

# Transmission and revival of the puppet Sambasou ritual in the Izu Peninsula, Japan

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines transmission efforts relating to ritual puppet performances through two case studies in the Izu Peninsula, Japan. Transmission of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter 'ICH') in Japan has often been perceived as exemplifying the fossilisation of heritage, with its strict adherence to faithfully reproducing performances or products handed down from previous generations. The findings of this study call this perception into question. The first case study demonstrates the community's capacity for agile modification of its social system to accommodate external social transformations, while the performance itself remains unaltered. The second case study examines the contemporary revival of the ritual performance after a seven-decade hiatus. This revival is distinguished by

a spirit of re-creation that enabled a synthesis of skills from diverse origins to reinvigorate the lost ritual performance. The study also seeks to examine more fully the impact of the listing system on ICH. A frequent criticism of the system is its tendency to fossilise heritage. However, such criticism may place undue emphasis on performances and products rather than on the social system of transmission in its entirety. The study highlights this issue in order to prompt a profound sociological enquiry into the transmission of ICH.

## Keywords

Heritage transmission, social system, community organisation, cultural revival, ritual puppet performance, traditional performing arts, rural depopulation, folk performance, Izu Peninsula

## Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing body of research on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage by focusing on the dynamics of local social systems of transmission. It examines two cases of transmission relating to the ritual puppet performance known as Ningyou Sambasou in the Izu Peninsula, Japan. The performance comprises three dances featuring puppets representing a sacred old man, a refined boy and a virile young man. Its origins lie in the Noh play or its predecessor, the ritual performance known as Sarugaku. Dedicated to deities, the ritual serves to celebrate an occasion, purify the stage, and pray for

peace and fertility. Unlike Noh theatre, in which each role is performed by a living actor, this ritual employs puppets manipulated by three men. In the Izu Peninsula, it is usually performed in shrines during harvest festivals in autumn.

Notwithstanding the fact that the ritual performance is disseminated extensively throughout the southern region of the peninsula, this study focuses on two cases: those in a coastal hamlet on the west coast of the peninsula; and in Ogawa, a mountainous hamlet in the central region. The former has been officially recognised as 'intangible cultural property' by the prefectural government. This

designation necessitates the establishment of a local association within the community with the objective of 'preserving' performance, which is supported financially by the prefectural government. Conversely, the latter has not been designated by either the prefecture or the municipality, and the community does not receive any financial support. Within the community, a voluntary group is organised to perform and transmit the rituals. The latter has a distinct historical trajectory. Despite the supposition that the ritual performance originated in the 18th century, it had not been practised for over 70 years until a small number of young members of the local community initiated a movement to revive it. Based on the contrasting cases of the two hamlets, the author intends to elucidate the differences in the social systems for transmission and, to a lesser extent, the influence of ICH listings.

The geographical scope of the study is the Izu Peninsula, located approximately 100 kilometres southwest of Tokyo. Historically, the peninsula's position along the navigation route between Tokyo and Osaka, the historical centre of commerce, gave it strategic importance. Cultural influences from both cities enriched the local cultures of the peninsula. Since the late 19th century, the peninsula has attracted large numbers of tourists from the Tokyo metropolitan region. However, tourism failed to halt the rapid outmigration of young people to the Tokyo metropolitan region. Depopulation and ageing remain acute, particularly in the south, where more than 40% of the population is aged over 65 years (Shizuoka Prefecture Division of Health and Longevity 2024). This demographic condition profoundly overshadows the transmission of various ICH items, including ritual puppet performances. A significant number of hamlets have been compelled to relinquish their ancestral practices. This gloomy situation nevertheless underscores the significance of this study. It is acknowledged that unfavourable demographic trends are a common salient challenge to rural communities in East Asia as well as in Southern and Eastern Europe. Therefore, the cases studied may serve as a reference for considering measures to address the ongoing struggle to transmit intangible cultural heritage in these regions.

## Literature review

Every ICH is subject to perpetual metamorphosis as a consequence of its interaction with political, economic and social circumstances, as well as the manner in which it is re-created within each community to which it belongs

(Skounti 2008). Hashimoto and Ambaras expressed an interest in these dynamics in the nature of ICH, as follows:

*What is actually occurring in that folk performing arts practitioners, while treating the various externally determined social contexts as resources to be manipulated, are employing local tactics that allow them to adapt their respective performing arts in response to each set of conditions.* (Hashimoto and Ambaras 1998: 44)

These arguments constitute the theoretical framework of this paper. The author's central concern is to examine how an intangible cultural heritage can be re-created and transmitted in the course of interplay within a social context. This interplay is notably illustrated in Wayang Kulit, a traditional shadow puppet performance originating from Kelantan, Malaysia. The performance offers an example of the intricate relationship between religion and the imposed transformation of puppet performances. The performance's primary repertoire draws from Hindu epics. Consequently, concepts such as karma are pivotal elements of the repertoire (Ghani 2012: 322; Singaravelu 2004: 118–134). Originally, the traditional performance was initiated with a ceremony involving the recitation of mantras (Ghani 2012; Mustafah and Abdullah 2018: 25). The Islamist state government had banned performance for decades due to concerns regarding the paganistic elements incorporated within it. Nonetheless, with multiculturalism as its national doctrine, the federal government has attempted to safeguard the traditional shadow puppet performance as an intangible cultural heritage and tourist attraction. The performance has metamorphosed under these contradictory political speculations. Specifically, a corpus of comical or morally instructive short stories was created to supplant the Hindu epics, and the practice of reciting the original mantra was superseded by the recital of Islamic prayers or their omission (Ghani 2012; Mustafah and Abdullah 2018: 27).

The Khon, a masked dance performance originating from Thailand, serves as a prime example of active re-creation driven by the creative ingenuity of existing performers. The organisation of elements such as choreography, tempo, lighting, and the sequence of the performance is conducted in close collaboration with contemporary theatre producers (Damrhung 2011: 42–46). Recently, Thai dancers embarked on the 'Revitalising Giants and Monkeys' project to create a contemporary

piece, collaborating with young Cambodian counterparts with whom they share a common repertoire of Hindu epics and similar methods of training (Damrhung 2011: 47). A distinguishing characteristic of the collaborative piece is that classical dancers perform without the customary masks and elaborate costumes. This approach was adopted to foster a more profound awareness of the dancers' bodies and emotions, enabling them to articulate their own expressions beyond the confines of established patterns (Damrhung 2011: 48).

Furthermore, contemporary societies are witnessing a need to reimagine rituals and festivals. Thornbury (1995) provided an example of Itabashi no Tasobi, a ritual dance performed during the autumn festival of a shrine. The dance was originally intended as a manifestation of gratitude towards the deity for a successful rice harvest. While the ritual dance itself is a beautifully preserved ancient form, the Itabashi ward today entirely lacks paddy fields, being located within the heart of a metropolitan region. Ku (2019: 188–189) illustrates a profane form of reimagination based on his enquiries into Chinese folk beliefs. During the process of reviving folk beliefs, which had previously been prohibited under the Cultural Revolution, non-religious stakeholders utilised recycled rituals for economic development and/or political merit. As Ku (2019: 189) asserts, revised beliefs are intertwined with the various desires and actions of social actors.

Contrary to the preceding illustrations of dynamics, it is widely accepted that ICH in Japan is characterised by a high degree of conservatism that suppresses such re-creation and reimagination. Cang (2008) demonstrated that the preponderant authority of lemoto (the primary member of families that inherit intangible heritage) constitutes the primary rationale for this conservatism because the prerogative to reinterpret and arrange the inherited performances and practices lies exclusively with lemos. Aikawa-Faure (2014) also critiqued the national designation of 'intangible cultural property' (*mukeyi bunkazai*) at that time, arguing that it encouraged the reproduction of performances and crafts in an unchanged manner from that employed by previous generations. According to Aikawa-Faure (2014: 48), the law for the protection of cultural property encourages conservatism by emphasising the concept of authenticity. Alivizatou (2012: 13) also mentioned that the Japanese Living Human Treasure system prioritises the transmission of a specific practice with as little change as possible.

The author concedes that certain forms of Japanese ICH, most notably traditional arts such as Noh, Kabuki and the tea ceremony, embody transmission in static forms within the lineage with the authority of the lemoto. However, Cang's observation is not applicable to intangible cultural heritages transmitted in rural communities, which lack particular lineages to be lemoto. Japanese legislation for the protection of cultural property includes a category of 'Intangible Folk Cultural Property' (*Mukei Minzoku Bunkazai*), defined as patterns from people's daily lives transmitted through lived practice. This category comprises a wide array of folk traditions that exhibit fluid forms and are perpetuated within rural communities. Despite ongoing criticism regarding its commitment to authenticity and its potential to 'fossilise' ICH (Aikawa-Faure 2014: 42), the following statement explicates the philosophy underlying the legislation:

*Even limited to the modern age, Intangible Cultural Properties such as festivals, rites, and folk performances have been transmitted through ceaseless adaptations to dramatic social changes triggered by harsh religious policy in the early era of Meiji Restoration, decades of wars in Asia and the Pacific, and rapid economic growth after the Second World War. Remember that intangible cultural properties have never lasted for hundreds of years without changing. This includes how they are transmitted and the social systems surrounding them. The existing form of the intangible cultural properties has been subject to countless transformations over the course of history. (Ogawa 2022: 214)*

A reiterated attempt is made in the present study to depict the dynamics of transmission as people's efforts in small rural communities without an established lemoto system.

Considering the dynamics of social change, it is important to recognise that Japanese society has undergone several significant transformations since the conclusion of World War II. The number of households engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishery declined dramatically until the late 1980s. This shift has had a significant and irreversible impact, leading to a considerable decline in the relevance of traditional practices such as praying and celebrating good harvests through rituals and festivals. Moreover, accelerated depopulation and ageing

in rural areas have become significant challenges for communities in the 21st century. These social changes have eroded the structure of rural communities in which traditional rituals and performing arts have been embedded. Notwithstanding this unfavourable trend, a significant number of communities have demonstrated the ability to perpetuate their traditional rites and ceremonies, exhibiting a high degree of adaptability in their approach to prevailing circumstances. The adaptation strategies frequently observed can be summarised as follows (Harashima 2022: 182–184; Ogawa 2022: 219–221):

1. Relaxing the burden on practitioners. This includes simplifying rituals and performance, as well as changing the date of events to weekends or public holidays.
2. Setting out the entities with legal personality to stabilise the organisations for transmission.
3. Receiving support from the private sector in various ways.
4. Relaxing or abolishing restrictions on participation in rituals and performances based on factors such as age, gender, birth order, lineage and current place of residence.
5. Publicising performances and appearing on stages outside the region to find potential successors.

The adaptation strategy to facilitate continuous transmission of the ritual puppet performance in the Oyazawa hamlet of Nagano Prefecture in Japan is an exemplary illustration of this approach. The ritual puppet performance introduced through the old trade route has been handed down since the late 18th century. Makino (2021) outlines the unique transmission system in the district as follows: a group of three men, two young and one middle-aged, act in a manner that suggests that they are a family unit. The youngest boy is expected to participate in the ritual, and as such, he will be instructed by the senior young man (brother) on all aspects of the ritual, including choreography, songs and social rules, for seven years. The eldest man (uncle) was responsible for their care. While he will not perform on stage or instruct the younger boy directly, he is responsible for raising funds for his costumes, negotiating with other male groups, and overseeing the rituals. Following a seven-year training period, an apprentice assumes the role of trainer, while the former mentor becomes an 'uncle'. The extended commitment to the puppet ritual has historically been a privilege reserved for the first son of a family in the

district, a practice that was observed until the early 1970s. Makino (2021) hypothesised that a commitment to sacred performances spanning two decades may serve to bind boys to the region. Furthermore, it was highlighted that the roles assigned to the groups during the puppet ritual were intended to reflect the status of the apprentice's family within the local community (Makino 2021: 256). However, declining birth rates later compelled the community to extend the opportunity to any male child born within the confine of the hamlet. Eventually, the male group began to identify new apprentices among boys living outside of the hamlet who had any degree of kinship to the villagers. Since 2012, participation has been opened to individuals irrespective of blood ties with the hamlet. Although stage performance may appear static, the underlying social system has undergone significant changes to sustain transmission.

Similarly, the present study also examines the dynamics of the transmission system for ritual puppet performances, as opposed to the content of the performance itself. In contrast to the circumstances surrounding Wayang Kulit, the performances were not imperilled due to religious and political pressures, but rather as a consequence of factors such as rapid ageing and depopulation. In contrast to the case of Khon, the performance on stage appears to be a mere static reproduction of past legacies. Nevertheless, community creativity is demonstrated by the invention and reconfiguration of transmission systems. The second case presented herein may be of particular interest to readers because it pertains to the resumption of a ritual performance that had been suspended for seven decades. Hence, this article may also function as a point of reference for readers when considering measures to safeguard their own ICH.

## Method

This study was primarily based on a document survey, interviews and field observations conducted between April and November 2023. Additional information was collected in June 2025 and March 2026.

In 2023, the author visited Nishina four times and Ogawa five times. The puppet ritual in Nishina hamlet was comprehensively documented by Nishiizu municipality's Education Council (1988). Although the documentation was not commercially published, the ritual procedure, the stage setting for the puppet performance, the scores of the tunes

played during the performance, and the chanted mantras were all recorded in detail and are available for viewing at the town hall and municipal library. The author interviewed two leaders aged in their late forties. They outlined major changes since the documentation was compiled. They also demonstrated training methods for younger generations, explained the structure and social roles of performance associations within local communities, and shared their own perspectives on performance and its transmission. The author also attended the ritual, which took place on the night of 2 November 2023 and into the early hours of the following morning. The entire puppet performance was recorded on video. The behaviours of the performers were also meticulously observed. During the fourth visit, in March 2026, the author identified two significant unpublished materials kept in the municipal library: a report by a folklore research group that conducted extensive fieldwork in Nishina hamlet (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987); and a memoir written in 1983 by Mr. K. S., a master performer.

In the absence of existing documentation pertaining to the ritual in Ogawa hamlet, the author first visited a local history archive. The curator acquainted the author with the members of the performance group who had initiated the performance revival. Eventually, the author conducted semi-structured group interviews with them. The following questions were posed to the interviewees:

- What were the motivations for the decision to revive the abandoned ritual?
- How did the interviewees acquire the skills required to manipulate puppets and perform using traditional instruments?
- How did the group recruit members from the local community?
- How did the interviewees train the younger generation?
- To what extent did the municipal government provide support?
- What are the most significant challenges currently faced in the process of transmitting tradition to the next generation, and what strategies are being employed to overcome them?

Next, the author visited the homes of the two main members of the group. The informants provided the author with copies of old diaries and notes from the initial stage of the revival, as well as the scores and practice

books used for training children. They also provided a copy of the application for subsidies to purchase new puppet costumes. A practice session in the community hall and the ritual held in the shrine were also recorded on video, with close observation of instructional methods and the behaviour of the group members.

## Findings

### *Case 1: Nishina hamlet*

The Sawa Shrine in the hamlet and its Sambasou puppet performances have written records that underwrite their long history. The appellation of the shrine is recorded in the Register of Deities, a compendium codified by the Imperial Court during the 10th century. The documents housed within the shrine also provide evidence of significant construction projects, including the renovation of the primary edifice, which took place in 1825 and the Puppet Performance Commission commemorating the completion of construction works. However, they did not clarify whether this performance was the inaugural occurrence of its kind in the hamlet.

It is still unclear how this performance has been introduced to the region. Local lore ascribes its origin to an individual who held the position of governor of the region under the Tokugawa Shogunate (1603–1868). He is said to be descended not from samurai lineage but from an entertainer who had served a noble family in Kyoto. For instance, Mr. K. S., who served as the main instructor of chants and instruments, proudly mentions this lore in his memoir.<sup>1</sup> However, Mr. Y. M., a former curator at the Odawara City Museum and an active researcher of the puppet performance tradition of eastern Japan, provides a more realistic account of the origins of this phenomenon.<sup>2</sup>

*When shipping was the main means of transport between Japan's two largest cities, the west coast of the Izu Peninsula played a pivotal role as a major port of call. The Port of Matsuzaki, located approximately 10 km south of Nishina, was one of the most prosperous ports on the peninsula. During this period, professional performers from Edo (today Tokyo) visited the region to generate additional income. Furthermore, residents enjoyed frequent opportunities to visit Tokyo as sailors. Consequently, in the 18th century, the region was introduced to the novel entertainment genre of bunraku. Eventually, the*



**Figure 1**  
Heads of historical puppets in Nishina hamlet.  
Source: Author. Photo by Tsuji Shuji, 2 November 2023.

*local population adopted the performance. This puppet performance, which originated in the port of Matsuzaki, spread across the peninsula, with Nishina among the earliest sites of adaptation.*

This hypothesis may be supported by the observation that 9 out of 21 puppets inherited in the hamlet do not correspond to the characters that appear during the *Sambasou* performance (Nishiizu Education Council 1988: 70–71, Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 160). Instead, they are from other well-known *bunraku* theatre repertoires.

The puppet performance, an integral component of the annual festival of Sawa Shrine, was conducted on the night of 2 November and the early morning of 3 November. In the context of the performance, three puppets were introduced to a stage set within the shrine’s sanctuary. The puppets engaged in choreographed movements synchronised with chants that petitioned for longevity, a bountiful harvest and safe navigation. The performance is considered sacred because of its inextricable association with the shrine’s annual festivals. Consequently, performers must maintain complete silence. (Nishiizu Education Council 1988; Shizuoka Prefecture 1987). Local lore posits that any misstep during the performance, or a lack of devotion among the performers, would result in a failure of the harvest, not only in Nishina but also in six neighbouring hamlets (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 143).

The transmission of the performance in the hamlet is attributable to the boys’ organisation, which is firmly



**Figure 2**  
A ritual puppet performance on the stage of the Sawa Shrine in Nishina hamlet.  
Source: Author. Photo by Tsuji Shuji, 2 November 2023.

embedded in the local society. A report by folklore experts indicates that single males would often congregate or reside in communal huts to facilitate collective fishing endeavours (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 42). In the 1890s, this loosely



**Figure 3**  
The stage setting for the morning performance in Nishina hamlet.  
Source: Author. Photo by Tsuji Shuji (3 November 2023).

structured group received official acknowledgement from the prefectural government and underwent a transformation into an educational organisation for local youth (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 2; Nishiizu Education Council 1988: 42–49). Training for puppet performances was one of the central functions of the institution, as it was considered a sacred service for the shrine festival. After World War II, the local organisation was stripped of its official recognition by the prefectural government. This action was taken in response to criticisms directed towards the organisation for its role in encouraging young people to embrace militarism (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 146). However, it has survived as a local voluntary group.

The male offspring were instructed in either the art of puppet manipulation or the recitation of chants and the playing of musical instruments, in accordance with the precedents laid down by their fathers and grandfathers (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 147). A strict hierarchy was observed among the puppet manoeuvres. The initial role of the novice is to be able, after several years of experience, to manipulate the puppet's feet, left arm and body. Subsequently, the individual was permitted to control the puppet's head (Shizuoka Prefecture 1987: 147–149). The most prominent puppets at this stage were particularly significant. The manipulation of the puppet's head was a demonstration of social acknowledgement of mastery in the performance, as well as a display of muscularity and aptitude for leadership among youth.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the decline in ports on the west coast in terms of maritime commerce, hamlets on the west coast continued to thrive as vibrant fishing ports for harvesting bonito and seaweed until the 1970s. The tourism industry experienced a significant surge in the 1980s and the early 1990s, which had a substantial impact on the local economy. It is evident that the villages, including Nishina, were affluent, and it was still feasible for local youths, especially the first sons with social privileges within the community, to remain in their home village permanently. Mr. K. I. is the first son of a distinguished family of Nishina; he is in his early fifties and is employed by the Education Committee of the municipality. He provided the following retrospective description of the community.<sup>4</sup>

*When I was a teenager, Nishina had three organisations for young men: a fire brigade, puppet performers, and assistants (or servants) for the performers. At the time, it was seen as a big honour*

*to be one of the puppet performers. Only the first sons of families with a local origin and reputation held in high esteem could take part in the religious performances at the shrine. Members of the performance group were exempt from the usual chores imposed on young boys in the hamlet.*

Mr. T. I. was also born as the first son in the hamlet and served as the chief instructor of the performance. He mainly indicated how the young boys were trained in this community organisation.<sup>5</sup>

*Local boys joined the group when they finished junior high school at the age of 15. We had to sit straight at all times because the seniors were very strict. As you might expect, the practice was also very strict. As part of this initiative, the boys in this hamlet learned to drink and smoke. Yes, we began to be seen as adults when we joined the group. In addition to teaching us puppet play, the seniors taught us much more. I think the sense of unity in this hamlet actually came from this group of boys.*

Written documentation of the performance was scarce. Consequently, senior community members orally passed on musical compositions and lyrics. The acquisition of puppet manipulation skills and choreographies required dedicated practice.<sup>6</sup> Mr. T. I. also reiterated that the primary focus was on precise execution of the reproduction process.<sup>7</sup>

*The idea of making a mistake was upsetting because I thought that even the smallest mistake could ruin this important tradition. Even though I am the leader of the performance group and the main instructor, I still worry a lot about making mistakes, no matter how small they are. I am worried that I might make mistakes that have a serious impact on the performance. If I am not very good at teaching, my students often perform without authenticity.*

These descriptions are representative of the conservatism commonly observed in the traditional Japanese performing arts. Non-structured interviews with novice performers conducted in November 2023 revealed that all instructions were still communicated verbally, and that repetition was still considered the predominant method of achieving proficiency. The tradition of the Spartan upbringing appeared to have persisted.

While the performance on stage is regarded as maintaining the 'authentic' form that has been passed down from previous generations, the structure of the community organisation for the performance has undergone substantial modification over the past three decades.<sup>8</sup> In contemporary times, performance groups are open to any young males from Nishina and neighbouring villages, irrespective of whether they are the eldest sons. The initiation process for the 15-year-old cohort was revised.<sup>9</sup> At the time of their induction, several members were in their late twenties.<sup>10</sup> The group formerly designated as the 'assistant' has become dissipated and amalgamated with the group of performers.<sup>11</sup> This decision should not be attributed to criticism of its semi-feudal nature; rather, it was precipitated by a decline in the number of children.

These pragmatic measures have facilitated the maintenance of membership of approximately 30 individuals within the performance group. This figure is particularly noteworthy in light of the cessation of numerous rituals and festivals in the West Coast municipality, as previously referenced in this paper. Notwithstanding this flexibility, the prospect of admitting females into the group has not been contemplated. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that membership remains exclusive to families under the patronage of the Sawa Shrine, which is located near the beach in the hamlet and is worshipped as the guardian of fishing and navigation by the locals.<sup>12</sup>

### Case 2: Ogawa hamlet

Ogawa hamlet, in the central mountainous region of the peninsula, once had a prosperous industrial base. As part of the old dominions of the Tokugawa family – the de facto monarch of Japan from the 17th to the 19th century – villages in the area were privileged to supply charcoal to the Shogunate. As stated by key informants, there was once a theatre in the area that was well-equipped and served as a venue for villagers to enjoy *bunraku*, a puppet play that was considered a significant novelty at the time. The key informants hypothesised that the puppet ritual in the Ogawa hamlet was established during the period under discussion and was influenced by the art of *bunraku*.

Throughout the 20th century, the primary economic activities in the central region of the peninsula were agriculture, forestry and tourism. However, the number of tourists was modest compared to that in coastal areas. Despite the surge in tourism in the 1980s and the early 1990s, Ogawa hamlet remained one of the most tranquil



**Figure 4**  
Puppets for the ritual performance in Ogawa hamlet.  
Source: Author. Photo by Tsuji Shuji, 2 November 2023.

districts in the peninsula, with a limited number of visitors. However, since the 1970s, the region has benefited from relatively good access to urbanised areas in the northern part of the peninsula and the Tokyo metropolitan region. This is due to the existence of regional highways. A modest number of upper-middle-class urban dwellers have purchased villas there, and a smaller number have become permanent residents of the region.

The puppet ritual in Ogawa was suspended for approximately 70 years, from 1919 to 1990.<sup>13</sup> Although the exact reason remains uncertain, shrine mergers in the late 1920s are thought to have influenced the decision.<sup>14</sup> As stated previously, younger members of the community spearheaded the resurgence of puppet performances. Mr. H. Y., a professional craft potter who had migrated from Tokyo in 1971, played the most pivotal role in this revival. Prior to his relocation to the hamlet, he pursued a major in chemistry and subsequently worked as an engineer for a period of ten years (Nakaizu Craft Pottery n.d.). Mr. H. Y. discovered an archaic puppet while the shrine master was organising the storage facilities.<sup>15</sup> He stated that this encounter served as a source of inspiration, prompting him to make an immediate decision to 'take action' with the abandoned puppet.

Following the restoration of the puppets, some young members of Ogawa visited Nishina hamlet to observe a ritual puppet performance dedicated to the Sawa Shrine's autumn festival. Using a cassette recorder and an 8-millimetre film camera, Mr. H. Y. and his



leaders many decades ago. The author is left to ponder how the group lost the ingenuity that was evident in the early stages of its revival.

## Discussion

This study examined the dynamics of social systems in the context of the transmission of intangible cultural heritage in East Asian societies confronted with significant challenges posed by population decline and ageing.

The case of Nishina demonstrates the strict local system for the transmission of ritual puppet performances. As previously outlined, transmission within a community-based organisation is characterised by the absence of a specific lineage or figure with uncontested authority. Community organisation is firmly entrenched within the socio-cultural milieu of the coastal community. It is characterised by a hierarchical structure, adherence to age-based norms, and an emphasis on collective unity. The mechanism functioned as a means of transmitting performance with minimal alterations from ancestral practices. However, as has been demonstrated in various studies (e.g. Harashima 2022; Makino 2021; Ogawa 2022), the organisational structure supporting the ritual performance has exhibited a high degree of adaptability, evidenced by its flexible alteration of internal regulations in response to prevailing circumstances. In accordance with the findings of Harashima (2022) and Ogawa (2022), the organisation has adopted a substantially more lenient approach to entry criteria, including age, birth order, lineage and current place of residence. The coastal hamlet has undergone a significant transition in its economic base, with the traditional reliance on coastal fisheries being replaced by a shift towards other forms of employment. Concurrently, there has been a significant increase in the outbound migration rate among the younger male demographic. Moreover, there has been a precipitous decline in the number of boys born and raised in the hamlet. These social changes have gradually resulted in the loss of the function of ritual puppet performances to organise the first sons, who are the heirs of the household, and to instil a sense of unity among them. It is imperative to interpret the consecutive revisions of regulations as a component of the community's endeavours to reconfigure their local societal order.

The case of Ogawa represents a departure from the conventional paradigm of revising or renovating an existing

performance. The approaches adopted in this instance were reimagination and re-creation, which were marked by a high level of creativity. At that time, the initiative to revive the puppet ritual lay exclusively with the youth, with a leader who migrated from an urban area. This initiative was driven purely by curiosity, with neither commercialism nor government intervention exerting a significant influence. The choreography, puppet manipulation techniques, tunes and vocalisations were largely adopted from neighbouring hamlet productions and reconstructed locally. The application of contemporary competencies, including design and musical notation, has facilitated their audacious endeavours. It is of particular significance to note that the resurgence gave rise to the establishment of a social system for the training and transmission of puppet performances. This movement was beautifully concurrent with a government-led social education programme, a product of the post-war democratic era. The government-led programme was designed to promote cultural activities for adults in rural areas and to provide children with various forms of healthy recreation. The modern children's club system has been utilised as a conduit for the dissemination of performance to the younger generation since the early stage of the revival, thanks to the involvement of a dedicated employee of the municipal government. This concurs with the argument concerning the revived rituals in China (Ku 2019). The practice of the recycled ritual was intricately interwoven with pedagogical considerations and the overarching national agenda. Although the performance had become redundant as a ritual to pray for a good harvest in the hamlet, with the dependency on agriculture having decreased, this secular concern had provided a foundation for the survival of the revived performance for decades. The distinctive course of the revival deviates from the established dualism between tradition and modernity, as well as between intrinsic and Western origins and rural and urban origins. Instead, it was facilitated by a combination of elements from disparate domains. This underscores the significance of this case as a reference point for discussing the transmission of ICH in contemporary non-Western societies.

However, it is a matter of misfortune that the leaders of the voluntary community group have reproduced their performance for decades, despite the proven flexibility they have shown in the early stages of the revival. The existing transmission system also lacks the flexibility to accommodate further expansion. The introduction of supplementary resources, such as assistance from private

companies and participation from individuals outside the small hamlet, has the potential to broaden the scope of revived ritual performances to subsequent generations.

The influence of heritage listing systems also warrants discussion in this context. Scholars have raised concerns regarding Japan's listing of intangible cultural heritages, including the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter 'the 2003 Convention') (Aikawa-Faure 2014). Critics argue that the system risks privileging authenticity at the expense of adaptability and may lead to the 'fossilisation' of traditions (Aikawa-Faure 2014). The case of Nishina suggests that their concerns were to a certain degree justified. While the prefectural designation does not prohibit practitioners from altering the performance details, as the instructor stated, it was evident that the practitioners adhered to the perfect reproduction of 'authentic' performances. However, the conservatism is merely the most visible aspect of a more complex phenomenon. Conversely, the community organisation has undergone a process of active transformation characterised by the revision of entry restrictions and the dissolution of the divide between performers and assistants. Considering that ICH is defined as the social process of interaction between communities and larger societal circumstances, these alterations in the underlying social system should not be overlooked.

The author intends to add another point to stimulate discussion pertaining to listing systems. While the revival of Ogawa may be regarded as embodying the spirit of recreation promoted under the 2003 Convention, the primary example for the vanguard of this movement was Nishina's traditionalist performance. The underlying premise of this anecdote is that, historically, the tradition of puppet performances in the peninsula has been disseminated among various communities via a network. This suggests that the listing system has a dual impact. Although a registered item may become a static reproduction of its status at the time of registration, it may acquire a new social function as a reference point. This function facilitated the transmission of similar or related items.

Following this study, two issues of particular importance should be addressed in future studies. First, it did not capture the mindsets of ordinary members of transmission groups and hamlet residents in general, as it was based chiefly on qualitative information acquired

from key informants. The utilisation of quantitative methodologies encompassing the deployment of questionnaires and multivariate analysis has the potential to facilitate the identification of socio-psychological factors that either promote or restrict the transmission of the subject in question. Regarding Nishina's case, the extent to which the group's ordinary members supported the performance as a faithful reproduction of the inherent ways of presentation, as emphasised by the chief instructor, is a matter of interest. Furthermore, quantitative analysis has the potential to elucidate the extent to which an individual's devotions are motivated by factors such as faith, honour, affection for their place of origin, a sense of obligation, or other variables. In relation to the case of Ogawa, the survey may reveal whether the younger members of the volunteer group continue to value creativity, or whether the virtues of the first generation of the group have already been superseded by a propensity towards simple reproduction, which is anchored in a fixed conception of authenticity. An empirical examination of these points has significant potential to generate new fields of enquiry in the study of intangible cultural heritage.

Second, this study does not contribute to the advancement of discussions on ICH and folk beliefs. In the case of Nishina, worshipping at the Sawa Shrine remains a prerequisite for individuals seeking to join the transmission group despite successive amendments to the group's internal regulations. It is evident that the leaders of the Ogawa hamlet transmission group adhere to the traditional parishioner system, which is under the patronage of the hamlet shrine. This leads to the establishment of a stringent imagined boundary for entry into the transmission group. The author takes the position that ICH is constructed through the interactions of various stakeholders. These interactions encompass the reinterpretation and redrawing of the boundary between the sacred and the profane (Ku 2019). However, the repercussions of these actions by local community members are contingent on the tolerance exhibited by the shrine masters of local tutelary shrines. In this regard, it is vital to consider the views of those who are responsible for the guardianship of sacredness. Whether it is possible to reconcile religious sacredness with practical needs to increase the probability of transmission remains a contentious issue. Future dialogue with shrine masters and experts in Shinto doctrine may offer a solution to this conundrum. 🏯

## ENDNOTES

1. The memoir of Mr. K. S. He was formally recognised by the Education Council of the municipality in 1963 as a 'master performer' in his field.
2. An interview was conducted with Mr. Y. M. on 18 November 2024. The individual providing the information is a Ph.D. candidate at Showa Women's University in Tokyo, specialising in the history of puppet plays in Eastern Japan. Prior to commencing his Ph.D. research, he accrued a significant amount of professional experience in his field, working for Odawara City as a curator for a considerable duration.
3. The memoir of Mr. K. S. Statements of this kind are frequently made by individuals from other regions of the Southern Peninsula that are associated with the puppet performance tradition.
4. Interviews with Mr. K. I. were conducted on 12 and 13 September 2023. He is a native of the Nishina hamlet and has been continuously employed in the municipal hall for three decades. His career included a lengthy period of service with the Education Council, which documents ritual puppet performances. The author was able to identify key figures in the community organisation for transmission, thanks to the guidance and introduction provided by the subject.
5. An interview was conducted with Mr. T. I. on 9 October 2023. He hails from Nishina and worked as a crew member, and later as a captain, for a pleasure cruise company. This work enabled him to remain in his place of origin without interruption.
6. Interviews with Mr. K. I. on 12 September 2023 and with Mr. T. I. on 9 October 2023.
7. Interview with Mr. T. I. on 9 October 2023.
8. Interviews with Mr. K. I. on 13 September 2023 and with Mr. T. I. on 9 October 2023.
9. Interviews with Mr. K. I. on 12 and 13 September 2023.
10. Mr. K. I. reiterated this point with a modicum of regret, as he had relinquished his opportunity to become a key figure within the performing group because he had spent several years attending college in Tokyo.
11. Interviews with Mr. K. I. on 12 and 13 September 2023.
12. Interview with Mr. T. I. on 9 October 2023. Despite the considerable temporal discrepancy, analogous descriptions have been documented in both Shizuoka Prefecture (1987) and the Nishiizu Town Education Council (1988).
13. The present statement is based on an interview with Ms. Y. M., curator of the Ogawa local historical archive, on 29 March 2023, and on notes by Mr. H. Y. Ms. Y. M. specialised in Japanese classical literature and enthusiastically read historical documents handed down by old families in the region. She also organised an exhibition on the revival of the ritual puppet performance in Ogawa hamlet. As noted in the main text, Mr. H. Y. is a craft potter with a higher degree in chemistry. He initiated the revival of the ritual puppet performance after an intermission of seven decades.
14. Interview with Ms. Y. M. and notes of Mr. H. Y.
15. An interview with Mr. H. Y. and Mr. Y. T. on 19 April 2023. Mr. Y. T. is an early member of the voluntary organisation for the transmission of the ritual puppet performance in Ogawa. He worked for the municipality hall and was well connected with the educational committee of the municipality. He also comes from an old lineage of the hamlet. His father was the founder of the local historical archive.
16. Interview with Mr. H. Y. and Mr. Y. T. on 19 April 2023.
17. Notes by Mr. H. Y.; an interview with Mr. H. Y. and Mr. Y. T. on 19 April 2023; and an additional interview with Mr. Y. T. on 11 October 2023.
18. Notes by Mr. H. Y.
19. Notes by Mr. H. Y.; an interview with Mr. H. Y. and Mr. Y. T. on 19 April 2023; and an additional interview with Mr. Y. T. on 11 October 2023.
20. Interview with Mr. H. Y. and Mr. Y. T. on 19 April 2023.
21. Interview with Mr. Y. T. on 11 October 2023.
22. In post-war Japan, municipalities organised children's groups and offered recreation programmes for them. These initiatives aimed to support children whose parents often returned home late and were therefore unable to care for them. Unlike similar organisations that existed before World War II, these activities were not designed to instil any particular ideology in children.
23. Interview with Mr. Y. T. on 11 October 2023.

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