



# OKINAWAN HERITAGE AND ITS POLYVALENT APPROPRIATIONS

Sean Casey

University of Hawaii at Manoa, United States

**Abstract:** UNESCO's initiative to create a shared, global schema of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) has generated considerable debate across disciplines on the efficacy and consequences of heritage designation. Such criticisms tend to rely on presumptions born from the 'Invention of Tradition' model of analysis that lacks explanation of the articulation of local and (inter)national forces. Based on ethnographic and archival research, this article examines stakeholders at the local, national, and international level involved in the current nomination of Tarama Village's August Dance Festival for ICH. It critiques the theoretical value of analysis that neglects multiplicity of scale and suggests the need for a more global, system-oriented approach to heritage that illuminates the interplay between overlapping fields of heritage, tourism, and politics. **Keywords:** heritage, cultural politics, stakeholders, UNESCO, festivals, Okinawa. © 2013 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

“Heritage-making”—the process by which an agent(s) selects a particular instance of culture legitimized by the past from its diachronic complex and positions it vis-à-vis a specific narrative to some end—has evolved over the past half-century from governmental practice into internationally celebrated events of the intergovernmental United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well as non-governmental organizations. These heritage-making practices require the cooperation of local, national, and international actors and thus occupy a complex site of overlaying fields such as tourism, politics, law, economics, history, geography, and anthropology (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2009; Di Giovine, 2009; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Smith & Akagawa, 2009a). Despite this global, multi-disciplinary nature, case studies of heritage-making in the social sciences tend to focus on the local and utilize a set of presumptions about the constructedness of heritage that neglect issues of scale. By reconceptualizing heritage-making as a simultaneously local, national, and international practice that is

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Sean Casey is an Anthropology MA Candidate at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where he researches UNESCO heritage initiatives, applications of heritage in Japan, Japanese tourism at home and abroad, and Okinawa and its diaspora, [2424 Maile Way; Saunders Hall 346; Honolulu, HI 96822-2223 Email <[scasey@hawaii.edu](mailto:scasey@hawaii.edu)>] He is especially interested in how various stakeholders, academic disciplines, and fields of production simultaneously articulate around the heritage product.

facilitated by a multiplicity of stakeholders with both divergent and convergent interests, this article seeks to situate a specific instance of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) in its (inter)national context and provide a more nuanced understanding of the multiple levels of articulations that make institutionalized heritage possible.

UNESCO defines ICH as “the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003, p. 2). Festivals tend to incorporate all of these criteria, making them easy catch-all objects of intangible heritage designation. They also mark particularly interesting sites for researching the production and consumption of intangible culture, as they serve as stages “par excellence” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 61) on which ephemerally tangible events are actively created by locals through the production of elements of intangible culture and consumed by locals and tourists. *Hachi-gatsu Odori* (August Dance Festival)—of Tarama Village in Okinawa Prefecture, Japan is one such festival that has been nominated for and is anticipating inscription to UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. This nomination coincides with Japan’s substantial investment in UNESCO’s ICH project, illustrated by the tenacious nominations of the Agency of Cultural Affairs that has led to Japan’s ownership of 21 of the 298 elements currently inscribed as ICH, and recent sponsorship of a \$1.02 million project for safeguarding heritage in eight Asian and Pacific nations. What is at stake for Japan in all this? For UNESCO? For Tarama Island? How does a festival like *Hachi-gatsu Odori* appeal to all of these stakeholders? This paper examines how *Hachi-gatsu Odori* is simultaneously yet differently appropriated at international, national, and local levels and how what the author calls “polyvalent appropriability”—the potential of an object to be used in multiple ways by divergent stakeholders—determines its selection as (inter)national heritage and excludes other local practices that may be equally or more important to identity. Unlike previous notions of contestation in heritage, “polyvalent appropriability” seeks to understand the intrinsic qualities of heritage that facilitate cooperation—rather than competition—amongst divergent stakeholders. In other words, how are the tensions of heritage resolved in its making?

## HERITAGE BEYOND THE INVENTION OF TRADITION

The social sciences tend to focus on a predefined set of concepts in critiquing heritage and the efficacy of its safeguarding. Brumann (2009) labels these “petrification,” “falsification,” “desubstantiation,” and “enclosure.” “Petrification” refers to the freezing of cultural practice in a synchronic past that results from preservation (Munjeri, 2009). “Falsification” is the political concern that people in power (re)invent traditions to some benefit (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983). “Desubstantiation” is the idea that removing an element of culture from its original

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