

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RESCUING INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE

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## **Introduction – The Impact of Disasters on Culture and Cultural Properties/Heritage**

The tsunami disaster, which occurred on 11 March 2011 as a result of the Great East Japan Earthquake, destroyed people's everyday lives and swept their properties out to sea. Besides sweeping away their cultural properties, the tsunami erased many things people in the region needed for their lives.

'Cultural property' mainly refers to properties that are designated as such under the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties in Japan. Rescue work was undertaken for these cultural properties, and many of them were rescued in areas affected by the disaster. A characteristic of the concept of cultural properties in Japan is that they not only include art and craft products with high aesthetic and historical value, but they also include folk cultural properties. 'Folk cultural properties' are defined in the Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties as cultural assets 'essential for the understanding of developments in the everyday lives of the Japanese people', including tools used in daily life, and tools and equipment used for traditional customs and festivals. Furthermore, these folk cultural properties are not just tangible assets such as tools, but include intangible assets such as festivals and rituals.

The cultural properties damaged in the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster were targeted for rescue work. It can be understood that rescue measures were taken for the tangible cultural properties that had been physically damaged. However, what sorts of measures were taken for intangible cultural properties? I would like to introduce the situation in the areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster.

## **Measures for Rescuing Intangible Cultural Heritage**

To understand intangible cultural heritage in relation to natural hazards, first, it is necessary to consider how 'intangible' cultural heritage is damaged by disaster.

First, let us consider the destruction of the tools and other items used. This can be understood as an extension of the cases of damage to 'tangible' cultural heritage. Simultaneously, the seriousness of the damage to intangible cultural heritage can be seen in the loss or cessation of traditional performances and festivals as a consequence of the destruction of local communities.

The areas that were inundated by the tsunami in the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster maintain an extremely large number of traditional folk performing arts, called '*minzoku geino*', that are held and transmitted among local communities, and many of them were affected. Therefore, in coordination with the work of rescuing tangible cultural properties, various types of support were also extended to rescue intangible cultural properties. For example:

- A wide range of support was made to restore/renew tools and equipment.
- Cultural events inviting affected performers/practitioners were held in many places.
- Events substituting traditional festivals/ritual events were programmed.
- Increased visit to learn cases of the revitalization of traditional rituals and festivals
- Increased number of volunteers to support festive events

### **The Case of *Ogatsu-Hoin-Kagura***

So, what is the significance of these kinds of activities? I would like to address this using the example of *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura*, which is a folk performing art tradition that has been handed down in the Ogatsu region, in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, and has been designated as an Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property by the government of Japan. *Kagura* is a stage performance that re-enacts mythological stories. The dancers perform while speaking lines, in synchronization with the music of drums and a flute. *Kagura* is generally performed at festivals and rituals in local communities. You might think that many people enjoy *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* because it has been designated as a national cultural property. However, the community people treat this *kagura* as an essential part of a festival ritual on a special day set apart from everyday life, calling it '*okagura*'.

The Ogatsu region suffered huge losses in the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster, and most of the items used to stage *kagura* were swept away in the tsunami. Despite such difficult situation, the *kagura* performers (*kagurashi*) decided to resume their *kagura* as early as April 2011, and to restore tools and equipment that are necessary for the performance.

Inspired by the will of the *kagura* performers, many people supported them and provided funds so that the restoration of the equipment progressed smoothly. What is crucial to this series of actions is that the performers succeeded in reviving the *kagura* through their own will and efforts. They did not take orders from the Agency for Cultural Affairs as a nationally designated cultural property. The significance of their actions is that they did this entirely on their initiative.

Figure 1 shows the festival before the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster. You can see that all ages from children to the elderly are watching, but it is a pretty thin crowd for a nationally-designated cultural property. In other words,



**Figure 1** *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* before the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster (left); and the festival in the same community that was resumed in 2012 (right). Note that the latter is more crowded with visitors outside the local community. (Source: R. Kodani)

*Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* was embedded within everyday life. It was not something that you sat and watched with full attention.

### Heritagization of Local Culture

Cultural heritage (cultural properties) are defined as elements the government has decided to preserve and to be transmitted to future generations. On the other hand, culture is something that is shaped by constant changes. These changes occur in everyday life, gradually with the flow of time. In other words, changes are not noticed as they occur. Therefore, one of the challenges in Japanese cultural property protection administration is how to relate cultural change to the preservation and safeguarding of heritage.

After the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster, a movement to save cultural properties was evident, regardless of whether they were tangible or intangible, to be transmitted to future generations. The projects of rescuing cultural properties was not just for tangible cultural properties, but also included intangible cultural properties. It was a movement in which cultural elements that should be protected from disasters and transmitted to future generations were discovered and preserved as cultural heritage. I call this ‘the heritagization of local culture’.

An important point here is that cultural heritage (or cultural properties) is to be preserved and transmitted to future generations, whereas local culture is something that changes over time. In the very concept of intangible cultural heritage, there is no elements of intangible cultural heritage that does not change. However, for a certain cultural element to be defined as a cultural heritage it becomes necessary to specify what exactly is to be preserved, and in this respect culture takes on the nuance of ossification. The movement has grown in this context, in which elements that were not recognized as cultural properties have become recognized as cultural heritage and targeted for preservation.



**Figure 2**  
*Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* being performed on stage.  
 (Source: R. Kodani)

Figure 2 shows *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* being performed on stage. You can see that the atmosphere in which it is performed differs greatly from the community festival we saw on Figure 1. For a folk performing art that has been held and transmitted in local communities, in particular, becoming cultural heritage means that it is separated from the local community to be performed on a stage, as seen here. This is because this particular component of the event is what has been defined as cultural heritage. Therefore, ‘heritagization of culture’ also means that the element could be preserved independently of the local community.

From a viewpoint emphasizing its link to the local community, it is not preferable for an element to be separated from the local community by heritagization. Conversely, becoming an independent cultural heritage could be an advantage when settlements were lost, as was the case for the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster. In other words, protecting culture as cultural heritage enables to preserve at least a part of the local culture even if the local community physically disappears. However, protecting cultural heritage actually enables to preserve the local culture, leading to the reestablishment of new local communities? This is the final point I would like to discuss.

Figure 3 shows a scene of *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* being performed before the disaster. An old man who had too much to drink got on the stage and started to dance, telling the *kagura* performer, ‘hey you, you’re a terrible performer, let me take your place’. A person would be really brave if he could do that on the fancy stage we saw on Figure 2. That kind of happenings are quite common at the *okagura* in the Ogatsu region; even the *kagura* performers say that these are the most thrilling and enjoyable part of the *okagura*.

Such relationship between the performers and the community members is the biggest difference between the *okagura* that is part of daily life in the community and the *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* as intangible cultural heritage. Protecting only the heritage aspect



**Figure 3**

A scene of *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* before the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster.  
(Source: R. Kodani)

of *Ogatsu-hoin-kagura* would lead to the loss of its connectedness with the people of the local community. For protecting and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage after the disaster, it is very important to consider how such community-linked aspects of *kagura* could be maintained and transmitted.

### **Importance of Qualitative Survey in Disaster-Affected Areas**

Values of some cultural elements was recognized in the post-disaster context by being or becoming cultural properties; however not all cultural elements became cultural properties. From an anthropological standpoint, what is called for is to grasp as much as possible a diversity of cultural phenomena in the local communities, and to identify based on that knowledge what must be preserved and what is better to be preserved after a disaster. While rescuing cultural elements such as performances and festivals that are more recognizable as cultural heritage or cultural properties, how do we deal with other elements that are rather unnoticeable? Therefore, it would be desirable to perform a qualitative survey, not just to target existing cultural properties, to gain a holistic view of a diversity of culture that grounds the society and the people's daily life in a given community. Based on that, elements that should be continued in the recovered community, that are beneficial for revitalizing the community, and that are too close to the people's daily lives and their importance is not recognized, are identified for safeguarding.

Figure 4 shows scenes that can be found here and there when you walk around the areas affected by the tsunami. Photo on the left shows the remains of a house that was about 100 m from the coast, and you can see a small shrine stands alone in the corner. This is *Myojin-sama*, the god that protects the house and the compound. This scene suggests that the god has to be re-enshrined even when people are devastated by tsunami and evacuated far away from their ground. The image on the right side is the *Myojin-sama* I came across at Minamisanriku-cho. The god appears to have been properly enshrined by tying tree branches together in the shape of a *torii* gate. It



**Figure 4** A small shrine for *Myojin-sama* inside the remnant of a house (left); and the one seen in Minamisanriku-cho. (Source: R. Kodani)

looks like the members of the household that worshiped this shrine were all killed in the tsunami, and the neighbors have re-enshrined this god, even though the people who had once looked after it are gone.

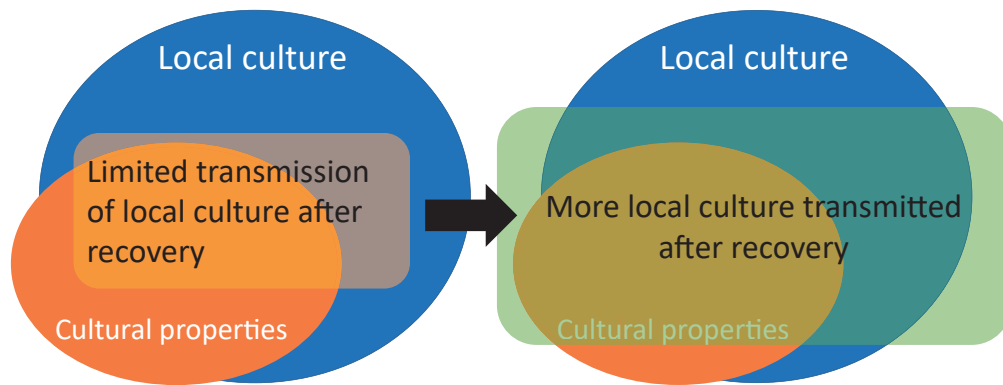
Since the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami Disaster, no one is permitted to live in these housing areas, and the people have been required to move elsewhere. However, in the meantime, they continue to make these temporary shrines for the gods. You can see the depth of the local tradition regarding the protective gods of their home and land. The culture surrounding the Shinto and Buddhist beliefs as described here is too trivial to be incorporated into the official plan for disaster recovery. However, it is an essential part of their lives for the people who used to live there.

### **Pre-Disaster Local Culture in A Context of New Post-Disaster Communities**

It would be necessary, along with transmitting cultural heritage, to create a mechanism to transmit this kind of local cultural elements that are not recognized by the community people as their own unique culture. Given that such cultures are fostered spontaneously, it is of course possible to think that local culture would gradually take shape in a different form in the new community. However, I believe that including those elements in the process of recovery would be highly beneficial for building a new community and local society more smoothly.

Figure 5 shows a diagram of this process. Cultural properties are one part of the local culture, and by rescuing cultural properties, some prominent part of local culture could be transmitted (Figure 5, left). As a matter of course, it is not possible to rescue everything, but if only a small part is preserved, the amount of culture that are transmitted becomes smaller. Conversely, it would be necessary to preserve as much culture as possible for transmitting local culture in the process of forming a new community.

Preserving local culture as cultural heritage makes it possible to transmit large areas of



**Figure 5** Diagram showing the range of local cultural elements that could be transmitted after recovery.

culture after a disaster. On the other hand, modest elements of local culture are also an important part composing local communities, and we could say that an accumulation of these modest elements creates local communities. They are indispensable for the transmission of cultural properties to the future generations.

Those of us who are working in the academic fields such as Japanese folklore studies and anthropology that study local communities should clarify the relationship between the two aspects of culture, and communicate the importance of both to the people of the local communities recovering from disasters.