of other teams. However, they are still able to pass on their skills to younger students, which helps secure Kantō's succession.

What is more, by participating in Kantō Matsuri, *ohayashi* performers are able to become part of the fabric of its musical tradition. When playing flute or drums, accomplished performers are able to embellish the two basic songs with, often improvised, flourishes (*aya*) which help make the atmosphere more lively, so it can build to a climax at the most exciting parts of the performance. These flourishes can express performers' individual playing styles, although this has to be balanced with keeping to the rhythm and contributing to the overall sound of the music. As one flute player described, "once you learn the basics, there are so many different ways of like a variation that you can improvise and there is no correct, like, answer to it" (MAR Interview 1, 2022). On the one hand, she said some locals would tell her at times "you're not doing the correct, traditional way" of playing a note (MAR Interview 1, 2022). However, she also added "there's no written um... codes that we need to follow", noting that this improvisational way of playing was "really interesting and also difficult" (MAR Interview 1, 2022). This is part of what makes Kantō Matsuri's *ohayashi* music such a rich tradition, shot through with contradictions.

Within this tradition, particular styles of playing can be passed down orally from master to student. To illustrate, that same female flute player and graduate spoke of her experiences learning from a flute "master" ("*oshishō*") or mentor from a local team (MAR Interview 1, 2022). Historically, these types of mentor-student relationships have been between men, due to the traditionally male-dominated nature of *ohayashi* music, but two of the women I interviewed had sought further teaching from a flute master or mentor figure from a local team (MAR Interview 1, 2022; MAR Interview 5, 2022). One told me a story of her learning a particular "traditional variation" of playing the flute from him, which he, in turn, was learning by listening to a recording of another flute player (MAR Interview 1, 2022). One night at the festival, she played the flute in this traditional way, echoing the playing style of her mentor and, in turn, the flute player he was imitating. A man from another *ohayashi* team who had been listening to her play said her style of playing sounded like the flute player who was on that recording, who her mentor was imitating. She said, "then, of course, maybe he was so famous among the locals. But I was really surprised that he recognised the way I play, the way I imitate my flute master, and his master" (MAR Interview 1, 2022). Reflecting on this event, she remarked (MAR Interview 1):

So I was kind of really happy that he could hear it through my flute and through my master's flute, then, um, connecting the dot so immediately. And I think it's one of like a... I don't know, I've been only playing less than ten years, but... I think if you are local or if you play long enough and know, um, the people, how they play, how they perform, you'll be able to connect the dots and even go back in history to make it more personal or, I'm not sure how to say but [...] you'll be able to connect the dots and peoples.

This flute player depicts Kantō Matsuri's *ohayashi* music tradition as akin to a web of lineages, in which generations of master-student relationships can potentially be traced back by those in the know. Playing in a particular way therefore marks one's place within a particular lineage. In her study of a matsuri in Sakae, Kawano (2005) analyses the way singing a particular version of a song signifies a singer's resident status, arguing that “the place-based identity is embodied in the act of singing” (p. 101). However, by learning this version, newcomers to the tradition were also able to acculturate themselves into it. For example, Kawano refers to an “in-marrying spouse” who “learned the local men's tradition and thus proved himself in the eyes of his peers” (p. 101). By learning from a local flute master, the female flute player I interviewed can similarly embody a place-based identity and prove herself as part of the Kantō tradition. Not only that, the improvisational potential of Kantō Matsuri's *ohayashi* music enables even newcomers to transform this musical tradition, albeit with potential limitations reinforced by local *chōnai* team members.

4.2.4 Playing a different role to everyday life

Furthermore, being part of Kantō Matsuri can have an effect on participants' sense of self. Many of the performers I interviewed expressed the pride they felt about having participated in Kantō Matsuri. A former international exchange student and drummer described performing in Kantō Matsuri as “one of the greatest memories of [his] life” (MAR Interview 3, 2022). Similarly, when I asked a *sashite* performer for a strong memory of his of Kantō Matsuri, he spoke about the “beginning of the last performance” on the year of his graduation, specifically the moment the *kantō* pole was lifted up, which made him feel “pride”, and also the feeling that “this is the real end of my [...] performer life” as a university student in Kantō Matsuri. According to Roemer (2009), belonging to a matsuri association can provide members with social support and positively affect their self-image and wellbeing, in part because of its privileged status. This is apparent here, where the interviewee looks back with pride on the unique position of performing in Kantō Matsuri as a university student.

In fact, performing in the matsuri can be, for some, a break from the roles they take on in everyday life. Interestingly, one *sashite* performer connected this idea to gender, reflecting on his experiences participating in the matsuri before he graduated. Here, he referred directly to the Japanese concept of “*hare* and *ke*”, which he explained as “usual and unusual” time (MAR Interview 6, 2022). According to Namihira (1977), *ke* is the “profane”, “ordinary”, “common” or “usual”; everyday life (viii). On the other hand, *hare* is associated with “purity” and sacrality (Namihira, 1977, viii). For example, purification rites

bring about a state of *hare* (Namihira, 1977, p. 66). This *sashite* performer said that, during the matsuri, it was an “unusual time”, where he was able to take on an “unusual persona” distinct from ordinary life (MAR Interview 6, 2022). Alternatively, Turner (1977) refers to this function of ritual action as “antistructure”; a way to test out new possibilities and unsettle the social order of everyday life (vii). The heightened atmosphere of a matsuri creates a feeling that the mundane is suspended, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis.

In particular, this *sashite* performer linked this “unusual persona” with the type of masculinity he was able to perform during the matsuri. “At least to me, being *sashite* feels like more [...] masculine”, he said, in a way that was different from his usual life, referring to this as a benefit of performing in Kantō Matsuri (MAR Interview 6, 2022). This comment seems to reflect Roemer's (2010) observation that the pride participants feel from participating in Gion Matsuri comes in part from the opportunity to belong to something which is outside of ordinary life (p. 506). In this case, the gendered nature of this exclusivity has seemingly resulted in a sense of pride for the *sashite* performer which is connected to a masculine performance of gender separate from that of daily life.

Yet, a similar sentiment was also expressed by a female flute player, who remarked upon the special nature of being a musical performer at a matsuri. Specifically, she tied this idea to the relationship between work and identity. I asked this flute player what the the benefits of Kantō Matsuri have been for her (MAR Interview 5, 2022):

I'm working for the company, right? And... I— I am hired by the company and I am doing my best during the work but, um... there is no opportunity to— [...] describe myself or perform myself in the work, right? [...] I really like to perform, like, Kantō in front of many people. I felt I am like a performer, not like— that feeling is I can, that is— that I cannot feel in daily life. [...] And I also— uh, you know [...] in Kantō festival we have the competition, right? [...] Yeah, and [...] I entered that competition this year for second time as a local team, and it was— I felt much pressure on it. I felt very nervous. [...] But that kind of feeling, like excited feeling is, uh, I cannot, like, feel in the daily life so... I— I'm not sure it's a benefit or not, but... I—well, at least I can say I need such moments for my life. [...] As participating in the festival, I can feel different thing, in the usual life. [...] that I think [...] means that festival is very special for me.

As such, this flute player implied feeling estranged from her identity in her normal life as a worker, in a similar way to what Karl Marx (1959) suggests in his theory of alienation. According to this theory, in a

capitalist society, the worker becomes alienated from the products of their own labour, the process of labour production, and eventually from their own human potential and from other people. In contrast, this flute player described her enjoyment performing in Kantō Matsuri, and especially competing, which was a way for her to play a different role than in her everyday life, and one that brought out different, more heightened emotions. Discussing young Japanese women's desire to develop their own interests and hobbies outside of the societal roles expected of them, Rosenberger (2006) remarks “women want to play more than one position throughout life and to have some say over the construction of their own life trajectories” (p. 83). In this case, the matsuri and its contest seems to have functioned as a way for this musician to enjoy playing a position better aligned with her interests.

Thus, we can see the extent to which Akita International University (AIU) students are able to become part of Kantō Matsuri, and how this may positively affect their self-image. Men and women alike are able to create strong social bonds, particularly because of the large amount of time and effort spent aiming towards a common goal. Further, they are able to maintain their ties with each other and with the wider society of Kantō Matsuri by returning to participate in the matsuri. For some graduates, belonging to a different Kantō team can be a way to take on a more central role, although there are still practical issues involved in travelling between Akita and cities such as Tokyo. This annual journey resembles a return back home, especially as graduates may have developed an emotional attachment to Akita. Moreover, part of belonging to a Kantō team means continuing the tradition, whether by taking care of children or embodying a place-based identity by playing a particular musical style. Taking on the privileged role of a performer in Kantō Matsuri can give participants a feeling of pride, and a role they could not ordinarily play in everyday life. While these roles certainly have gendered dimensions, now that the opportunity to perform as a musician is also given to women, they can access a similarly — if less — privileged position.

4.3 Conclusion

In conclusion, participants from Akita International University traverse a literal and symbolic distance between their membership in Kantō Matsuri and their working lives in Tokyo. Their participation in Kantō Matsuri is a transferable experience that seems to count towards their mature social personhood. This experience is geared towards male social bonding, but also functions as a site for women to navigate the gendered division of labour — and subsequent gender roles — which prop this up, especially in the

example of drinking parties. On the one hand, having been part of Kantō Matsuri can be beneficial for one's life as a company employee; an awareness of hierarchical relationships can be used to better navigate a corporate environment, for example. At the same time, participating in Kantō Matsuri can provide graduates with a persona or self separate to that of their working life. While these conceptions intersect with and are affected by deep-rooted gender dynamics, the skills, social support and sense of pride can now be accessed by women as well as men. What is more, by performing in and maintaining ties with Kantō teams, women and men alike from outside of Akita prefecture are able to pass on and transform these cultural forms.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

In her book about the *onnagata*, the Japanese art of female impersonation, Maki Isaka (2016) uses the analogy of a labyrinth to explore the idea of gender systems as socially-constructed, ever-changing, yet unavoidable (pp. 163-164). The labyrinth can be amended and redefined, but “one can hardly escape from the labyrinth itself” (Isaka, 2016, p. 163). Likewise, in Kantō Matsuri, the traditional gender dynamics have been renegotiated and redefined but still feel inescapable. Even so, women can find purpose and fulfilment in it.

On the one hand, Kantō Matsuri is a “man's festival”, in that it continues to reproduce elder male power. The historic exclusion of women is in some ways retained, especially through the taboo around the central pole or *sao*, which necessitates a division between *sashite* — who balance the lantern-pole structure — and *ohayashi* — accompanying musicians who create the heightened atmosphere of the matsuri. In this way, the sacred boundary is able to be remapped, allowing women to participate, with the taboo now internalised as the expectation for *ohayashi* to run out of the way of the pole, and for *sashite* to try and protect them from it. This taboo also impacts the structure of Kantō teams or associations, impeding women from taking on the role as the whole-team leader, which has a knock-on effect on decision-making in the team. What is more, the aesthetics of the matsuri are conceptualised as masculine, and linked to essentialistic understandings of strength and power as associated with men's bodies. For this reason, female *ohayashi* performers are encouraged to play in a “masculine” way, with the assumption being that this will require additional physical effort from them. Additionally, the types of networks and social support accessed through matsuri are paternalistic. This can still be seen in the drinking parties, which centre around men's “heroic drinking”, particularly systems of nomination which leverage and reinforce the hierarchical relationships between men.

On the other hand, women can belong to, and benefit from belonging to, this “man's festival”, while still being aware of the deep-seated dynamics and division of roles. They can have fun, learn to perform ritually-charged music, build strong friendships, and give and receive social support. However, women now benefit from socialising in Kantō Matsuri, while still, more subtly, maintaining the division of labour which has historically enabled men's socialisation. By performing, being a good teacher, or presenting themselves in a particular way, they can gain respect and feel pride in themselves. Moreover, they can nurture skills which are useful in the workplace, such as navigating hierarchical relationships. Thus, women can access gendered models of maturity and belonging. They can lay claim to part of a matsuri, a symbolic space, and a persona of their own, outside of everyday life. By integrating into the relational

networks used historically for sharing information between men, they can become part of the fabric of the Kantō musical tradition. Furthermore, they can develop their own interests outside of the societal expectations which are placed on them.

It is less clear, however, to what extent women are able to subvert the gender hierarchy of Kantō Matsuri. This thesis is a case study of the Akita International University team, which is an outlier compared to local *chōnai* teams. Conversely, this means expectations are often applied more markedly to this team, and especially to its female participants, who are not supposed to stand out visually, for example. However, it would be worth broadening the scope in further research, such as to interview participants in other teams or matsuri. Ultimately, though, this thesis does not attempt to make broad statements about the place of women in matsuri. It is an interview study analysing the thoughts and observations of eleven students and graduates from this particular team, drawing also on my own experiences participating in Kantō Matsuri. Thus, it is able to contribute to the literature on women's participation in matsuri, which is still scarce, yet beginning to develop as a field of study.

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Appendix

I. Evidence of ethics approval

🗑️ Delete 📁 Archive 📄 Report ↩️ Reply ↩️ Reply all ➡️ Forward 🔍 Zoom 📧 Read / Unread 🗂️ Categorise 🚩 Flag / Unflag 🖨️ Print ⋮

RE: LTSLCS-157: Application for Proportionate **Ethical** Review - Favourable outcome

AE Daksha Chavda on behalf of AHC Research Ethics
To: Abigail Meyer
Cc: Irena Hayter, Jieun Kim

Wed 02/11/2022 17:06

Dear Abigail,

LTSLCS-157 – A Comparative Analysis of Gender Dynamics in Akita Kanto and Gaina Manto

NB: All **approvals/comments are subject to compliance with current University of Leeds and UK Government advice regarding the Covid-19 pandemic.**

I am pleased to inform you that your proportionate touch research ethics application has been reviewed by the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Cultures Research Ethics Committee (AHC) and I can confirm this has received a favourable **ethical** opinion based on the documentation received at date of this email.

Please retain this email as evidence of **approval in your study file.**

Please notify the committee if you intend to make any amendments to the original research as submitted and approved to date. This includes recruitment methodology; all changes must receive **ethical approval** prior to implementation. Please see <https://ris.leeds.ac.uk/research-ethics-and-integrity/applying-for-an-amendment/> or contact the Research Ethics Administrator for further information (ahcresearchethics@leeds.ac.uk) if required.

Ethics **approval** does not infer you have the right of access to any member of staff or student or documents and the premises of the University of Leeds. Nor does it imply any right of access to the premises of any other organisation, including clinical areas. The committee takes no responsibility for you gaining access to staff, students and/or premises prior to, during or following your research activities.

Please note: You are expected to keep a record of all your approved documentation, as well as documents such as sample consent forms, risk assessments and other documents relating to the study. This should be kept in your study file, which should be readily available for audit purposes. You will be given a two week notice period if your project is to be audited.

It is our policy to remind everyone that it is your responsibility to comply with Health and Safety, Data Protection and any other legal and/or professional guidelines there may be.

I hope the study goes well.

Yours sincerely,

Daksha

On behalf of Professor Robert Jones (AHC REC Chair)

Daksha Chavda on behalf of Research Ethics
Secretariat Support Officer
Secretariat Office
University of Leeds