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The potential of intangible loss: reassembling heritage and reconstructing the social in post-disaster Japan

Attitudes towards cultural heritage have long been characterised by an ‘endangerment sensibility’ concerned with preventing losses. Recently, however, critical heritage scholars have argued that loss can be generative, facilitating the formation of new values and attachments. Their arguments have focused primarily on material heritage, whose risk of damage and disappearance is accelerating due to growing environmental crises. After Japan’s 2011 tsunami, however, heritage scholars there began probing a related question: what happens when supposedly ‘intangible’ heritage is damaged? Taking this question as a starting point, I ask how recent applications of assemblage theory in studies of heritage can shed light on destruction’s role in forming and reforming places and peoples. Drawing on fieldwork in Japan’s disaster regions, I argue that disassembly is a form of damage rendering both the things mediating heritage and its reciprocal mediation of social life matters of concern. I suggest that the potential of loss lies in how heritage can be made to translate other interests during its reassembly. By contrast, attempts to perpetuate pre-existing relations can render the social more rather than less precarious, depending on the context.

Key words assemblage, community, disaster, intangible cultural heritage, Japan

Introduction

On 11 March 2011, an undersea megathrust earthquake with a magnitude of 9.1 shook northeastern Japan. Much of the damage was immediate. A handful of buildings collapsed. In others, windows shattered, stone walls cracked and ceilings buckled. But the worst was yet to come. Some 30 minutes later, a tsunami inundated the coastline, taking around 22,000 lives and damaging or destroying hundreds of thousands of buildings. This included 774 designated as ‘national properties’ (*kokuyū zaisan*) by Japan’s official heritage agency (Bunkazai-bu 2012). Many shrines, temples and museums disintegrated. Other buildings survived but required significant repairs; their artefacts, dispersed among the mud and debris, had to be excavated. Funding such projects was controversial, given the strained financial situation faced by survivors. But concern for ‘protecting the past, and the identity of those who live’ near sites (Okamura *et al.* 2013: 263) soon saw state agencies and other organisations provide resources.

Japanese heritage scholars were worried about more than its material variety, however. Led by anthropologist Hiroki Takakura and supported by Miyagi Prefecture, several began surveying how the tsunami had impacted the rituals, dances and other practices known as ‘folk performing arts’ (*minzoku geinō*) in the Northeast (Takakura 2016, 2019; Takakura and Takizawa 2014; Takakura and Yamaguchi 2018). Some of these had been designated ‘intangible folk cultural properties’ (*mukeyi minzoku bunkazai*) by the state in the decades following the last major disaster, but most had not.

The group argued that such practices were critical for recovery because people needed social and cultural continuity. 'By turning to folk performing arts that they've grown intimate with over many years,' Isao Hayashi wrote, 'they can recall connectivity with their pre-disaster lives' and rebuild fragmented social networks (2014: 33). Instead of focusing on 'cultural properties that have form' (*katachi aru bunkazai*), the group accordingly sought to examine what it meant 'that something without form has been damaged' (Takakura 2014: 11).

These statements show how many Japanese scholars considered so-called intangible cultural heritage threatened with losses after the tsunami that would impoverish its holders and delay or even prevent recovery. A similar 'endangerment sensibility' characterises wider attitudes towards heritage conservation, including after disasters. For those holding it, Caitlin DeSilvey and Rodney Harrison write, heritage appears a 'non-renewable resource' (2019: 2). Its values and meanings are already established; perpetuating these into the future is the primary task of those 'safeguarding' heritage (Akagawa and Smith 2019). A belief underlies this sensibility, expressed by John Warren, that 'the essential element of cultural survival is continuity; continuity in creative matters, in human behaviour patterns and in the traditions which underlie social behaviour' (2005: 829). We must prevent damage or loss to heritage, he writes, because it would create 'discontinuity with the past' (Kathem 2020: 167), threatening people's ability to perpetuate themselves.

However, other heritage theorists have begun arguing against endangerment sensibilities (Holtorf 2015; Rico 2018; DeSilvey and Harrison 2019; May 2019). DeSilvey and Harrison note that climate change makes material losses inevitable, particularly in coastal areas (like northeastern Japan). Such losses can be generative or even emancipatory, they claim, because they 'facilitat[e] the emergence of new values, attachments, and forms of significance' (2019: 3). Cornelius Holtorf argues similarly that endangerment sensibilities may restrict our capacity to create or appreciate new values. 'According to the theory of loss aversion', he writes, loss or damage is 'considered as a net loss of cultural heritage'. However, destruction or damage is not necessarily a problem because the meaning of material objects 'is not given but constantly evolving and the objects can be expected to fulfill a valuable function in society ever [sic] after being subjected to major alterations' (2015: 418).

These claims about tangible heritage recall earlier arguments by anthropologists regarding intangible 'folk performing arts' (*minzoku geinō*). Like Takakura and his colleagues, many of them argued that local dances, rituals and other practices structure and maintain community groups. However, some were sceptical about attempts to conserve those practices by other actors fearing their loss. For example, Theodore C. Bestor argued that innovation characterises ritual practice, which must 'pragmatically and flexibly [adapt] to changing circumstances' (1989: 226). Similarly, Barbera Thornbury (1994) wrote that attempts to prevent practices from changing through heritagisation might threaten their survival (and thus their communities). Christoph Brumann (2009) has criticised the latter claim, countering that heritagisation has not harmed Kyoto's Gion Festival, which the Japanese state protects as an important cultural property. However, he leaves open the question of what endangerment sensibilities and resisting change do to practices and practitioners not supported by the government. This question applies particularly to rural areas that cannot count on immigration to sustain the populations whose identities local arts mediate.

Regarding such areas, Michael Foster also argued that maintaining folk performing arts in them as an 'infrastructure' of community requires 'flexibility, improvisation, and

a willingness to negotiate with current realities'. However, 'when those current realities are of devastation,' like in the Northeast, 'then flexibility may entail extreme change' (2017: 119) rather than subtle iteration. In this article, I explore how extreme changes in ritual practice related to the structure of affected groups in Japan's disaster regions. I draw on fieldwork conducted on the politics of reconstruction in Minamisanriku Town, Miyagi Prefecture. In doing so, I first seek to answer Takakura's question: 'what is implied by saying that something without form has been damaged?' (2014: 11). Second, I engage with critiques of endangerment sensibilities by asking whether, how and just as crucially under what conditions such damage might enable changes to ritual practice and performance producing new values and attachments.

My arguments build on recent applications of assemblage theories and relational ontologies in heritage studies. Such theories treat relations between things as ontologically more fundamental than things themselves (Wildman 2010: 55). For example, Matthew Hill suggests that the objects and practices we call 'heritage' are outcomes of historical and political projects establishing relations between 'heterogeneous groups of people, institutions, ideas, and things', as well as 'mediators' that shape those groups and their structures (Hill 2018: 1237). His perspective resonates with the critiques of endangerment sensibilities discussed earlier, even when they do not explicitly adopt it. For instance, Holtorf (2015) contends that the loss of or changes to particular 'heritage objects' is not necessarily problematic because their values are not inherent but emergent properties of an objects' articulation within networks of people, institutions, ideas, etc. Although many practitioners do not necessarily consider their activities 'heritage',¹ I will argue that the same applies to the intangible aspects of 'folk performing arts' in Japan.

Relational theories enable answers to both Takakura's question about damage to these arts and questions regarding the potential of that loss. They suggest that by degrading or destroying material elements within assemblages, disasters affect the latter in a specific way. I call this 'disassembly': the severing of relations between things or rendering once taken-for-granted relations unstable. Here, what Bruno Latour calls 'matters of fact' – sets of stabilised relations composing 'things' – become 'matters of concern' (Latour 2004), meaning that the relations that comprise them are open to renegotiation. Reviving practices can, from this perspective, be cast as reassembling them: associating them with other people or things, material and immaterial, that they rely on and alter. In the case of 'intangible' folk performing arts, this not only implies that the practice itself becomes different, as Ahmed Skounti (2009) and others have argued regarding cultural transmission. What the practice mediates – including 'the community' – also changes. The potential for new values and attachments lies in how this reassembly can enable 'heritage' to translate different interests, relations or values than previously. Paradoxically, the more thorough the disassembly, the more things might be re-mediated (although this is by no means certain, as I later discuss).

¹ Most of the practices in question are not registered as heritage. However, heritage regimes and their ontological assumptions can refract back onto how people understand other cultural objects and practices (Geismar 2015: 79). This means that the questions asked (and answers given) by heritage scholars have palpable effects on the 'folk performing arts' that I am concerned with. Thornbury demonstrates something similar, writing that implicit in the designation of folk arts as 'heritage' is the idea that they will be 'carried forward unaltered into the future', and although few of them have been designated, 'there is now a tendency to view all such arts in this manner' (1994, 221).

I elaborate on these arguments in the remainder of this article, showing how severe damage made some practices more likely to survive in parts of northeastern Japan. I begin by briefly discussing assemblage theories of heritage and what they reveal about supposedly intangible practices. I then show how reassembling rituals known as ‘visiting performances’ mediated the reconstruction of places and their communities in parts of Minamisanriku where damage was serious but not existential. I argue that comparatively smaller degrees of destruction to existing socio-material networks constrained re-mediation, paradoxically rendering practices (and perhaps peoples) more likely to disappear. This section then segues to an analysis of how people reassembled new communities and new traditions from the fragments of those destroyed in more severely damaged areas, revealing the potential that loss also creates.

Reassembling intangible practices

Many anthropologists studying ‘heritage’ have given structural, scalar and symbolic explanations of its origins and politics, according to Matthew Hill (2018). However, assemblage theories and relational ontologies are increasingly gaining ground. He provides several recent examples. For instance, Sharon Macdonald (2009) has used Latour’s idea of ‘mediator’ – something that transforms or ‘translates’ what it links to or transmits – to describe how particular items of heritage affect the social interactions related to them. John Pendlebury, meanwhile, has argued that we need to shift our focus from these items to the wider ‘assemblages [of] institutional organizations, norms, objects (e.g. laws and regulations, and normalized practices’ (Hill 2018: 1237) that constitute them and imbue them with meaning and value. Finally, Hill cites Rodney Harrison (2013), who argues that assemblage theory can move us beyond analysing what heritage means and show how it is actively produced through networking heterogeneous entities.

Hill synthesises these theories from an anthropological perspective. First, he argues that heritage is what Latour calls a quasi-object: an entity or phenomenon that emerges only through ongoing associations with other ones (Latour 2013: 372). The latter includes both people and things, like other artefacts, buildings or physical spaces. It can also include immaterial or more-than-material phenomena, such as organisations, institutional norms, laws and regulations, and other forms of social and cultural practice (2018: 1237). The particular entities that we delineate as ‘heritage’ act as ‘mediators’ within the resulting assemblages, meaning they actively translate and transform what is associated with them. By tracing how heritage is assembled and whose interests it translates, Hill concludes, anthropologists can show how ‘multiply intertwined organizational actors, in conjunction with the affordances of buildings and the materiality of public space, combine to produce a particular, and provisional, heritage assemblage’ (2018: 1262) that has specific social and political effects.

These arguments lend support to Akagawa and Smith’s claim that all material heritage is also intangible. By this, they mean that the meaning of particular objects comes into being only within sets of values that are themselves immaterial (Akagawa and Smith 2019: 6). Assemblage theories also have implications for how we understand ‘intangible’ practices, however. The latter are also material because they emerge through associations with entities that have a physical form and whose meanings or effects they shape. At the bare minimum, many practices rely on the performer’s ‘body

as material culture' (Martin *et al.* 2013). Furthermore, folk arts in Japan such as animal dances require the costumes that performers wear, the instruments they play, the buildings where they perform, etc. Without these, the performance is not considered authentic. And in turn, the dance imbues these things with meanings (including sacral-ity). The difference between 'tangible' and 'intangible' heritage is thus not their nature but how one conceptually divides an assemblage. The former label creates an 'artefactual surface' separating objects from practices that could, from another perspective, themselves be considered heritage (Armstrong-Fumero 2018: 1307). The latter dematerialises practices through spatially and temporally segregating them from their physical dependencies.

However, events like disasters bring those dependencies back into view. Returning to Takakura's question, we can understand some of the damage to intangible practices as also physical. Many folk arts ceased after the disaster because the tsunami destroyed buildings, washed away costumes and implements, and drowned practitioners. Furthermore, aid policies dispersed survivors spatially, both short and long term, weakening the social relations that practices had translated. I call the result 'disassembly', as described above: a phenomenon where an assemblage 'disbands', offering insight into what socio-material relations it had gathered (Latour 2004: 235). There are two ways of thinking about disassembly, I propose. In the first, particular nodes in the assemblage disappear or are removed, leaving broken or tenuous connections. The second kind of disassembly often accompanies this, but subtly differs. The relations that entities *should* have with each other become what I earlier called matters of concern, meaning open to dispute and negotiation. The greater the damage, the more such matters of concern might appear.

Furthermore, the more matters of concern, the more potential for articulating entities within new or altered sets of relations when reassembling them (recovery policies play a significant role here, with rebuilding and relocation also altering socio-spatial relations and introducing new actors into affected areas). This is where I locate opportunities to realise what DeSilvey and Harrison call the 'potential in loss' (2019: 2). Reassembly does not only make the 'heritage' in question different. It can create new associations between 'people, institutions, ideas, and things', making it possible to translate other interests, values and meanings than before (Hill 2018: 1237). For example, a ritual that served to bind particular some people into a spatialised form of community while excluding others might become a more inclusive mediator. Later in this article, we will examine some evidence for such a claim. First, however, we will turn to how reassembling folk arts makes not only the 'art' itself but also the domains it mediates otherwise, even when done so in the name of continuity with previous interests.

Reassembling places

I began thinking about this in 2015 when I first witnessed a *shishi-mai* or 'lion dance'. The venue was a temporary housing complex for survivors from Hadenya, a district in the south of Minamisanriku. Lion dances are votive performances found all over Japan in which several men garb themselves as a lion spirit. Within Shinto practice, the latter forms one among many vectors of ritual purification or *oharae*. The lion's body typically comprises several performers covered in green cloth; its head, a large, painted wooden mask with an articulated jaw. As we waited for the dancers to arrive, a group

of women circulated food among the gathering crowd, followed by an elderly man bearing a sake bottle, cajoling those old enough to drink in celebration. Shortly after arriving, the performers began to dance, the ones forming the body mimicking a lion's vigour while pretending to battle another, fan-wielding dancer. Afterward, sake was used to cleanse the lion's mouth, into which giggling children and adults placed their heads to be purified.

Lion and other animal dances are particularly amenable to both assemblage theories and theories regarding the productive potential of loss. In the northeast, they often emerged historically through people articulating parts of other assemblages within new sets of relations after a catastrophe. For example, anthropologist Johannes Wilhelm describes how one lion dance in another Miyagi village, Yoriiso, was created after a famine in the 1830s. Although described today as 'intangible', the practice began with villagers appropriating a material object around which they assembled other artefacts and practices. A community association had decided to create a new ritual to ensure the safety of villagers, Wilhelm reports. They sent a representative to a nearby island, where he borrowed a wooden lion mask. After his return, villagers crafted new instruments, composed new songs, and choreographed the dance, first performed in 1835 (Wilhelm 2004: 38–9). Hadenya's dance has a similar history, allegedly assembled there during a disease outbreak as a means of purifying residents (Masaoka *et al.* 2008: 160).

Alongside ensuring safety, such reassembled practices functioned as what Foster (2017) calls the infrastructure of community. As I noted earlier, performances like lion dances are among the phenomena commonly labelled 'folk performing arts' (*minzoku geinō*). Japanese scholars argue that what distinguishes such arts from other kinds of performances or practices is that they are 'tied to a community's religious beliefs' (Thornbury 1994: 215) or were at some point historically. In other words, they identify such arts more closely with a 'folk' or regional community, understanding the practices as 'vivid symbol[s] of communal identification' (Bestor 1989: 234). However, from an assemblage perspective, such folk arts not only symbolise but actively and materially mediate communal relations by enacting them in time and space. This perspective shifts attention from symbolism to the 'arrangements of materials, equipment ... technologies' and actions through which arts and their communities of practices co-produce each other (Harrison, in Hill 2018: 1239).

In the case of lion dances, Wilhelm argues that we can consider them a category of folk performing arts called 'visiting performances' (2004: 39). Rather than occurring in some central location where parishioners gather, visiting performances go to their viewer-practitioners, as the name suggests. For example, in Yoriiso the lion would first process to a shrine at Anba Ōsugi Daimyō (literally, 'the magnificent light at the large cedars of Anba'), where performers would make offerings, and then visit other shrines, the harbour and each household (2004: 39). In Hadenya, similarly, the lion would visit each home, purifying and 'connecting (*tsunagu*) the people of Hadenya' with both each other (Masaoka 2014: 40) and locations such as the shrine. The dance thus functioned as a ritual technology mediating the relations constituting the hamlet as a socio-material network incorporating objects, places and social interactions (Pred 1984).

The tsunami, however, disassembled this network. First, it destroyed almost all of the hamlet's houses. Displaced residents evacuated to gymnasiums, hotels and government buildings. Later, the municipality moved them into prefabricated temporary housing units like the one where I first witnessed the lion dance. Particularly in the early days, these were small. Some were even located outside the town. The authorities

could have allocated units by hamlet. However, concerned about fairness – meaning every household having an equal shot at allocation – they decided initially to assign them by lottery. The result was residents of most hamlets that entered temporary housing early, including Hadenya, scattering across sites inside and outside the town. For older residents, in particular, this rendered social relations a matter of concern. ‘We couldn’t contact each other,’ one told me, ‘because we didn’t know where anybody was.’ Community associations even disbanded in some districts, severing the ‘connections to land’ and ‘connections to people’ that rituals like lion dances had mediated (Murosaki 2013: 90).

Some heritage scholars worried that these changes might obliterate ‘intangible heritage’. ‘The situation in the disaster regions is changing so rapidly’, Masaoka wrote, ‘and the folkways for whom those [regions] are the background may lose their existential meaning’ (2014: 49). However, many former residents of Hadenya believed that the only thing left that could ‘bind them’ (*tsunageru*) was the lion dance. Their mask, stored in a shrine on higher ground, had survived the tsunami. However, the wave washed all the clothes and instruments away, which needed replacing (in other areas, state agencies and private organisations concerned for coastal heritage often funded this; see Littlejohn 2020). With residents scattered, the dance’s trajectory also needed altering. In 2012, the performers decided to visit all the temporary housing complexes hosting one-time residents that had lost their homes. This represented the first time that many of the latter saw their former neighbours after the tsunami (Masaoka 2014: 46).

Other ‘visiting performances’ underwent similar changes in Minamisanriku and elsewhere (Hayashi 2014; Itaya *et al.* 2017), creating temporary circuits re-connecting parts of disassembled networks. For example, a hamlet called Horowa boasted a yearly festival where residents brought a palanquin bearing one of the town’s deities to their shrine. After performing a votive *kagura* – a dance where parishioners don masks of gods, demons and mythic heroes – they would return downtown, parading through Minamisanriku’s Shizugawa district before returning the deity to its principal shrine. During the tsunami, Horowa mostly survived due to its inland location. However, the tsunami destroyed the downtown districts where they would parade. In response, they altered the palanquin’s route, visiting and blessing shopkeepers in a temporary arcade erected after the disaster. This began as a short-term adjustment to altered circumstances. From 2017, however, they permanently incorporated new residential areas where the town had relocated displaced residents, including those from Horowa. Tanibata *et al.* argue that this ‘functioned to rebuild bonds between parishioners interrupted’ by the disaster (2018: 7).

These examples show how lion dances and other folk arts suffered significant damage during the tsunami in the manner that I defined earlier. Implements, costumes, locations and performers were lost; survivors were also scattered. This disassembled parts of the place-based, socio-material networks that the practices had mediated, rendering them matters of concern. However, it did not mean that practices necessarily lost their existential meaning, as Masaoka worried. Some acquired more or novel significance, just like their elements had when reassembled after previous catastrophes. Re-situated within new sets of socio-spatial relations, Hadenya’s lion dance and Horowa’s *kagura* mediated the reassembling of social and spatial relations by re-articulating their dispersed elements. This recalls Holtorf’s argument that ‘if each heritage object is considered as a process of becoming through associations ... the object can be expected

to fulfill a valuable function in society even after being subjected to major alterations' (2015: 418). But this has limits, as we will now see.

Bounded networks

Scholarly concern for heritage after the tsunami was often motivated by the desire to resurrect or revive pre-disaster collectives – the 'folk' in 'folk cultural properties'. Much of the literature treats these 'communities' (*komyunitī*) as requiring little elaboration beyond brief histories of places and the occupations associated with them. However, as Walsh and High (1999) argue, 'common-sense' approaches to communities – which assume them as static, circumscribed entities associated with defined places – fall analytically short. Three dimensions, they argue, require explaining: community as imagined reality, community as social interaction and community as an ongoing process. Historically, practices like lion dances served to mediate all three: they translated and enacted community as imagined reality through social interactions in time and space. The collective, here, appears 'in a constant state of emergence over time' (Barrios 2014: 330) through interactions that denote which bodies are included and excluded from it.

In some places like Horowa, these interactions were a matter of concern even before the tsunami. I learned this in 2015, when I witnessed the hamlet's *kagura* and procession through what had been downtown Minamisanriku alongside a group of heritage scholars from Kyoto's Ritsumeikan University. We met early in the morning at a community centre near the base of the mountain hosting the local shrine. Parishioners soon began to arrive, most of them men in their fifties and sixties. The priestess introduced me to one with whom she was talking, who represented the parishioner's association. They were discussing a growing problem: lack of young people strong enough to carry the deity's palanquin (*mikoshi*). Later, I learned that the association also lacked members young and fit enough to dance the *kagura*. The priestess asked whether youth from other parts of the town could participate, but the representative responded dismissively. If they allowed outsiders, the ritual would become 'merely an event', he said. 'This is our festival', he concluded. 'If that ended, what would be the point?'

The literature on Japanese heritage provides many examples of similar dynamics, where participation in intangible practices is limited to those living within the 'neighbourhood' or 'community' (Bestor 1989; Brumann 2009). However, this is not always the case. For example, Hashimoto (2003) documents how first tourism and later official designation as 'heritage' transformed the Mibu Rice Planting Ritual and whose interests it mediated. Mibu residents revived the ritual during the Shōwa period after a long hiatus. From early on, their local railway company brought sightseeing buses to visit performances. Later, practitioners began taking part in folk art competitions sponsored by local industries, adding ostentatious dance moves to appeal to the judges while eliminating elements that didn't fit the new venues. During this period, they opened the ritual to performers not native to the area, bookending a process whereby 'the more folk performing arts are identified as cultural properties, the more they take on a life of their own apart from the festival occasions of which they are traditionally a part' (Thornbury 1994: 215).

The changes did not bother performers, Hashimoto recounts. 'The ritual will die out if we stick to only the old forms', one told him (2003: 234). In the tsunami's aftermath, many Minamisanriku residents also believed that survival required change. The

reason was the region's ongoing depopulation. Since peaking in 2010, Japan's population has continually fallen and is expected to decline further, causing acute labour shortages and economic contraction. Most affected will be rural areas, afflicted not only by falling birth rates but also outmigration to the cities. Both increased after the tsunami, which accelerated population decline in towns and villages across the north-eastern coastline. Horowa's population fell by a quarter between 2011 and 2016; it continues to fall today, leading to the lack of able-bodied youth that I mentioned earlier. In other hamlets, similar trends saw many ritual practices cease even before the tsunami (it is possible that other factors, such as the declining relevance of rituals, also played a role). In Hayashi, some miles south of Horowa, a ritual boat called the *kurobune*, or 'black ship' – formerly processed through the bay every few decades during the *kurobune* festival – has sat unused in a storehouse since 1952.

Despite their own population decline, however, Horowa residents' objective was not changing but perpetuating imagined communal realities even as the social interactions constituting them were becoming stretched across time and space. By altering their ritual's route, they sought to re-establish the networks disassembled or rendered matters of concern by the tsunami and subsequent recovery policies. Members dispersed across new sites but their networks remained exclusive, restricting whose interests 'heritage' could be made to translate during reassembly. While understandable, this reveals the possible downside of an approach focused solely on reconnecting existing social relations. Given the context described earlier, the refusal to expand Horowa's network has made the practice itself more likely to vanish because what threatened it was never the tsunami but the longer-term structural forces producing depopulation.

During my fieldwork, such dynamics often arose when some or all of the parishioner or community association organising an art survived both mostly or partially intact and *in situ*, like in Horowa. Takizawa (2019) records a similar trend in other areas. He describes how some households that survived *in situ* in another town, Yamamoto-chō, revived a ritual and used it to restore connections with relocated residents. Here, the same issue that we saw in Horowa arose: who will carry the *mikoshi* given population decline (Takizawa 2019: 50). Residents tried to hold together networks whose relations were already matters of concern and whose further disassembly could cause what Takakura feared: loss of the 'heritage' or art. By contrast, Takizawa shows how in Iwanuma city the collective relocation of six devastated villages to a new, purpose-built area resulted in old rituals ceasing *and* new ones emerging. These were not short of willing participants, young and old, raising the question of whether greater initial loss might create more possibilities (and if so, how). To provide an answer, we now turn to somewhere more damaged than Horowa.

Reassembling communities

This is Motohama, a district that formed part of central Minamisanriku's waterfront before the disaster. Across from it in the bay sits Areshima: a sacred island (*kami no shima*) hosting several deities protecting those working the surrounding waters, according to its owner and other residents that I spoke to. In the summer of 2016, I visited Areshima's shrine, located deep in the island's forest. I was going to watch a ritual called The Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods (*shichifukujin-mai*), performed yearly in pre-tsunami days to propitiate the deities and ensure bountiful catches. As

the name suggests, the dancers would also dress as divinities: Daikokuten, protector of cooks and crops; Bishamonten, friend of the well-behaved; Ebisu, guardian of fishermen; Jurōjin, the prolonger of life; Fukurokuju, herald of happiness and longevity; Benzaiten, goddess of good fortune; and Hotei, simultaneously a Buddha incarnate and a Zen priest of dubious morality.

When I reached the shrine, I found the young performers still dressing. They had purchased, been donated, or had hand-made replacements for costumes and instruments lost during the tsunami. Once they were dressed and their preparations complete, the priests offered prayers and introduced them to the deities hidden within the shrine's inner sanctum. From a laptop perched on the edge of the sanctuary, music began to play. One by one, each performer stepped in front of the altar, performing the stylised movements unique to their character. Finally, they formed a moving circle around the one dressed as Jurōjin, a god of longevity also believed an incarnate star, who gently wafted a wand bearing *shide* – zig-zag paper streamers used in Shinto purification rituals – towards the shrine interior.

After the ritual finished, I mingled and chatted with the performers, many of whom I knew through my fieldwork. I asked one, a young fisherman born in Motohama, why he had joined the dance. 'The tsunami provided an opportunity to revive vanished things', he told me, highlighting that nobody had performed it the year before the disaster. Later, I spoke with the troupe's leader: a local politician who, fittingly given Minamisanriku's reliance on the fishing industry, had assumed the role of Ebisu, a favoured deity of fishermen. I asked him the same question. His answer was different. 'Today', he told me through a large, drooping false moustache, 'was our first step in making a new tradition' (*atarashī dentō*). A local high-school teacher and trainee anthropologist also present punctuated this point. He told me that the performance was an 'invented tradition' (*tsukurareta dentō*) drawing on Motohama's practices.

Before the tsunami, the ritual was certainly different. Like Horowa, Motohama was part of central Shizugawa. However, it occupied the urban waterfront instead of the more rural, deep interior. Perhaps due to this, its population was larger, with 283 households to Horowa's 221 in 2010. Unlike the latter, more dominated by agriculture, most of Motohama's residents made their living at sea, one told me. This explains why during the summer festival, some would perform the Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods – a prayer for safety at sea, originally – on a boat in Shizugawa bay. One of the adult performers reminisced about this, remembering the cold water washing over his feet. He had danced it as a child; like in Horowa, only residents were allowed to perform, but young rather than adult ones.

Of course, the biggest difference with Horowa was that Motohama no longer existed after the disaster. Its immediate waterfront position meant that the tsunami destroyed all buildings. Afterwards, the state declared the entire area a 'disaster danger zone' (*saigai kiken kuiki*), prohibiting people from rebuilding their homes. As described earlier, former residents dispersed among temporary housing complexes. The town planned to rehouse them in three new residential estates inland, allocating plots by lottery. The cumulative effect of both the tsunami and these policies was the irreversible disassembly of Motohama's community, in terms of both people's relations with other people and with space and place. This led to the resident association that had previously organised the Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods permanently disbanding. Although many people today still describe themselves as from Motohama, the

district itself is a memory whose reality the mediation of social interaction and ritual life no longer reproduce.

But this was not the end of the Dance. Areshima Shrine is one of four in Minamisanriku affiliated with the centre's principal one, Hachimangu. Together, they are known as the 'five shrines' (*gosha*). For the most part, each led separate ritual and communal lives before the tsunami. After it, however, the disassembly of communities and dispersal of residents saw novel associations emerge. This included the establishment of the Minamisanriku Five Shrines Young Parishioner Association (Minamisanriku Gosha no Ujiko Seinenkai, hereafter 'Seinenkai'). The group of eight, approximately half of whose members were formerly of Motohama, first met in January 2016 at Hachimangu. Their objective was to build new social connections among themselves and others by 'considering the town's festivals alongside the deities' (*machi no matsuri wo kamigami to tomo ni kangaeru*) (Itaya *et al.* 2017). In other words, they sought a mediating practice that could assemble new cross-boundary relations. And this led to them adopting the defunct Dance of the Seven Lucky Gods.

The reasons they could do so were both the complete disassembly of its community and its transformation into documented 'heritage' through scholarly inscription. By this, I mean what Armstrong-Fumero describes as 'the re-articulation of [an] object into an intelligible and transmittable form of discourse ... through the process of translating non-verbal artefacts into narrative descriptions, maps, and drawings that can be filed as part of the official documentation' (2018: 1312). The agents of this were the same scholars with whom I had attended Horowa's procession, who had surveyed residents about the Dance and the 'organisations' (*soshiki*), 'things' (*mono*) and 'places' (*basho*) it had mediated. They passed on 'memory maps' documenting this information to Hachiman shrine, which the Seinenkai drew on to construct a new ritual (Itaya *et al.* 2017: 228–9).

The results were different from what we saw in Horowa. Like there, the Seinenkai changed the ritual's spatiality. They would no longer perform on a boat, for example. Instead, they danced on stage during events like the summer festival. They also changed who danced. Previously, only children had; today, adult Seinenkai members dance themselves. Most critically, they opened participation to members of the new Minamisanriku Five Shrines Young Parishioner Association that had belonged to the other four shrines and their districts. Later, they even asked people from outside the town to become dancers: a stark difference from Horowa, where I heard the parishioner representative warn against allowing 'people from Tokyo' to participate. In other words, the Seinenkai situated the Dance itself – a compilation of physical movements unique to each Lucky God – within a new assemblage of equipment, bodies, spaces and values that changed what it was and what it did. The old ritual provided a set of elements that, through reassembly, could translate the interests of new or altered groups of actors. These included a perceived need to break down some of the boundaries rendering Minamisanriku and its sub-divisions *heisa-teki* or 'closed'.

The Seinenkai were not able to do this because Motohama was more open than Horowa (although it may have been in some respects; an exhaustive comparison of social capital in the respective areas is beyond this article's scope). Former residents that I interviewed said that the infrastructure of community there was just as strong. Instead, things could change because the tsunami destroyed the area, the state forbade people to rebuild and resident associations disbanded due to members' dispersal. In other words, both disaster and recovery disassembled the district, breaking or severely

weakening the relations that the Dance had mediated and which in turn imbued it with meaning. With the need to reassemble existing relations and injunctions regarding who could perform obviated, the Seinenkai could use aspects of the Dance to translate new values and interests, including ones that would have been unfathomable before the disaster. And this returns us to the issue of what DeSilvey and Harrison have recently called ‘potential in loss’.

Conclusion

Heritage scholars like DeSilvey and Harrison have argued for a new paradigm open to ‘relinquishing’ heritage in the face of disaster – that is, accepting change or even disappearance when efforts to retain or preserve things prove unviable or ‘could make matters worse’ (2019: 3). They claim that this can help those concerned with heritage to better cope with coming catastrophes and enable approaches to the past allowing new, perhaps better, meanings and values to emerge. To date, such arguments have focused on heritage of the sort that we call ‘tangible’. They are also underpinned by materialist ideas regarding what ‘destruction’ and ‘damage’ mean or entail. These include things disappearing, the disaggregation of material objects into ‘ruins’ or accrual of new ‘patinas’ (Dawdy 2016) that can become symbolic.

By contrast, I’ve asked what it means for something ‘intangible’ to be damaged and whether there is also potential in that loss. Like some of the above scholars, I’ve drawn on assemblage theories of heritage. These imply that the meaning, value and connective capacities of practices like Japan’s folk performing arts depend on how they mediate and are mediated by assemblages comprising intangible things – like legal frameworks, institutions or ideas – and material ones such as bodies, objects and spaces. I’ve defined damage to such assemblages as ‘disassembly’, when events disaggregate their socio-material networks, harming the relations ‘without form’ whose traces, per James Leach, we tend to reify as heritage ‘objects’ (2003: 131). After this, people often try to put things back together or arrange their elements in new combinations. Whether damage yields potential depends on whether and how they translate new interests and relations in doing so. The more an assemblage disbands, the more scope there might be for it to mediate other interests and values when its parts are reassembled.

The inverse can also be true. In places like Horowa that suffered minimal damage, people focused on re-mediating pre-tsunami communities through reconstructing ‘visiting performances’. This was an understandable response to the disaster. But paradoxically, it may have ensured the performance – and maybe the community – was less likely to endure. By contrast, in Motohama elements of a ritual already on the verge of disappearing due to population decline were disaggregated and reassembled in ways networking members of once discrete areas *and* recent arrivals in the town. ‘New traditions’ assembled from older ones mediated emergent communities that were amenable to further ‘movement[s] of opening’ (Ingold 2011: 4) – and were thus more likely to survive. This comparison suggests an alternative perspective to the fear of net cultural loss commonplace in heritage management and studies. As Tanibata *et al.* write, ‘change is incompatible with the ways of thinking of cultural property regimes’ (2018: 2). But sustainable community reconstruction often depends not only on people reviving, per Takakura (2014: 12), but also reassembling both arts and folks.

Some caveats are necessary here. I do not intend to minimise the trauma inflicted on people by catastrophic events (including the trauma resulting from losing things constituting oneself or one's community, such as heritage). As Stuart Kirsch has argued, cultural losses have profound and long-lasting effects on people; 'Anthropological arguments about culture', he concludes, 'must be able ... to recognize change while simultaneously acknowledging loss' (2001: 177). Changes yielding new value might not do so for everyone: many former residents of Motohama have probably suffered greatly from the disassembly enabling others to create 'new traditions'. Furthermore, I am not claiming that new interests and values are necessarily progressive or better than older ones. In northeastern Japan, the latter's unsustainability derived from a specific circumstance: rural areas' long-term depopulation. Other places will have different situations and thus different needs.

However, given ecological crises like climate change, losses are certain even in places not historically subject to recurring disasters. And as Fluck and Wiggins argue, it is not necessarily losing 'heritage' that is problematic for our societies, 'but how individuals, communities and societies choose to deal' with that loss (in DeSilvey and Harrison 2019: 2). From a historical perspective, much of what we call heritage today was itself assembled in response to earlier moments of crisis, as I showed earlier when discussing lion dances (see also Littlejohn 2020). The question for scholars of the present is whose interests such reassembly mediates and how.

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Le potentiel de la perte immatérielle: réassembler le patrimoine et reconstruire le social dans un Japon post-catastrophique

Les attitudes à l'égard du patrimoine culturel ont longtemps été marquées par une « sensibilité à la mise en danger », soit un souci de prévenir les pertes. Cependant, certains chercheurs spécialisés en questions de patrimoine ont récemment fait valoir que la perte peut être génératrice, en ce qu'elle facilite la formation de nouvelles valeurs et de nouveaux attachements. Ces arguments concernent principalement le patrimoine matériel, dont les risques de dommages et de disparition sont désormais accrus en raison des crises environnementales à répétition. Toutefois, après le tsunami de 2011 au Japon, les chercheurs ont commencé à se pencher sur une question connexe: que se passe-t-il lorsque le patrimoine supposé « immatériel » est endommagé? Partant de ce présupposé, je pose la question de savoir si les applications récentes de la théorie des assemblages dans les études sur le patrimoine peuvent permettre de comprendre le rôle joué par la destruction d'un patrimoine (matériel ou immatériel) dans la formation et la réforme d'un lieu et d'un peuple. Grâce à un travail de terrain que j'ai effectué dans les régions du Japon sinistrées par le tsunami de 2011, j'argue que le désassemblage est une forme de perte, et que cette perte transforme les formes de médiation de ce patrimoine ainsi que les manières dont il devient médiation du social, en "matière à préoccupation" (le "matter of concern" latourien). Je suggère que le potentiel de la perte réside dans la manière dont le patrimoine peut être amené à traduire d'autres intérêts lors de son réassemblage, mais que, par contraste, tenter de perpétuer les relations préexistantes peut rendre le social plus ou moins précaire, en fonction du contexte.

Mots-clés assemblages, communauté, catastrophe, patrimoine culturel immatériel, Japon