

Un/Mapping Sacrality in Kamakura: Towards a (meaningful) spiritual cartography

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This short autoethnographic essay describes an attempt to challenge the curation and commodification of sacrality in the historic city of Kamakura, Japan, through the practice of intentional walking. Having moved from the UK to Japan in early 2016, my position here is as both resident and tourist. The provocation set out below stems from an engagement with Kamakura made possible through multiple visits to the city over a three-year period. As such, I have been able to familiarise myself with both Kamakura and the prescribed encounters with sacred and historic spaces that its heritage industry promotes. In what follows, I attempt to foster new ways of experiencing Kamakura's spiritual cartography through a subjective account of my own specific un/mapping of the city's hidden sacred spaces.



Figure 1. Purification utensils at Zeniarai Benten Shrine, Kamakura.

Kamakura is a coastal city situated approximately one hour south of Tokyo. The city has been mapped out as a constellation of sacred sites, predominantly Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, and is a popular sightseeing destination for tourists due to its close proximity to the capital and the density of its historic and religious locations. Sites such as the Zeniarai Benten Shrine (figure 1) attract visitors due to their alleged mystical properties and unique mountainside settings, offering a striking contrast to those in nearby Tokyo. An official map has been created by Kamakura City Tourist Board (figure 2), illustrating the scores of sacred features that permeate the city's geography. It is handed out by volunteers on arrival at the city's main train station. To this end, the local government can be seen to encourage self-led walking tours, delivering its sacred sites via a series of prescribed ambulatory routes.

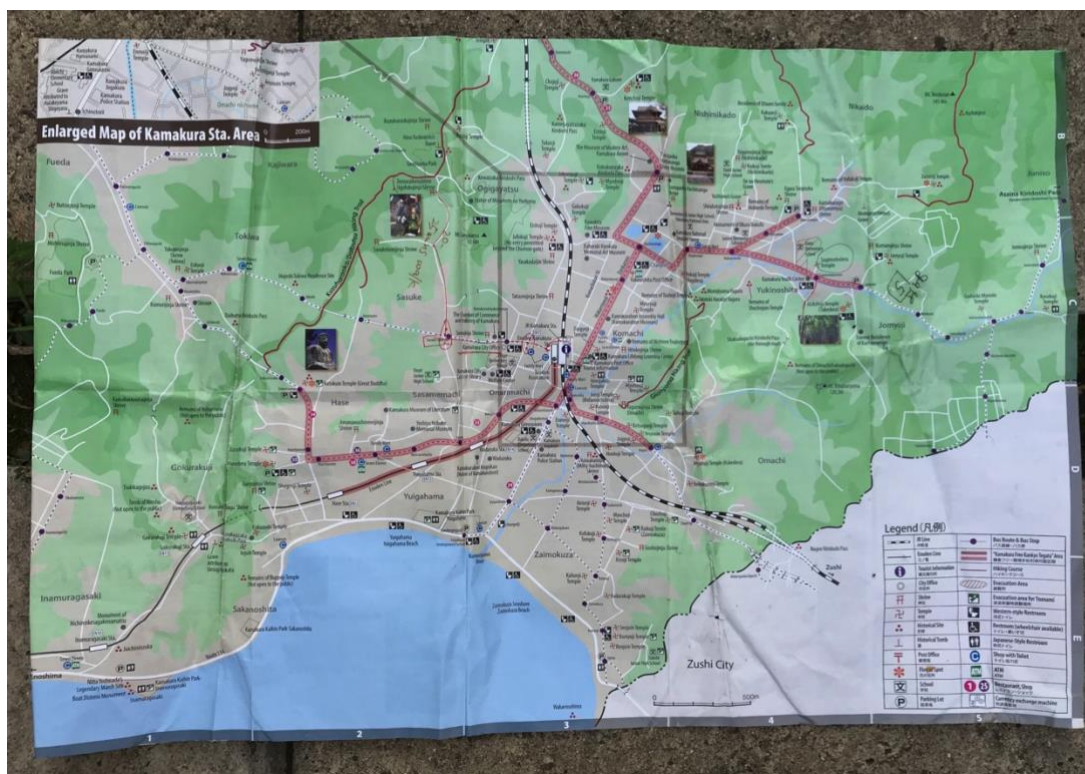


Figure 2. Map showing Kamakura's sites of historic and religious importance.

Kamakura serves as a nexus for narratives of life and death. Even the briefest study of the tourist map reveals a sequence of interconnected paths that run between graves and sites of worship. The area is offered to visitors as representative of Japan's two constituent belief systems - Shintoism and Buddhism. The former was constructed around ideas of animism and material vitality. The latter, and specifically the Japanese iteration of *Jōdo bukkyō* (Pure Land Buddhism), stressed the importance of preparation for and treatment after death, rooted in a belief in reincarnation. It is possible to locate numerous built manifestations of these beliefs, which, when plotted out, demonstrate a flow of potential spiritual encounters,

moving in and between the historical and the sacred. This itself is not contentious, but my own experience of (spiritual) authenticity in Kamakura is impaired by the orchestration of movement and the coercion of the body to experience specific sites and in a particular manner.

The tension between tourism and heritage is highlighted in discourse about the appropriate treatment and visitation of ancient and sacred sites.¹ How, then, can visitors make meaningful encounters with the spiritual through ambulatory practices when a utilitarian mapping of space has rendered both walking and the spiritual to little more than the *pedestrian*? This is the question that troubled me after first visiting Kamakura. Ordinarily, the sacred is considered to be encountered at a deeply personal level - spirituality derives from meaningful subjective and transgressive experiences of the world beyond the quotidian. Thus, Kamakura's official system of mapping and packaging the spiritual as a series of replicable encounters with sacred sites appears to be problematic.

As a geographer who uses walking to interrogate place and its performativity in spiritual practices², I found myself questioning Kamakura's laying out as a simplified series of paths in and between religious sites. Having made numerous trips to the city and having been left unsatisfied from following the directives of the map, I wanted and needed to get beyond the vernacularised sacred that the city officials presented me with. Of course, the named locations proffered by the local tourist office *are* spiritually imbued, unquestionably so, and the mapping out of their locations is very helpful to both local and international tourists. Yet the configuration of Kamakura as a network of marketable spiritual-spatial experiences mobilises an awkward blurring of the sacred and the mundane. It prompts me to consider new ways of gathering together the spiritual resonances of the area, and to move beyond the official map and its directions. I decided to locate and walk the gaps in the map, to seek out attachments to the places that Kamakura City had left off its official guide, and practice my own spiritual cartography.

I sought to un/map sacrality at Kamakura, redefining the boundaries of the sacred so that it became possible to leave the meandering line of tourists that snakes between temples and shrines and find for myself a way of getting *into* the city. I developed a personal spiritual cartography, one that led not to the Great Buddha (Daibutusu) at Kotokuin Temple, nor to the crowded steps of Tsurugoaka Hachimangu Shrine or the congested footpaths of the bamboo forest at Hokokuji Temple. Walking off the map allowed me to reconstruct and reinterpret Kamakura's sacred sites on my own terms. In doing so, it was possible for me to locate meaning beyond the abstraction of the map and to understand the spiritual as an atmosphere that permeates the entirety of the place.



Figure 3. *Following the map: tourists making their way to Hachimangu Shrine.*

Working with and against Maps

Mapping, as Farley and Symmons Roberts suggest, is always a process of abstraction³. The organisation of Kamakura into a network of tourist-friendly sacred sites demonstrates such abstraction *par excellence*, privileging certain locations and implementing a hierarchy of 'spiritual experience', with sites deemed to be of higher cultural or economic importance clearly marked for visitors while many others remain absent. Acknowledging the process of cartographic selection allows one to read further into these absences and to imagine what exists in the gaps which the map presents to its reader. It is only by challenging the map, by pondering the unmapped, that I could find an alternative method for processing the space. Over a series of trips to Kamakura, I found it was possible to work with the map in a way that was largely *counter-touristic* and so to follow in the tradition of performative walker Phil Smith, challenging the sanitising practices of the heritage industry by 'enjoying its mistakes and omissions'⁴. This subsequently allowed for a deeper

exploration of the city, providing me with more meaningful encounters with the spiritual.

The exploration process began by identifying alternative routes to the listed destinations, in the hope that by moving away from the prescribed walks I would uncover a Kamakura that had hitherto remained unseen. On leaving the official Kamakura circuit it quickly became apparent that the bustling streets lined with traditional restaurants and souvenir shops betrayed the city's (apparent) decline. Neglected and abandoned properties occupy a state of ignored ruination (figure 4), hidden from the tourists who follow the main roads through the city. Boarded windows and locked gates offered an alternative view of the life-death binary celebrated in Kamakura's myriad shrines and temples. These traces of previous habitus worked to augment the spectral narrative of this ancient city, delivering ghosts that disrupted the otherwise clean separation between past and present. These remains, unlike those commemorated on the tourist map, were clearly not intended for public consumption.



Figure 4. One of the many abandoned mansions found throughout Kamakura.

The combining of the spectral with Kamakura's existing necronarratives offered an insight into the problematics of curating spatial experience. Whereas previous

visitation to the congested temples had failed to initiate the zen-like introspection which I had hoped for, the new discovery of widespread abandonment, with its tactile, material ghosts, prompted a reflection on place that had been absent from the mapped city. This encounter reiterated the necessity of going off map, of walking outside the curated heritage of the Kamakura landscape. In an attempt to navigate further unmapped sites of interest, I looked to connect other sites of death and haunting through my walking practice, locating unmarked areas in and around the sacred complexes of the city's shrines and temples. Doing so introduced me to Kamakura's countless *yagura* - artificial caves dug from the area's malleable rock that were used as grave sites (largely for the Samurai class) throughout the Kamakura era (1185-1333).

Whilst Kamakura is famous for *yagura*, many of its more interesting graves are hidden amongst the densely-forested hills that surround the city and lay outside of the trails offered by the tourist map. Though not unique to this area, Kamakura has a particularly high concentration of cave graves. The graves provide an unrivalled sense of tranquillity. Their frequency in this region makes it possible to navigate the city and its surrounding area solely by seeking out *yagura*. As memorialised spaces of death, *yagura* occupy a particular place in the geographic imagining of this region. Their often precarious and isolated positioning along cliff edges deep within the hillside forests has fed into local lore and legend. Tales of haunting and curses are widespread in Kamakura, which is unsurprising given the macabre nature of some of these sites. At the *Harakiri yagura*, for example, 870 samurai of the defeated Hōjō clan committed *seppuku* (ritual suicide) in 1333. Such trauma permanently stains the earth, marking it as a place of haunting where the darkness of the past casts a grisly shadow over the present.

Yet the positioning of Kamakura's *yagura* on its official tourist map merely works to organise grave sites in the same way that it does temples and shrines. Visitors are presented with examples that uphold the narrative implemented by the local authority, diminishing the spatial complexity of the city and consequently reducing these sacred sites to little more than a series of photo opportunities in a historical city. But, of course, neither the urban space nor its history can be so clearly demarcated. Each one spills into the other and neither can be delineated in a way that maintains the potential for meaningful experience at a subjective level. Conjuring meaning from such abstraction demands a move beyond the prescribed and into the unmarked and unmapped.

I turned to the map to locate spaces that were deemed unfitting for the official Kamakura experience. I identified an area that had been left blank save for the marking of Mount Kinubari (*Kinubariyama*), a low peak of 120m located thirty minutes' walk east of Kamakura's central train station. The forested flanks of

Kinubari itself were left unmarked on the map for tourists and there was no footpath shown. It was an ideal territory for establishing an alternative encounter with Kamakura. Having chosen to walk out to the east side of the city and explore the cartographic void which the map presented, I noticed that, unlike the nearby Shakadoguchi Kiridoshi Pass, the Kinubariyama Pass lacked any physical signage. I located a path leading to the foot of the hill by working between the map and my phone's GPS service, searching for ways of getting off the main road and into the much quieter residential streets. Leaving the arterial routes offered me glimpses of an 'unseen' Kamakura. More unkempt and abandoned properties lined the steep slope that led toward the city's peripheral forest. The rhythmic chirping of late summer's dying cicada echoed through the trees.

Following a trail off the tarmacked street into an area of dense woodland, I located the first *yagura* that had been left off the map. Set approximately thirty meters back from the footpath stood a large hollowed out area of rockface (figure 5). The entrance was partially obscured by the trunk of a fallen tree, but the recess was clearly visible as a shadowy void on the façade of the cliff. A weathered wooden placard tied to a tree warned of *mamushi*, Japanese pit vipers, lurking in the undergrowth. Mindful of the snakes, I slowly passed through the foliage and clambered over the collapsed tree to enter the cave. Though only shallow, the cave provided a coolness that marked a distinct change in atmosphere from the city streets that I had previously encountered. The solitude of the spot, just a few minutes' walk from the main road, allowed for a contemplation of place that I had not managed to attain elsewhere in Kamakura.



Figure 5. Yagura at the foot of Mount Kinubari.

Returning to the path, I soon found that the route leading to the summit was poorly maintained. Rotten planks of wood and makeshift rafts bridged the various streams and crags that had to be traversed in order to ascend Kinubariyama. A growing awareness of the role which my moving body played in this landscape, and of the coercive nature of place within my own encounter, worked to further ground me in the site. I felt like I was becoming part of it. I became increasingly conscious of its undulations, its sounds, textures and smells, each of which had become more apparent as a contrast to the calmness which the *yagura* had provided.

Halfway into the climb the path forked. Left led down and across a narrow cliff face, while the right path climbed further toward Kinubariyama's peak. As the purpose of this walk was to seek out and explore the unmapped elements of Kamakura's sacred cartography, I edged my way along the left-hand path and soon arrived at another, much larger, *yagura*. The exterior of the *yagura* was decorated with *gorintō* (small stone towers) and *jizō* (carved stone figures). The assemblage of these three sacred things – the tomb, the tower and the figure – signalled a clear division between the secular and the sacred. There, on the tapered ledge between the cliff face and the footpath, rested a spiritual site that was outside both the itinerary and the imagination of the majority of Kamakura's visitors. In walking this route I was finding meaning in this place that would have otherwise been unknown to me due to the crowds, the sterility of the city's prescribed encounters and the lack of opportunity to contemplate its surroundings. Up on the side of Kinubariyama, however, it had become possible to see the fusion of sacrality and landscape. I felt a transformation in the atmosphere and increasingly more connected to my surroundings.



Figure 6. Entrance to Kinubariyama stone mine.

As the footpath led me further toward the south side of the hill it dipped down to reveal a large rectangular cavern carved out of the bottom of the cliff that supported the decorated *yagura* (figure 6). All but the mouth of the cave was hidden in the waning sunlight. Unlike the shallow carving of stone tombs, torchlight revealed that this excavation was far more substantial, stretching back into the hillside at least ten metres, with cathedral-like ribs rudimentarily carved from the walls and ceiling. A small hand-painted sign nailed to the cave's entrance indicated that the hollow had once been a stone quarry. Tool marks were still visible on the cave's walls, while a small stone circle to the right of the entrance hinted at a far more mystical purpose for this lonely place. Walking inside the cave proved difficult due to thick clouds of dust but the affective nature of the site, both physical and emotional, consolidated various experiences of place and spirituality that I had made in climbing Kinubariyama and leaving the tourist track behind.

Moving away from the prescribed routes on the map to walk a path led by curiosity not custom, resulted in a subjective redefining of Kamakura's spiritual cartography, enabling me to experience the city beyond the idealised representation of the space promoted by the region's heritage industry. Working both with and against the official map allowed a rewriting of my experience, a teasing out of the tensions between the desired and the delivered and a growing awareness of the failure of experience offered by Kamakura's tourist office. Alternative cartographies, especially those that have been provided in the works of passionate walker-writers such as Alfred Watkins and Alfred Wainwright⁵, share a common interest in un/mapping and re-mapping those places that come with a multitude of existing accepted historic readings. In challenging the recognised navigations and narratives that places like Kamakura afford, it is possible to move beyond the map and make meaningful experiences of place that allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of our surroundings.

¹ See Tim Winter, 'Material Culture and Contested Heritage in Tourism' in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Tourism*, ed. by Alan Lew and others (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2014), pp. 368-377.

² James Thurgill, 'Mobilities of Magick' in *Sacred Mobilities: Journeys of Belief and Belonging*, ed. by Tim Gale and others (London: Ashgate Press, 2015), pp. 53-69; 'A Strange Cartography: Leylines, Landscape and "Deep Mapping" in the works of Alfred Watkins', *Humanities*, 4 (2015), 637-652.

³ Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, *Edgelands: journeys into England's true wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2012), p. 16.

⁴ Phil Smith, *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* (Axminster: Triarchy Press, 2012) p. 5.

⁵ Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track* (London, Methuen, 1925); Alfred Wainwright, *A Pictorial Guide to the Lakeland Fells, Book 5: The Northern Fells* (London: Frances Lincoln, 1962).