

# Miyako Odori: Tourist Icon of Kyoto Tradition

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**Abstract.** Miyako Odori, a traditional dance performance orchestrated by the geiko (geisha) and maiko, is an annual event that represents Kyoto's rich cultural heritage. Unfortunately, this performance was canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused several Geiko and Maiko to lose their places of work. In 2023, after the COVID-19 pandemic, Miyako Odori performed for the first time in three years. This research delivers historical significance, icon cultural impact, and contemporary relevance of Miyako Odori as a tourist attraction. It examines how the event not only preserves traditional Japanese arts but also adapts to modern tourism demands, attracting domestic and international visitors. The research highlights the interplay between cultural preservation and tourism, demonstrating how Miyako Odori contributes to Kyoto's identity as a bastion of traditional Japanese culture while promoting cultural exchange and economic vitality. Study aims to elucidate the multifaceted role of Miyako Odori as Kyoto's icon culture through a review of historical documents, contemporary accounts, and tourism statistics. This research underscores the role of Miyako Odori as an icon of tourist attraction, significantly boosting the local economy and society.

**Keywords:** Miyako Odori, Tourist Icon, Tourist Attraction.

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, tourism has become one of the sectors that has experienced a lot of improvement in Japan. This can be seen from the increase in tourists entering Japan. JNTO revealed that tourists coming to Japan have increased from 2013-2019 and reached the highest position in 2019, around 31,8 million people with the dominant purpose of traveling [1]. One of the cities which is popular with both local and foreign tourists is Kyoto. Kyoto is a special city that is rich in historical and cultural heritage. Some of these cultural heritages include the existence of the Kyoto Imperial Palace, Temple and Shrine, Geisha, and Theater performances.

Gion is a district in Kyoto that is famous for the existence of Geiko and Maiko. Geiko, also known as Geisha, symbolizes the beauty of traditional Japanese culture that is still preserved today. Mariko Okada explains that Geiko and Maiko are obligated to show their skills and represent traditional Japanese Culture. Furthermore,

Okada mentions that the Kyoto city government is aware of the role of Geisha/Geiko to further introduce authentic Japanese culture to both domestic and foreign tourists[2].

In 2020-2022, Covid-19 hit the world and caused paralysis of activities in several sectors. One of the entertainment sectors affected by Covid-19 is the activities of Geisha and Maiko in the Gion district, Kyoto. One of those affected is the Miyako Odori performance, a tradition of theater performances also affected by Covid-19. Miyako Odori is generally held annually, where selected Maiko and Geiko in Gion perform in a public performance that a larger audience can enjoy. The Miyako Odori performance, a traditional cultural icon of Kyoto city, was cancelled in 2020 [3] but began to be performed again in 2023 [4].

## **2 Methods**

This research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative approach and literature review data methods. The stages carried out in this research are collecting data, categorization, and analysis using theories and literature sources. The data obtained is secondary data derived from documentary video footage and online news related to the research topic.

## **3 Result and Discussion**

The Miyako Odori is a must-see annual show held every April in Gion District, Kyoto, Japan. This show has been held for a hundred years and has become a symbol of Kyoto's tradition. Miyako Odori is a dance and theatrical show performed by Maiko (an apprentice Geisha) and Geiko (also known as Geisha). In this paper, I will use the term Geiko to represent Geisha. Since it was first performed, Miyako Odori has become a symbol of the glory of Kyoto, which was once the capital of Japan before being moved to Tokyo.

Miyako Odori's first performance was held in 1872 (Meiji-5) during the first of The Kyoto Exposition. Miyako Odori performances attract the attention of both domestic and international tourists visiting Kyoto. Miyako Odori then became one of Kyoto's tourism attraction icons that still exist today. Miyako Odori is not only a dance performance performed by Maiko and Geiko, but also a theater art with a depiction of traditional community life in each season. Geiko and Maiko take turns performing dances that represent each season, the show featuring a spring scene as the event's finale and highlight. Thus, Miyako Odori is also known as the Cherry Blossom Dance.

### **3.1 Icons as Tourist Attraction**

Icons as tourist attractions often refer to the role of a symbol of a landmark or site that is an attraction for tourists. The word icons in this research refers to cultural activities that have existed for a long time and are preserved until now. The existence of the icon is often the main attraction, as well as a symbol of the identity of a place. Research conducted by Liang Tang and Alastair M. Morrison, looks at Icons as Tourist Attractions with a comparative study between members of the American Destination Marketing Association (formerly IACVB) and China's tourism bureaus (city and county tourism bureaus). The concept of Icons in Tang's research is to define famous individuals as potential destination icons. The research findings explain that famous individuals in America as tourism icons do not necessarily increase one's motivation to travel to a place. This is very different from China, which has a very long history, so individuals as tourism icons are still a solid motivation to encourage someone to do tourism activities [5].

Susanne Becken states that tourist icons are major pull factors of a destination that attract the attention of potential tourists [6]. Furthermore, Becken added that tourist icons are often used as marketing because they generally have a uniqueness that characterizes a tourist spot. A place will become a tourism icon after going through a long process involving many parties, such as the tourist location, the local community's involvement, and the mass media's role. Tourist icons often depict famous buildings that represent tourist spots, such as the Taj Mahal in India, Borobudur in Indonesia, and others. In this research, the concept of an icon as a tourist attraction is a theater performance that presents the characteristics of Kyoto's traditional culture.

### **3.2 Miyako Odori as Kyoto's Icon Tourism**

Miyako Odori is a dance performance performed by Geiko and Maiko that is held every April in Kyoto. 'Miyako' means Capital City, while 'Odori' means dance, so that Miyako Odori can be translated as 'Capital City Dances'. This is related to the history of Japan, where Kyoto was once the capital of Japan. Kyoto was the capital of Japan for approximately 1000 years, and in 1869, the capital moved to Tokyo. Miyako Odori began in 1872, four years after moving the capital from Kyoto to Tokyo, as a performance aimed to raise local spirits.

Miyako Odori features selected Geiko and Maiko residing in the Gion district. Despite being known worldwide, the opportunity to see a Geiko is not easy to come by. Generally, Geiko performs at Ochaya (a small private teahouse), which generally requires difficult access, and expensive fees. Thus, Miyako Odori performances

provide a greater opportunity for people to see the performances of Geiko and Maiko because the performances are public.

Geiko and Maiko performances in Miyako Odori generally feature eight scenes, each showing a different aspect of Japanese life. The backdrops feature places that characterize Japan, such as shrines and temples, as well as the changing seasons throughout the year. Geiko and Maiko improvised the performance as they danced with theatrical acting and singing.

The local government of Kyoto also influences the development of Miyako Odori as a traditional cultural icon. This can be seen from the timing of performances and the publication of activities included in the annual agenda. The government's plan aims to increase the number of tourist visits.

Name of Icon	<b>Miyako Odori (都をどり)</b>
Name of Country	Japan
Name of City/Area	Gion District, Kyoto
Reason	Miyako odori is a Japanese traditional culture. It is also known as Cherry Blossom Dance, because it is held every April of the year.
Description	Miyako Odori held since 1872 and performed by Geiko and Maiko which is represented to Japanese culture. Japanese Geisha is very rare to be seen, but visitor has a chance to see geisha in public performance. Miyako represented to Kyoto traditional culture.

#### 4 Conclusion

Miyako Odori is an essential symbol of Kyoto's rich cultural heritage and tradition. This annual event not only celebrates the arrival of spring but also presents cultural aspects of Geisha. Miyako Odori is a Kyoto tradition icon that not only boosts Kyoto's local economy through tourism but also serves as a cultural bridge and educates people about the beauty of Japan.

First, I am grateful to the Faculty of Humanities of Diponegoro University for funding and resources for this research project.

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