Self-discovery through sound recording: the aesthetics of Namaroku in 1970's Japan

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Abstract

When the hi-fi portable cassette recorder became popular in 1970's Japan, audio enthusiasts enjoyed recording sounds of not only music but also nature, events, and surroundings. These activities were commonly called *Namaroku*, which means "live recording" in Japanese. In many introductory books, magazine articles, and radio programs concerning *Namaroku*, professional sound recordists and audio critics informed an amateur audience about the nature of sound recording and how our ears listen to sounds. Thus, *Namaroku* seems to be a significant movement in understanding the history of Japan's aural culture.

This presentation focuses on the aesthetics of sound recording in the *Namaroku* movement and tries to relate it to the major cultural context of 1970's Japan. In introductory explanations of the basic skills of *Namaroku*, many professional sound recordists often referred to the difference between our ears and the microphone. They said our ears select sounds that are meaningful and create a perspective of our hearing, whereas the microphone picks up every ambient sound automatically. Therefore, sound recordists have to be aware of the methods used to operate microphones to eliminate unwanted sounds just as our hearing does. While listening to excessive environmental sounds through microphones, sound recordists try to discover how our ears work to give a perspective to recorded sounds.

This aesthetics of *Namaroku* has an interesting resemblance to a famous concept of tourism of the same period. Japanese National Railways launched the Discover Japan campaign in 1970; this is regarded as Japan's biggest commercial campaign at the time and a turning point in Japanese tourism. One of the initial concepts of the campaign was "Discover Myself," which encouraged consumers to reflect on themselves while traveling. Therefore, the concept of Discover Japan and aesthetics of *Namaroku* relate to a re-examination of the self in unusual situations. This presentation attempts to identify further connections between these ideas and thus gain more understanding of self-image in the aesthetics of *Namaroku*.

INTRODUCTION

Sound recording using Hi-Fi portable cassette recorders gained popularity as a hobby in Japan in the 1970's. The sound sources were not only homemade music but also surrounding sounds like the sounds of trains, nature, and social events. This practice of sound recording was generally called *Namaroku* in Japanese, which means "live recording" (*Nama* means "live," *Roku* means "recording") and it is similar to "sound hunting" or "field recording" in English. There were many magazine articles, local groups, contests, radio programs, and guidebooks regarding the *Namaroku* boom.

This study considers how people listen to sounds through microphones in a particular period and place. In other words, it discusses the history of the relationship between the ears and technology. Japan's *Namaroku* culture in the 1970's is a good example for understanding this history because various texts informing amateur audiences about the techniques of sound recording were published at that time. Thus, this study attempts to find from such texts the essential ways of listening through microphones. Further, I will compare *Namaroku* to another commercial movement of the period, the Discover Japan campaign, to place *Namaroku* in 1970's Japanese culture.

1. THE AESTHETICS OF *NAMAROKU*

In early 1970's, Hi-Fi portable cassette recorders became popular in Japan. Some audiophiles took them outdoors to record diverse environmental sounds for pleasure. As mentioned before, various articles and guidebooks, wherein professional sound recordists instruct beginners, were published at the time. This section examines these texts to understand the normative ways of sound recording in this culture.

The most impressive feature of the instruction of sound recording in the *Namaroku* culture seems to be the diagrams of microphone arrangements. Professional recordists demonstrated examples of microphone arrangements for each specific sound source. As people used a cassette tape that was difficult to cut and splice, normative instructions tended to focus on spatial aspects of sound recording rather than temporal aspects. Microphone arrangements were considered as the key factor to shape perspectives of recorded sonic spaces.

To explain radio dramas in interwar America, Neil Verma coins the term "audioposition." According to him, audioposition is an element of auditory fields. Similar to "viewpoint," it denotes "the place of the listener that is carried by coding foregrounds and backgrounds." Therefore, audioposition is associated with a perspective of the auditory field. In addition, Verma indicates "it is always fabricated." This concept may be used to generalize my arguments about *Namaroku*. *Namaroku* recordists fabricate audioposition through microphone arrangement. The question arises as to what are the normative rules of fabrication in the *Namaroku* culture.

In introductory explanations regarding *Namaroku* techniques, professional sound recordists often referred to the difference between our ears and the microphone. They said our ears intentionally or unintentionally select sounds that are meaningful to create a perspective of our hearing, whereas the microphone automatically picks up every ambient sound. Therefore, to eliminate unwanted sounds just as our ears do, sound recordists need to be familiar with the arrangement of microphones. While listening to excessive ambient sounds through microphones, they attempt to discover how our ears work in order to provide a perspective to recorded sounds, in other words, to fabricate audioposition. This argument could be termed as the aesthetics of *Namaroku* because it is concerned with the sensitivity of the microphone and the judgment of sound recording qualities.

This study thus far has discussed ideal recording practices in normative instructions of *Namaroku*. Needless to say, there were many texts that mentioned difficulties or failures in actual sound recording. Many amateur

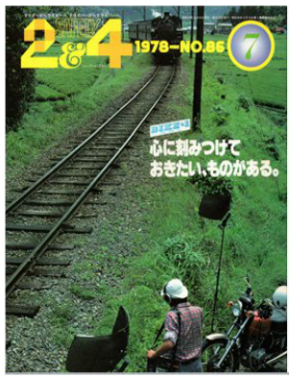

Figure 1. A front cover of a leaflet published by Japanese motorcycle maker, Honda. The rider is recording the sound of a steam locomotive.

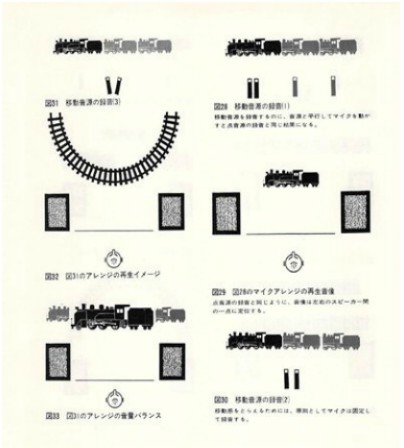

Figure 2. Examples of the diagrams of microphone arrangements, which instruct how to fabricate audioposition through microphone positioning.

Figure 3. "Mobile audio room" from "Sound recording journeys across Japan."

recordists talked about the difficulty in making others recognize the sound sources of their recordings. They often mentioned that such obscure recordings vividly reminded them of their experiences of recording the sounds, even though others could not understand what the sound sources were. In another case, a writer recollecting *Namaroku* culture spoke as follows: "I have never listened to my recordings again nor edited them as sound materials. 'The act of sound recording itself' was my hobby." It is considered that these comments were, in some way, the results of *Namaroku*'s normative instructions.

2. SOUND RECORDING AND TOURISM

This section demonstrates the significant connection between *Namaroku* and domestic tourism in 1970's Japan. Domestic tourism was one of the significant Japanese cultural attributes at the time. The *Namaroku* movement was actually linked with it in various ways. Further, it appears that the aesthetics of *Namaroku* has an interesting resemblance to a famous concept of tourism during the same period, "Discover Myself." This resemblance will be discussed in the next section.

An audio critic, Shuji Kasagi, discusses the pre-*Namaroku* sound recording movement around 1970. According to him, radio-cassette players gained popularity at the end of the 1960's and people often carried them on trips. People used them to listen to the radio or music cassettes while traveling. Some people used the recording function like a camera. At the beginning of the *Namaroku* movement, a Japanese audio maker, Sony, organized local sound recording bus tours throughout Japan to promote the movement. Magazines and radio programs also held *Namaroku* tours for enthusiasts. For example, an audio magazine, Play Tapes featured a series of articles, "Sound recording journeys across Japan" in the late 70's. Travelogues, in fact, became one of the popular topics of magazine articles concerned with *Namaroku*. In this way, the Namaroku culture was tightly connected to domestic tourism at the time.

Kasagi mentions the following two huge domestic travel booms in the 70's: EXPO 70 in Osaka that more than half the population of Japan visited and the Discover Japan campaign, which was the biggest commercial campaign of the time. The latter was organized by the Japanese National Railways and is regarded as one of the remarkable turning points of Japanese tourism. It is often said that the campaign was a revaluation of the "good old Japanese homeland," and it promoted personal travel among youth and women after a period of high economic growth in Japan.

The chief producer of the Discover Japan campaign, Wakao Fujioka, developed the initial concept of the campaign, "Discover Myself." In the campaign's first proposal, he said "this is not travel to see but to create myself—to achieve a feeling of fullness in discovering Japan and rediscovering myself." He distinguished this travel campaign from existing campaigns that stressed the promotion of the destinations. Fujioka also contrasted traveling with watching television to gain and share information. His concept "Discover Myself" emphasized the process and experience of traveling and recommended self-reflection in unusual situations to travelers. In my opinion, this concept has certain similarities to the aesthetics of *Namaroku*.

Visual images of Discover Japan campaign embodied Fujioka's initial concept in their own way. The designer of early posters for the campaign, Keiichi Matsuda, deliberately eliminated picturesque landscapes of travel destinations from his works. He sometimes used blurred photographs to make the location unidentifiable. In doing so, he attempted to focus on a traveler's experience during contacting to unusual situations.

3. SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH SOUND RECORDING

This last section compares the aesthetics of *Namaroku* and the concept of the Discover Japan campaign to place the former in 1970's Japanese culture. In fact, there seems to be remarkable resemblances between *Namaroku* and Discover Japan.

Namaroku was deeply related to domestic tourism at the time in various ways. Here, I will demonstrate the similarity of *Namaroku* as a commercial campaign to the Discover Japan campaign. Sakiko Kuwamoto argues that the campaign involved not only the general public but also railway employees and private corporations in the boom. It blurred boundaries between the producers and participants. As a commercial campaign, the *Namaroku* movement seemed to share the same character. For example, Sony initially held *Namaroku* contests only for its staff to make them aware about its enjoyment. In addition, there were also similarities in the assumed subjectivity of participants between *Namaroku* and Discover Japan.

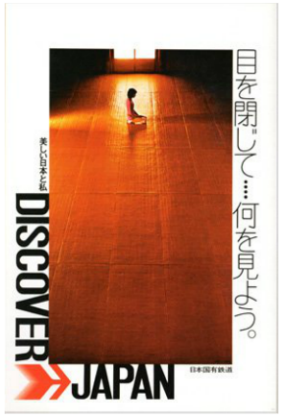

Figure 4. One of the most popular posters for the Discover Japan campaign. The copy written by Wakao Fujioka means "With my eyes closed, what will I see?"

As mentioned above, the main concept of Discover Japan was "Discover Myself," which encouraged the participants to reflect on themselves while traveling. *Namaroku* instructions also advised beginners to discover how our ears work while listening to excessive ambient sounds. Therefore, both of them suggested that participants reexamine themselves in unusual situations. These suggestions were not concerned with any specific objects, that is, with any specific destinations or sound sources, but rather they were concerned with the individual participants' subjectivity. Therefore, *Namaroku's* participants often could not make others recognize the sound sources of their recording; further, some of them found pleasure only in the act of sound recording itself.

Makoto Fujioka, a Japanese sound recording engineer, asserted, "Technology alone cannot settle everything around sound recording. The basis of sound recording is rather epistemology, the way people can understand sounds." There are remarkable similarities in participants' subjectivity between the aesthetics of *Namaroku* and the concept of one of the major cultural movements in 1970's Japan. These similarities imply the significance of *Namaroku* in both the history of sound recording in Japan and 1970's Japanese culture studies.

CONCLUSION: REMOVING A FILTER FROM THE EARS?

This study first focused on *Namaroku's* normative instructions and the contrast between the ears and microphone. Professional recordists advised beginners to eliminate excessive ambient sounds through microphone arrangements to fabricate audioposition in their recording. Subsequently, the aesthetics of *Namaroku* was compared to Fujioka's concept of the Discover Japan campaign, the biggest commercial campaign at the time, to place *Namaroku* in the seventies Japanese culture.

This study focuses on *Namaroku's* normative instructions. The supposition that the actual practices of *Namaroku* must be more diverse than the instructions is quite reasonable. Some professional recordists concentrated on specific sound sources and researched their conditions in detail. Other amateur recordists equipped with various editing devices entered the *Namaroku* contests. The realities of domestic tourism at the time were equally diverse.

Nevertheless, it is meaningful to recognize normative aspects of these cultures. For example, an editor who participated in "Sound recording journeys across Japan" reported that his experiences of the journey made him remove a filter from his ears, so every ambient sound became fresh to him. It is certain that his comment sounds like a cliché or sounds similar to Murray Schafer's concept of "ear cleaning." However, in *Namaroku* culture's context, his comment might be radical because it could mean the removal of the ability of discrimination from the ears.

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