

## Folk Performance Usage in Disaster-affected Communities - Re-thinking the Notion of Authenticity -

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### Synopsis

Following the 2011 Great Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, many communities in the affected areas put effort in reviving their local traditions. Classically associated with contributing to community cohesion, sense of identity and continuity as well as place attachment, these practices have a potential role to play in terms of community resilience and rebuilding. This research, based on ethnographic data, is part of an ongoing investigation into the adaptive nature and relevance of living heritage for disaster-affected communities. Using the revival of Ogatsu hōin *kagura* (Ogatsu, Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture) as case study, this paper explores the question of living heritage, highlighting the notion of authenticity as both a key element and framework to better understand the nature of these practices and the dynamic of their usage for the benefit of communities in extreme circumstances.

**Keywords:** living heritage, folk performance, community, authenticity, disaster

### 1. Introduction

The aftermath of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami has seen a wave of folk performance revival in affected areas, notably in the Miyagi and Iwate prefectures, starting just a few weeks after the disaster. This revival movement hinted both to the importance of and attachment to these local traditional practices, and raised the question of the relevance and significance of such efforts in the midst of disaster recovery.

Folk performances and the question of their preservation and transmission have been a consistent focus of Japanese folklore studies. While the function of these practices in promoting and maintaining community cohesion is well documented, the 2011 disaster has shed new light on the extent of the ties between local folk performances and community, as well as the dynamic nature of their continuity and adaptation. Using the revival of Ogatsu hōin *kagura* (Ogatsu, Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture) as case study, this

paper explores the question of living heritage – here, folk performances, in disaster-affected communities, highlighting the notion of authenticity as both a key element and framework to better understand the nature of these practices and the dynamic of their usage for the benefit of communities in extreme circumstances.

### 2. Folk performances and community

Living heritage, or intangible cultural heritage, refers to practices handed down from generation to generation and that locals acknowledge as their cultural heritage. This paper refers specifically to a type of masked theatrical dance common in Japanese shrine festivals known as *kagura*, belonging to the larger family of folk performances. Constantly recreated by communities in response to their circumstances and environment, often deeply integrated within communities, these practices provide a sense of identity and continuity.

Before addressing the core issue of authenticity and presenting the case study, it is first necessary to consider folk performances and their ties to the community.

Japanese ethnology and folklore studies have given a lot of attention to folk performances, placing much emphasis on the continuity and authentic character of these practices, as embodying the cultural essence of Japan. Departing from these trends, contemporary folklorists have approached folk practices as adaptive constructions reflecting local history and adapting to ongoing sociocultural changes (Shinnō 1993; Iijima 2001). More recently, scholars have examined the contemporary sociocultural purpose, place, and significance of folk performances in community life.

True the nature of the subject, research has reflected the constant tension between adaptation and continuity, fabrication and authenticity.

Questions of transmission and relationship to the community have long occupied an important part of folk performance scholarship. However, these topics take on a different urgency in disaster-affected communities, where preexisting socioeconomic issues combine with post-disaster problems that threaten not only the continuity of folk performances but the survival of the communities themselves.

As Stallings (2002) points out, disasters provide a lens through which to observe aspects of social processes that are generally not visible. Here, it notably highlighted how dynamic and flexible the usage of the Ogatsu hōin *kagura*, leading to renewed consideration regarding the meaning of authenticity for these practices.

One of the main characteristics of folk performances is that they require the involvement of the community and depend on it for their continuity. As a by-product of this involvement, social organization and networks are both reaffirmed and strengthened through the collective organization and participation in rituals and celebrations (Befu 1971), especially in rural, isolated areas. Organization and logistics involved in folk performances require the existence of active local relationships and a fair amount of goodwill and cooperation, especially since the organizational aspect of such practices and related celebrations

extends far beyond the timeframe of the event and involves more than just the practitioners.

Living heritage such as folk performances is the repository of local history and cultural traditions, and the expression and reaffirmation of shared values, social ties, and belonging (Schnell 1999). They contribute to identity and community formation and signaling the belonging to a specific group. The level of trust required to conduct these practices both reflects and reinforces the community's health, its bonds, the depth and width of its relationships (Coleman 1988). These practices offer significant cultural and social functions, their continuity thus contributing to the continuity of the community.

### **3. Authenticity in folk performance scholarship: a maladapted notion**

An ongoing theme in folk performance scholarship, notably in relation to cultural heritage preservation and tourism, is the notion of authenticity. Often maladapted to the reality of living heritage in general and folk practices in particular, authenticity has created many grievances in the field of cultural heritage studies as well as folk studies, and needs to be redefined within the scope of this paper.

The very concept of authenticity as an unmovable form is in direct contradiction with the nature of living heritage in general, and folk performances in particular.

As many have discussed (Schechner 1985; Thornbury 1996; Hashimoto 2003), the premise of authenticity as an original, whole form one should try to preserve or restore is problematic.

Ignoring the fluid nature of folk performances, the construct of authenticity, a product notably of folk performing art scholars (in reaction to the Festival Law) has often been associated with a certain vision of a peaceful, rural Japan (Hashimoto 1989), where values and practices are supposedly transmitted unchanged to this day. Such a construct does not however reflect the reality of folk performances, and maintaining that it does can lead to what Hashimoto (1989) has called folklorism or authenticism.

When applied to folk performances, this

concept of authenticity appears forced at best and in conflict with the very nature of folk performances development.

Folk performances are preserved not by the transmission of unchanged practices, but by their constant repetition and recreation – even if unconscious, of it. Each offering a recreation, a reenactment of the tradition. The very idea of recreation negates the premises of authenticity, as defined for ex by admin for protection f cultural heritage.

Schechner (1985), observed that “restored behavior is the main characteristic of performance”. Like other types of performances, folk performances are in themselves not original. Variations, even involuntary (Averbuch 1995), occur through the course of repetition. Authenticity in performing art is “a copy of a copy” (Schechner 1985).

Preserved through constant repetition, folk performances are, as folk practices in general, "continuous transformations" (Ben-Amos 1990), where each offering is a recreation, a reenactment of the tradition.

Authenticity thus describes a state in a given moment, and evolves along with the fluid and adaptive nature of folk performance. It is in this fluid, flexible, adaptive nature that lies the authentic nature of these practices and, in part, we can assume, the essence of their link to the community.

#### **4. Method**

The following draws on ethnographic data collected as part of a larger research project focusing on the adaptive nature of folk practices within communities affected by disaster. The core data have been compiled from participant observation and the resulting field notes, as well as long interviews conducted mainly between Spring 2013 and October 2016. Semi-structured, as well as informal interviews were both conducted at different times. Semi-structured interviews were obtained following a snowball sample technique. Document collection and analyses were also conducted to ensure a solid grasp of the positioning of living heritage in the Tōhoku area, and the

overall progress and pace of reconstruction plans.

### **5. The revival process in Ogatsu**

#### **5.1 Contextualizing Ogatsu**

Ogatsu consists of 15 settlements concentrated between ocean and mountainous terrain along the Sanriku coastline. Like many other localities in Tohoku, it has been facing population aging and depopulation issues and was amalgamated to the nearby city of Ishinomaki in 2005.

The Ogatsu area suffered extensive damage by the 2011 tsunami. According to the City of Ishinomaki, the number of deaths and missing persons amounts to 241 in the Ogatsu area (as of September 2013). In terms of material destruction, it is estimated that 90% of Ogatsu was destroyed, including most private homes and public facilities at the core of local community life (Ishinomaki-shi 2011). The dispersion of residents in shelters in nearby districts and subsequent temporary accommodation caused an enduring scattering of the community.

Part of the local cultural heritage, the Ogatsu hōin *kagura* is a 600-year-old masked theatrical dance, part of the celebrations of 15 different shrines throughout the Ogatsu peninsula. The Japanese Government designated it as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1996. Given the extent of the material damage and the scattering of the community, virtually every aspect of the Ogatsu hōin *kagura* was heavily affected, too. Most costumes and masks, drums and flutes were damaged, destroyed or lost. Most practitioners lost their homes. Many shrines associated with the *kagura* sustained extensive damage or were completely destroyed.

The extensive material and human impact of the 2011 tsunami on the *kagura* put it at risk of disappearing along with its scattered community.

#### **5.2 Two expressions of the *kagura***

Before presenting the results obtained through the ethnographic study conducted in Ogatsu regarding the revival process, it is first necessary to consider the nature of the *kagura* in Ogatsu and its two specific manifestations up until the 2011 disaster.

As in many rural communities, *kagura* and *matsuri* in Ogatsu are not the public, highly advertised events that urban *matsuri* often are (Thompson 2006; Lahournat 2016).

Until recently, *kagura* and *matsuri* in Ogatsu were held by locals and mostly for locals, as inward-focused and private celebrations. The *matsuri* would regularly include *kagura* as offering or *hōnō* (奉納). The designation as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property in 1996 brought more outsiders, and prompted the troupe to present the *kagura* as a public performance, or *kōen* (公演) in annual folk festivals throughout Japan and even on the stage of the National Theater. Nevertheless, the *kagura* as an offering to the *kami* in Ogatsu mostly remains a local, private affair (Lahournat 2016).

The difference between *hōnō* and *kōen* is essential to grasp the nature of this practice and its place within the community. On the one hand, *hōnō* is the *kagura* within and for the community, in its traditional setting, as an expression of a very local heritage maintained by and held for the locals. On the other hand, *kōen* extricates the *kagura* from its natural milieu, as a performance without any links to the local community, within outside-enforced boundaries of place (stage) and time (performance strict schedule), which do not exit locally.

The consequences of the tsunami on the community and by extension on the *kagura* prompted an expansion of the manifestations and usages of the *kagura*, which eventually led to its revival though a process of repeated negotiation of the “true” nature of the *kagura*.

### **5.3 Reviving the *kagura*: from bricolage to return within the community**

#### **(1) Restarting: inward to outward**

The first phase of the revival process can best be described as a time of bricolage: formal bricolage to deal with the material loss, and functional and contextual bricolages to adapt the *kagura* to the new circumstances and the pressing needs of the community.

A little over two months after the tsunami, the first post-disaster Ogatsu *hōin kagura* was held during the Ogatsu Reconstruction Market (Ogatsu

fukkō-ichi), using salvaged and lent props, while most residents and practitioners were still living in shelters. A month later, the *kagura* was presented in one of the emergency shelters, in front of evacuated residents. From the fall on, the Ogatsu troupe participated in several folk performance events across Japan, while gathering the missing props (masks, drums, portable stage, etc.) with financial aids received from private and public sources.

In the immediate aftermath of the tsunami, practitioners adapted the *kagura* to the new circumstances: first materially, to make up for to the lack of original props, and functionally, to respond to the immediate needs of the community. Organized with salvaged and borrowed props and presented on makeshift stages, it was not the “normal” *kagura*. The *kagura* here is neither an offering nor a public performance per se. The use of the *kagura* in the shelter, for instance, out of any normal context, is a direct reflection of the extreme circumstances. Despite the extraordinary circumstances and usage however, one of the main characteristics of the *kagura* remains: it is for the locals, by the locals. Its presence in such a liminal time and space confirms and reaffirms its position within the community, as part of a mutual relationship between *kagura* and locals and as part of the “normal” Ogatsu, literally bridging the before and after 3.11 (Lahournat 2016).

During this first phase, the functions of the *kagura* are expanded and reinvented to bring solace and comfort to the community. The boundaries regarding material integrity are lowered to accommodate the loss of props and the general circumstances, and make the *kagura* available for the community despite it not being “complete”.

In the aftermath of the disaster, the *kagura* was also turned outward. The Ogatsu troupe, like other Tōhoku *kagura* groups, was invited to take part in various events related to reconstruction efforts, and while the *kagura* was not yet in its best material shape, practitioners actively participated in these events.

In practitioners’ accounts, they used the *kagura* to express gratitude for the support and financial aid received from all over Japan, and to make Ogatsu known. At a time where the media presented

Tōhoku as a pile of debris, the *kagura* was also used to convey something positive about the area (Lahournat 2016).

During this first stage, in the midst of extraordinary circumstances, and in order to respond to them, the *kagura* was assigned new functions, beyond the boundaries of its preexisting usages. It is made into a PR tool, as well as a mode of expression to convey feelings of gratitude and hope to the general public. Here, the presentation of the *kagura* to the outside, while out of context, is accepted as necessary, as a means to preserve it while contributing to the community.

## **(2) Rebuilding material and contextual integrity**

While the first year after the disaster witnessed the adaptive and fluid nature of the *kagura*, the following stage of revival suggest renewed preoccupations of continuity and integrity (Please refer to Appendix 1. for further detail on the reviving process).

## **(3) Reviving tradition**

In the aftermath of 311, the motivations for reviving the *kagura* were several. Stemming from a sense of responsibility towards the past generations who transmitted the *kagura* to the present day, to the next generations, to hand down as their heritage, to a lesser but still real extent to the administration who designated it as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Property. (Please refer to Appendix 2. for further detail).

## **6. Reframing authenticity**

As noted previously, discussions on authenticity tend to either embrace an idealized and unchanging vision of a rural Japan wherein supposedly lies the essence of Japanese culture, or denunciate it as a form of folklorism or authenticity.

Due to the constant recreation process mentioned previously and the historical development of the *kagura*, authenticity as an original form is difficult to locate. More importantly, this elusive original form is not necessarily relevant.

In order to reflect the fluid, living nature of the

*kagura*, authenticity here refers to what practitioners and residents recognize as the *kagura*. It is defined as what practitioners, as representative of other residents, deem necessary to preserve and transmit in terms of tangible and intangible aspects, and what makes it recognizable as the *kagura* that locals can identify with.

The authenticity issue can be framed in terms of a form of integrity set by boundaries and a focus on continuity. The question of authenticity, or integrity, refers to how much adaptation and decontextualisation is acceptable, and for how long, as to not damage the *kagura*.

There is a contradictory tension between the will to preserve the *kagura* in all its integrity, and the will to see it contribute in some way to life in Ogatsu. From this tension, negotiations have arisen concerning the possible adaptations and usages of the *kagura*, pushing or pulling boundaries temporarily.

Boundaries here help define how much change and what usages are acceptable, considering a various factors such as consideration towards previous generations and responsibility towards the next ones, the local audience, and the needs of the community (Lahournat 2016).

Authenticity is thus located in the will to preserve and transmit, and eventually use the *kagura* in ways that are consistent with its place within the community and its past, retaining its main tangible and intangible features.

The revival process in Ogatsu shows how relevant the Hashimoto's vision (1989) is by locating authenticity "in practitioners' subjectivity, and in the creativity with which they adapt to new contexts", suggesting to "reconstruct the notion of authenticity by considering the experiences, attitudes, and feelings of the practitioners of folk performing arts".

The revival of the Ogatsu hōin *kagura* appears as an ongoing process of setting boundaries while renegotiating authenticity. It rendered visible the back and forth process of adaptation and continuity: from the emergency response stage where boundaries collapse, giving ways to new forms and usages, to concerns of preservation and transmission of the *kagura*, toward the

renegotiation of its acceptable usages in order to contribute to the community.

## 7. Conclusion

The very nature of living heritage, fluid, adaptive and engrained in the community, makes it a potentially relevant tool for communities in changing or extreme circumstances, notably as a contributor to community cohesion.

As the community has taken a different shape following the 2011 tsunami and is facing many challenges, the Ogatsu hōin *kagura* has become an agent of continuity and change, first bridging life before and after 3.11, and later contributing to a new form of community ties based on a shared past and reaffirmed regularly through the *matsuri* and *kagura*. The usage of the Ogatsu hōin *kagura* has been temporarily expanded and adapted to respond to the various needs of the community, and to ensure its continuity.

As the process of revival suggests, locally defined boundaries dictate the extent of the usage of the *kagura*. These boundaries for decontextualised usages have been established over time through a balance between community benefit and preservation of tradition integrity.

Locally defined and repeatedly renegotiated authenticity appears to be a determinant in how useful the heritage can be in terms of benefit to the community. As a new phase of reconstruction unfolds and shapes a new Ogatsu, boundaries will have to be negotiated yet again to decide the best usage and possibilities of the *kagura* to fit the circumstances of the new community. Continued fieldwork will hopefully provide further insight into this notion of authenticity, both in the understanding of the nature of these folk practices and their potential contribution to the community.

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## Appendix

1. “As mentioned earlier, the *kagura*, along with the *matsuri*, is originally a local, inward-looking event, organized by locals for locals, in a very local setting. Reviving it would mean bringing it back inside the community, in a form and a feel that locals identify as their own.

A variety of fundings from private organizations and benefactors, along with financial support by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, were used to gather masks and props.

The Ogatsu hōin *kagura* was also performed in many events surrounding reconstruction, contributing to building a network of aid that would eventually make the revival a reality. Later on,

funding from the Nippon Foundation as well as the Association of Shinto Shrines allowed repairing or entirely rebuilding damaged shrines, literally returning the *kagura* to the community.

It is important here to consider what reviving the *kagura* meant for the local community, especially practitioners. In order to give the *kagura* its true feel, it was necessary to revive each characteristic element. This included masks, costumes, stage, and ultimately the repair or rebuilding of the associated shrines, to physically bring the *kagura* back into the community and its ritual context.

In May 2012, the first *kagura* offering after the tsunami was held. Unlike the many representations staged for various events outside of Ogatsu, or even the one held in Ogatsu in the shelter, this brought back the *kagura* to its original place, among local residents, in a traditional setting. Here the *kagura* was finding its way back to, as informants expressed it, “what it originally was”.

Each step of the revival had its own set of challenges and setbacks, but the concern for the *kagura*’s “true face,” in a most literal sense, is perhaps best seen through the efforts of retrieving the masks. It was not enough to get masks back, but it was imperative for the *kagura* that these masks “felt right” to the practitioners and the local audience. Originally, the community where the celebration was held prepared the props. The use of their own masks made it their own distinct *kagura*. It is one of the main elements that differentiate their performance from that of other settlements, a distinctive sign, a marker of a specific identity. Practitioners expressed concerns that people seeing the *kagura* would not recognize it as Ogatsu hōin *kagura* if they kept using borrowed masks, which, while quite similar, were still different. After several failed attempts, most masks were gathered again in the spring of 2013. This concern reflects the very local quality and historical development of

the *kagura*, and the link it fosters between people and place. Similarly, a special meaning is assigned to seeing the *kagura* locally, with a distinction made between just seeing “a” *kagura* and seeing “our” *kagura*” (Lahournat 2016).

2. “In a dire situation, practitioners resolved to support their community through the *matsuri*, and this decision was a direct reflection of the needs of the community at the time. After the tsunami, practitioners actively answered requests for public performances and, out of need, became more outward looking. However, once the material integrity had been re-established, they had to consider the very nature of the *matsuri*, as a celebration directed at and for the people of Ogatsu. Past the emergency response stage, the gap between the frequency of public performances and the fact that the *kagura* offering was still not back within the community caused serious concern. People were reminded of the original nature of the *kagura*, its strong relationship with the community and how faint this aspect had become. There were concerns that despite the material recovery, the *kagura* would be lost if it could not recover its place within the community, as a regular feature of shrine celebrations. This realization brought a sense of urgency and the focus shifted from simply restarting the *kagura* to reviving it “back to its original form,” in its original setting.

The rebuilding of the Hayama Shrine, damaged by the tsunami, was started in June 2013 and completed in September 2015, celebrating its new life with a three-day *matsuri* and *kagura* offering” (Lahournat 2016).

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