

RESOURCE PAPER - 20



**INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

# **An Introduction to Japan's Intangible Cultural Heritage**

by  
**Geethanjali Rajan**



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## PREFACE

This Resource Paper is an attempt to understand and appreciate the Intangible Cultural assets of Japan. We are happy to dedicate this Paper to Japanophiles.

The author, Ms. Geethanjali Rajan teaches Japanese language at the Chamber's Language School, and had undergone the Teachers' Training programme at the Japan Foundation Japanese Language Institute, Urawa in 2015. She evinces a lot of interest in Japanese language, culture and tradition and is passionate about haiku and other Japanese forms of poetry. She currently serves as the (English language) haiku editor of the international journal, *cattails* (United Haiku and Tanka Society).

We hope our readers find the Resource Paper interesting and informative.

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**Suguna Ramamoorthy**  
Secretary General



## **An Introduction to Japan's Intangible Cultural Heritage**

### **Introduction**

A visit to Japan often leaves the visitor awestruck and open-mouthed. Part of the awe is from the superlative level of cleanliness and the use of technology, which makes the country appear superior in most areas. But then, one steps back and thinks about other countries, in comparison. There are other 'very clean' countries and those that use technology to make life easier and more comfortable for the average citizen. Then, what really is the difference?

A closer analysis of the Japanese ethos would reveal many other aspects that make Japan an attractive country and definitely not the lowest ranked among them, would be the high regard that the Japanese

people have for harmony, their respect for nature, and the awareness of their tradition and culture that works in tandem with their futuristic technology forays. When one travels in Japan, this is probably why it is quite natural to find old buildings, 8<sup>th</sup> century Buddhist temples, early Shinto shrines, 13<sup>th</sup> century castles and business streets maintained in pristine surroundings. This sounds like good cake with added icing. But the cherry on top of the icing is what is called Intangible Cultural Heritage, a concept that exists all over the world, and gratitude is due, to the efforts of the UNESCO. However, safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage is a concept that is less known than the other programmes that the UNESCO runs to preserve tangible world heritage in the form of buildings, landmarks and gardens that have existed from centuries ago.

This paper aims to take a look at the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage and examples of some of the aspects of intangible cultural heritage that Japan aims to safeguard. The author hopes that this paper will help readers understand a little bit more about the cultural traditions and treasures in Japan.

## **Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) - a walk down the years with UNESCO**

UNESCO has changed the way the world looks at Cultural heritage. When the UNESCO programmes that support the identification, conservation and preservation of world heritage sites were started, the focus was on nature conservation and separately, heritage conservation. This was started after World War I. Later, what started in 1959, as a movement to preserve the Abu Simbel temple in Egypt from the destruction that could be permanent due to the building of the Aswan Dam, became a world-unifying movement to preserve objects

and landmarks of cultural importance. In 1972, when the two movements were unified (preserving natural and cultural heritage), the World Heritage Convention was born. This convention focused on preserving tangible structures that were existent from centuries ago and were in danger of being destroyed with the passage of time, perhaps, due to the neglect of civilisations that are often in a hurry to develop, at the cost of culture. The UNESCO programme has helped many countries to recognize and safeguard around 1073 sites around the world. The availability of the World Heritage Fund (around USD 4 million every year) helps in some way to preserve and promote these world heritage sites as well.

Later, with the forward movement of technology and development, it was felt that many cultural intangibles were the unfortunate collateral damage in the hurtle to a globalized society. With the globe suddenly shrinking, the dimensions of culture and tradition were being forgotten. This led to many international debates, conferences and discussions.

A formal definition of Intangible Cultural Heritage, then made its appearance - ICH includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as *oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts*. What is interesting is that Japan had recognised the need to support traditional artisans and their skills very much earlier (1950 Law for Protection of Cultural Properties) wherein the concept of Intangible Cultural Properties was defined to include music, drama, dance and other arts that formed a part of the history of Japan. The Japanese Government recognises and supports Living National Treasures, artistes who are preservers of important intangible and artistic



processes in Japan. This list encompasses many delicate and intricate art forms and performing arts.

### **ICH - what it encompasses**

The importance of ICH is that it is deeply rooted in the people of a society and the mode of transmitting cultural practices, is from generation to generation or from community to community. It ensures that traditions that are rural or urban, minority or majority-based, irrespective of its complexity or geographical location are treated with respect and are safeguarded. The wealth of knowledge and/or skills of the cultural practise in discussion, are what are deemed important and not the actual manifestation of the practise itself. This approach helps to bring about cultural dialogues and preserve cultural diversity in a fast-changing world. It also helps to bring about respect for other cultural traditions and helps in the appreciation of other communities and their practises, either by understanding the differences or by appreciating the similarities.

To take a look at Japan's approach to ICH within the UNESCO framework, in 2004 with the Nara Conference, Japan stressed on the need for an integrated approach to maintain tangible and intangible cultural markers at the joint conference with UNESCO. This led to The Yamato Declaration on Integrated Approaches for Safeguarding Tangible and Intangible Cultural Heritage. In this, as with many other areas, Japan's proactive approach has borne results by helping to lay down clearer guidelines as to what would comprise ICH.

### **Samples from Japan's Intangible Cultural Heritage on the UNESCO list**

From the list of Mukey Bunka Isan or the Intangible Cultural Heritage UNESCO list in Japan, this paper takes a look at a few of the interesting

cultural heritage aspects that have been added to the 'safeguard list' in Japan.

### **Washi or Traditional Japanese Paper making**

A visit to a traditional Japanese paper factory in Higashi Chichibu in Saitama Prefecture, Japan is when one can see the traditional art of making paper from Mulberry, being practised in pristine environs. This is one of the three places in Japan where the art of making washi is done and has been recognised as a part of the ICH of Japan. Washi paper has many uses and traditional Japanese homes have screens, sliding doors and walls made of the material. It is also used to make paper for books, letters and other artistic stationery.

Each of the three areas of Japan that have been recognised for the art of hand-made paper, is said to have their own individual special type of paper. In Shimane, the paper is called *Sekishubanshi* whereas in Gifu, it is *Honminoshi*. The *Hosokawashi* in Saitama is made of mulberry pulp and much of its qualities are said to be dependent on the clear water of the Ogawa river that flows near the village. The enduring paper that is also used to make account ledgers, is made from *Kozo mulberry* pulp and lasts long without getting brittle with age.

While the handmade Japanese paper, *Washi*, itself is really a wonderful product, the process that the washi-making village communities use is what has been certified as ICH. The process itself is what is being preserved as intangible culture as such processes tend to be forgotten easily in the hustle and bustle of technology-driven processes. By recognising washi-making as intangible world heritage, the village communities who are involved in the paper production keep the traditions of growing mulberry, using the techniques of making paper, as well as making innovative paper products from washi, a viable and vibrant cultural tradition.

## **Washoku or traditional Japanese dietary culture**

*Washoku* refers to traditional Japanese food. In 2013, UNESCO included the traditional Japanese dietary cultural practice into the safeguard list, stating that Washoku is a social practice based on a set of skills, knowledge, practice and traditions related to the production, processing, preparation and consumption of food. Traditional Japanese food is said to have all the elements of a good balanced diet. The process of preparing the food, as is the case with most traditional cuisines across the world, is passed on from generation to generation or from group to group formally or informally (discussions, demos, classes etc.) It is the tradition of Japan's *Osechiryori* or the New Year meal that has been the cynosure of all eyes, or taste buds, in this case. The traditional art of pounding rice for *Mochi*, using seasonal vegetables, fruits, fish, seafood, and the use of traditional *Chyoumiryo* (seasoning) are all included in washoku. The gourmet culture in Japan does not limit itself to sushi and ramen, as many in the west and Hollywood would have one believe. Any meal in Japan is akin to eating with one's eyes 'me de taberu', as minute attention goes into presenting the meal in harmony with the season. This is why the New Year meal has colours, flavours and ingredients that make it necessary to be cooked in particular styles and when done, the *Ojubako* (lacquer box where the meal is packed), is loaded with meaning, myth and stories of tradition. Each dish has a special wish for the New Year too. For instance, black beans or *Kuromame* is associated with a wish for good health, while herring roe or *Kazunoko* is a wish to be blessed with children; *Konbu* is said to symbolise joy and *Ebi* or shrimp symbolising long life (bent at the waist and a long beard!).

It is easy to see why a complex art such as this is dependent on the human community. The tradition of making and packing food for the first three days of New Year (which is the most important holiday of the year) also sees a gathering of family members to share the tradition, and

also sees the use of traditionally crafted lacquer boxes and tableware at shared mealtimes. It is also easy to understand how such a tradition can fade away, without proper support or recognition. In fast-paced Japan, it is becoming more common to see western equivalents of osehiryouri or international fast food outlets dotting the city's roads. By marking Washoku on the ICH safeguard list, it is going to get a fillip, making more people aware of the idea of traditional culture in culinary practise and perhaps, also promoting keen interest amongst foreign visitors and international tourists.

### **Stage Art forms Kabuki, Nogaku and NingyoJohruriBunraku**

The ancient stage theatre-dance forms of *Kabuki*, *Nogaku* (consisting of Noh and Kyogen) and puppet theatre were all recognized as part of World Intangible Cultural Heritage as early as 2008. In fact, these were the first to appear amongst Japan's list of 21 UNESCO ICH items, as of the year 2017.

Nogaku is a dance-based performance that has its origins as early as the eighth century and is formally said to have existed from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is the principal performance form in Japan and has influenced the theatre forms of kabuki and puppet theatre. It finds the use of masks, costumes and props in depicting tales of classical literature. Specially trained professional dancers and musicians depict emotions in a stylized form. The Japanese government recognized Noh as a matter of ICH in the late 1950s itself. The setting up of the National Noh Theatre in Japan added to its development.

Kabuki is the traditional theatre art form of Japan that originated in the seventeenth century and was very popular with townspeople. This drama form too is unique in the splendor of its costumes, makeup, music and stage and props. The main stories revolve around history and

the moral values that acted out in the lives of samurai and their clans. Some are stories of the heart and society. The support of the Japanese government in setting up the National Kabuki theatres and the training centres for actors has given it the much-deserved encouragement that it deserves. As with Noh, Kabuki has attracted the attention of many international travelers too, apart from being the most popular traditional art form amongst the Japanese today.

NingyoJohruriBunraku or puppet theatre has been practised in Japan from around 1600 and has been influenced by *nogaku* as well. This too depicts stories from history or society with the help of music, narration, large puppets with elaborate costumes and under the direction of master puppeteers. The aesthetic value of this form is unparalleled. The art form is dependent on the intricate art of puppet making, which itself is a traditional and highly skilled master art.

These dance and theatre forms of Japan have been on the ICH national list from the late 1950s. But their recognition by UNESCO has given them the international recognition they truly require. These forms too, promote cultural dialogue and the collaboration of communities involved in the making of the costumes, makeup, masks, music and the performers who were earlier from generations of the same family. However, now with the setting up of training centres for the art forms, young aspirants are getting involved in these areas.

### **Yuki-tsumugi or the handwoven silk fabric process**

In the Ibaraki and Tochigi prefectures, a unique and ancient process of making silk fabric from handspun silk thread exists, called the *Yukitsumugi*. Dating back to the Keicho era in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the fabric was said to have been made as presents for the shogun. The fabric can be classified as a raw silk fabric and has a unique spinning, dyeing

and weaving process that is transmitted from generation to generation in their communities. The fabric itself is used to make kimonos and is known for its aesthetic and soft, warm quality. As the process is done by hand, making enough fabric for a plain, adult kimono takes 2 - 3 months and an elaborate patterned kimono can take up to 2 years! The end product of this unique process is prized and often passed on for generations in families. The process is dependent on mulberry trees and sericulture and the silk floss is spun by hand. Patterns added by tying bundles of yarn before dyeing the yarn. The silk is then woven using a loom. The important aspect of this process is that the silk floss is made from broken and otherwise unusable cocoons of the silkworm. This makes it a very important part of recycling and helps to sustain the process and the silk producing communities. With the UNESCO recognition, more attention has been focussed onto this ancient process.

### **Mibu no hanataue - Annual rice-planting festival, Hiroshima**

Many agrarian traditions too form part of the cultural ethos of an agriculture-driven society and with the advent of newer industries, many such traditions see a decline in their significance. To prevent this, the *Mibu no hanataue* has been rightly recognised in Hiroshima prefecture as being part of the intangible culture of Japan. Conducted on the first Sunday in June, the ritual involves the transplanting of rice by the Mibu and Kawahigashi communities of the Hiroshima prefecture. The ritual that enacts the planting and transplanting of rice (after the actual transplanting) is accompanied by traditional drums, song and dance. Prayers to the rice deity for a bountiful harvest form the central theme of the ritual. The celebration sees cattle being led in a vibrant procession to the Mibu shrine the cattle are in full decoration, with colourful necklaces and baubles. These agrarian traditions see a

confluence of man, nature and the symbiosis between the two, a very important aspect of the Japanese way.

### **Dances, float festivals and temple rituals**

As is the case in most nations of Asia, Japan too has a wide range of folk and ritual dances, festivals and temple functions that form the core of tradition. These are celebrated in the community, passed down generations and if not taken into cognisance, would be under threat of being destroyed or diluted.

One of the first dances to be declared in the ICH list, the traditional dance of the Ainu is an affirmation of man's relationship with nature. Living in the northern area of Japan, Hokkaido, their dance relates to the fact that Gods can be found all around, in nature. This dance is part of cultural festivals today and also of some ritualistic traditions. Here, we can see the similarity or a connection with other Arctic cultures. This is probably an example of what encompasses pluralistic traditions and cultural dialogues across geographic areas.

Move to the South and one finds *Kumiodori*, the performing art of Okinawa which helps to preserve the unique language, vocabulary and literature of the island. This performing art has similarities to other stage forms of Japan. The influences are many and the intermingling is important.

The enthralling list of ICH includes Gagaku, the oldest of the traditional performing arts that still finds place in the Imperial household and is today performed in many theatres across Japan.

Other interesting inclusions are those of temple rituals like the *Sada shin noh* (purification rituals from Shimane) and *Nachi no dengaku* from the Fire festival at Nachi. Japan, which has many traditions of float festivals at temples, has recognised the need to preserve the

custom through popularising and safeguarding them. Under the *Yama*, *Hoko* and *Yatai* float festivals, 33 representative festivals which involve music, dance and construction of floats have been included in the ICH. This involves many groups, communities and participants, all striving to keep the tradition and culture of the country alive!

## **Summation**

By recognising culture that is deep rooted in the country's past, Japan has acknowledged the need to retain its history and diversity amidst a rapidly transforming, technology-based, urbanised society. It has succeeded in that many of its rich practices have become vibrant and some even popular, among the Japanese people as well as international travellers, tourists and Japanophiles. Most of the items on the UNESCO list of 21 practices of ICH, were already on the Japan government's radar for support from a long while ago. By recognising them as world heritage, the process of safeguarding becomes more formal and structured. What is interesting is that there are many such items that are waiting to be listed and will be done in the future. In this, many practitioners of traditional art and craft become activists and lobby for their own regional cultural emblems, a case of community support and involvement within the able programmes of the government - for instance, the renowned and traditional *Urushi* or intricate lacquerware process.

India has such a vast array of dances, art forms, drama, crafts and festivals, where some of the traditions date back to thousands of years. India too has many items on the UNESCO ICH list - a total of 13, but many on the backlog list and some that are ongoing - to be inscribed on the list. Some that are already on the list are *Kalamkari* art, *Kalbelia* dance, *Kutiattam*, *Ramlila*, *Kumbhmela* and *Chhau* dance. There are so many more that are in urgent need of safeguarding, preservation and



perhaps, even enshrinement, before the wave of technology and urbanisation pushes them further into the margins. Perhaps, the process has started and is ongoing but it is time we bring in more support from corporate entities and NGOs to bolster governmental aid. Needless to say, the community has to be involved if we wish to preserve the cultural diversity of our country.



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## **INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

No. 21, Kavignar Bharathidasan Road, Teynampet, Chennai 600 018.

Tel: 91-44-2435 2010 / 2435 4779 / 4855 6140 E-mail: [indo-japan@ijcci.com](mailto:indo-japan@ijcci.com) Website: [www.ijcci.com](http://www.ijcci.com)