

Lecture 8:

Prospects for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Kyoto - Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage and its methods

UEKI Yukinobu

Former Professor, Kyoto Gakuen University

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Self Introduction: A former Kyoto Gakuen University professor and an expert appointed as a member of the Council for Cultural Affairs, Agency for Cultural Affairs (the 4th and 5th Expert Investigation Committees, Subdivision on Cultural Properties). Currently a member of the Mie Prefecture Council for the Protection of Cultural Properties and an advisor to the National Association for the Conservation of Yama, Hoko and Yatai.

Specializing in the history of Japanese performing arts, culture, and folklore.

Authored *Yama, Hoko, Yatai no Matsuri – Furyu no kaika (Festivals with Yama, Hoko, and Yatai – Development of Furyu)*, *Chusei geino no keisei katei (Formation Process of Medieval Performing Arts)*, and some others.

Lecture Summary: While intangible cultural heritage (ICH) emerges in the form of human conduct and is founded in the structural chain of people, objects, and skills, the traditional structure has changed dramatically and rapidly collapsing. In order to safeguard our intangible cultural heritage, it is essential that we protect the heritage and focus on the mechanism of the chain system and implement countermeasures to prevent a collapse. In this lecture, using the Gion Festival as an example, we review the issues that we currently face and seek possible ways to safeguard ICH in the future.

Outline:

1. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Japanese Cultural Properties
2. Characteristics of Intangible Cultural Properties
3. Intangible Folk Culture and Protection
4. Protection of the Gion Festival Yamahoko Events
5. Challenges and Future Prospects

1. Intangible Cultural Heritage and Japanese Cultural Properties

Cultural properties can be categorized into tangible culture that exists as tangible objects and intangible culture that takes the form of human conduct. Intangible cultural heritage, which belongs to the latter category, is defined by the Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (the third convention announced on April 14, 2006, and came into effect on April 20, 2006) as follows: “Intangible cultural heritage means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups, and, in some areas, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated...thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.” Specifically, it is “manifested inter alia

in the following domains (Article 2)”:

- (a) Oral traditions and expressions (including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage)
- (b) Performing arts;
- (c) Social practices, rituals, and festive events;
- (d) Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; and
- (e) Traditional craftsmanship.

In Japan, the Japanese Law for the Protection of Cultural Properties defines the intangible cultural heritage as including “intangible cultural properties,” “intangible folk cultural properties,” and “cultural properties preservation techniques.” The definitions of these cultural properties and their protection systems have already been provided in the lecture by Mr. Kensaku Kikuchi. It is a global understanding, however, that the intangible cultural heritage as defined in the Convention corresponds only to the “intangible folk cultural properties”: Unfortunately, the Japanese concept of ICH has not been fully understood.

2. Characteristics of Intangible Cultural Properties

Intangible culture manifests itself in the form of human conduct and disappears with the completion of the conduct. Its characteristics can probably be described as follows:

- a. Intangible cultural heritage, which living individuals or groups of individuals embody, cannot exist without those people who possess and embody them.
- b. It emerges as the conduct of individuals or groups of individuals who possess the techniques and skills and constitutes a continuum of moments where it appears and disappears. It is, therefore, impossible to fix to store it.
- c. The act of embodiment can be divided into two categories: The first category includes cases where the act itself is the main body, such as performing arts, festive events, and rituals. The second category includes craftsmanship where the act produces material objects.
- d. While performing arts and others presuppose the presence of the third parties, such as an audience, craftsmanship does not require the presence of others as its outcome is presented in the form of products.
- e. Performing arts cannot be fully appreciated unless the act and the space-time of those who embody them are shared with the audience. Traces of their existence can only be found in the minds of those who enjoyed them as experiences or memories of strong impressions or deep appreciation. While it is possible to reproduce or view/listen to them via media, such as images, such reproductions provide only indirect appreciation of replicas.

Measures to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage should correspond to these unique characteristics of incorporeality. Simply put, it boils down to how to secure people who possess the techniques and skills. However, the intangible folk culture transmitted by certain groups, such as local communities, faces growing difficulty in even securing its bearers due to the collapse of local communities as represented by *marginal villages* (a village on the verge of disappearance due to aging of residents).

3. Intangible Folk Culture and its Protection

Promotion of recording

Folk culture is the culture substratum of Japan, which is inherited as manners and customs by certain groups, such as particular families or local communities, and constitutes invaluable materials depicting lifestyle transition. It is, however, subject to transformation or change along with lifestyle transition, and its essence lies in its value as materials. The protective measure for the folk culture is the so-called measures of creating records. By accumulating these records and leveraging facilities and tools/equipment that can be stored as objects, the disappeared folk culture can be revisited in the present.

For example, a life with *kamado* (a Japanese traditional earthen vessel used as a stove or oven), which used to be the most basic lifestyle in Japan, has become a thing of the past and the word “*kamado*” has also become obsolete. Now it is only the elderly that can form the image of a life with *kamado*. The disappearance of *kamado* life has resulted from a change in fuel from firewood and charcoal to gas and electricity. Coupled with the consequent spread of electric cooking equipment, the fuel change drastically changed our eating habits. Such uniform changes across the country resulted not only in the disappearance of *kamado* and other cooking equipment, but also in the extinction of the entire life culture associated with *kamado*, such as open fire, charcoal, ashes, and even their smell. It also led to the weakening of knowledge and techniques nurtured by a life surrounded by village forests and mountains and to the degradation of natural environment by transforming natural blessings, which have been inherited over years, from resources into refuse.

In the past, plant ashes produced by *kamado* returned to the soil as manure or became important resources for dyeing or ceramics. Despite the fact that such a system represents a typical example of recycling-based culture friendly to nature and is quite inspiring to the modern society, we have thrown it away so easily in exchange for the convenience of gas and electricity. Nevertheless, we can neither force the party involved to continue the past lifestyle nor record their dynamic images since the mere pro forma recording of such images are useless. For the preservation of folk culture, we can do nothing but select intangible folk culture worth recording via tangible objects, create and accumulate such records, and seek ways to leverage them.

Folk culture is a planar culture system that exists anywhere and everywhere, and its value as materials is relative. Therefore, recording of folk culture should be as extensive and inclusive as possible, but naturally, such an effort has limitations. Realistically speaking, what we can do is to rank intangible folk cultural properties according to the accumulated amount of materials and implement further recording in descending order. The registration systems stipulated by the culture protection ordinances of Kyoto Prefecture and Kyoto City are designed to cast a protective net over intangible folk culture whose essential value resides with its value as materials. Through the effective use of such systems, it is expected that the efforts to create the records of intangible folk cultural properties will be greatly promoted.

However, such documentation efforts require thorough and accurate investigations that make the recording worthwhile. It is also important to create both written and visual records while systematically collecting and storing objects that give shape to the folk culture in accordance with the records.

Protection as Intangible Cultural Properties

As stated above, the protection of the intangible folk culture basically comprises its conservation via records corresponding to its essential characteristics. There are some traditions that still retain

their value as intangible culture even if they no longer exist as folk culture. These are folk techniques, festive events, rituals, and performing arts. They have a universal value that enables them to exist on their own as intangible culture, or some of them can retain their value even in the pro forma conservation from.

Folk techniques are the techniques and skills to create goods like baskets and wooden barrels/tubs, which have been inherited as livelihoods. While such livelihoods are destined to decline as the demand for traditional instruments decreases due to a change in lifestyle, they are basically professional work (mostly family business). Even if the techniques and skills are separated from their traditional bases, that is, local communities, they can be transmitted to the next generation if they can be linked with the production of tools and instruments required for the times.

On the other hand, some of the festive events, rituals, and performing arts, which are folk culture for special occasions (out-of-ordinary), contain the techniques and skills that require certain historical styles and instructions and have irreplaceable value as materials even if they have lost substance.

For example, Igomori Festival of Tanakura (Kizugawa City, Kyoto) is an inherited tradition comprising the folkways where the entire local community shuts itself away from society to purify itself and a medieval festival and its related events led by a certain group of people called *miyaza*. The ceremony where the chief of the group invite town people to a dinner and the performing arts conducted on the eve are the events of particular importance as they retain a style reminiscent of the old times. Another example is the festival performing arts of Kawabe Hachiman Shrine in Maizuru City, which comprises a king dance, a lion dance, and *dengaku* (ritual dancing and music). They have been transmitted by shrine parishioners in six districts, who take turns in conducting the festival performing arts each year. They show the festival performing arts that developed in the central part of Japan during the period from the end of Heian to Kamakura. Particularly, the costume of *modoki* (comical imitation of the main player's dancing), who accompanies the king dance, represents the costume style of *gagaku* (ancient court music and dance), where the costume pattern on the right is different from that on the left. On the other hand, the five-layered costume for a lion dance shows the traces of lion dances in the ancient Chinese masked drama (*gigaku*) and those in *bugaku* (court dances and music) (Goho lion dance). While it cannot be denied that these performing arts have become devoid of substance, they constitute good examples of folk performing arts that have high material value.

It is possible to protect these rituals and folk performing arts as intangible cultural heritage. However, they are actually folk culture and will lose their essential value once they are separated from certain local communities that are their bases. The characteristics unique to these rituals or folk performing arts can be summarized as follows:

The first characteristic is that they are conducted by local residents, such as shrine or temple parishioners, who assume leadership of the events when they have reached a certain age or obtained certain qualifications. Although performing arts are sometimes performed by professionals, they have to be invited by the community and obtain certain qualifications to be allowed to perform.

The second characteristic is that the time and place where the performance takes place is limited. As a principle, they can be performed only at a predetermined time and occasion, such as at an annual festival or a Buddhist memorial service. They do not require the presence of a third party as an audience: What is most important is conducting the performance and the proficiency of the skill is of secondary importance. In recent years, it has become popular to present these performing arts on a stage in front of an audience. However, like it or not, performing on the stage results in the transformation of folk performing arts into performing arts for entertainment, that is, something to show and to be seen. I don't particularly deny such performances, but the performing arts that have

been separated from the original time and place and whose primary focus is on showing can no longer be called folk performing arts.

The third characteristic is that they have functions of fostering members of a community and maintaining and strengthening their solidarity. These functions are closely tied to securing the development of successors and have maintained the community by assigning a role to each member, young and old, and thereby developing them into full-fledged members of the community. We call it “the educational capability of a community” and intangible folk culture does have this ability and can become a driving force in regenerating amenity-rich local communities.

The conservation and succession effort independent of these characteristics, that is, the alternative succession by a third party, is useless and the intangible folk culture must be protected in such a way that maintains its original form as much as possible. It is, however, extremely difficult to achieve at present where local communities are collapsing. We have no other choice but to conserve the intangible folk culture by recording, but consideration should be given to the following protection and succession measures: While complementing folk culture by the creation of records, the important folk techniques and folk performing arts, which can become independent, should be deemed intangible cultural properties and the appropriate conservation and succession measures should be taken accordingly.

The successors of intangible cultural properties are not as selective as those of the folk culture. Anyone who strives hard toward the succession of the intangible cultural property can become a successor, which opens the way for alternative succession. Down the way, we should be able to envision measures to conserve and transmit the intangible folk culture through professional experts in the field and the establishment of specialized institutions. Although such measures require institutional reforms, I believe that these are the realistic action we can take.

4. Protection of the Gion Festival Yamahoko Events

The Gion Festival Yamahoko (float) Events are a typical large-scale urban festival and represent an integrated chain system of people, goods, and techniques. For their conservation and succession, it is indispensable to have measures for the following three areas and their combined efforts:

- a. Maintenance and succession of a town = people and organizations as transmission bases
- b. Securing and succession of techniques and skills (people) related to the erection and the dismantling of Yamahoko and the Yamahoko Junko (float procession)
- c. Maintenance, management, and replenishment of tangible objects, such as Yamahoko themselves and hanging decorations.

Each of the above is truly difficult to achieve.

For the first one, a town structure has drastically changed due to traditional members’ moving out of town. Some of towns in charge of *hoko* (large float) have a zero living population due to the separation of living and work areas among shops and the penetration of company branch offices. While the reorganization of a conservation organization into an incorporated foundation was one of countermeasures to the situation, the decline of towns as communities shakes the very foundation of *yamahoko* events. The greatest challenge that the *yamahoko* events currently face is how to promote revitalization programs to create easy-to-live towns that can incorporate new residents living in condominiums.

The erection and dismantling of *yamahoko* represent their essential nature that they are temporary

devices to appease the gods thought to cause fire, floods and earthquakes, which together with the *yamahoko junko* (procession) should not be changed. The issue here is how to hand down all skills involved. While helpers, carpenters, and float handlers are in charge of hoko (large floats) *hikiyama* (dragging a Hoko), *kakiyama* (carrying a Yama) is conducted by the entire town residents. However, the techniques to handle these flexible structures cannot be acquired just by experiencing it once a year. In particular, the operational techniques of *hoko hikiyama* (float handlers) that involve use of leverage in tune with dragging require highest proficiency. While it is said that it takes ten years of experience to acquire the techniques, it means only 10 times of actual performance, which is hardly enough to become veterans. It is, therefore, necessary to provide an opportunity to learn the structure and the operation of *yamahoko* in advance to help enhance the acquisition of these techniques. However, such a system has not been established: it still remains a challenge. Moreover, since it is also important to foster draggers who pull the ropes in accordance with the calls of a leader controlling the whole operation, it is urgent to develop effective measures for temporary volunteers.

The stable performance of *yamahoko* events can only be achieved when a series of operations related to *yamahoko* is united in a seamless manner by the calls of a leader aboard the float. In reality, however, there are many cases where each part is not well coordinated with one another and in some extreme cases, draggers pull a float despite the fact that float handlers have applied the brakes, causing the wheels to run over a pile (a brake) and giving a strong shock to the float. While the wear and damage of floats is inevitable as long as they are used, the declining skills accelerate it. We should realize that the careful handling of objects is also important culture and take appropriate measures to promote it.

Objects play a major role in the festivals comprising *yama*, *hoko*, and *yatai*. Therefore, ongoing care should be taken to protect them from wear and damage. The *yamahoko* of the Gion Festival is an elaborate craftwork comprising woodwork, lacquer ware, metal fittings, sculpture, and decorations involving dyeing, weaving, embroidery, and tassels (braids). The structure comprising many delicate parts is susceptible to operational shock. The flexible structure, as represented by the use of ropes, is specifically designed to absorb the shock and the heavy use of woven decorations is also a measure against the shock.

Thus, the *yamahoko* events are founded on a chain system of traditional techniques and skills and the system encompasses everything from instruments to the production and procurement of raw materials. In reality, however, each part of the chain system that has been handed down as a family business is declining drastically and many of these basic fragmental techniques and skills are disappearing. It is inevitable that this trend will soon reach the techniques and skills at the top of the chain system. Some of the measures against this trend include the selection of cultural properties preservation techniques and the accreditation system for the repair/refurbishing technicians by the National Association for the Preservation of *yama*, *hoko*, and *yatai*. However, in order for these measures to function effectively and supplement the chain system, it is vital to create and secure work = demand enough to support the livelihood of those people involved. To this end, the budgetary steps should be expanded and granted projects should be organized. Eventually, these efforts should lead to the construction of a nationwide network of techniques and skills.

5. Challenges and Future Prospects

The Gion Festival *Yamahoko* events take the highest priority in the efforts of safeguarding the intangible cultural heritage. By way of a conclusion, the challenges and the prospects of intangible cultural heritage are summarized below:

- (1) Strive to expand and promote recording by leveraging the registration system
- (2) For traditions that can become independent despite the fact that they are no longer folk culture in the strict sense of the word, such as festivals, performing arts, and folk techniques, seek measures to conserve and succeed them as intangible cultural properties after recording them. Launch projects required for such efforts by working on the government.
- (3) Promote the following to develop successors:
 - a. Promote training programs designed to arouse would-be successors' commitment to the conservation and succession of the intangible cultural heritage and enhance their renewed understanding of the value and the modern significance of the heritage.
 - b. Strive to accumulate and cultivate particular techniques and skills by providing more opportunities to practice them.
 - c. Develop teaching materials, such as video recordings, that can contribute to the aforementioned efforts.
- (4) Promote accurate repair/refurbishing techniques indispensable for the preservation of ICH in a systematic manner; strive to expand and consolidate the preservation technician accreditation system of the National Association for the Conservation of Yama, Hoko, and Yatai and enhance collaboration among them toward the establishment of a national network of preservation techniques; and plan and implement repair/refurbishing programs by obtaining government assistance.

Intangible cultural heritage is the crystallization of living knowledge and wisdom of mankind that have been obtained and accumulated through their interaction with nature and provides inspiring suggestions to the issues that the modern civilization faces. This is why the significance of intangible cultural heritage has gained global attention and its safeguarding has become a subject of considerable discussion. I sincerely hope that the protection efforts in Japan will be reviewed as pioneering cases and contribute to promoting the safeguarding of ICH.