

'Community' as a Landscape of Intangible
Cultural Heritage: *Basho-fu* in Kijoka, a Japanese
Example of a Traditional Woven Textile and its
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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of 'community' as a place which engages with 'self' and 'other' in safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage. By observing a scheme piloted by the Japanese government to promote traditional craft industries, I will show how a cultural form and its practitioners are attached to a particular place, and how the government's support of 'traditional craft products' invites outside evaluation and consumption of those products. The case study of a traditional woven textile, *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, produced in Okinawa Prefecture, suggests that 'community' allows practitioners to embody the time-space configuration of their work and also frames the public perception of this work as 'tradition'. Cultural heritage within a community creates a site where one may recognise one's self through one's experience of outside values and social change.

Keywords

community, landscape, production and consumption of 'tradition', public appreciation of 'tradition', *Basho-fu*, kimono, banana leaves, *Den-San* Law, Living National Treasures, Okinawa, Japan.

Introduction

The definition of community in safeguarding ICH

The *Convention for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage*, established in 2003, was noteworthy for its promotion of community involvement in its safeguarding activities:

[W]ithin the framework of its safeguarding activities of the intangible cultural heritage, each State Party shall

endeavour to ensure the widest possible participation of communities, groups and, where appropriate, individuals that create, maintain and transmit such heritage, and to involve them actively in its management (Article 15).

This convention was understood as a more viable methodology than the previous system, in which inclusion on the list of *Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage* was decided by international juries according to their own exclusive criteria (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: 2004; Joy: 2009), since it focused on the initiative from the

grassroots level. Kurin (2007) explains the importance of participation by communities in the safeguarding of ICH as follows:

ICH is not preserved in states' archives or national museums. It is preserved in communities whose members practice and manifest its forms. If the tradition is still alive, vital and sustainable in the community, it is safeguarded. If it exists just as a documentary record of a song, a videotape of a celebration, a multi-volume monographic treatment of folk knowledge, or as ritual artifacts in the finest museums in the country, it is not safeguarded. (Kurin: 2007, p.12)

In response to this assessment, regional conferences have been held to discuss a methodology for making ICH inventories that include grassroots commitment from practitioners, community members, government and NGOs. In the meantime, at both the administrative and intellectual levels, it has proved difficult to interpret the term 'community' as employed by UNESCO in the context of participatory approaches. The major questions that arise are who exactly represents the community and in whose interests should the resource of ICH be identified and managed? Blake, who was involved in the drafting of the *ICH Convention*, offers further explanation: at the expert meeting of UNESCO in 2002, a glossary of relevant terms was produced, in which 'community' was identified as *people who share a self-ascribed sense of connectedness. This may be manifested, for example, in a feeling of identity or common behaviour, as well as in activities and territory* (Blake 2009: p.51). Additional wording has since been suggested and added to this definition, *such as groups and communities who are the holders and transmitters of the elements that are to be safeguarded* (UNESCO; 2006, p.4) and *cultural gatekeepers* (Arizpe 2007).

External evaluation and the recognition of the 'self'

While the definition of 'community' remains fairly unclear, UNESCO advocates an external approach to community involvement by highlighting the importance of acknowledging others' concerns.

The Intergovernmental Committee for Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage has emphasised time and

time again the fundamental importance of international cooperation in promoting awareness of ICH. External visibility and recognition, whether local, national, or international, can help communities to identify with their own heritage and recognise its importance not only for themselves, but for others as well, in turn encouraging greater pride in their heritage and motivating them to transmit it to younger generations. Respect for the heritage of others is fundamental to the Convention, and so our awareness-raising activities aim to ensure such mutual respect. (Yoshida: 2009, p.3)

Reiko Yoshida, who is one of UNESCO's administrative officers, emphasises the interaction between the 'community' and various other actors, while the majority of interpretations of, and concerns surrounding, the term 'community' have focused instead on the subjective acts of 'practising and transmitting' the ICH. Yoshida's approach provides some marginal space to explore the concept of 'community', in that it allows us to consider the interrelationships between community and practice as well as between community and the outside world, rather than being fixed in a linear relationship between subject (those who practise and safeguard ICH) and object (cultural practices recognised as ICH). Although Blake states that community *can also be denied in terms of the spaces in which the ICH occurs and the community exists* (Blake: 2009, p.61), so far major discussions of 'community' have dealt separately with people who practice a cultural form (as ICH) and the spaces in which those practices occur. I would point out that the practice of a cultural form is embodied by practitioners' specific time-space experiences, as well as by those with whom they share their lives. Then, by coming into contact with outside values, people become aware of the 'self'. In what follows, I employ this phenomenological perspective to explore the definition of 'community' in efforts to safeguard ICH.

Community as a landscape of time-space practice

In his work *A Phenomenology of Landscape* (1994), Tilley argues that place is not a mere container of people's action, but a medium of people's bodily experience of action and of the meaning of being in the place according to their intention, social condition, class and politics. Landscape is a humanised place, existing

through the linear time-space relationships of people who are 'being there' and their memories of the past.

The experience of space is always shot through with temporalities, as spaces are always created, reproduced and transformed in relation to previously constructed spaces provided and established from the past. (Tilley: 1994, p.11)

Tilley also describes the effect of the 'lived consciousness' of a place, which leads people to establish an identity. He points out that the relationship between the body and the place is vital to create a sense of self through contact with others:

[P]ersonal and cultural identity is bound up with place; a topo-analysis is one exploring the creation of self-identity through place. Geographical experience begins in places, reaches out to others through spaces, and creates landscape or regions for human existence. (Ibid. p.15)

Bender also notes that landscape is a people's segmented experience of place. People create their own landscape by narrating it according to their own experience of life. (Bender: 1989)

In the context of these phenomenological statements, ICH must be considered as a part of human life through which people live, experience, feel and communicate their being in a particular place. Through the experience of daily life in their habitual space and their contact with other people, practitioners recognise it as their 'tradition' or their 'culture'. Without the spatial interrelationships of people inside and outside of the space, the recognition of ICH is not possible. In fact, in the ICH list, all cultural forms are represented as belonging to particular places. Of course, a topological view of cultural forms in the world is an essential administrative practice for representing the geographic features of ICH. My viewpoint on the discussion of 'community' is not as static and mathematical as that offered by 'cultural mapping' (a methodology applied in UNESCO's ICH operation). I would argue that in order to identify 'community' and thereby safeguard ICH, it is essential to consider the entire 'lifeworlds' of those who are the practitioners of a cultural form, as well as other people who appreciate that cultural form. In addition, when we reflect on the social awareness of ICH, it is crucial to take

into consideration people's experience of social change, since the concept of cultural heritage is itself a product of modernity. How has modernity influenced these people's lives? And how has it contributed to the conceptualisation that ICH needs 'to be safeguarded'?

Before considering the example of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, a form of ICH from Okinawa, I will explore the ways in which official designations such as 'ICH' and 'tradition' impact upon the practitioners of cultural forms, and how the space of the production activity faces the challenges posed by modernity and social evaluation, by describing the Japanese government's policies on traditional craft products.

Japanese policies to institutionalise 'tradition' in the 20th century

Known as a country that made a major contribution towards the establishment of UNESCO's *ICH Convention* in 2003, Japan has developed the concept of ICH and run its own safeguarding policy since 1950. A significant example is the designation system, which falls under the Law for the Protection of Important Intangible Cultural Property (PIICP). Highly skilled craftspeople and performing artists are designated as 'Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Property' and are widely known as *Ningen Kokuho* (Living National Treasures – LNTs).¹ They are supported in their transmission activities by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA). In addition, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) has promoted traditional craft production activities throughout Japan under the Law for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries (*Dento-teki-kogei-hin Sangyo-no Shinko*, known as the *Den-San Law*) since 1972. The difference between the two policies run by these two ministries can be summarised as follows: the former is aimed at sustaining the 'historical and artistic value' (the Law for PIICP, Article 2.6) of traditional crafts and performing arts, whereas the latter aims to contribute to both local industrial craft production and the regional economy in which the craft originated (*Den-San Law*, Article 1). Both have been shaped by the country's experience of modernisation and Americanisation. While PIICP was established in the chaotic aftermath of World War II, the METI's policy was introduced when the country started undergoing drastic economic development, which was accompanied by the destruction of large swathes of the rural landscape.

Production of locality: the industrial promotion of craft products in Japan

Known as the 'post-war economic miracle', Japan experienced dramatic economic and social recovery in the years between 1950 and 1990. Keynesian economic measures, such as large-scale land development, were imposed throughout the nation in order to promote logistics and local autonomy, but this resulted in the substantial destruction of local landscapes. The radical development of the 1960s and 1970s led to a serious risk of the disappearance of traditional cultural practices due to rural depopulation, agricultural mechanisation² and emerging alternative leisure activities, such as TV and travel (Honda: 1976, p.29).

Under such conditions, there was a shortage of young people to whom skills could be transmitted; due to land development, there was a shortage of natural materials, and due to the development of capitalism, the economy shifted towards mass production and mass consumption. In order to safeguard traditional craft techniques, in 1972 a *Mingei-Sangyo* (folk craft industry) policy was introduced by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (now METI).³ METI started to promote local craft industries so as to help popularise these products in the modern era of mechanisation and mass production. In contrast to heavy industry's production processes, the Ministry defined the traditional craft industry with reference to the following five key characteristics:

- 1) Tradition: the product's technology and its materials have been locally sourced, while craftspeople may continue to be innovative by modifying the shape and purpose of their products in accordance with wider social change.
- 2) Handmade character: highly labour-intensive and dependent on the level of experience of the craftspeople.
- 3) Locality: based in a location where the technique was cultivated, a landscape from which the materials were gathered, and with a history of production patronised by local clans during the Edo era (1600-1867).
- 4) Popularity: based upon the product's orientation for daily use and affordability for ordinary people.
- 5) Prototype: the product's shape and pattern were developed and established over centuries of history, unlike art objects created for purely decorative purposes, *Mingei* products are designed for practical use (*Mingei-Sangyo-Taisaku-Shinko-linkai* 1972, author's translation).

Following these guidelines, in 1979 METI established the *Dento-teki Kogei-hin Sangyo-no Shinko* (Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries) bill, also known as the *Den-San Law*. This was initially aimed at promoting local industry in rural areas that faced severe depopulation by supporting the establishment of local craft training schools as well as by cooperating with local tourism authorities to channel their products to wider markets. The significance of this measure was that industrial means were required for the promotion of tradition; specifically, it officially signalled the 'commodification of tradition', codifying a holistic approach to local places, people and industry. This law also demonstrates the phenomenon of the 'production of locality' (Appadurai: 1996) in contemporary Japanese society through four nexus elements: the 'traditional craft' itself; the local space where the tradition is practised; the people who practise it; and the commodification of 'tradition' in such a way that others recognise its locality.

Authorship in craft associations and Intellectual Property Rights

Another important element in the *Den-San Law* was the establishment of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) in traditional craft associations aimed at promoting local industry. IPR provided 'authorship' (Rowlands: 2002, p.107) to local individuals so that the economic and moral value of their products could be officially recognised. First, local governments encouraged the establishment of craft associations or groups for each product in order to certify the holders of the skills in question; they then delegated the production and quality control of products, as well as the transmission of relevant skills, to these associations. Each prefectural government channelled funding from METI to the relevant craft association to support their activities (Articles 2, 6 and 16, *Den-San Law*).

When establishing the *Intangible Cultural Heritage Convention*, UNESCO faced a dilemma in choosing between adopting either the global cultural approach or the IPR approach (Aikawa: 2009, p.21). Ultimately, however, UNESCO's ICH mission went beyond the IPR approach, since the latter aims merely to safeguard the economic utilisation of the end product of a cultural process. Referring to Francioni's statement, Aikawa described the inherent conflict between IPR and ICH as follows:

[The] IPR approach focuses on the end products of a specific artistic or cultural tradition, rather than on the social structures and processes from which the cultural product is derived... The collective character of most forms of ICH, may represent a further obstacle to the use of IPR as an instrument for international protection... With ICH it is difficult to identify the titleholder as custodian by whom IPR are to be exercised or legal process is preceded to license the commercial use of the relevant heritage. (Ibid, p.29)

As this statement suggests, it is essential to identify the title holder in order to protect authorship during the process of industrialisation. METI therefore created a marking system for traditional craft products, known as the 'Den-Mark' system. The 'Den-Mark' itself is a logo sticker (see Plate 1) attached to each item to show that it is a traditional craft product – that is to say, that its quality is certified by METI. This logo sticker is provided to each craft association or group via their prefectural government to show that their products have passed a quality inspection. With the country's economic development accelerated by a domestic tourism boom from the late 1970s onwards, there was a proliferation of mass-produced, machine-made products sold as 'traditional craft products' or 'mingei-goods'. Rowlands has examined heritage as a property right, whereby *authorship designates both a legal status of ownership, a mode of aesthetic production and a form of moral subjectivity.* (Rowlands: 2002, p.107). His definition clearly

applies to the Den-Mark system which serves to protect copyright and signify quality, both of which are overseen by an autonomous local craft association.

Leach (2007) has also explored cultural production activities in the context of creativity and Intellectual Property (hereafter IP) law by looking at how ownership and reward are thought to motivate the work of creation. He describes IP law as a particular form of ownership that functions to provide the motivation for people to create and innovate. This is not the only purpose, however, as Leach elaborates:

IP law also works in another important respect. For once property is granted to the inventor or creator, the invention or creation can circulate. Instead of keeping knowledge secret to prevent others using it, IP law allows others to use knowledge, while at the same time ensuring that its origin is acknowledged each time they do. These two factors together – reward and circulation – are the most prevalent justifications for IP. (Ibid, p. 109)

By referring to Leach's study, the establishment of *Den-San* Law can be understood as an instrument that invites social interactions between 'inventors' or 'creators' and 'others', with regard to the craft products, practitioners and local places. The craft associations' subjectivity is acknowledged through recognition of the 'locality' of their products; it is further enforced by tourism and the promotion of craft markets. In fact, METI



Plate 1
'Den-Mark' logo.
The right side of the logo states that it is a 'traditional craft product appointed by the Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry'. Japan Traditional Crafts Aoyama Square website.

also offers funding for craft associations looking to develop new products to meet public demand. (Articles 7 and 11, *Den-San Law*)

The introduction of the *Den-San Law* was a formal acknowledgment that 'heritage' is not simply an isolated cultural activity that functions by itself; it is part of the socio-economic practices of people in local spaces, encountering 'others' who recognise the value of 'traditional craft products' in an urbanised material environment of *homogenised, mass-produced commodities driven by the capital economy* (Kopytoff: 1986 p.72). It is apparent that the conceptualisation of ICH and 'tradition' in modern Japanese society has been formed through people's experiences of social change and modernisation. Identification of a local 'tradition' is embedded in several social functions such as local administration, industry, culture and education so that it maximises access by the public. In order to examine further the relationships between space, cultural practice, the subjectivity of practitioners and outside evaluations, let us now consider the example of a traditional textile produced in Kijoka, Okinawa, from a phenomenological perspective.

The landscape of *Basho-fu* in Kijoka, Okinawa

People's spatial experience of modernity in Okinawa and the material transformation of *Basho-fu*

Kijoka-no-Basho-fu (*Basho-fu* in Kijoka) is a woven textile made from the fibres of banana leaves. It is made in the Kijoka area of Ogimi village, in the northern part of the island of Okinawa, which is located in the south west of the Japanese archipelago. Apart from its production process, the uniqueness of the *Basho-fu* in Kijoka stems from its changing material form and social meanings, in tandem with its practitioners' and local Okinawans' experiences of drastic social change in their local environment.

From the 15th century until its fall in 1868, Okinawa was an independent kingdom called Ryukyu. Like other woven textiles made from local natural materials, *Basho-fu* was originally produced for people's everyday clothing. When the kingdom started a diplomatic relationship with China and feudal Japan in the 15th century, *Basho-fu*

was produced as tribute for Chinese Emperors and trade goods for the feudal clans of Japan under the strict monitoring system of her authority (Okamura: 1989; Yonamine: 2009). After the Kingdom's fall, Okinawa became part of Japan in 1872, and as a corollary of modernisation its inhabitants ceased to make *Basho-fu*. Following World War II, Okinawa fell under US control until 1972. In these unstable social conditions, some craftspeople revived the production of traditional textiles as a way of making a living. In Kijoka, a woman called Toshiko Taira started a business using *Basho-fu*, producing coasters, postcards and dining mats; soon, she was asking other craftspeople to design their own motifs for her products using their dyeing techniques.⁴ These products became popular among American officers at the military base in Okinawa. After the region's amalgamation with Japan in 1972, *Basho-fu* and other craft items became popular souvenirs with the development of domestic tourism. Eventually, *Basho-fu* was designated as a traditional Okinawan craft product - *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* - by the government. Practitioners then turned their attention to the Japanese kimono market, producing kimonos with *Basho-fu*, the most expensive form of the textile. At present, *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is one of the most popular and luxurious styles in Japan's kimono market.

The production of *Basho-fu* in Kijoka: the segmentation of time, place, material, people and the technique

Kijoka is situated in an extensive area of forest, where small-scale tourism and sugar cane production are the major industries. It has become under-populated since most of the young people tend to move to the capital city of Naha for work. Besides the technical complexity of weaving, *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is prized for the characteristics of the material from which it is made. Most of the raw materials for producing the textile are found in the local forest called Yanbaru; in addition to the main material (i.e. banana leaves), dyestuff is extracted from the bark of trees and colour-former is made by juicing tons of *Shiikuwaasaa*, the Okinawan citrus fruits. The production of a roll of textile (measuring 0.38 x 12.0m) is extremely time and labour intensive;⁵ it takes three years to raise banana plants, another two years to process the materials, and then several months to complete the weaving (Plate 2). Craftspeople in Kijoka spend many hours a day in the forest looking after their plants, and in the workshop preparing these natural materials for weaving before they even start working on

their pieces on the loom. Therefore, *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is born of the interrelationship of a skill, the practitioner's experience and a particular place, Yanbaru –the forest.

Mieko Taira, the craftswoman whose story I will now relate, has been practising *Basho-fu* for forty-five years under her master and mother-in-law, Toshiko Taira, who holds the title of Living National Treasure in recognition of her skill in *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*. Toshiko is a renowned craftswoman in Kijoka, having successfully revived the *Basho-fu* technique after World War II and later becoming the president of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu-Hozonkai* (Preservation Group for *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*),⁶ which promotes the transmission of *Basho-fu* techniques to the younger generation. Meanwhile, as the president of the craft association for *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, Mieko has been engaged in the industrial promotion of their products. She appears at many of the craft events that are organised by kimono retailers in major cities in Japan and talks about Kijoka, the *Basho-fu* practice and her mother-in-law's story, as well as her esoteric skill. To reiterate, then, the present success of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* in the Japanese craft market was driven by two craftswomen: Toshiko Taira, as a custodian of the *Basho-fu* technique, and Mieko Taira, as a managing director of the workshop as well as a marketing director for their products.

Mieko Taira's story of *Basho-fu* practice

Some people have knocked on our door to become members of our workshop. More often than not, once they learned the entire process, they left us and then opened their own workshops and made a business with their Basho-fu products. I understand it is very hard to live in such an isolated, small-scale society and especially in a craft society that is somehow still hierarchical. However, those products made outside Kijoka are different from Kijoka-no-Basho-fu. They are merely 'their own Basho-fu' and can hardly be the same as ours, even though they use the same materials that we prepare in our workshop. Through daily life here, we understand the essence of our materials. As seasonal and natural products, banana plants are subtly different from year to year according to the weather, even though we take a lot of care of them in the field. By inspecting their condition carefully, we specifically choose the softest fibres from each leaf. Without decades of experience and the knowledge of the natural environment of Kijoka, it's hard to recognise the best part of each leaf. Without the knowledge of the fibre and the experience of the entire preparation, one can hardly attain a good weaving technique. The best Basho-fu is densely and evenly woven without making the textile thick and heavy. It is smooth and airy, lightweight; it looks like the wings of a dragonfly. A craftsperson cannot gain such good technique by him- or herself. By teaming up with other people at the workshop, doing the same thing together everyday, comparing and competing with others for many



Plate 2
A piece of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* woven on a loom. Photo: author.

decades, eventually one may come to know what a good example of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is, to comprehend the technique required to make such an example, and to understand how to gain that technique.

These days, our neighbours have become ignorant of the importance of Basho-fu, even though they know that Kijoka is the only place in Okinawa where Basho-fu is produced in the original way and with the original materials. Some of them will readily use chemical herbicides in their garden and on paths to the forest. They do not care how harmful these chemicals are to nature, to our life and to our Basho-fu. However, if I ask them to stop using these fertilisers directly, it is not good for our neighbourhood relationship. They are inhabitants of Kijoka and members of our society, so they are as important as our textile. I used to publish a newspaper to report the daily operations happening at our workshop and distributed it to our neighbours to make them aware of the importance of Basho-fu. However, I found that nobody read it. Then I got the idea of arranging a tea gathering for our neighbours, and started to hold it once a month. Each time, I book a room in the local community centre that is accessible to most of the neighbours, and all of our workshop staff talk with them over tea and sweets. I do not set any specific agendas related to Basho-fu on these occasions, but just let them have a chat. This seems to be working well. Old neighbours get a chance to chat to somebody, and our staff get an extra teatime. Some of our staff are not from Okinawa and even most of the Okinawan staff never lived in this area before, so it might be good to listen to the stories of old people, even if it is not directly related to Basho-fu. Most of the old ladies helped my mother-in-law, Toshiko Taira [aged ninety-one], when she first established her workshop and made a business with her textiles in the 1950s. Long before attaining the status of Living National Treasure, she had been a person of great charisma, and had made Kijoka come alive through her weaving in the struggle of post-World War II social chaos. They affectionately call her 'Toshi-chan' and frequently tell me their own stories about her. They said, 'we helped Toshi-chan in her Basho-fu making as we have known her since we were born, and she has been a fashion leader all of that time. As Toshi-chan led, so we all followed.' Therefore, the tea gathering might provide these younger generations of craftspeople with a good opportunity to understand how our Kijoka-no-Basho-fu has been developed by these old people, as well as

by my mother-in-law. We, the craftspeople, need to realise that we are actually living in Kijoka, and not merely practising the skill that originated here. (Interviewed on 15 September, 2008)

'Community' as a landscape: a place for living and remembering

Mieko Taira's statement summarises the essential interrelationship of the place (Kijoka) and its inhabitants, the practitioners (craftspeople), the skills (preparing the material and weaving) and collective memories of Kijoka's past as well as of the social change that has occurred there. All these elements are informed by temporality in Kijoka. For example, Taira's environmental concerns, which are not compatible with the neighbours' use of chemicals, testify to the fact that Kijoka is constantly shaped by the inhabitants' daily activities. Her assertion that *We, the craftspeople, need to realise that we are actually living in Kijoka* reinforces the fact that the cultural form of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is not only embodied in the craftspeople's temporal practice; it has existed and continues to exist in a social complex occurring in the landscape of Kijoka, mediated through the social relationships between the craftspeople and their neighbours. These old ladies who used to practise *Basho-fu* weaving are a part of the landscape of Kijoka, the entities who embody it by living there, talking about their memories of the past and attending tea gatherings organised by Taira.

Based on my observations of the landscape of Kijoka and its *Basho-fu* textile production, I contend that people do not practise or appreciate a cultural form independently from their daily experience in a place; a cultural form is embedded in a landscape where people are 'being' (Tilley: 1994). In this sense, discussions on the meaning of 'community' in policies for safeguarding of ICH repeatedly fail to find a resolution, essentially because these discussions are divorced from the spatial interrelationships of people, time and culture. Without the daily environment, it is hard to identify the subject that drives the time-space practice of a cultural form. I suggest that 'community' may be better interpreted as 'any group of subjects who experience the landscape where a cultural form occurs, who judge or justify it, and who narrate it according to their past-present spatial experience', to employ the words of de Jong, *with the nostalgic discourse*. (de Jong: 2009, p.169)

The consumer as an agent of 'tradition': the external evaluation of 'tradition'

Through the government's designation of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu-Hozonkai* (Preservation Group for *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*) as a group holder of IICP and its award of the Living National Treasure title to Toshiko Taira, *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* is now codified as 'tradition'. Meanwhile, as discussed above, the material *Basho-fu* has adapted its social meaning and form according to others' values, serving as, among other things, a tribute to Chinese Emperors, postcards and coasters for American military personnel based in Okinawa, souvenirs for tourists and kimonos sold in high-street shops in Tokyo. The story of Mieko Taira, the *Basho-fu* craftswoman, highlights her sense of the landscape of Kijoka as realised through her action of weaving and the lives of the local people who have engaged in the revival of *Basho-fu* production and bestowed on it its current status as a 'tradition'. Thus, these craftspeople have been making their passion to popularise the value of *Basho-fu* material through their action of weaving, in tandem with social change and diversified market demand.

In support of my argument concerning the transformation of a cultural form through the interaction with others' value systems and facilitated by the social recognition of 'tradition', it is necessary to consider the consumers of traditional craft products as well as the social conditions that promote the utilisation of these products. Despite the fact that consumers are by no means always identical to the economic actor, to discuss heritage as mediated by economic (and political) actors is still often perceived as an *ivory-towered outrage*. (Bendix: 2009, p.254)

In the fiscal year 2010, Japan's official annual budget for activities geared towards the transmission of ICH dropped to approximately \$8,900,000 (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 2011). At present, about 120 individuals and groups in Japan are designated as the holders of techniques of Important Intangible Cultural Properties (IICP), popularly known as LNTs. Each individual or group designated as an LNT receives only approximately \$21,000 each year from the government for their activities relating to the transmission of the skill. Mr Masanao Sasaki, Chief Senior Specialist for Cultural Properties, Traditional Culture Division in the Agency for Cultural Affairs, explained the situation that the Japanese administration of ICH faces:

The number of people we designate⁷ [as LNTs] is initially fixed by the budget that we can allocate to that purpose. Due to the present economic turmoil, our budget for the promotion and protection of traditional cultural activities gets tighter year by year; therefore, the number of designations has become fewer in more recent years. During the economic boom from the 1980s to the 1990s, the budget was abundant, so we could support various activities [of ICH]. I heard that many big-name companies at that time could also afford the prize-winning products produced by these Living National Treasures, which they acquired from prominent art exhibitions and then displayed in the receptions and halls of their company buildings. However, we cannot do the same any more in this economic situation. There is a limit to the extent to which the authority can fund the safeguarding activities of traditional practices. In a sense, this underlines the importance of grassroots support from the public. In the case of both performing arts and crafts, after all, the practice is a livelihood. They need to be accepted and appreciated by people in contemporary society. (Interviewed on 23 September 2009)

In support of Sasaki's argument, in the case of Japan's traditional crafts, an industry worth \$13.4 billion in the fiscal year 2011 (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, Japan, 2013),⁸ it is evident that the public is very interested in traditional craft. The consumption of traditional craft products points to the *reciprocal interaction between the process in production and consumption* (Miller: 1995), and suggests that there is a certain amount of social demand for 'tradition'.

Consumers, mass media, customs and the social capacity to appreciate 'tradition'

Kimono is the most obvious example of the consumption of traditional craft products in Japan. More often than not, both men and women still wear kimonos for religious customs and festivities.⁹ Despite the dominance of western-style outfits such as suits, dresses and blue jeans in every day life, the wearing of kimonos is not limited to formal occasions. For instance, the mass media provides evidence of the popularity of kimono practice and traditional craft markets in contemporary Japan. *Kimono-salon* is one of several magazines that deals specifically with kimonos and their styles. An extensive portion of this publication consists of images of

popular actresses, models and anchorwomen modelling suggested kimono styles. (see Plate 3) In addition, special issues of each volume report on certain practitioners of kimono-textile production. Plate 4 is taken from a report on *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* and Toshiko Taira, entitled *The Living National Treasure in the technique of Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*. These issues typically involve an explanation of the history of the featured textile, an interview with the practitioner, and photographs of the practitioner, his or her workshop and the land from which the raw material originates. Plate 5 shows the cover of a magazine that targets young women aged from their late teens to early twenties. It introduces the hairstyles worn specifically with the *Yukata*, a casual style of kimono for summer wear. This custom of wearing a *Yukata* is very popular among many generations including these young people, and many can be observed wearing them during firework displays in the summer.

Apart from kimono practice, 'tradition' is a part of many occasions in contemporary Japanese society, such as religious ceremonies and, in particular, in the state education system. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Japan (MEXT) has promoted the inclusion of traditional and cultural elements into the compulsory school curriculum since 2003 (Bunka Shingi-Kai: 2003). Following this national policy, the local authorities in each prefecture have developed their own initiatives in education. For instance,



Plate 4
Entitled 'Wearing *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, blessing nature: Toshiko Taira, a Living National Treasure' (author's translation). This article describes some production processes and records an interview with Taira about her work and techniques. Source: *Kimono-salon*, Spring 2011, p.107.

students learn local folklore, music and festival practices as part of their classes in history, art, music, gymnastics and ethics.¹⁰ One can also find many traditional local dishes on school lunch menus. In addition, traditional cultural practices such as the tea ceremony and sports like kendo and judo remain popular after-school activities.¹¹ And it is not only in the education system that one finds such customs; in contemporary Japanese



Plate 3
Cover of *Kimono-salon*, Spring 2011, featuring a popular TV anchor-woman in a kimono.



Plate 5
Feature entitled 'The cutest hair arrangements for novice *Yukata* wearers'. Source: *Ray+Mina*: Special Edition, June 2011.

society, 'tradition' is embedded in a myriad other contexts, from the home to the workplace.

Consumption of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* and the interpretation of 'tradition'

In order to explore the experience of the consumption of 'tradition', I offer the following contrasting accounts from two consumers I met at an Okinawan textile sale event held at a kimono retailer in Ginza, one of Tokyo's most fashionable areas. One day during the event, the shop held a talk by a craftswoman who makes *Bingata*, one of the Okinawan textiles. The craftswoman explained the entire process of making *Bingata* as well as showing the special utensils and materials involved in its production. [see Plate 6] According to the sales manager of this retailer, they hold similar types of presentations by artists once a month and invite craftspeople from all over Japan. In addition to the *Bingata* talk, the shop sets up a separate room next to the discussion space where Okinawan traditional court dance can be seen on a large screen. In addition, many other local craft products, such as pottery and lacquer ware, are also displayed. I selected two interviewees from different age groups, Mrs T (aged fifty-eight) and Miss Y. (aged thirty-four), each with different experiences of kimonos.

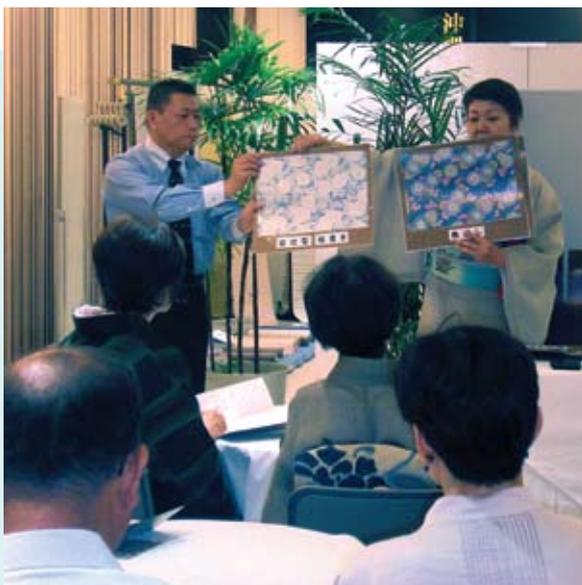


Plate 6
At the *Bingata* artist event, Sachiko Yafuso (right), a craftswoman, explains how to make *Bingata*. Photo: author.

Mrs T. is a housewife living in a suburban area near Tokyo. She is fairly well off, with income from her husband's retirement fee, pensions and additional income gained from properties in her hometown. She started wearing kimonos as a hobby after her two children became independent and her husband retired. She now wears a kimono at least once a week, when she goes out with her friends for lunch or shopping or to visit the theatre or art exhibitions. Her friends also usually attend in their kimonos. At this Okinawan textile event, she purchased an *obi*, a long, broad (7.0 x 0.38m) sash that holds the kimono in the middle of the body, and that is tied at the back in a complicated shape. This particular item was made of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* and was woven by Toshiko Taira herself. Mrs. T bought it for about JPY 600,000 (approximately \$6,240).

The Basho-fu fabric was stunning. It was made by Toshiko Taira, who is the Living National Treasure of Basho-fu, though I never choose an item just because of the title of the craftspeople. Once I saw her in a newspaper; I remember she was very sweet and old. I'm lucky to find her work on sale. Usually, the price of products produced by Living National Treasures, once their makers have passed away, increases beyond the reach of most people. Regardless of the market price, I look forward to wearing the product eagerly and also am excited to imagine how the item will mature in the future. I sometimes buy old textiles in the antique market. Old textiles offer a somewhat deeper and more mature character in terms of colour and texture, one we rarely see in modern materials. This is due to the fact that they were 'handmade' with natural raw materials sourced from the forests of Okinawa, whereas these days they tend to use chemical stuffs.

For me, wearing this item means enjoying a handmade product from Okinawa that uses only local, natural materials. I generally love craftspeople's works when I can sense their spirit in the material. It is different from the kimonos made in factories, where people just press a button and the product comes out from the machine.

Generally I have a positive image of Okinawa. I heard that local society is very close and that people look after each other, which is something we seldom experience in urban life. I also like their healthy diet. However, I'm not interested in living there since I'm now too accustomed

to life in the city. I was always interested in Okinawan woven textiles, which are considered chic and highly desirable among kimono fans. It is well known that Okinawan products are always genuine and honestly produced, and Basho-fu is no exception. I heard that once a kimono retailer in Korea trained local workers in the technique of Oshima-tsumugi [a silk shantung from Amami Oshima Island] in order to reduce production costs and pass off this Korean-made textile as 'Oshima-tsumugi' in the Japanese kimono market. I also heard that some other local fabrics involve heavy use of chemical dyestuffs. But with Okinawan products, this sort of thing never happens. The logo mark [Den-Mark] provided by the government also ensures the safety and genuineness of the craft products. I usually keep this part of the kimono cloth once it is tailored to identify the material and its origin. (Mrs T., interviewed on 23 September, 2009)

Miss Y (aged thirty-four) didn't purchase any items at this event. She is a temporary employee in a small company. Her kimono experience is limited largely to formal occasions such as weddings, but she occasionally wears casual items (eg. summer cotton kimonos) for going out to summer festivals. She owns two sets of formal kimono items for festivities and funerals respectively, prepared by her parents, and two or three casual items that she has bought herself. Her account of the event and her experience of kimonos was as follows:

I didn't buy any items today since these woven and dyed stuffs from Okinawa are not for formal use. My kimono collection is still very basic so I need some more formal items [as Basho-fu is not suitable for formal occasions]. However, I very much enjoyed looking around at these products. Eventually, some decades in the future, I might think seriously about buying one. Kimono shopping is not so easy because it is expensive. If I find a good item and intend to buy it, I usually spend many months considering my choice and checking similar items and their prices, studying the history of the textile, reading about the style in kimono magazines, and consulting with my mum, who knows a lot about kimonos.

Though I respect people who have learned the very complicated and subtle techniques of traditional textile making, if the product did not suit my taste or current way of wearing kimono, I don't think I would buy it. Once I visited a small needlework workshop where old ladies

sat and did very dexterous things. However, there were none of their craft products that I liked, either for my own use or for gifts. In this sense, some Okinawan woven textiles, such as Basho-fu, even though I guess they require a lot of work, seem a bit dowdy if I wear them the wrong way. I liked other items such as Bingata since they are colourful and pretty. I saw a customer who wore a Basho-fu item nicely. I guess I might need to learn more about Okinawan products and which items go with each other to make me look pretty. For this and other reasons, I think I'm not ready to get any Okinawan products right now. Despite the fact that I didn't buy any items, I really enjoyed the atmosphere of Okinawa that was evoked through these products and the artist's presentation that I attended today. Had I bought one of the Bingata items and worn it, I would be able to explain the production process and materials that I learnt about to my friends or people around me.

Meanwhile, I have a very positive opinion of the Den-San Law. Unlike the exclusiveness and high price of products made by Living National Treasures, these products from local craft associations are less expensive, while their quality is assured by the government. This is good for those of us who are not specialists in craft textiles for helping us to buy good material. (Miss Y., interviewed on 19 September, 2009)

As is clear from these narratives, consumers and the market economy can be viewed as 'active agencies' (Miller: 2009; Schneider: 2006; Weiner and Schneider: 1991) in facilitating the social institution of 'tradition'. As indicated by magazine articles about *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* and kimono styles as modelled by a popular television anchorwoman, 'locality' and 'tradition' exist as elements of kimono fashion in contemporary lifestyles. The semiotic impact of extensive media coverage and the rhetorical expression of 'tradition' contribute to promoting a positive image of Okinawa. Neither of the ladies discussed above knew much about the production process of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, and nor had they ever been to Okinawa. However, through the physical action of visiting the event, browsing the products, deciding whether to buy something and, for one of the two, wearing the purchased item, these two ladies can appreciate the complexity of the technique attained by the practitioner over many decades of practice. Their respect for craftspeople and their image of Okinawa, as well as of the craft community, is a product solely of their

imagination. This imagination is itself a corollary of the social capacity of 'tradition', which sees individuals practise and consume 'tradition' in many and diverse contexts – education, religion, fashion, and so on – as well as through mass-media and government promotion. Thus *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* gains the moral value of 'tradition' and 'locality' through the established cultural convention of kimono wearing and the layers of experience associated with the consumption of 'tradition'. Mrs T., who purchased an item, might learn more about *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* through the actual practice of wearing it. Miss Y., who didn't purchase anything, was also actively engaging as an agent of 'tradition' by criticising the craft item and imagining her future kimono practices.

Conclusion

As observed by the consumers of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, it is clear that the Japanese traditional craft industry is supported by the public's experience of 'tradition' as acquired through the socio-cultural, economic and educational circumstances that prevailed after the Second World War. The concept of ICH or 'traditional craft products' from a particular region, like the title of Living National Treasure, gains moral value through consumers' interpretation of 'tradition' and its subsequent use as a means to make their lives more meaningful or enjoyable. It is obvious that without the widespread and comprehensive public recognition of 'tradition', practitioners would no longer be motivated to engage in their craft or to transmit their skills to future generations. Public recognition also helps the rising generation in the locality to become aware of the present practice of the cultural 'tradition', and to appreciate the efforts of previous generations to sustain that tradition while adapting to social change. This in turn enables them to understand the economic and moral benefits of the 'tradition' to their own lives and to the environment in which they live.

As emphasised by UNESCO, social awareness plays a crucial role in the continuation of a cultural form, and this awareness must come from those members of the public who are able to appreciate 'tradition'. As exemplified by *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*, what the *ICH Convention* means by 'safeguarding' is the act of associating the concept of ICH or 'tradition' with an existing cultural form, creating multiple public access points in different sectors of society (eg. through education, the economy, the media, leisure

and cultural activities), and of facilitating the production and consumption of the cultural form. As an offshoot, a sense of 'community' develops around the safeguarding of ICH and its practitioners through the respectful opinion of the general public.

Giddens argues that all 'tradition' is invented, whereas genuineness, which is *the "real past"...is effectively unknown, since tradition is the very medium of the "reality" of the past* (Giddens: 1994, p.94). Indeed, as exemplified by the cases of Ms Taira and the two kimono consumers, the past is often employed arbitrarily according to the practical concerns of the practitioners and consumers of 'tradition'. Each one develops his or her own sense of authenticity regarding what they believe to be the 'tradition' of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu* or Okinawan craft products. As no cultural form was born as either 'tradition' or ICH, the latter's identification is entirely contingent on an individual's own interpretation, which is based to a large extent on one's socio-economic, educational and cultural experiences as influenced by social dynamics and modernity. Therefore, I suggest that the involvement of the 'community' in safeguarding ICH, especially in the case of craft techniques, is more effective if it is accompanied by efforts to build the capacity of the public to appreciate ICH and to utilise it in a way that makes individuals' lives richer and more meaningful. 🇯🇵

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NOTES

1. When the government announced the establishment of IICP at a press conference, a press officer asked whether the holders of IICP status could be referred to as *Ningen-Kokuho* (Living National Treasures); this phrase has since entered common usage (Saito: 2006).
2. Such mechanisation enabled year-round farming, reducing the time available for observing customs.
3. The *Mingei* Movement (Folk Cultural Movement), which was founded in the 1930s, was a significant grassroots project for the promotion of traditional craft. Under the Meiji government, the production of industrialised, machine-made craft products had been promoted with the aim of increasing revenue from the export of Japanese art objects. *Mingei* contested this mass production of art objects, supported by artists such as Muneyoshi Yanagi and Shoji Hamada. The movement's members opposed the concept of the 'art object' whose purpose was limited by the need to be exportable and decorative: rather, they emphasised such items' simplicity and functionality to ordinary people (Otaki: 1993). *Mingei* established the idea of *Yo-no-Bi* (functional aesthetics) to demonstrate the beauty of figurative simplicity when applied to objects with a 'handmade character' created by skilful craftspeople for practical use (Yanagi: 1967).
4. Toshiko Taira's successful production of *Basho-fu* items for American people was backed by Eiki Shiroma, a master of *Bingata*, a traditional stencil-dyeing technique. *Bingata* production ceased due to the Kingdom's fall and Eiki Shiroma substantially contributed to its revival after the World War II.
5. For instance, to make one skein of yarn, numerous processes are undertaken: the fibre must be removed from the banana leaves and boiled and beaten until soft; the ends of the fibres must be joined together without leaving any knots; then the fibres must be dyed (with the colour fixed with citrus juice) and finally skeined before being woven.
6. In 1974, the *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu-Hozonkai* (Preservation Group of *Kijoka-no-Basho-fu*) was designated as a group holder of Important Intangible Cultural Properties in recognition of their *Basho-fu* technique.
7. In the designation of the practitioners of traditional performing arts and crafts, each year *Bunka-Shingi-Kai* (the Cultural Committee for the designation of LNT, which is composed of specialists like artists and curators, bureaucrats and academics) carefully decides who will be qualified as the holder of particular techniques of Important Intangible Cultural Properties, (Agency for Cultural Affairs, Japan 2010).
8. The Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) identifies 211 items as 'traditional craft products', including woven and dyed textiles, pottery, lacquer wares and wooden items produced in Japan.
9. These festivities include celebrations of children reaching the ages of three, five and seven (known as *Shichi-go-san*), coming-of-age parties at twenty and weddings.
10. Goya (2011) provides an actual example of the transmission of a local festival, *Taneodori* in Okinawa Prefecture, in the context of education at a local primary school.
11. For detailed information on traditional practices introduced into the Japanese education system, see Sarashima 2013a (forthcoming).

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