On Making Sense of Tradition: The Preservation of the Kakunodate Samurai District and the Portrayal of Traditional Japan

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Heritage wasn't only about the past—though it was that too—it also wasn't just about material things—though it was that as well—heritage was a process of engagement, an act of communication and an act of making meaning in and for the present.

Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (2006)

Walking into Japan's Kakunodate samurai district feels like travelling back in time. The district's traditional houses and the centuries-old trees provide the visitor with a sensory experience, as if they had suddenly walked into seventeenth-century Japan. Visitors can complete this experience and fully immerse themselves in Japan's traditional past by renting a kimono from one of the local shops. Since the 1990s, the number of visitor arrivals to Japan has increased almost annually,[1] and heritage preservation and heritage tourism can bring economic benefits, particularly in smaller cities. At the same time, preservation can lead to the commodification of heritage and the "corruption of pre-existing social ties and heritage value," as is the case in Lijiang, China.[2] Commodification can also result in "ecological degradation and conflicts between different users," as is the case in Okinawa, Japan.[3] In the Western gaze, Japan is a country filled with traditional

[1] There are a few exceptions to the annual increase. After the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami of 2011, and the Covid-19 pandemic, the number of visitors to Japan has decreased massively. For the specific data see: Japan National Tourism Organization, "Trends in Visitor Arrivals."
[2] Su, "Urban entrepreneurialism," 2885.
[3] Rots, "Whose sacred site?," 108.

culture and architecture, including tea ceremonies, Buddhist temples, tales of samurai, and the former samurai districts of which I examine one in this article. Promoting a "traditional Japan" is therefore a powerful way to raise interest in visiting Japan among Western tourists. In this article, I examine the portrayal of tradition in traditional architecture preservation districts. Using the Kakunodate samurai district as a case study, I investigate the particular role that "senses" play in constructing an image of "traditional Japan." To be more specific, I am interested in how the senses create representations of tradition.

The concept of "tradition" can be discussed in regard to various fields, but in this article, I draw primarily on the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, who propose the idea of the "invented tradition." The term "invented tradition" refers both to "'traditions' actually invented, constructed and formally instituted" and "those emerging in a less easily traceable manner within a brief and dateable period . . . and establishing themselves with great rapidity." Invented tradition involves "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past."[4] The concept of tradition itself has a long history in the Japanese context. During the Meiji Revolution of 1868, modernity and tradition became critical topics of debate: one group strove for modernization, while the other group wanted to return to Japanese tradition. While it was clear, that "modernity" in this debate referred to new ideas and innovations of the West, the meaning of Japanese traditionality was not as easily definable. Even those in Japan who favored tradition, in the words of Roy Starrs, were "influenced by modern Western ideas of exactly what was meant by 'Japanese tradition'."[5] Starrs cites *seppuku* or *hara-kiri*, suicide by cutting open one's own abdomen to restore one's honor, as an example of this uncertainty around tradition. After it was taken up as a subject by Western and Japanese writers, ritual honor suicide became a world-famous symbol of "traditional Japanese culture"

[4] Hobsbawm, "Introduction," 1.
[5] *Modernism and Japanese Culture*, 37–9.

and a typical "Japanese way of death."[6] According to Starrs, the so-called double gaze, where the Japanese watch Westerners watching the Japanese, played a powerful role in the formation of the contemporary Japanese sense of national identity.

This concept of the "double gaze" shows the importance of the gaze of an Other in the creation of identity. Starrs argues that the gaze of an Other—crucial in a number of fields, particularly postcolonial theory[7]—plays a particularly critical role for the Japanese, as they are "prone to this 'other-conscious' tendency—as many phrases in the Japanese language advising us to beware the 'eyes of others' (*hito no me*) . . . also attest."[8] Starrs' example explains the construction of identity based on the gaze of an Other and shows how traditions can be adapted because of this gaze. As a result, *seppuku* is now considered a symbol of traditional Japanese.

In this article I contribute to discussions about the image of tradition by looking at the role of the senses in the construction of this image. I begin by introducing the Kakunodate samurai district and its background. Next, I explain the importance of the senses in experience creation in Japan. I end by analyzing the role of the senses in constructing the Kakunodate samurai district's image of traditional Japan.

Background of Kakunodate

The Japanese interest in tradition as a counterpoint to Western modernity developed during the twentieth century. After the enormous wave of migration from the countryside to the cities in the decades following the Meiji Restoration in 1868, a nostalgic symbol of Japanese tradition emerged: *furusato* villages. *Furusato* can refer to one's birthplace or hometown, but it can also, as Chris McMorran argues, refer to "an idealized rural village that is spiritual home to all Japanese people."[9] The difference between these two senses is clearer in Japanese. The word *furusato* can be written with the

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[6] *Id.*, 48.

[7] See, for example, Said, *Orientalism*; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*.

[8] *Modernism and Japanese Culture*, 50–1.

[9] "Understanding the 'Heritage'," 339.

Japanese characters 故郷, the first meaning "old" and the second meaning "village; hometown." The combination of these characters can be read as *furusato* or as *kokyō*, both meaning "hometown; birthplace." On the other hand, the word can be written in hiragana, one of the two Japanese syllabaries, as ふるさと. When it is written this way, the word can only be read as *furusato*. According to Jennifer Robertson, the latter way of writing is most used today, signifying the abstract idea of *furusato* and the "warm, nostalgic feelings aroused by its mention" rather than any particular real old village.[10]

McMorran goes on to explain that three aspects make up *furusato* heritage: proximity to nature, architectural cohesiveness and familiarity, and a sense of cooperation and community. This nostalgia for the rural hometown continued throughout the twentieth century. Starting in the 1970s, it was adapted by the state-owned railways in the 1970s, facilitating the "Discover Japan" (1970) and "Exotic Japan" (1984) advertising campaigns, which were some of the most successful in the country's history. Amidst rapid industrialization, these domestic travel campaigns urged the Japanese to discover the remaining parts of their premodern past.[11] In 1984, a project called *furusato-zukuri* ("native place-making," as McMorran translates it) was set up to help local governments fund the preservation or creation of these nostalgic landscapes. *Furusato* and *furusato-zukuri* also became a central political interest given the widespread public interest in heritage following the Second World War. In 1950, the Japanese National Diet advanced heritage site preservation by establishing the Law for the Protection of Cultural Property, which was intended to enhance the cultural quality of Japan and contribute to the evolution of world culture.[12] An amendment to this law in 1975 created a system for the preservation of districts containing traditional architecture.[13] This category of cultural properties differs from others because it contains groups of

[10] "Furusato Japan," 496.
[11] Ivy, *Discourses of the Vanishing*, 34–6.
[12] Article 2, Item 1.
[13] These districts are referred to in Japanese as *dentōteki kenzōbutsugun hozon chiku*, meaning "traditional architecture preservation districts."

traditional buildings and the surrounding environment rather than single buildings. Similar to nostalgia for the *furusato* villages, these architecture preservation districts are intended to portray traditional Japan and to step away from modernity.

The Kakunodate samurai district is one of eighteen traditional architecture preservation districts containing samurai. Sometimes called the little Kyōto of Tōhoku (*Tōhoku no shōkyōto*), in recognition of the atmosphere created by the district's historic architecture and cherry blossoms, Kakunodate is located in the inland city of Semboku, in the central-eastern part of Akita Prefecture. The preservation district in Kakunodate, a samurai castle town founded by the Ashina clan in 1620, contains the former residences of upper- and middle-class warriors. Features of the samurai town, including Edo period houses, a gate and a storehouse, are well preserved. Kakunodate has become widely known throughout Japan as a town of samurai residences and cherry blossoms, attracting over two million tourists a year.[14]

The popular image of the Kakunodate samurai district for Westerners and Japanese results partially from the way in which the district is preserved. The earliest samurai residences date from the end of the Edo period (1603–1867). Very few sources are available on the period before that, indicating that the restoration of the area is, therefore, based on the townscape from the end of the Edo period to the early Meiji period (1868–1912). Hiroshi Izumi argues that because townscapes change constantly and the Japanese interest in the samurai residences started around the time of its designation as a traditional architecture preservation district in 1976, the restoration of Kakunodate's residences is not necessarily faithful to an actual historical moment but can be better understood as a restoration to an ideal type. In other words, it is not a restoration of the townscape as such but rather the restoration, maintenance and construction of the scenery[15] based on an ideal image of what the

[14] Semboku City, "Kakunodate." After the 2011 earthquake the number of tourists decreased but has gradually recovered since then. The document dates back to August 2020, meaning that the number of two million tourists is dating back to before the Covid-19 pandemic.

[15] The Japanese term often used to describe this process is *shūkei* which translates to "landscaping; beautification."

townscape should look like.[16] Among the preservation projects that have adjusted the appearance of the district to conform to this idea are the construction of new walls, hedges, and gates (seen as appropriate for the townscape and the samurai residences), the replacement of concrete walls with wooden fences, and the restoration of shops and offices in an appropriate style.

The Sensory Experience in Japan

Recent work by Nina Konovalova building on Tatiana Grigorieva's insight,[17] has begun to understand Japanese culture as sensual, a culture of "feeling." Konovalova, for example, argues that sensory experience "has been defining both traditional rites and ceremonies" throughout Japan's history.[18] One Japanese ritual defined by sensory experience is the admiration of the teacup in a traditional tea ceremony. Konovalova explains that participants in a tea ceremony first pass the cup from hand to hand; they are "to pick it up at first, to hold it, to feel the textured pattern, and only after that to start talking about its aesthetic qualities."[19] Tea ceremonies are not just about drinking tea, and therefore the obvious scent and taste of the tea, but about the entire sensory experience and, in particular, the tactility of the teacup.

Taking a wider view beyond the Japanese context, numerous scholars have examined the role of the senses in creating experiences and memories.[20] Heritage studies scholar Rodney Harrison has identified a shift in leisure, tourism, and travel at the end of the twentieth century from "the marketing and sale of 'services' to the marketing and sale of 'experiences'."[21] This new approach, which Joseph Pine and James Gilmore understand as the experience economy, values goods and services no longer for their function but rather for the sensory experience they create, both in

[16] Izumi, "Between Creation and Conservation," 77.
[17] *Japan: The Way of the Heart.*
[18] "Architecture of Sensory Experience," 37.
[19] *Ibid.*
[20] See, for example, Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*; Dias, Correia, and Cascais, "Traits in Tourists' Experiences;" Pine and Gilmore, *The Experience Economy.*
[21] *Heritage*, 85.

their purchase and their use.[22] Daniela Jelinčić explains creating such an experience involves seven key design principles: attributing a theme to each experience, harmonizing impressions with positive cues, eliminating negative ones, supplying memorabilia as additional experience enhancers, engaging all five senses, stimulating participation and co-creation, and stirring emotions in visitors.[23]

These criteria suggest that while the sense of sight is critical to the sensory experience, even for the creation of visual experiences this sense alone is not sufficient. Combining visual and auditory stimuli, according to Jelinčić, can be used to "create atmosphere" and "increase the intensity of the tourists' experience."[24] Sounds can also create an emotional response in listeners, further intensifying their experience. Olfactory stimuli can evoke an even greater emotional response. Since the sense of smell is closely linked to memory, the use of scents can result in "audiences stay[ing] longer at the attractions and remember[ing] the consumed experiences for a longer time."[25] Cuisine—where the structure, temperature, and consistence of a dish are important—appeals to the sense of taste in combination with the senses of smell and touch. The example of dining demonstrates that engaging multiple senses is often needed to create a complete experience. The sense of touch plays a particularly important role in creating complete experiences given its ability to drive active participation. Creating a complete sensory experience requires an appeal to all of the senses.[26] The Kakunodate samurai district provides visitors this complete sensory experience.

Kakunodate's Traditional Atmosphere

The Kakunodate samurai district was one of three samurai districts designated as a traditional architecture preservation district in 1976. As one of the first districts, it gained interest among the Japanese people as well as among foreign tourists. The idea that visitors are transported back in time upon entering the district is one of the

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[22] *The Experience Economy*.
[23] Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*, 7–8.
[24] *Id.*, 9.
[25] *Id.*, 10.
[26] *Id.*, 11–2.

appeals of Kakunodate. This "time-travel feeling" is described on many travel websites:

> Though some of them are still functioning homes, the residences are open to the public so visitors can get a feel for the traditional samurai life. Tourists can travel back in time to the Edo period by strolling around the traditional streets in an antique Kimono from one of the rental stores in town! A rickshaw ride from the Kakunodate Denshokan Museum will enhance the experience.[27]

> Kakunodate stayed a large feudal city and has barely changed over the last 4 centuries. Of an easy access by train . . . it is one of the major sightseeing destinations in Akita prefecture, appearing as an ideal traditional postcard of Japan, with a preserved architecture enhanced by the blooming of sakura . . . in spring.[28]

> The impressive samurai and merchant quarters will give you an idea of life in Japan's feudal past.[29]

While English-language websites like the above emphasize the feeling of temporal displacement and the experience of tradition, Japanese websites emphasize the sensorial aspects of the district. For example, the tourism website of Akita prefecture suggests that visitors can "wa no fuzei o ajiwaeru." This can be translated as "enjoy the Japanese atmosphere."[30] Although this translation renders *ajiwaeru* as "can enjoy,"[31] the Japanese word contains the noun *aji*, "flavor, taste; experience," resulting in a more literal translation of

[27] Travel to Tohoku, "Kakunodate Bukeyashiki."
[28] Kanpai Japan, "Kakunodate."
[29] Japan National Tourism Organization, "Akita, Kakunodate & Around."
[30] Akita prefecture, "samurai residences of Kakunodate." Note that from this point on all translations from the Japanese are the author's own.
[31] *Ajiwaeru* is the potential of the verb *ajiwau*.

ajiwaeru as "can taste/experience."[32] While many other words in Japanese have meanings similar to "enjoy" and "experience," the deliberate choice of *ajiwaeru* in this case encourages the reader to associate Kakunodate with a sensory experience.

Figure 1: Pictures of the Kakunodate samurai district showing some of the samurai residences and their gates, and the natural scenery in the district.[33]

Visitors are also encouraged to rent a kimono and walk through the district as if they have "travelled back in time."[34] Travel websites explain that the feeling of having gone back in time is enhanced by wearing Japan's traditional clothing, having the very cloth touch one's skin.[35] This feeling can be further enhanced by taking a rickshaw ride and enjoying the sensation of movement. The sense of hearing is also involved when a visitor walks through the district,

[32] The verb *ajiwau* is written in Japanese as 味わう. The first character 味, read as *aji*, is a noun in which case its meaning is "flavor; taste," but also "charm; appeal; experience." The noun *aji* is commonly used in sentences and expressions such as *aji ga deru* "the taste of something becomes apparent," *aji ga usui* "lightly seasoned," or *aji o totonoeru* "to flavor; to season."

[33] Travel to Tohoku, "Kakunodate Bukeyashiki," originals in color.

[34] Akita prefecture, "samurai residences of Kakunodate." Original Japanese: *taimusurippu*, literally "time slip."

[35] *Ibid.*

hearing the sound of people walking in the traditional houses and the sounds of the rickshaws on the streets.

The experience of a traditional Japanese atmosphere in the Kakunodate samurai district also engages the sense of smell. The district is filled with a variety of scents that add to its overall atmosphere, attempting to make visitors feel that they have "travelled back in time." One of the most prominent scents in the district is that of wood. Many of the historic buildings in the district are made out of wood, which creates a smell that is earthy and warm. Visitors can smell the wood as they walk through the streets, reminding them of the physical materials and human labor that went into each building's construction.

Finally, the sense of touch plays an important role in the district's immersive atmosphere as visitors can experience the texture of the district's traditional architecture, as well as the tactile qualities of its natural surroundings. One of the most notable tactile experiences in the district is the feel of the wooden buildings. Many of the historic buildings in the district feature traditional Japanese wooden architecture, which has a distinct texture that visitors can feel as they walk through the district's streets and enter its houses. Walking through these buildings sounds and feels different as well. Some of the residences have tatami mats—traditional Japanese mats used as flooring material—on the floor, giving visitors the opportunity to experience the traditionality of a historic residence.

Experiences in Kakunodate

Beyond the overall atmosphere Kakunodate creates, it also offers experiences that engage visitors to participate more directly. I will discuss these experiences by focusing on several specific buildings in the district and exploring the possibilities they offer visitors.

One of the better-known residences in Kakunodate is the former Aoyagi house, currently functions as a samurai museum, showcasing the lifestyle and traditions of the samurai class. At the Aoyagi house, visitors can see artifacts and objects from the samurai era, including weapons, armor, and clothing. The museum also features reconstructed rooms from a samurai home, providing visitors with a glimpse into the daily life of samurai warriors. An armory and multiple galleries atop the main building of the house,

provide visitors with the chance to engage with Japan's traditions and history. For example, visitors can wear a samurai helmet and hold samurai swords.[36] As Jelinčić explains, active participation and immersion in an experience are crucial for creating experiences. Letting visitors engage with historical items like swords, helmets, and armor allows them to not only see but experience Japan's traditional past.

The Ishiguro residence, the oldest samurai house in Kakunodate, is considered to be one of the best-preserved of such houses in the district. The Ishiguro residence is special in that it is the only samurai residence in Kakunodate in which descendants of the original occupants continue to live, making the connection to the past in the Ishiguro residence not only physical but literally genealogical. As visitors look at the house, guides can also provide information about its rooms, the building in general, and its exhibits, which contain weapons and armor, old documents, and snow tools.

Kakunodate's Kabazaiku Museum promotes the traditional craft of Kabazaiku. Often translated as birch craftsmanship, Kabaizaku is a traditional Japanese woodworking craft that mostly uses cherry bark. The museum exhibits a wide range of materials on Kakunodate's history, culture, and residents, with a focus on Kabazaiku. The museum also offers demonstrations of Kabazaiku production, allowing visitors to see the skills of traditional craftsmen. The museum shop sells different products of the city's traditional crafts, providing visitors with the chance to see and touch these products.[37] According to Jelinčić, using their sense of touch, visitors engage in "active participation and immersion in the experience" which is part of the "most powerful" experience.[38] However, the sense of touch and the sense of sight are not the only senses Kabazaiku Museum engages. Kabazaiku is a woodworking craft, and the scent of wood lingers during and after these demonstrations. The sounds resulting from the production of traditional crafts complete this experience.

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[36] Aoyagi Samurai Manor Museum, "Welcome."
[37] Rakuten Travel, "Kakunodate."
[38] Jelinčić and Mansfeld, *Creating and Managing*, 12.

It is also possible for visitors to participate in the district's hands-on workshops where they can learn, for example, the history and etiquette of a tea ceremony. Like at the Kabazaiku demonstration, participants in a tea ceremony engage with both the tangible and intangible aspects of local and Japanese traditions. Both the tea ceremony and Kabazaiku production transfer Japan's traditions to visitors. Given that both these crafts are multisensory experiences, they are likely to create long-lasting memories.

The Ishiguro house is used for tea ceremonies and cooking classes.[39] In addition, the district is home to several local restaurants and food vendors, offering visitors the chance to taste traditional Japanese dishes and sample local sake, the traditional Japanese rice wine produced in Akita Prefecture. These restaurants and vendors offer traditional Japanese food, giving special attention to local flavors and locally produced ingredients. Going to a local restaurant can be a multisensory experience, particularly when having Kakunodate Kaiseki, a traditional Japanese dinner of multiple artistically arranged small dishes.[40]

Nature in Kakunodate

Nature also plays a key role in the construction of the experience of tradition, which can be seen, for example, in a cultural context in which nature is central to Japan's historic Shinto religion.[41] One other example of nature in cultural context can be found in traditional teahouses. Traditionally a teahouse should always have a front garden; passing through the garden is "the first step in detachment from the outside world and everyday life."[42] As discussed before, *furusato* villages must also have proximity to nature, as they are seen as a sort of alternative to modern city life.[43] The traditional architecture preservation districts consist of groups of traditional buildings and their surrounding environments. The natural environment is, thus, an equally important part of these

[39] Semboku City, "Kakunodate."
[40] Rakuten Travel, "Kakunodate."
[41] See, for example, Aston, *Shinto*; Cali and Dougill, *Shinto Shrines*; Rots, *Shinto, Nature and Ideology*.
[42] Konovalova, "Architecture of Sensory Experience," 39.
[43] McMorran, "Understanding the Heritage," 339.

Figure 2: Cherry blossoms in the Kakunodate samurai district.[44]

districts as the buildings themselves. The main natural aspects of the Kakunodate samurai district are the gardens of the samurai residences and the district's centuries-old trees.

The changing seasons and the different colors of nature can be experienced by walking through the district and "feeling the seasons."[45] The black walls of the samurai residences contrast with pink cherry blossoms and red autumn leaves, connoting a contrast between human life and nature.[46] Cherry blossoms are an important part of Japanese tradition; when the cherry trees blossom every year, people all over Japan go out to enjoy the flowers. This activity, called *hanami* in Japanese, is a traditional custom all over the country. One of the most popular places in Japan to enjoy the flowers is in Kakunodate (fig. 2). The trees, the activity of *hanami*, and the samurai residences combine to form the image most Westerners have of traditional Japan.

[44] Tazawako Kakunodate, "Kakunodate Festival."
[45] Original Japanese: *kisetsu o kanjinagara*. Rakuten Travel, "Kakunodate."
[46] Travel to Tohoku, "Kakunodate Bukeyashiki."

Conclusion

Taking the Kakunodate samurai district as a case study, this article has investigated the role of the senses in constructing an image of traditional Japan. Having introduced the district and explained the sensory experience in Japan, I discussed three different aspects of that sensory experience in the samurai district: atmosphere, experiences, and nature. The atmosphere is created partially through the buildings and nature, and partially by giving visitors the opportunity to engage with the district by, for example, wearing a kimono and feeling the traditional clothing on their skin while walking through the district's centuries-old streets. The Ishiguro and Aoyagi buildings give visitors the opportunity to interact with Japan's traditions and history, providing a multisensory experience in the form of workshops. The natural features such as the gardens of the residences and the cherry blossoms, part of a traditional image of Japan, add even further to the experience in the district. The engagement of all five senses with Kakunodate's buildings and natural features is essential to the construction and visitor experience of tradition in the district. By looking at the role of the senses in the Kakunodate samurai district, I have shown the importance of the senses in conveying traditions and the traditional image of a nation. Sensory experience is one way for visitors to interact and engage with heritage and traditions. Future research could examine the sensory experiences of other types of Japanese cultural districts and build on the present study by comparing findings.

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