

The evolution of Pokémon into Japanese local mascots as touristic resources on Pokéfuta manhole covers: an interim field report

Debra J Occhi*

Abstract

The globally famous Pocket Monster characters (Pokémon) have become used as local mascot characters in their native Japan, first emerging in 2018 in southern Kyushu. They appear on decorated manhole covers under which no hole exists, providing mappable spots for pilgrimage style touristic consumption in locations of existing tourist resources. These are called Pokéfuta, combining Poké- of Pokémon with *futa* ‘lid’, and may appear as mobile objects as well as those found in fixed locations. The Pokémon are specifically chosen for their location. Wordplay, image, and other associations of each Pokémon to its respective place have transformed these characters from their original associations with fictive regions (e.g., Johto, Aronia) into local mascots using strategies already established by *yuru kyara* phenomena (Occhi 2014). Since I have previously researched Pokémon GO and related Pokémon phenomena, I have undertaken a fieldwork project to explore the Pokéfuta locations and potential interactions of deliberate or accidental visitors to these pop pilgrimage spots and their environs. Such observational research methodology combined with autoethnography are social science tools surely enjoying a renaissance during these COVID-19 pandemic years. This working paper documents some of my findings thus far, including personal visits to Ibusuki (the Pokéfuta birthplace) and a report of the visits in Miyazaki funded by my individual discretionary account with approval from the Testing, Research, and Assessment Committee.

Background

Ibusuki, in the southern tip of the Satsuma peninsula of Kagoshima, is the birthplace of the Pokéfuta phenomenon. Like so much in the Pokémon world and in the Japanese character world more broadly (Occhi 2012), the character chosen for its place has a name that creates an affective and memorable resonance with its place. Eievui, the squirrel-like Pokémon #133 (and its eight evolutions Showers, Thunders, Booster, Eifie, Blacky, Leafia, Glacia, and Nymphia), are now affiliated as mascots for Ibusuki, using the ruse *Eievui suki* ‘(I) love Eievui’ which sounds like the city name Ibusuki. In 2018 that character appeared on a decorated manhole cover in front of JR Ibusuki train station, near

the police box and opposite the free hot spring footbath. Ibusuki station also includes a garden surrounded by the taxi roundabout. Inside is a visitor center office, part of which has been converted to an Eievui goods shop. Nearby, in the middle of the public area stands a large glass box in which stuffed toys of the nine Eievui variations appear to be sleeping in a pile. These cute, pastel, and untouchable fuzzy toys are a natural draw for visitors who may then obtain a map showing the manhole locations from the tourist office and potentially buy goods.

Ibusuki's Pokéfuta map includes a suggested route to each of the manhole covers, with estimates for travel times by rental bicycles available at the station (called Iburin, with *rin* referring to bicycle wheels), on foot, and by car (or bus for the two furthest spots, since not all the landmarks correlate to bus stops). These nine spots include three major hot spring facilities, a public library, Ibusuki central park, the archaeological museum, an eco-camping facility bordering a large park on the promontory, and both sides of the train station (Ibusuki Tourism Net 2021). The distribution of Eievuis appears to be nonrandom, for example Leafia who has green leaflike tufts appears at the Eco Campground site. This strategy localizes each Pokémon as a representative of the place where its manhole cover is located, effectively turning it into a 'working character' (Nozawa 2013) as well as a *yuru kyara* style of local mascot (Occhi 2012). I have visited the Ibusuki Eievui Pokéfuta twice by car (in summer of 2020 and winter of 2022), finding it possible to get them all in a leisurely day trip from Kagoshima city. Though this research is not intended to be interactional, fellow pilgrims I have encountered there have all been identified with Kagoshima thus far (either verbally or by car license plates). The tourist office workers told me that a much wider range of visitors have received maps, including international tourists, but that there are no additional promotions or attempts to gauge visitor behavior.

Following the lead of Kagoshima's Ibusuki City tie up with the Eievui Pokémon character through the placement of decorated manhole covers at local points of interest, Miyazaki as well as other prefectures has installed Pokéfuta around its various towns. Currently there are 26 locations in Miyazaki with no plans to add more. I began visiting those in southern Miyazaki bit by bit on my own and became interested in traveling to the more distant ones in the north and west. Research activities have been limited in this COVID-19 era, but I realized it would be fruitful to conduct autoethnography and make

observations in each location. I wanted to see if visitors to these already existing public facilities take notice and engage with the manholes. Though a stamp rally to promote interest had been established in late 2021, I did not partake in it since it was ultimately cancelled with the state of emergency, so it falls outside the bounds of this project. Other promotions involving stamp rallies and social media tags have taken place over the last year; their investigation will require further research.

Partial findings with some contextualizing details

Starting in 2019, Miyazaki prefecture has installed Pokéfuta at touristic locations. The promotion office has created maps and hosted several promotions over the course of its installation and use of Pokéfuta, with stamp rally features built into its maps. The maps include general tourist information as well as Google Map data in QR codes. In contrast to Ibusuki's strategy of a single Pokémon per Pokéfuta, Miyazaki's Pokéfuta promotion combines the palm tree character Nassy with various other Pokémon who are chosen specifically for the place where their manhole is located. In this way they are reframed as local mascots as are Nassy and the Eievui cohort. Other decorations on each manhole include specific images that further contextualize the Pokémon and deepen associations of the manhole with its location. After visiting several of these on my own recognizance, from 2022 I undertook a more formal study of these manholes as an institutionally supported research project. I aimed to understand their localizations as representatives of their respective areas, the touristic contexts of their locations, and the emergent phenomena of local promotions, which have included various mechanisms such as stamp rallies and SNS-driven prize lotteries. Furthermore, as follow-up to my previous research on Pokémon GO (Occhi 2019), I am exploring what affordances these Pokéfuta have within that virtual world. This brief working paper is intended specifically as an interim research report of the institutionally supported travel I made as this project continues. Other data is slated for presentation elsewhere as this is a project still in progress.

The two versions of Nassy, the palm tree Pokémon who were chosen for Miyazaki's Pokéfuta character, recall the prefecture's original transformation into a tourist destination. Its name Nassy has been rumored to derive from the words for palm tree, nuts, and/or date palm (i.e. *yashi*, *nattsu*, *natsume yashi*) (Pokémon Wiki n.d.). Two

versions of the Nassy character resemble the two main types planted here; original 2 meter tall Nassy resembles the shorter Phoenix palm while 10.9 meter tall Aronia Nassy looks like the Dracanea palm, each with three funny faces added. English localizations of these names are Exeggutor and Alolan Exeggutor. The ‘egg’ further hearkens back to the palm trees’ pre-evolved form of five egg shapes with faces, known as Exeggcute in English and Tamatama in Japanese. *Tama* means jewel or ball and reflects the roundness of the eggs. *Tamatama* literally means ‘sometimes’ or ‘by accident’ and is also the appellation of a special local variety of *kinkan* ‘kumquat’, a recently famous Miyazaki fruit product. This combination of wordplay and locally resonant imagery is similar to that used by *yuru kyara* local mascots (Occhi 2013) such as the neighboring Kumamon whose name derives from its home, Kumamoto, and dialectal *mon*, meaning person. Kumamon resembles a bear (*kuma*) but is not actually one (Occhi 2018, 2020). The following table will summarize the locations, characters, and their associations, and other contextualizing imagery I was able to discern from local lore of each location.

Table 1. IDA funded Pokéfuta visits (Pokémon names are trademark versions; see Table 2 for English localizations)

City	Pokémon	Location	Rationale
Kawaminami	Numakuro	SAN-A Culture Hall	interesting local water creatures
Shintomi	Makunoshita	Tondahama Park	fighting, a famous local flower
Kijo	Metamon	Kawabaru Natural Park	<i>oni hasu</i> rare local flower
Takachiho	Rejigigas*	Gamadase Ichiba	near Takachiho shrine
Gokase	Rejiaisu*	G-Park sports park	ice machine, near the ski park
Morotsuka	Rejirokku*	Morokko House	rock name wordplay, mountainous area
Misato	Tamatama	Ishitoke Lakeland	<i>kinkan</i> name wordplay with Nassy's pre-evolution form
Kobayashi	Mokuro	Nojirikopia	cosmos flowers
Nishimera	Goruugu*	Nishimera Onsen	carries a basket of vegetables with local <i>itomaki daikon</i> radish
Nobeoka	Both Nassy versions	Kitaura beach park	beach

The obviousness of local reference is stronger for some characters and elements than in others. For instance, the Miyazaki City Pokéfuta, located near Aoshima Beach and the Kodomo no Kuni kiddylane entrance, sports a version of the Powarun character who resembles a sun looking down on the Nassy palm tree at the beach. Nobeoka's Pokéfuta, listed in Table 1 above, is also near the coast and includes both versions of Nassy. Takanabe's Pokéfuta is located at a surfing beach and shows Aronia Raichu surfing on its tail. These references are much more obviously connected to the touristic possibilities of their locations than are others, such as Shintomi's Makunoshita. This character trains to fight; it refers to the local Self-Defense Force training grounds. The most remote of the locations I visited were inhabited by extremely rare Pokémon (marked in Table 1 with *) accompanying the Nassy. These would have appealed to Pokémon fans in that the effort to visit would be rewarded by the sight of such an unusual character. This strategy was also apparently employed in the locating of the rare Mew #151 Pokéfuta in Tokyo's faraway Chichijima Island along with its inclusion on three other Pokéfuta with Pokémon who are the highest evolved versions of Johto Pokémon #1, #2, and #3 (Baseel 2001). The combination of these characters makes the Ogasawara set representative of the first and last Pokémon of the original generation. Since Ogasawara is not part of my personal data collection thus far, I can unfortunately offer no further insight to their rationale.

In Miyazaki and typically, each of the characters is said to have been chosen for maximal local resonance, so it is not surprising if visitors cannot retrieve the local references easily. Other resonances include local plants and other specific entities, some of which are described in guide maps distributed by the prefectural tourism office. Pokéfuta images may be simple or complicated; the simple Eievies represent Ibusuki well on their own, but other cases may benefit from further contextualization. Local mascots typically also contain elements that befuddle spectators because of their fantastic mashup of characteristics (Miura 2004). This strategy renders mascots unique and piques curiosity for tourists while it gives a sense of importance and familiarity for locals. The Pokéfuta combinations of Nassy palm trees, other Pokémon, and other specifically chosen visual elements create this mashup style of fantasy, a semiotic strategy similar to those embodied in local mascots known as *yuru kyara*.

Following the approved TRAC application guidelines, I did not engage other visitors in interviews. This was easy since other visitors to the Miyazaki manholes were usually not present during these visits. That said, I have no doubt given social media evidence that tourists are engaging with these spots and will glean more data from the web in order to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomena. Where possible I asked local officials about resonance of characters and other details of the Pokéfuta in the vicinity. I also have data from several other Pokéfuta I visited on personal funds, most of which are not described here. These include five in northern Kyushu. Three Pokéfuta remain in Saga that I must visit to have all of Kyushu in the data set.

Stamp rally promotions encourage travel to multiple locations. Those taking place during the year discussed here were difficult to research thoroughly for lack of time. However, one unusual event was held on July 4, 2022 that allowed easy access to all the manholes at once. I attended this Nassy no Hi event held at the Miyazaki Airport. The numbers 7 and 4 expressing July 4 in Japanese can be read as *na shi*, homophonous with Nassy. This re-reading and inscription of the character Nassy onto the calendar date that sounds like its name is a kind of wordplay called *goroawase* which is used to establish events widely throughout the year. This event used the wide central area in Miyazaki Airport and combined the mobile effigies of each Pokéfuta with QR codes for their Google map locations and brochures advertising each of the 26 areas. Coloring pages and pencils were provided at two tables. An inflatable Aronia Nassy provided a life-sized example at its full 10-meter height listed as an attribute in the character's profile. This huge character still graces the airport, overshadowing the Aronia themed photo board *kaodashi* which has been provided since the early days of the Nassy installations. Nassy was animated as well; the shorter Nassy appeared as a costume suit *kigurumi* on the event day and allowed visitors to have a photo opportunity during specified times that day. This event was popular not only with incidental travelers, but also fans, some who wore Pokémon themed garments or carried goods. A popup shop allowed further purchases; however, the Nassy character toys were unavailable due to COVID-19 related troubles with their import from China. Overall, the event was impressive and well attended; its centrality and assemblage of the manholes allowed for an unusual level of immediate consumption which a later stamp rally held elsewhere has employed in part.

Final Notes

While this project is still underway with plans for expansion, it is already begun to promise results as a scholarly contribution beyond this working paper. My research is, as far as I am aware, the first scholarly investigation of Pokéfuta to date. The topic has not been taken up widely in popular media either, save the overview provided in Claudia (2021) and the reports on installations provided by Sora News. Thus far I have been accepted to present at one domestic conference in Tokyo during summer 2023 and have submitted an abstract as part of a proposed panel at a major conference in North America slated for late 2023. These research results should also form the basis of publication following the presentations. The data has also made a substantial contribution to my Japanese Popular Culture course module on contents tourism, an expanding area of promotion and scholarship. I am grateful for institutional support of my research and am enthusiastic about its potential. Due to the deadline for this article, I will not be able to include data from my forthcoming visit to Kagawa for their Yadon Pokéfuta promotion, which will have partial institutional support.

*Due to the preliminary nature of this report and the likelihood that ongoing research will update its findings, I wish to be contacted in advance by anyone who wishes to quote or cite it and can be reached at docchi@sky.miyazaki-mic.ac.jp.

Table 2. Pokémon trademark names and English localizations

Japanese	English
Nassy	Exeggutor
Numakuro	Marshomp
Makunoshita	Makuhita
Metamon	Ditto
Powarun	Castform
Rejigigas	Rejigigas
Rejiaisu	Rejice
Rejirokku	Rejirock

Tamatama	Exeggcute
Mokuro	Rowlet
Goruugu	Golurk
Raichu	Raichu
Eievui	Eevee
Showers	Vaporeon
Thunders	Jolteon
Booster	Flareon
Eifie	Espeon
Blacky	Umbreon
Leafia	Leafeon
Glacia	Glaceon
Nymphia	Sylveon
Yadon	SlowPoke
Mew	Mew

References

Baseel, Casey. 2021. Mew makes Pokémon manhole project debut in the most crazy-remote part of Tokyo there is. Sora News 24, March 3, 2021. Retrieved 14 March 2023 from <https://soraneews24.com/2021/03/03/mew-makes-Pokémon-manhole-project-debut-in-the-most-crazy-remote-part-of-tokyo-there-is/>

Claudia. 2021. Pokéfuta: Explore Japan through Pokémon Manholes. Voyapon Japan Travel Guide. August 10, 2021. Retrieved 14 March 2023 from <https://voyapon.com/Pokéfuta-Pokémon-manholes-japan/>

Ibusuki Tourism Net 2021. *Ninki Pokémon 'Eievui' to shinkakei no manhooru w setchi!* Retrieved 14 March 2023 from <https://www.ibusuki.or.jp/news/2019/02/22/14826.html>

Miura Jun. 2004 *Yuru kyara Daizukan*. Tokyo: Fusōsha.

Miyazaki Prefecture. Nd. *Nassy rizooto in Miyazaki*. Retrieved 14 March 2023 from <https://nassy.hinata-miyazaki.jp>.

Nozawa, Shunsuke 2013. Characterization. Semiotic Review 3
<http://www.semioticreview.com/index.php/open-issues/issue-open-2013/21-characterization.html>

Occhi, Debra J. 2020. Yuru Kyara: Kumamon. In *Japanese Media and Popular Culture: An Open-Access Digital Initiative of the University of Tokyo*. Tokyo: University of Tokyo International Publishing Initiative and Kadokawa Culture Promotion Foundation.
<https://jmpc-utokyo.com/character/kumamon/>

Occhi, Debra J. 2019. Social and Affective Implications of Pokémon GO in Japanese Contexts: “Mind your Manners and Have Fun” in The Augmented Reality of Pokémon Go: Chronotopes, Moral Panic, and Other Complexities, Neriko Musha Doerr and Debra J Occhi, eds. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Occhi, Debra J 2018 Kumamon: Japan’s Surprisingly Cheeky *Yuru Kyara* Mascot In *Introducing Japanese Popular Culture*, Alisa Freedman and Toby Slade, eds. Oxford: Routledge, 13-23.

Occhi, Debra J 2012 Wobbly Aesthetics, Performance, and Message: Comparing Japanese Kyara with their Anthropomorphic Forebears. *Asian Ethnology* 71:1, 109-132.

Pokémon Wiki n.d. ポケモンの名前の由来一覧/第一世代 Retrieved 14 March 2023 from <https://wiki.ポケモン.com/wiki/>

Sora News n.d. <https://soranews24.com/tag/Pokéfuta/>