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Whaling on stage: a comparison of contemporary Japanese whale festivals

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ABSTRACT

Conservative Japanese politicians, academics, and journalists regularly state that whaling is an essential part of their national heritage, expressed in material culture, folk songs, ritual practices, and festivals. Japan has several whale festivals (*kujira matsuri*): playful events at which participants re-enact Edo-period (1600–1868) coastal whaling practices and perform whaling-related songs and dances. This article compares the festivals of Taiji (Wakayama), Kayoi (Yamaguchi), Shinkami-gotō (Nagasaki), and Ayukawa (Miyagi). It argues that these festivals not only have economic and social significance for the communities in question; they also support the notion of Japan as a traditional whaling nation. By organising and participating in these festivals, local priests, volunteers, and audiences enact this imagined whaling heritage, thus supporting the agenda of the present-day whaling industry. However, local actors have their own motivations and interests, and in fact the celebration of whaling heritage is not contingent upon the continuation of whaling today.

KEYWORDS

Festivals (*matsuri*); fishing communities; intangible cultural heritage; Japan; whaling re-enactments

Introduction

Conservative Japanese politicians, academics, and journalists regularly state that whaling and the consumption of whale meat are essential parts of their national culture, and that human-cetacean relations in the archipelago are historically characterised by sustainability, multispecies harmony, and ritualised gratitude (e.g., Itoh 2018a; Kato 2007; Kojima 2009; Komatsu 2002). When discussing Japanese whaling culture, they usually refer to the history of small-scale coastal whaling in some parts of Kyūshū, western Honshū, Shikoku, and the Kii Peninsula between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, and make it representative of 'national culture' as a whole. In this discourse, there is an assumption of continuity between these early modern practices and present-day commercial whaling, even though the introduction of modern industrial whaling in the second half of the nineteenth century led to the decline of traditional coastal whaling techniques, not their survival (Arch 2018, 74). The notion that whaling and whale meat have constituted core parts of Japanese subsistence and culinary traditions since

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pre-modern times is advocated in popular books and magazines, TV shows, and whaling museums and exhibitions, sponsored by organisations such as the Institute for Cetacean Research (ICR) and the Japan Fisheries Agency (JFA) (Morikawa 2009, 5–6). These organisations frame whaling as an integral part of national cultural heritage, expressed in material culture, folk songs, ritual practices, and festivals, and link the preservation of these cultural traditions to the survival of the whaling industry today, as if one thing cannot survive without the other. The reality, of course, is different: the survival of the whaling industry is no precondition for the preservation of whaling-related cultural heritage, and the existence of this heritage is no justification for continued state support for a shrinking whaling industry (Morikawa 2009, 14). Nevertheless, the discursive association between the two is strong, not least in much of the relevant academic literature.

Some early modern ritual traditions related to whales and whaling have been preserved until today. Others were reintroduced or invented in the post-war period. This includes practices such as the performance of memorial services (*kuyō*) for the spirits of dead whales and festivals (*matsuri*) related to whales and whaling. *Kuyō* and *matsuri* are different kinds of events: the former is a particular type of ritual practice, usually conducted in Buddhist temples (or occasionally in Shinto shrines), not necessarily in front of an audience, while the latter is a public community event. There may be some overlap—some *matsuri* include *kuyō* as part of the festival programme—but they are not the same. This article briefly discusses whale-related *kuyō* in order to provide some relevant historical and religious context, but it focuses primarily on *matsuri*. We have decided to focus mainly on festivals for two reasons. First, it is the overarching topic of this thematic issue, and we use some of the same analytical concepts as the other articles (patronage, play, and piety), which allows for the comparison of different festival traditions across Asia (see Teeuwen, Sen, and Rots 2023). Second, the Covid-19 pandemic has led to the cancellation of many festivals and public rituals in the period 2020–2022, and fieldwork opportunities have been limited. One of us has been able to visit all four communities and attend two of the festivals discussed in this article,[1] but only one *kuyō* performance, so a more in-depth discussion of the latter practice will have to wait for a later publication.

This article introduces some of today's most prominent 'whale festivals' (*kujira matsuri*). Participants in these festivals re-enact Edo-period (1600–1868) coastal whaling practices and perform whaling-related songs and dances, in addition to more common festival activities such as attending shrine rituals, watching fireworks, eating snacks (including whale meat), and drinking alcohol. In this article, we compare the whale festivals of Taiji (Wakayama), Kayoi (Yamaguchi), Shinkami-gotō (Nagasaki), and Ayukawa (Miyagi). What is the significance of these festivals in today's modern society, when coastal communities no longer have the close contact with whales that they might have had in pre-modern times? Why are these festivals still organised, even if the communities in question—or, at least, a majority of community members—no

[1]Aike Rots visited Shinkami-gotō in 2017, Kayoi in 2018 and 2022, Ayukawa in 2018 and 2022, and Taiji in 2022. He attended the Ayukawa festival in 2018 and the Kayoi festival in 2022, as well as several other *matsuri* not discussed in this article (see Rots forthcoming). Unfortunately, the whaling festival and whale *kuyō* in Taiji were cancelled in 2022 due to Covid-19. Our article is partly based on ethnographic observations and conversations during these visits, in addition to literature research conducted by both of us.

longer engage in whaling?[2] Who are the main patrons behind them? Are these merely playful, secular re-enactments, or is there an element of piety in them as well? And what can whale festivals tell us about the wider significance of festivals (*matsuri*) today, especially in the face of rapid environmental and societal change?

We argue in this article that these festivals not only have economic and social significance for the communities that organise them; they also support the notion of Japan as a traditional whaling nation, and therefore have ideological significance that extends beyond the localities where they take place. Local actors and stakeholders have a variety of reasons for organising and participating in these festivals, which do not necessarily correspond to those of the whaling industry. Nevertheless, by enacting this imagined national whaling heritage, local priests, volunteers, and audiences do often end up supporting the agenda of some of the festivals' most powerful patrons, the present-day whaling industry and its lobby groups. Play, in these cases, is serious business: publicly performing pre-modern whaling practices strengthens notions of whaling as an integral part of Japanese traditional culture. Piety is less visible, but not completely absent, as devotional practices and beliefs survive and return at unexpected moments.

Whaling in Japanese history

To understand the symbolic and ideological significance of whale festivals today, we will first briefly discuss the history of Japanese whaling. Traditional coastal whaling was practised between the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries in some areas of Kyūshū (including Iki and the Gotō Islands), western Honshū (present-day Yamaguchi Prefecture), Shikoku (present-day Kōchi Prefecture), and the Kii Peninsula (the Taiji-Kumano region). These were the areas where the migration routes of baleen whales passed close to the shore, which made it possible for humans to catch them (Arch 2018, 25). Although whaling was practised mostly in small villages on the coast that were far removed from the main urban centres, whales found their way into Japanese culture and society in many ways, through a lively coastal trade that inspired awe of and general curiosity about whales. As Jakobina Arch has demonstrated, whale products were important commodities during the Edo period: one whale was worth a lot of money and its uses were many, from oil and leather to fertiliser and insecticide (2018, 79–85). Whale meat was less important. It was consumed, but not on a large scale, as the meat was quick to spoil even when salted and thus could not travel far (Arch 2018, 91–100). Even though whale products had a significant economic and social impact, whaling was concentrated in only some coastal regions. In other parts of the archipelago, fishing communities did not catch whales, even though they might occasionally consume or sell stranded whales. This was the case in the Noto Peninsula, for instance, where people believed beached whales to be the incarnations of humans who wanted to pay back a debt to the community (Hosokawa and Miyawaki 2015, 179).

In the middle of the nineteenth century, Japanese whaling fell into decline as a result of overfishing (Arch 2018, 33). The industry recovered, and changed significantly, when Japanese whalers followed other countries and picked up pelagic whaling by use of

[2]Whaling is still conducted in two of the four communities discussed in this article (Ayukawa and Taiji), but it is very low-scale, and only a handful of people participate in it. See Holm 2019 for an overview.

harpoon cannons on larger and faster factory ships—a method that was referred to as 'Norwegian-style whaling', because it was invented by the Norwegian Svend Foyn (1809–1894). This shift to newer methods coincided with the country's dramatic industrialisation at the end of the nineteenth century and eventually rendered classic whaling obsolete. Japanese industrial whaling expanded, not only in domestic waters but also in other parts of empire, where it was embedded in the wider imperial project of developing Japan as a pelagic power (Tsutsui 2013; Watanabe 2009, 10–48). The promotion of whale meat as a source of nutrition for the Japanese population as a whole also dates from this period (Watanabe 2009, 94–121), and was subsequently promoted by the American occupying forces in the late 1940s and 1950s (Arch 2016). Many elderly Japanese still nostalgically recall the canned whale meat they ate at school, but few of them are aware of the fact that the widespread consumption of whale meat is not part of 'traditional' Japanese food culture, but, in fact, a rather brief and unique mid-twentieth-century phenomenon.

Today, Japan is one of very few countries in the world that allows and promotes whaling. Although the number of whales caught annually is comparatively low (a few hundred individuals per year), whaling is fraught with controversy. After the International Whaling Commission's 1986 moratorium on commercial whaling, Japan continued whaling under the scientific research provision of the agreement. For many years, Japan tried to convince other IWC member countries that traditional small-scale whaling has cultural value and, therefore, should be subject to similar exceptions and quota regulations as Aboriginal Subsistence Whaling (ASW).[3] It never succeeded in securing a majority for this, however, and therefore continued to catch whales under the 'scientific whaling' label. After the 2014 ruling by the International Court of Justice that Japanese whaling operations were commercial in nature rather than scientific, Japan announced its withdrawal from the IWC in December 2018. Japanese whalers have since continued with commercial whaling on a small scale, legitimised by narratives about the longstanding significance of whales in Japanese culture.

Whaling in Japanese religion

Arguments that justify commercial whaling rest to a large extent on the role whales have played in Japanese culture, and on historical relationships between humans and whales—especially those centred on killing and consuming whales. Importantly, however, the relationship between humans and whales extends beyond mere resource extraction; it also includes notions of interdependency, gratitude, and fear. As in other cultures—e.g., Iñupiat in Alaska (Sakakibara 2020) and Lamalerans in eastern Indonesia (Durney 2020)—early modern Japanese whalers acknowledged the agency of whales in the hunting process. They also provided ritual care for the spirits of whales after their death, by performing memorial rituals (*kuyō*) for them (Ambros 2012, 56–66). Whether this was an expression of gratitude, a precautionary measure to prevent the spirits from becoming angry and causing havoc, or a combination of both, is subject to some debate. In any case, these traditions signify an awareness on the part of

[3]Under the ASW provision of the IWC, certain designated Indigenous communities are allowed to catch a limited number of large cetaceans per year. See Durney 2020; Sakakibara 2020.

fishing communities of the whales' power to impact human societies, not only while alive—by killing whalers, which happened regularly, or by staying away and thereby causing economic hardship—but also after they had died and become spirits that could cause problems. The agency of these nonhuman actors, alive or dead, was a given.

Kuyō rituals are still performed widely in Japan today, for a variety of animals, ranging from deceased pets to victims of industrial farming (Ambros 2012, 71–89; Nagano 2015). Some *kuyō* are recent inventions, but others date from the Edo period. An interesting example of a whale-related *kuyō* can be found at the southernmost tip of the island of Shikoku. The bay of Tosa (present-day Kōchi Prefecture) was one of the main whaling centres during the Edo period. The local Shingon Buddhist temple Kongōchō-ji (the 26th temple of the *Shikoku henro* pilgrimage) has a high *kuyō-tō* (memorial stele) for the spirits of whales hunted in past centuries (see Figure 1). Today, Buddhist monks still conduct an annual ceremony for these spirits. The nearby city of Muroto markets itself as an important centre of Japanese whaling culture; it is home to a small but attractive and professionally curated local whaling museum, and known for its whale meat cuisine. The fact that no whaling ships depart from the local port anymore—except for whale-watching—apparently is no obstacle for the development of 'whaling heritage' as a tourism marketing strategy.[4]

The *kuyō* tradition of Kongōchō-ji is an example of the ongoing ritual relationship between humans and whales, which has been preserved despite the decline of modern industrial whaling in recent decades, yet which is used by pro-whaling advocates to argue for the ongoing cultural significance of whaling today. Many of these rituals are centred on guiding the spirits and commemorating the deaths of whales—or, as some scholars have framed it, on 'mourning' them. For instance, in *The Japanese Culture of Mourning Whales* (2018a), Mayumi Itoh describes the different ways in which whalers have ritually marked the deaths of whales. In some cases, this involved creating a whale grave by burying some of the bones and erecting gravestones. Most of these are dedicated to a single whale, but there are also collective graves. Whalers would pay Buddhist priests to conduct funeral services for whales, pray for their spirits to find peace, and perform annual memorial services for them. In addition, some paid considerable amounts of money to give dead whales a *kaimyō*—a posthumous Buddhist name usually only given to humans—and include them in a temple's death register (Itoh 2018a, 14). Such memorial rites have been observed not only in areas that practised whaling, but also in non-whaling communities where villagers would occasionally catch or encounter a stranded whale. Itoh lists a total of 156 graves and monuments dedicated to whales throughout the country (2018: 223–230), a number that has decreased over the years due to monuments being weathered down and lost over time. In addition, she lists a number of designated intangible cultural properties dedicated to whales and whale spirits, including memorial rites, songs, dances, and festivals (2018: 231–242).

In some places of Japan, whales were believed to be incarnations of the deity Ebisu (Naumann 1974). Ebisu is one of the most popular gods in contemporary Japan, but his origins are unclear; he is 'a sea god whose nature and status in the Japanese religious

[4]In that sense, whaling is similar to industrial heritage, such as former factories or mines, some of which have been turned into tourist sites, in Europe as well as Asia. Prominent Japanese examples include the Meiji Industrial Revolution World Heritage Sites in Kyushu and Yamaguchi Prefecture and the Iwami Ginzan Silver Mine in Shimane Prefecture.

Figure 1. The memorial stele (*kuyō-tō*) at Kongōchō-ji temple, Muroto. The inscription reads: 'Memorial stele for the spirits of 8000 caught whales.' Photo: Aike Rots (2017).

system is still elusive' and who 'has multiple characteristics' (Ōuchi 2018, 53). He is identified with Hiruko, the first child of Izanagi and Izanami, who according to legend was born with deformed arms and legs and therefore abandoned at sea. According to a fifteenth-century legend, Hiruko grew strong and returned to land as a god of the sea, whereupon he was renamed Ebisu, meaning 'foreigner' or 'someone from the outside' (Itoh 2018a, 17). Fishers and whalers would regularly make offerings to their local Ebisu shrine and pray for a good catch and safety at sea. Among the communities that held such beliefs, there were some that did not hunt whales, possibly because they feared divine punishment if they did (Itoh 2018a, 17) . There may have been regional differences in religious attitude as well. In western Japan, fishers attempted to pacify the souls of the whales they had killed (or, in the case of non-whaling communities, those that had stranded) through rituals dedicated to helping the whales become an ancestral spirit ('become a Buddha', *jōbutsu suru*) or be reborn in Amida's Pure Land (Ambros 2012, 59–62; Arch 2018, 149–182). In northern Japan, where whales were possibly more strongly identified with Ebisu, whaling was not developed until the modern period, and Buddhist rituals were not as widespread. Thus, as Holm points out, early

modern Japan did not have a single 'culture of mourning whales' with a shared ritual repertoire; there was significant diversity within the archipelago (Holm 2020a, 75–76).

Whaling festivals

Japan has a number of whaling-related festivals and cultural events. Some of these go back to early modern whaling traditions, while others are twentieth-century inventions. Some are organised by local shrines and involve *kami* worship rituals, while others were established as more or less secular community events. What these different whale *matsuri* have in common is that they all include performative practices that celebrate whaling as an intrinsic part of local, and in some cases national, cultural traditions and identity. The exact nature of these practices varies from place to place, but they are typically playful events that include singing, dancing, temple or shrine rituals (e.g., *kuyō* memorial rites), the consumption of whale meat, and, in some cases, the re-enactment of Edo-period spear-and-net whaling. As with other *matsuri* in Japan, today these festivals are conceptualised as 'traditional culture' and 'intangible cultural heritage', not as 'religion', even if they include elements of piety.

Interestingly, references to whaling are found not only in festivals that are located in traditional or modern whaling towns, such as Kayoi in Yamaguchi Prefecture, Taiji in Wakayama Prefecture, and Ayukawa in Miyagi Prefecture, but also at places that are not known for whaling historically, such as Tomida in Yokkaichi city (Mie Prefecture). This last festival involves a re-enactment of a whale hunt using boat-shaped parade floats and whales made of bamboo and black cloth (see Figure 2). It was listed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2016, along with 32 other float festivals in the country, and has since attracted new audiences (see Rots forthcoming). This is not the only festival that involves physical models or other material representations of whales. The well-known urban Nagasaki Kunchi festival features a whale float spouting water, while the annual *matsuri* of Ōsatsu in Mie Prefecture involves a whale model set out onto the sea, accompanied by songs and dances. There is also a recently created Ainu whale festival, the Humpe Icharupa festival, held annually in the town of Shiranuka on Hokkaidō, which includes an Ainu whale dance and references a local legend about a whale that sacrificed itself to the Shiranuka community in a time of hardship.

The whale festivals we discuss in this article are rather different in size and shape. What they have in common is that they all celebrate the shared heritage of whaling as a marker of cultural identity. The prominent, internationally (in)famous whaling town of Taiji in Wakayama Prefecture holds several yearly events related to whales, including a whaling re-enactment, a *kuyō* performance, and a whale dance. Likewise, the festival on the early modern whaling island of Kayoi (Yamaguchi Prefecture) is centred on a whaling re-enactment as well as the performance of Edo-period memorial rituals and whaling songs.[5] Somewhat less famously, the Benzaiten *matsuri* in Arikawa on Nakadori Island in Kyūshū is an annual event in which the townspeople perform plays, play *taiko* drums, and sing whaling songs throughout the town. Finally, the whale festival in

[5]Felicity Greenland has conducted research on early modern Japanese whaling songs. Following the Japanese scholarship, she distinguishes between 'celebration songs' expressing gratitude for a good catch and 'working songs' that provide information about geography, tools, methods, and whale species. See Greenland 2013; 2017.

Figure 2. Whaling re-enactment at the Kujira-bune gyōji festival, Tomida, Yokkaichi City, Mie Prefecture. Photo: Aike Rots (2018).

Ayukawa in Miyagi prefecture is an originally secular event—i.e., not related to one particular shrine or deity —that was developed in the early post-war period for whaling industry workers. The town suffered immense damage during the Great Tōhoku Earthquake in 2011, and the festival has since taken on new significance as a commemorative event and symbol of community resurrection.

In their introduction to a recent special issue on festivals in Japan, Michael Dylan Foster and Elisabetta Porcu argue that *matsuri* are subject to continuous adaptation and innovation: 'despite the value so often placed on continuity with the past, the history of any given *matsuri* is almost never characterised by linear progression or unified objectives, but rather by innovation, debate, creativity and flexibility' (2020, 2). This is an important point to keep in mind when analysing contemporary whale festivals: while they derive much of their legitimacy from a perceived continuity with a (real or imagined) pre-modern Japanese whaling heritage, they are in fact subject to continuous adaptation, reinvention, and processes of resignification. Adapting a festival is serious business, with real social and economic consequences, but it is also a playful and creative process. The re-enactment of a whale hunt, such as those in Tomida or Kayoi, is a *play* in both meanings of the word: it is both a theatrical performance in front of an audience *and* a ludic event in which participants are allowed to experiment with and transgress everyday rules and boundaries. Whaling festivals are serious play (Teeuwen, Sen, and Rots 2023)—which makes them all the more ideologically significant.

A prominent recent resignification practice is the classification of festivals as Intangible Cultural Heritage, not only domestically but also, in the twenty-first century, on the

international UNESCO stage. Festivals in Japan and beyond are subject to a type of societal reclassification that we may refer to as 'heritagisation' or 'heritage-making'—defined as the processes by which designated sites and practices are 'made into' heritage by relevant stakeholders (Teeuwen and Rots 2020, 2). For ritual traditions such as festivals, this focus on heritage has brought about an element of secularisation, in which devotional elements are downplayed and aspects such as tourist potential and 'cultural tradition' are emphasised. Teeuwen argues that in post-war Japan there has been a 'policy of identifying religious and secular aspects of festivals, and of isolating the latter for designation as cultural properties (and, thus, for subsidies)' (2020, 135). This has had an impact on festivals and the ways both stakeholders and visitors understand and value them. More so than before, there is now a focus on exploiting festivals to attract visitors from outside the community, in order to boost the local economy.

This development coincides with a push towards the economic revitalisation of rural communities through so-called 'town-building' (*machi-zukuri*) activities, which are employed in order to combat socioeconomic challenges such as long-term depopulation, ageing populations, urbanisation, and decreasing agricultural profitability (see Sorensen and Funck 2007). *Machi-zukuri* often includes commodifying and marketing local characteristics, such as particular food products, landscapes, or festivals, in order to increase tourism and boost local economic activity. In this sense, the festival becomes an instrument for economic revitalisation and tourism, and a prominent heritage designation—preferably by UNESCO, or if not, by the Agency for Cultural Affairs—can help local authorities attract more visitors. Paradoxically, then, while whaling is a marginal industry with very few job opportunities, the preservation (or creation) of whaling-related cultural traditions has more economic potential. This applies especially to towns such as Muroto or Taiji, which combine several attractions—not only festivals and other cultural performances that occur seasonally, but also whaling museums, whale meat restaurants, deep-sea aquariums, and historic sites, which can be visited year-round.

In some respects, then, whale festivals are subject to some of the same trends as other rural Japanese *matsuri* (e.g., Foster 2020; Kikuchi 2020; Klien 2020): they are threatened by rural depopulation and livelihood change, they are undergoing processes of heritagisation and standardisation, and they are subject to commodification by the tourism industry. At the same time, they are special because of their association with the controversial practice of whaling, and its contested links to *national* identity. Because of the ways in which whaling has come to be linked to the nation as a whole, festivals that are associated with whaling are not merely *local* events, like festivals associated with other food traditions (e.g., abalones or *sake*) or animals (e.g., silk worms or fireflies); their symbolic and ideological significance extends far beyond their locality. Consequently, their survival is not merely a matter of concern for local community members, but also for stakeholders and patrons elsewhere, including the whaling industry and its vocal advocates.

Taiji

Taiji, a small town of about 3,500 people located on the southernmost tip of Wakayama prefecture, is a prominent historic whaling town. Its people have drawn international

attention and criticism for continuing to hunt cetaceans after the IWC ban on whaling.[6] Priests at the town's shrines and temples regularly perform rituals related to whaling, and there are several annual events relating to whales, including a whale dance designated as intangible cultural heritage within Wakayama Prefecture. The town's homepage proclaims Taiji as a town that 'lives together with whales' (*kujira to tomo ni ikiru*) (Taiji Tourism Association 2019a). This expression is also central to the promotion of the region as part of the 'Japan Heritage' scheme: it is the title of the 'story' (*sutōrī*) told about its heritage by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, the Japan National Tourism Organisation (JNTO), and Wakayama Prefecture (Agency for Cultural Affairs n.d.; Rots forthcoming). The town is home to several sites related to early modern whaling (temples with memorial stones, mountain lookout and smoke signal sites, and a historic Ebisu shrine with a late-twentieth-century whale bone gate), as well as a whaling museum-*cum*-dolphin zoo that is controversial for its role in the dolphin drive hunts. Whales are central to local branding in every respect: there are art objects and reconstructed buildings related to whales everywhere in town, and whales figure as mascots for barber shops, real estate agents, dentists, hotels, and even mail boxes (Hosokawa and Miyawaki 2015, 152; Kalland and Moeran 1992, 30).

Organised whaling started in Taiji in 1606, but it did not become lucrative until after the invention of the net whaling method in 1675 (Kita 2009a, 70). This method then spread to the rest of western Japan, and whaling continued to thrive for the next couple of centuries, until the depletion of whale stocks in the nineteenth century. When Norwegian-style modern whaling was introduced in the late nineteenth century the townspeople reclaimed their ambition for whaling, and many made their living from whaling during the first half of the twentieth century. However, the industry has been in decline since. Between the 1950s and 60s, around half of the male population in Taiji was involved in whaling (up to around 600 people), but by the early 2000s, there were only two ships in operation, employing about 40 people in total (Kita 2009a, 75). In 2018, that number had dropped to one boat with a crew of six whalers (Holm 2019). In other words, whaling in Taiji is a dying industry, but whale-related tourism—watching dolphin and pilot whale shows, swimming with dolphins in tourist resorts, and visiting whaling heritage sites or events—is not.

There are several annual memorial services for whales in Taiji, and a number of shrines dedicated to whales and the god Ebisu. The retired whalers' society sponsors an annual memorial service for whales in front of a monument in the shape of a North Pacific right whale (see Figure 3). The event is co-sponsored by an organisation named 'Taiji council of absolute opposition to the IWC whaling ban' (Kokusai Hogei Iinkai (IWC) Hogei Zenmen Kinshi Zettai Hantai Taiji-Chō Renraku Kyōgikai). In addition to domestic supporters, pro-whaling advocates from other countries are regularly invited to this event, which has become a site for the continued promotion of whaling (Hosokawa and Miyawaki 2015, 22, 61). In other words, patronage of the Taiji memorial service is not merely a local affair: national lobby organisations and politicians are also involved, as are members of an international coalition of whalers and their allies.

[6]Taiji became infamous internationally after the success of the documentary *The Cove* (2009), which criticised the town's annual dolphin drive hunts. It has subsequently turned into a site of conflict, attracting foreign animal rights activists as well as Japanese nationalists claiming to speak on behalf of the local community. See Holm 2019; Rots forthcoming.

Taiji has several festivals. The local shrine Asuka Jinja has an annual archery ceremony (*oyumi shinji*), organised in January, to pray for a large catch and safety at sea. The chief priest of the shrine shoots an arrow at a target and reads a fortune based on where it hit, predicting the success of the catch. Spectators then rush onto the grounds to attempt to obtain one of three carved wooden talismans shaped like North Pacific right whales attached to the target—it is believed that fortune will come to those who bring one home (Kita 2009b, 190). Asuka Jinja also holds an annual autumn festival in which young men parade around town carrying barrels of sacred *sake*, finally bringing them into the sea to pray for a large catch (Taiji Tourism Association 2019b). Most famous, however, is Taiji-ura whale festival, which is held normally on the first Sunday of November each year. It is centred around a whale dance, *kujira-odori* (also known as *aya-odori*), that is said to have been passed down for over 400 years. The dance is performed on a stage accompanied by *kujira-daiko* and *isana-daiko* drums. Its origins are uncertain, but Kita suggests that it started around the middle of the Edo period, when it was performed at the start of the fishing season, before the first trip of the New Year, and to celebrate a good catch (Kita 2009b, 191). The dancers sit in boats and move only their upper bodies, while the *kujira-daiko* performance describes a battle between a large whale and small whaling boats. The dance was practised until 1955, when it was discontinued. It was revived in 1970, however, when it was showcased at the World Exposition in Osaka, and has since been performed annually (Kita 2009b, 191). Not coincidentally, the dance was also designated as an intangible folk cultural property of Wakayama Prefecture in 1970. The current form of the dance and music is a modernised one, adapted and renewed; their original forms have not been preserved. Regardless, the event attracts many tourists. It also features whale meat tasting and various whale dishes for sale, as well as dance and *taiko* performances by schoolchildren.

Figure 3. Whale memorial site in Taiji. Photo: Aike Rots (2022).

Another important event is the Taiji Isana festival, held on 14 August. This festival has been organised near-annually since 1987, the year following the IWC ban on commercial whaling. The Taiji website states that the aim of the festival is to 'contribute to the promotion of the handing down of Taiji's history and culture as a whaling town and the origin of old-style whaling, in the midst of an international anti-whaling movement' (Taiji Tourism Association 2019c). The main feature of the festival is the re-enactment of the net-based harpooning whaling method practiced in Taiji, using a reconstructed chaser boat and a 9-meter-long fibre-reinforced plastic model of a whale. The event recreates a hunt from the moment of discovering the whale until the whale's death. On the same day, there is also a fireworks display, and whale dancing is performed on a boat in the bay. Afterwards, Bon dancing continues into the night.

Even though these events have been cancelled three years in a row (2020–2022) due to the Covid-19 pandemic, Taiji maintains a strong collective identity as a whaling town. In recent years, this identity has been put under pressure from the international attention and backlash the town has received for its whaling practices, particularly the annual dolphin hunt. Environmental activists travel to Taiji to protest these practices, in some cases attempting to interfere with the hunt. As Sowa suggests, the town has responded to this backlash by strengthening its image as a whaling town, establishing whaling as a marker of identity that sets them apart from both urban Japanese and Westerners (Sowa 2014). This process involves a further symbolising and iconising of the whale even as whaling activities decrease. It goes back to 1988, when Taiji received a government grant of 100 million yen. At the time, the community faced the loss of their livelihood, and had to create a new identity on which to base their survival. The town council and residents decided that the money should be spent on an urban planning project that would enforce the image of Taiji as a whaling town (Sowa 2014, 28). As Sowa writes, whaling became a 'mental reconstruction of a community that is under threat of being lost. Before the moratorium, whaling was an un–reflected, everyday practice. Nowadays it has become a conscious symbolic and relational expression' (2014, 31). If anything, international pressure has strengthened this symbolic identity, not weakened it.

In striving to maintain a distinctive culture and identity, differences between the past and present may be glossed over in seeking to emphasise continuity with the past, as evidenced by the case of a modernised form of the whale dance that is promoted as traditional culture. Reinvented though it may be, for local residents whaling history and culture are likely an important source of pride, and perhaps also provide opportunities to play. But this is not merely a local affair. If it were not for government subsidies and other support (e.g., heritage listings), the Taiji municipal authorities would not have been able to redesign the town as a 'whaling tourism' destination and recreate whaling festivals, at least not to the same extent. Festival patronage here is not merely local; national stakeholders (e.g., the whaling lobby and associated state agencies) have also invested in the narrative of Taiji as a vestige of Japan's old whaling heritage.

Kayoi

Kayoi is a fishing village on the island of Ōmi, just off the San'in coast, near the city of Nagato in Yamaguchi Prefecture. It has a population of approximately 1000 people. During the Edo period, this was one of Japan's main whaling centres, as much cetacean

traffic passed by its shores. In the nineteenth century, whale populations declined, and whaling was discontinued around the turn of the twentieth century. Today, villagers nostalgically recount the days of small-scale coastal whaling, even if they do not remember them personally. Whaling is an important part of local identity, and the village has a unique and diverse whaling heritage. It is home to a small but attractive local whaling museum (*kujira shiryōkan*) and famous local whaling songs and folktales (Itoh 2018a, 132–134; cf. Greenland 2013).

Whaling traditions here are closely related to devotional Buddhism and characterised by public performances of ritual piety. The local Pure Land temple Kōgan-ji and nearby nunnery Hōsen-an have a number of whale graves and memorial tablets (*ihai)*, as well as death registers (*kakochō*) in which whales are listed as ancestral spirits (Itoh 2018a, 119–130; Kato 2007). Although the last whales were hunted more than a century ago, ritual ceremonies for these whales are still performed annually at the temple. In some cases, villagers accidentally killed pregnant whales, and they made a special tombstone for the foetuses that had lost their lives. The *nenbutsu* (recitation to Amida Buddha) is carved in the stone, and next to it is a statue of Jizō (Kṣitigarbha), the bodhisattva who is believed to save (unborn) children from hell—including unborn whale calves, apparently. There are also local legends about Kannon (Avalokiteśvara), the bodhisattva of compassion, who tried to prevent people from killing whales with calves.

While these Buddhist rituals go back to the Edo period, the whaling festival, Kayoi *kujira matsuri*, is of more recent date: it was established in 1992 to commemorate the 300th anniversary of the whale foetus tomb (Nagato-shi 2018). Thus, although it has incorporated various elements of Kayoi's early modern whaling heritage, the festival itself is a Heisei-period invention. The main protagonist of this festival, which takes place annually in mid-July, is a 13.5-metre-long fin whale look-a-like (see Figure 4). Most of the time, this 'whale' stands quietly on a parking lot next to the whaling museum, near the fishing port. During the festival, however, it comes alive and is allowed to go into the water. But the outcome of its brief aquatic excursion is inevitable: a group of men dressed in loincloths board small boats, paddle to the whale, and attack it with spears (see Figure 5). The whale fights back, bravely but in vain. Eventually, the bravest of the men climbs on top of the whale and thrusts his spear into its blowhole; a fountain of red blood comes out, whereupon the whale dies and is carried to the shore. Afterwards, the villagers perform some of Kayoi's traditional whaling songs.[7]

It is a spectacular performance. These days, however, it is not only the whales of Kayoi that have declined in number, but also the humans. Every year, village elders worry that it may be the last time they organise the festival. When one of us talked to an organiser in 2018, the latter expressed his concern that the festival might not be held again the following year, as the island's population had reduced in size and the festival had become dependent upon volunteers from outside. There are fewer and fewer young men in the village, and it is increasingly difficult to make a living from fishing because, as the festival organiser stated, there is not much fish left in the sea. Eventually, they did succeed in organising the festival in 2019 and, after a two-year pause due to the Covid-19 pandemic, again in 2022. The atmosphere in 2022 was festive, but the festival relies on external support: the boat crews were made up of volunteers from elsewhere (including Osaka

[7]For a more detailed description of the 2022 edition of the festival, see Rots forthcoming.

Figure 4. Whale model used in the Kayoi kujira matsuri. Photo: Aike Rots (2022).

and Tokyo), and the festival was sponsored by conservative prefectural politicians. In fact, the 2022 edition was supposed to have been attended by one of the most powerful patrons imaginable: former Prime Minister Abe Shinzō was scheduled to give the opening speech. Sadly, however, he was killed only a week prior to this event.

Figure 5. The Kayoi kujira matsuri. Photo: Aike Rots (2022).

When fishing no longer provides a viable livelihood, tourism may well be Kayoi's best bet. Its tourism infrastructure is underdeveloped, but has potential. Ōmi Island has a spectacular coastline and unique religious heritage. Nagato is located on one of the main beautiful train lines in Japan, between the historic towns of Hagi and Shimonoseki. Nearby Senzaki is home to a museum dedicated to Kaneko Misuzu (1903–1930), a female poet who lived in the early twentieth century, and whose work has recently acquired new attention (e.g., Itoh 2018b; see also Rots forthcoming). In the 1990s, Kayoi constituted a typical example of the ways in which local and national stakeholders collaborated in the making of whaling heritage, similar to Taiji. They showcased existing traditions (whale songs, religious sites, and literary traditions) in local museums, mass media, and academic texts (e.g., Kato 2007), and combined these with newly created events, including a spectacular whaling re-enactment. Three decades later, however, it remains to be seen if this relatively recently created 'whaling heritage' can survive, especially if there is no further development of the tourist infrastructure. As in other coastal regions of Japan, the island's population is declining, and few people can make a living from fishing. The future of the festival is most uncertain.

Arikawa

The municipality of Shin-Kamigotō is located on two islands in the northern part of the Gotō islands archipelago in Nagasaki prefecture, and was created in 2004 as a merger of five towns. One of these towns, Arikawa, is particularly associated with whaling: it is home to a whaling museum and library (located in the ferry terminal), it has a famous shrine gate made of whale bones (see Figure 6), and it has held a yearly whale-related festival since the late 1600s. The Benzaiten *matsuri* (known as *mēzaiten* or *mēzaiden* matsuri in the local dialect) is an annual event held in the middle of January near the Benzaiten-gū shrine in Arikawa, in which whale songs are performed accompanied by *taiko* drums. The event is led by the youth associations from each of Arikawa's six neighbourhoods, and features the town's young men clad as *hazashi* (harpooners) in red headbands and black kimono, playing drums and singing whale songs (NPO Tsubaki Net 2016). The songs last between five and ten minutes, and incorporate prayers for a large catch, prosperous business, family fortune and prosperity, a good harvest, and paying respect to the spirits of whales (Tsuji 2012, 68).

Arikawa was a leading whaling base in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, after village head Eguchi Jin'emon founded the Arikawa Kujiragumi (Arikawa whaling association) in 1693 (Tsuji 2012, 61). Prior to this, there had been a dispute about fishing territories in the bay. Jin'emon sent several appeals and travelled to Edo three times during the legal process before finally winning the dispute in 1690 after almost thirty years (Tsuji 2012, 68). According to the Eguchi family records, Jin'emon prayed at several different shrines for victory in his appeal during his stay in Edo, and among these he felt the strongest faith for Kamakura Benzaiten (*zeniarai benzaiten*), goddess of water and arts. On his return to Arikawa, Jin'emon set up a branch shrine for Benzaiten and made her guardian deity of the Arikawa whaling association. It is said that the Benzaiten festival started after enshrining her as the guardian deity of the whaling association (Tsuji 2012, 68).

The whaling association would perform an event called *shidashi* on the second day of the New Year. Forty or so *hazashi* would strip to the waist, form a circle and engage in

Figure 6. Torii in front of whale bone gate in Arikawa, Shin-kamigotō. Photo: Aike Rots (2017).

song and dance before embarking on the first fishing trip of the year. Then, on the 14th, they would perform the Benzaiten festival from dawn, playing drums, performing *hazashi-odori* and singing whale songs all day long. Whale songs were sung on important occasions such as the setting out on the first trip of the season, New Year, and the end of the season, and were generally celebrated by the *hazashi* forming a circle and playing *taiko* and singing whale songs (Nakazono 2009a, 182). As whaling declined in the latter half of the Meiji period, the festival ceased to be performed. However, in 1930 the whale songs of Arikawa were presented at the 'Nagasaki prefecture youth association promotion convention' as local folk songs (Arikawa Whale Song Preservation Society n.d.). Following this event, five youth groups in Arikawa revived the festival and re-established it as an annual event. A sixth group was added in 1990. A group of around a dozen volunteers founded a Whale Song Preservation Society in 1955 in order to preserve the songs and dances with their traditional tunes (Arikawa Whale Song Preservation Society n.d.). The festival was designated as a cultural asset for the town in 1982 and has featured on television several times, and the group also performs the songs at town events and for tourist groups.

According to Nakazono (2009b, 188), whale songs can largely be divided into celebratory songs and songs related to the work of whaling, such as cutting bone and fastening

nets. The contents of the lyrics are very similar to those of whale songs from other regions in western Japan that engaged in whaling, as well as folk songs such as *iwai medeta*. One hypothesis is that many whalers came from other parts of Japan such as the Chūgoku and Shikoku regions and the northern part of Kyūshū to work for the Arikawa whaling association, bringing with them modern whaling techniques—it is thus possible these songs were handed down along with them (Greenland 2013, 57).

Like Taiji and Kayoi, Arikawa is facing population decline. The population of the municipality the town belongs to has halved from 36,005 in 1985 to 18,056 in 2021 (Shin-Kamigotō Town Official Website 2021). The Benzaiten festival and its songs are still being kept alive despite the challenge of population decline, and the town maintains a local identity as a historic whaling town even though people have stopped interacting with living whales. In 2008, a national whale forum was held here in order to 'deepen the awareness of whale culture', and the town's mayor declared that Shin-Kamigotō would 'put all its energy into reviving the whaling industry' (Tsuji 2012, 71). About 300 people participated in the forum, which boasted events such as a *hazashi-daiko* performance by members of the Whale Song Preservation Society, a lecture on healthy cooking with whale meat that emphasised the importance of passing down whale meat to the next generation, a panel discussion on whale culture and island revitalisation that discussed ways in which whale culture could be used for regional revitalisation initiatives, and another discussion of food with free sampling of whale curry made by local mothers. According to Tsuji (2012, 74), who attended the event, the forum brought together municipalities, fishery cooperatives, and educational institutions from various parts of the country, facilitating dialogues on regional revitalisation and the spread of whaling culture.

Thus, as in Taiji and Kayoi, in Arikawa there seems to be a strong connection between the community's longstanding whaling history and its local identity, despite the fact that whaling has been discontinued. The performance of whaling songs at the local Benzaiten festival, which is historically associated with the early modern whaling industry, is an important part of this identity. Although relatively remote, Arikawa has some other sites that could potentially attract tourists and generate income: a World Heritage-listed nineteenth-century Catholic church and an attractive beach. But it remains to be seen if the community can counter the trend of depopulation.

Ayukawa

The town of Ayukawa, located on Oshika Peninsula in Miyagi Prefecture, is one of Japan's main modern whaling centres. In March 2011, the tsunami destroyed more than half of the town's buildings, including its whaling museum, and killed some of its inhabitants—although the death toll was not as high as in other towns and cities in the region.[8] The material costs, however, were immense. When one of us visited Ayukawa in 2018, the town was still full of empty plots, and many community members were still living in temporary housing in the city of Ishinomaki or elsewhere in the region. At the time, the whaling museum, Oshika Whale Land, was still closed,

[8]Holm reports that in Ayukawa, '65 per cent of the 700 houses were washed away.' However, 'the number of victims was surprisingly low: in a community of 1,400, there were 17 dead and 6 missing' (2020b, 96).

Figure 7. Oshika Whale Land. Photo: Aike Rots (2022).

but it was in the process of being rebuilt. Its doors were eventually reopened in July 2020, together with a new visitor centre and whaling-themed shops and restaurants (Saito 2020; see Figure 7). These new or rebuilt attractions are part of a large-scale initiative to attract more domestic tourists to the town.

Ayukawa prides itself on its long whaling heritage, despite the fact that the whaling industry here is of recent date: it was developed in the early twentieth century. As Holm has argued (2020a; 2020b), there were no whaling traditions in northeastern Japan in the early modern period, and local communities initially resisted the establishment of whaling stations in the region, for instance in Hachinohe in Aomori Prefecture. However, the whaling station in Ayukawa, established in 1906, was successful and attracted whalers from other parts of the country, such as Taiji. It gradually grew in size, until it had almost 4000 inhabitants in the 1950s. The whaling festival dates from this period: established in 1953, it was first and foremost a secular community event, which served to provide entertainment and a sense of community belonging to families with roots in different parts of country, most of whom depended upon the whaling industry for their livelihood.

As whale populations collapsed in the 1970s, the town shrank in size, too; but it kept a small whaling and flensing industry, focusing on minke whales and Baird's beaked whales, while also developing a modest whaling-centred tourism industry (Holm 2020b, 101–104). For various reasons, however—food poisoning due to the consumption of toxic whale meat, unsustainable minke whale hunting, and inadequate flensing facilities, to name but a few—whaling was a dying industry, which may in fact have been saved by the tsunami, as Holm states provocatively (2020b, 110). In post-2011 Ayukawa, the 'resurrection' of the town is discursively linked to the survival of whaling practices, not merely as a quaint tourist attraction but as a viable, commercial industry (Ōsumi

and Ōshima 2017). This may seem rather unrealistic, but it is an important reason for the reconstruction and extension of Oshika Whale Land, as well as the reestablishment of the whaling festival.

Several scholars have observed that *matsuri* and related cultural activities such as folk art performances and tree-planting festivals have played an important part in community resurrection in Tōhoku after the 2011 tsunami (e.g., Lahournat 2016; Littlejohn 2021; Rots 2021; Thompson 2014). Likewise, in Ayukawa, the revival of the annual *matsuri* took priority. Its importance extends beyond whaling symbolism: the festival embodies 'regional culture' (*chiiki bunka*) and, by extension, community belonging (Katō 2021). Festivals such as this one provide an opportunity for displaced villagers to return and meet their old neighbours, thus maintaining a sense of community belonging that is necessary in order to convince people to move back at some point. Importantly, *matsuri* also create opportunities for cross-generational socialisation and, indeed, play. At the 2018 festival, local schoolchildren performed an adorable dance of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune, applauded by senior villagers. Elderly ladies, on their part, performed their folk dances passionately, perhaps even piously, in the pouring rain (see Figure 8). The smell of grilled whale meat was ubiquitous, and canned whale meat was awarded as a prize in the lottery. Meanwhile, black-and-white photographs of the festival in the 1950s were exhibited at a temporary community building nearby, artists were showing contemporary whale statues, and local craftsmen were selling carvings and jewellery made of whale bones and teeth.

The importance of the festival lies partly in the fact that it represents continuity between the early post-war period and the present; that is, between pre-tsunami whaling traditions

Figure 8. Folk dance performance at the Ayukawa kujira matsuri. Photo: Aike Rots (2018).

and post-tsunami community resurrection. When it comes to its contents, however, it has been subject to considerable change and reinvention. A highlight of the festival in 2018, which one of us attended, was a dragon dance from Kinka-san, a sacred island nearby. This may have been an old ritual tradition, but, as Holm points out, it has only recently been introduced to the festival in Ayukawa, thanks to the involvement of a local folklorist, Katō Kōji (Holm 2020b, 112–113; see Katō 2021). As this example illustrates, festival patronage is not limited to powerful religious, state, or commercial actors supporting the festival in exchange for political legitimacy or symbolic capital. It can also involve academics and local historians who take an active role in preservation (and, at times, reinvention) by writing about festival traditions and gaining publicity for them.

Although more in-depth research is needed to confirm this, our impression is that the festival today contains more devotional elements than in pre-tsunami years, effectively combining elements of 'play' and 'piety'. Holm has observed that, in 2017, there were 'no rituals for appeasing the angry souls of hunted whales' (2020b, 113). Until that year, the *kuyō* service for whale spirits at the nearby Buddhist temple was held on a different date, earlier in spring. In 2018, however, this changed: the service was held in the morning prior to the festival, thus (re?)establishing the link between whaling, memorial rites, and the *matsuri* itself, temporally as well as spatially. Significantly, the Buddhist priest who conducted the ceremony explicitly associated the history of whaling with the event of the tsunami, not just discursively but also through ritual action. That is, the *kuyō* service was not only conducted for the spirits of the whales who have been killed in modern times, as was the case prior to 2011, but also for the human victims of the tsunami. Both categories of spirits were venerated together; they were addressed in the same ritual. This practice was continued in subsequent years: in 2022, too, the festival started with a *kuyō* for the whales and the victims of the tsunami.

In sum, at the *matsuri* in Ayukawa, there are many things going on at the same time. It is a secular festival that appears to become increasingly religious, as new ritual elements have been introduced in recent years, both Buddhist (the new *kuyō* ceremony, which now takes place on the same day as the festival) and Shinto (the Kinka-san dragon dance, which apparently involves shrine priests). It is also a whale meat festival that has become a symbol of community resurrection, discursively linked to the survival of the whaling industry. And it is a proud display of Japan's 'whaling heritage', modern though it may be, and corresponding 'food tradition', which is set to become a local tourist attraction. The aims of the local authorities, the festival's main patrons, are certainly ambitious: rebuilding the town and preventing further depopulation, strengthening the whaling industry, and attracting large numbers of tourists as well. The festival, at least, has acquired new significance after the tragedy of 2011, but whether this will lead to community survival remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The four festivals discussed in this article are not the only whale festivals in Japan, but taken together, they do give an indication of the ongoing significance of whaling in the Japanese cultural imagination. In this concluding section, we compare the four cases, using the conceptual framework used for this thematic issue as a whole: the three key terms of play, patronage, and piety (Teeuwen, Sen, and Rots 2023).

At first sight, the term 'play' appears to be the most relevant for describing all four festivals. All four include elements of performativity, playacting, and pretending: coastal whaling re-enactments (Kayoi and Taiji), traditional whaling songs (Arikawa and Kayoi), dances (all four), and recreated *kuyō* and other rituals that acquire new meanings (Ayukawa and Taiji). Whale festivals are characterised by 'performative authenticity' (Knudsen and Waade 2010): the pretence that certain practices are traditional. As mentioned, this type of play can be a serious affair, and some people and organisations invest significant amounts of time, energy, and capital into it. At the same time, however, the fact that participants take it seriously does not mean there is no space for comedy. In Kayoi, at the end of the re-enactment, 'whalers' cut open the belly of the whale to take out its baby—a cute stuffed whale calf that is placed in front of a copy of the memorial stone dedicated to the spirits of whale foetuses. It is a tongue-in-cheek reference to a local worship tradition, a type of 'religion play', to borrow Jolyon Thomas' concept (2007). The same can be said about the dance of the Seven Gods of Good Fortune in Ayukawa. Many Japanese festivals contain such playful elements, so in that sense these whaling festivals are not exceptional. Gods, buddhas, and spirits are powerful actors who deserve proper ritual veneration, but that does not mean you cannot joke about them—and *matsuri* often provide opportunities for doing so.

This brings us to the question of piety. To what extent is piety part of these whaling festivals? We find it hard to generalise about this: devotion for particular divine actors does not appear to be central, but it is not entirely absent, either. The festival in Arikawa, for instance, centres around Benzaiten, a popular goddess of Indian origin associated with water, arts, music, and good fortune. And even a corporate, non-denominational community festival like the one in Ayukawa contains various Shinto and Buddhist references, which may have become stronger after 2011. More extensive ethnographic research would be needed in order to say more about the various motivations of festival participants. Nevertheless, it is probably safe to say that piety does not appear as a core variable in these cases, even if it matters to some participants.

Patronage is certainly a key concept for understanding these festivals. In all four cases, the main patrons of the festivals are local actors: municipal authorities, tourism associations, whale song preservation societies, sponsors, schools, and of course the residents themselves. But national actors have been involved as well—especially the whaling industry and its powerful sponsors, for whom whaling festivals serve to substantiate claims about whaling being an intrinsic part of Japanese culture, as the examples in this article have shown. Today, the whaling industry is a vanishingly small part of the Japanese economy, and its significance has become symbolic rather than economic. Nevertheless, it still receives the support of powerful patrons within the state bureaucracy and ruling conservative party. As actual whaling activity decreases, the symbolisation of the whale increases, and peripheral towns become scenes for a national ideological project to vie for heritage status, of which festivals can be an important part. This is clearly visible in Ayukawa and Taiji, where the whaling industry is still present. It is less obvious in former whaling towns Kayoi and Arikawa, but there, too, national actors seem to have been involved—for instance, in supporting the establishment of local whaling museums and organising whale meat events in conjunction with festivals.

Contrary to what conservatives at the Japan Fisheries Agency or Institute for Cetacean Research argue, however, the continuation of whaling as an economic and cultural

practice is not a requirement for preserving whaling-related cultural traditions. Enacting whaling heritage at festival settings does not require the actual killing of whales. Playing a pre-modern whale hunt can support claims about Japan as a nation with a long maritime cultural heritage, but the international community is more likely to accept such claims when they are detached from today's controversial commercial whaling. Domestically and locally, however, some powerful stakeholders do insist on the industry's continuation—especially *because* the industry is perceived to be at risk of vanishing, which only adds to its appeal and symbolic capital (Ivy 1995). Therefore, some small-scale commercial whaling is likely to continue for a long time, even though it is economically marginal and not actually necessary for the preservation of whaling heritage.

The festivals discussed in this article are all tools for rural community-building and, at least potentially, economic revitalisation through tourism—especially if combined with other year-round attractions, such as whale-watching, museums, and sea aquariums. Currently, most whale-related tourism is domestic, but considering the increase of international tourists in the 2010s, there is significant potential for attracting more overseas visitors to coastal towns.[9] The cultivation and promotion of whaling heritage in Wakayama Prefecture by the Agency for Cultural Affairs—including English-language websites and signposting—is an example of an initiative to attract more tourists, both domestic and international. However, the continuation of controversial whaling practices, including the dolphin drive hunt, prevents further tourist development in places like Taiji and Ayukawa. The dissociation of whaling heritage from animal suffering—i.e., the cultivation of whaling-related 'play' combined with the discontinuation of actual hunting—will probably be economically strategic, even if some people may mourn the loss of whaling as a livelihood.

The significance of festivals lies in their perceived continuity—the reasons why people have kept on performing them year after year. The once-close identification between humans and whales fostered a closer community between humans, with bonds forged through the massive cooperative undertaking it is to capture a whale—bonds that remain even long after the whaling tradition disappeared, at least in the collective imagination, which is sustained by ritual practices. Their significance extends beyond local community cohesion, however. If dissociated from controversial present-day practices such as the Taiji dolphin hunt and commercial whaling in the Pacific Ocean, whaling re-enactments and other performances of whaling culture might well become central to reconfigurations of Japan as an Asian maritime hub with a rich cultural heritage. The whaling re-enactment at Yokkaichi—which, significantly, is not directly connected to any modern whaling practice—is already listed as UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, while other traditions such as whaling songs are listed as domestic or prefectural intangible heritage.

In sum, festivals have the potential to turn politically controversial whaling traditions into playful events that enforce community cohesion and add to towns' appeal as tourist destinations. Paradoxically, then, the heritage of whaling is not dependent upon the survival of the modern whaling industry. If whaling becomes play instead of controversy, its heritage can live on.

[9]In the years 2012-2019, international tourist numbers increased annually (JNTO, https://statistics.jnto.go.jp/en/graph/#graph--inbound--travelers--transition, accessed 10 November 2022), and the government invested in global advertising campaigns. The Covid-19 pandemic temporarily halted this trend, but by late 2022, Japan had reopened its borders, and tourist numbers are increasing again.

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