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Contents tourism and fieldwork in Akihabara: an ethnographic approach

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Abstract: This report gives a concrete example of how to conduct ethnography about contents tourism and tourism imaginary based on an ethnographic experience in Akihabara, Tokyo. This specific survey is part of broader research which focuses on the image of Hokkaido among foreign tourists and the role of contents tourism. Akihabara was chosen as a site for the ethnographic investigation. The fieldwork was prepared, but once it began adjustments were needed and the research adapted to the context. This account exposes how these changes were made, drawing a parallel between this diversification and the idea of multi-sited ethnography, leading to the idea of multi-sited fieldwork.

アブストラクト：本稿では、筆者が東京秋葉原で実施した調査に基づき、コンテンツツーリズムおよびツーリズム・イマジナリーに関する民族誌的調査の具体例を示す。本稿で紹介する調査事例は、筆者が取り組んでいる、外国人旅行者における北海道のイメージとコンテンツツーリズムの役割に関する研究の一部をなすものである。秋葉原において実施した民族誌的調査においては、現地の状況に合わせ、調査方法・内容の変更・調整を行った。本稿では、こうした変更・調整の経緯を記述することで、マルチサイト・エスノグラフィー、マルチサイト・フィールドワークの考え方についても言及する。

Keywords: multi-sited ethnography, methodology, fieldwork, tourism imaginary, touristification.

キーワード：マルチサイト・エスノグラフィー、方法論、フィールドワーク、ツーリズム・イマジナリー、観光化

On a sunny day in January 2014 in Akihabara, Tokyo, I met an Australian family with two children in front of the shop Kotobukiya, then while chatting together we were joined by a Dutch man in his forties, who took us to a *neko cafe* (cat café) because the Australian family (who had just left a maid café) wanted to experience it. Leaving them at the cat café, the Dutch man went back with me to near the JR station. He explained that he was a fan of the popular Japanese idol group AKB48 and the singer Kyari Pamyu Pamyu. While I was waiting for another group of tourists, this time French, which I was going to introduce to a maid café, he told me his story. He had discovered Japanese idols and fell in love with them. This was why he was so fond of Akihabara. I left him and joined the group of young French people, with whom I spent two hours in a maid café.

This was a fairly typical day while I was in Tokyo conducting ethnographic fieldwork into contents tourism in Japan. This fieldwork was part of a broader research project about Western tourists and their images of Hokkaido and Sapporo from the cool Japan perspective. This research is closely linked to the idea of contents tourism. It questions how media contents influence foreign

visitors' perceptions of Japan, and how they are connected to the various efforts to promote popular culture and entertainment through the label of 'cool Japan'. This essay presents a research-in-progress report that addresses ethnographic considerations more than providing conclusive analysis and theoretical explanations.

Planning the ethnography: where, why and how?

The fieldwork in Tokyo was planned as a way of providing some comparative data to similar research being carried out in Hokkaido. It took place over five weeks starting in mid-December 2013. Akihabara was selected as the main site given that the area has undergone a touristification process launched about ten years ago. Patrick Galbraith (2009) has written about this process and I have also witnessed the changes myself since my first visit to Akihabara in 2005. Long known as Tokyo's 'electric town' and considered to be the home of otaku (obsessive fans of manga, anime, idols, etc.) since the 1990s, Akihabara has been renewed and rebuilt during the past ten years. It is now promoted to foreigners as *the* place for people interested in otaku culture and hobbies, and as a site where people may find unique items relating to Japanese pop culture. It seemed, therefore, to be the perfect place to observe cool Japan tourism, or at least to look at the results of this attempt at touristification. Consequently, I planned to use the Akihabara case study as a model of successful touristification, in which a tourist area officially linked to contents tourism and labeled as a 'cool Japan' site has been created.

I was planning to spend most of my time in Akihabara to become immersed in the place. But, context immersion is not sufficient for collecting relevant data: an anthropologist doing participant observation needs to talk to people, not only to observe them from afar. I chose, therefore, to use a questionnaire as a means of approaching foreign tourists, collecting precise data, and engaging in conversation with them.

The questionnaire focused on three points: first, images of Japanese pop culture and Akihabara; second, general images of Hokkaido and Sapporo; and third, people's interest in and knowledge about Hatsune Miku. This last point requires some explanation. Preliminary investigations in Sapporo revealed that the character Hatsune Miku was an important topic at the time. Miku is a fictional character created to promote vocaloid software. The software is a singing voice synthesizer, developed by Crypton Futur Media, using technology created by Yamaha. Crypton also created some characters to promote the software, of whom Miku is one, and released the software in July 2007. She is a cute singer with blue hair and has many fans in Japan and overseas. Fans can create their own music and make her sing, as seen in many videos posted on internet. As Miku's image is open source, they can also create various artworks using her image (Crypton has also launched a platform to share these creations called piaproⁱ). Crypton Futur media, the company that created Hatsune Miku, is based in Sapporo and the city is using the image of the virtual singer as a promotional tool, especially during winter and for the Sapporo Snow Festival. With Miku now an established part of Japanese pop culture, I was trying to see how she is perceived by Westerners, if they are attracted to her, and if they made the connection between Miku and Sapporo.

The broad research method was to approach Western tourists in Akihabara for the questionnaire survey, and more generally to wander around in the area, familiarising myself with it, and trying to observe the atmosphere and tourist behaviour in Akihabara. Guided tours were also targeted for this research to see what kind of tours and information are provided to tourists and to acquire better knowledge of the sightseeing spots. To help achieve this, I also contacted Autrement Le Japon (ALJ), a small French travel agency with 4 employees in Tokyo who I had worked with before during my previous research in Tokyo. I was welcomed as a temporary member of the ALJ team and was invited to join them for the New Year stays (there were two stays: 10 days or one month, both starting from 26 December 2013).ⁱⁱ This gave me the opportunity to meet a group of French tourists interested in pop culture (the travel agency mainly focuses on this clientele, see Sabre 2012)

and to join them in their activities during their stay. In addition to Akihabara, visiting other places related to pop culture and attending the Comic Market were also included in the schedule as other sites of ethnography.

First contact and initiation of the fieldwork

I arrived in Tokyo in December 2013 and became reacquainted with Akihabara. My first day was both surprising and disappointing. I had not been there for more than four years since my previous fieldwork and I could immediately see how much had changed. There were a new entrance for the JR station, new malls and new restaurants, and the area was no longer only frequented by otaku but also busy with various passers-by who did not seem preoccupied with manga and anime. Nevertheless, the electric town and the otaku area were still alive and filled with regular customers and foreign tourists. So, my initial worry was not about finding subjects for the survey, but about how to reach them. On this first day, I sat in a tiny coffee shop writing gloomy thoughts about this problem in my fieldwork journal. It was a cold, windy, rainy day and I was desperate to speak to people in the street. I was also thinking that maybe accosting people and asking them to fill in a questionnaire in the street required some authorisation that I had not received.

I was facing one of the most common problems of fieldwork: once in the place, how should researchers interact with people? In tourism studies, this problem is amplified by the fact that the subjects are not living in the location of the study, so ethnographers cannot take much time to get subjects used to their presence and to accumulate many small interactions which, when put together, will give researchers a broad idea of what they want to learn. Meeting tourists in a specific site requires making the most of brief interactions with some people who are not staying in the place for very long and may not want to feel that they are wasting their limited travel time. Drawing on my previous experiences and some works that depict research at tourists sites (Couldry 2005; Palmer 2005), I finally began to approach Western tourists in enclosed places, like the UDX building (where the Tourist Information Centre is located), just at the 'electric town' exit. People were nice, and then the following day the sun came back, so I took my chance on the street, briefly introducing myself and my goal to people who seemed to have time to listen to me. I repeated this exercise during the fifteen subsequent days and I collected about 140 completed questionnaires. Each time I tried to talk with the respondents as much as I could, about their general impressions or to help them and give them information about Akihabara or Japan. Significantly, I never had any problems regarding authorisation. Nobody asked me to stop or to show permission to survey people in the street.

The problem of access had been solved, but another issue was raised: what about the sample, and how did I select the interviewees? It is tempting to say the sample was 'those who agreed to be interviewed', no matter who they were. Indeed it played a large part in sample selection, along with choosing people at random. The tourist population in Akihabara was not something I could control, so there were elements of random selection. My criteria for choosing potential subjects were very loose, and oriented toward physical characteristics and language. In my overall research about contents tourism the focus is on Western tourists for various reasons: to define a specific population that has roughly the same references relating to Japan and its pop culture, to ease the fieldwork, and to try to have one criterion for homogenising the sample population. Consequently, I was approaching people who looked as if they were from Western countries, either through appearance or behaviour, for example if they were speaking English or another European language.

This selection process may seem loaded and a bit simplistic, and it was a practical question that kept worrying me in the field. Asian tourists, for example, are numerous in Akihabara but the survey in English and French was targeted at Westerners. When people agreed to fill in the survey (and in fact there were very few refusals), I asked for their nationality. Other issues existed about the types of subjects I was selecting. I tried to diversify as much as I could, asking people of all

ages, families, couples, and groups. But of course, here too my room for manoeuvre was limited, and I was dependent on random sampling and my own implicit choices. Consequently the surveyed population is not strictly representative and its characteristics, therefore, cannot be taken as entirely statistically reliable. Nevertheless, their comments and impressions are useful for comprehending the appeal of contents tourism in Japan.

Looking from the other perspective: guided tours and sightseeing

The main site of investigation was Akihabara, but data was not only collected via questionnaires. To investigate a site of tourism, the two sides of the tourist interaction must be explored, namely locals as well as visitors. During the brief fieldwork, it meant being familiar with the highlights of Akihabara and evaluating the tourist supply in the area. To do so, I collected information in advance, mainly from English-language websites linked to tourism promotion. These included national organisations such as the Japanese National Tourism Office, JNTO,ⁱⁱⁱ and private initiatives, such as those supported by the Akihabara Tourism Promotion Association.^{iv} Based on these Internet searches I found and joined two different guided tours in English (run by private companies), both including some sightseeing spots and a stop at a maid café, which seems to have acquired a ‘must-see’ label. This experience did not turn out to be an effective way to meet more foreign visitors (I was alone on one tour and with two American girls on the other) but it was very instructive in many other regards. The two guides were quite different: one was a professional guide who has recently included Akihabara in her range of tours, and one was a girl dressed as a maid who was herself a deep fan of the area. The tours were different, too, but with a common frame that presents the tourist identity of Akihabara.

To summarise, the guided tours both created their own version of Akihabara as a tourist site, with some variations on the same central theme: Akihabara is *the* site of anime, manga and idol culture, a place inhabited by fans (or ‘otaku people’, as the professional guide called them) and where contemporary Japanese pop culture is developing some of its more extravagant aspects. This is also the discourse developed by tourism brochures and organisations, which described the area as an ‘Otaku Mecca’ (JNTO^v), a ‘Center of pop culture’ (Akihabara Tourism Promotion Association^{vi}), or a “‘sacred land” of the otaku legions’ (*Japan Anime Map*, provided by the JNTO^{vii}). The guided tours were then fixing the sightseeing route, with its variations and main attractions, the latter symbolised by a visit to a maid café. This importance of the maid café for foreign visitors was confirmed by my observations, by the answers to the questionnaire and by the tourists I talked to. Many people were simply interested. They were not fans of maid style but curious. As a French tourist and an Australian family said to me, ‘you can’t go to Japan and not try a maid café once!’.

Multi-sited fieldwork?

Wandering around in Akihabara, window shopping, observing people and speaking to foreign tourists was at the core of the fieldwork, but other sites that could potentially illustrate the concept of ‘contents tourism’ were on the list, too. I was planning to go as one visitor among many and to lay the groundwork for some more extensive fieldwork or to use these locations as points to give out the questionnaire. Consequently, I selected three sites: the Ghibli Museum (very famous and popular worldwide), the Toei Animation Gallery (from the Toei Studio, which has produced many television animations and is recommended by the JNTO website^{viii}) and the Hasegawa Machiko Museum (not listed by JNTO but linked to *Sazae-san*, a manga and family television anime well known in Japan). In the end, none were included as sites for the survey. The Hasegawa Machiko

Museum and the Toei Animation Gallery were quite empty and had only a few Western tourists; meanwhile, the Ghibli museum was very busy but did not look like a place where I could freely approach people. I could have tried standing a little distance from the museum, like the closest train station, but for reasons of time and feasibility I postponed that project. Visiting these sites was more a way of immersing myself into contents-related spots in Tokyo and observing the range of available sites and the ways they were aimed at foreign tourists.

By contrast, the Comiket, or Comic Market, a bi-annual event where non-professional manga drawers sell their own creations, was a good opportunity to give out questionnaires. I attended the event as an observer but many Westerners were visiting too, so I approached them and collected many questionnaires. Removing or ‘delocalising’ the survey from Akihabara was another approach: I tried asking some tourists near the Imperial Palace during the Emperor birthday’s appearance, but many practical issues like the lack of time and the necessity to concentrate on the main site meant that I limited that approach to just the one attempt. Indeed, the Comiket survey was not really a delocalisation to me, more of an intensification. The event is connected to Akihabara and otaku culture, so it seemed that it was a place to find deep fans who also visit Akihabara, or, to put it differently, a way to reach a sample of fans that I was not sure to reach by randomly selecting people in Akihabara streets and shops. According to Georges Marcus’ definition^{ix} multi-sited ethnography aims to follow elements that are connected from one site to another. The worldwide circulation of media contents and the local consequences are one example of this type of connection, and the ethnographers who investigate these contemporary contexts have to conduct fieldwork in the various sites tied by the globalised flows (the interconnected circulating flows described by Appadurai, 1996).

In the present study, the fieldwork mainly looked at one site, Akihabara, and the other places and methods of data collection were elements that contributed directly to the comprehension of this site, so it was not a multi-sited ethnography in itself, but multi-sited fieldwork. This is a feature of contemporary urban fieldwork conducted over a limited time period and focusing on the limited experience of tourism. Multi-sited ethnography is a useful model for preparing and conducting wide-ranging fieldwork, but it is also effective on a smaller scale considering all the methods the ethnographer can use to collect data.

In the present research, multi-sited ethnography is the general perspective. In order to study the imaginary of Hokkaido, its relation to contents tourism and to Hokkaido’s identity, various sites need to be investigated and connected altogether. Akihabara was chosen as one of the sites and I think the multiplicity of places and methods for that precise survey, using the same perspective of ties, connections and key knots, can be referred to as multi-sited fieldwork.

During this short period of fieldwork in Tokyo I spent time in Akihabara observing and immersing myself in the local environment. I collected questionnaires, joined two guided tours of Akihabara and provided one informal tour myself to the French tourists I met through the French travel agency; but I also visited various sites linked to contents tourism, interviewed guides and tourism professionals, collected tourist brochures and so on. Every activity was a piece of the fieldwork that contributed to the main survey, and this combination of various elements is a way to contextualise the research and to minimise the isolation of the site from the broad context.

For example, on New Year’s Eve after my fieldwork at the Comiket I followed some Japanese students to Washinomiya Shrine in Washimiya, a shrine famous for appearing in the anime *Lucky Star*. It was filled with fans and cosplayers. The place is advertised by the Japanese National Tourism Office in their website under the banner of ‘pilgrimage to sacred places, anime, manga and games’.^x I had heard that Japanese fans gather there. This trip was also a way to observe the Japanese side of contents tourism, not to study it in itself but to complete the broad picture and to improve my comprehension of the main survey in Akihabara.

Initial conclusions

The methodology for my fieldwork in Akihabara was not completely settled before the fieldwork and the method was adaptive. It depended on what happened in the field and on the circumstances, thereby following the model of anthropologic ethnography. The hypothesis that guided the study was not a precise one to be tested in the field but more of an open research question, and the exchanges with the foreign tourists provided many avenues for further investigations. The first impression gained from this research, although this is a tentative conclusion made before formal analysis of all the data, is that the touristification of Akihabara is successful: the area is associated with pop culture and contents by many visitors, but without losing its identity as an ‘electric town’ filled with electronic devices.

As for the people I met, it was striking to see the variations, from deep fans of manga, anime or idols to families curious to see what a maid café was like, or passers-by who just wanted to have a look or to buy some goods. Not taking into account the many biases caused by my approach, most of the tourists were quite young (under 35 years old), travelling by themselves and wandering in the streets (which was in marked contrast to the buses of Chinese tourists I saw regularly being dropped in front of duty free shops in the main street). Australians were the most numerous and they were almost the only ones who had some knowledge about Hokkaido.^{xi} This point will not be developed here, but it was striking to see the dichotomous representations between, on one hand, Tokyo, Akihabara and pop culture and, on the other hand, Hokkaido, nature and sport. The most common item associated with Sapporo was Sapporo Beer, and almost nobody knew that Hatsune Miku was connected to Sapporo, even the fans. Moreover, among Japanese people I talked with, many did not know either. ‘I thought she was from Akihabara’, said one man, a quote that perfectly depicts the strong association between contents culture and Akihabara. Further investigation in Hokkaido will provide more information about that, and the model that emerged from this experience of fieldwork in Akihabara will provide a useful backdrop to a comparative study in Hokkaido. The promotion of tourism through the idea of ‘cool Japan’ is developing in many sites and in many ways nowadays, and investigating these various elements requires a common reference point, a role that Akihabara would seem to play very well.

Note

ⁱ www.piapro.jp; www.piapro.net [Accessed 27 February 2014].

ⁱⁱ This period was chosen for various reasons, one of them being that the Christmas holiday period is busy with many Western tourists visiting Japan.

ⁱⁱⁱ See for example: http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/cultural/kie/akihabara/kie_akihabara_03.html, or <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/location/regional/tokyo/akihabara.html> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{iv} See for example: <http://akihabara-tour.com/>, <http://akiba-brand.com/> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^v <http://www.jnto.go.jp/engpre2/indepth/exotic/animation/index.html> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{vi} <http://akihabara-tour.com/> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{vii} <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/animemap/> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{viii} https://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/exotic/animation/d3_muse.html [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{ix} ‘Multi-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography’ (Marcus 1995, p. 105).

^x <http://www.jnto.go.jp/eng/indepth/cultural/pilgrimage/rakisuta.html> [Accessed 27 February 2014].

^{xi} This is due to the popularity of the Niseko ski resort (Hokkaido) among Australians.

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サブレ・クロチルド リール第一大学（フランス）にて PhD（文化人類学）を取得。専門は、エキゾチシズム、ツーリズム・イマジナリーに着目した、ファン・メディア・観光の関係性に関する研究。主なフィールドワークとして、日本におけるフランス人、欧米人観光客の動態を、マンガ、アニメなど日本のポップカルチャーとの関係性から分析している。現在、北海道におけるコンテンツツーリズムと北海道イメージに関する研究を展開中。2013～2014、日本学術振興会外国人特別研究員（欧米短期）として来日、北海道大学観光学高等研究センター研究員として研究活動に従事。