Intangible cultural heritage and societal gender structures: An interview study focusing on changes in gender roles and gender restrictions in Japanese float festivals

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage and gender are connected. This connection is arguably particularly articulated within the field of intangible cultural heritage, seeing as many traditional practices have gender-specific rules regarding participation and access. Because gender within traditional practices is a potentially contentious topic, however, research on this subject remains scarce. This paper presents the results of an interview study conducted with preservation associations connected to a selection of seven float festivals where changes in the gender restrictions have occurred. The interviewees were asked about the changes that had occurred in the gender restrictions and about discussions in the local communities. The results reveal similarities in terms of gender structure between the festivals and differences in terms of displayed attitude towards gender-restricted participation. The study finds that, while roles that were previously male-exclusive have opened up for female participation, there is a limit to the roles made accessible to women, and the top positions continue to be male domains. The organizational structures within the festivals can be seen as reflections of wider societal structures and, while changes have happened in the direction of increased inclusion, the underlying power structures have remained intact. As such, the findings underline the connection between societal structures and heritage practices and emphasize the contemporary nature of traditional practices.

Key words

gender, heritage, tradition, change, festival, gender roles, gender restrictions

Introduction

There is a connection between cultural heritage and gender. This can be seen in, for example, how cultural heritage plays a part in the validation of gender norms and how gender is a factor in heritage production. Heritage is arguably gendered on multiple levels. On a fundamental level, the heritage discourse is often gendered (Smith 2008). In some cases, cultural heritage is also overtly gendered. For example, some heritage sites have gender restrictions in place regulating who has access to the site and who is prohibited from entering. Mount Athos in Greece and Okinoshima in Japan are examples of male-exclusive sites inscribed on the World Heritage list. Within the realm of intangible cultural heritage (ICH), the gender aspect is arguably even more pronounced, seeing as many traditional practices have explicit rules pertaining to gender roles and gender restrictions. Traditional practices also play a part in reiterating, validating and renegotiating gender roles and gender norms. As such, there is an interactive relationship between gender and heritage, as gender affects a person's access to and participation in heritage practices, and traditional practices uphold and validate gender norms. At the same time, both gender and heritage are dynamic constructs, constantly being recreated and reshaped. In this context, a point in question is what gender means for the continuation and transmission of traditional practices and how contemporary issues regarding gender equality are approached by the relevant communities.

1. ICH and gender

1.1 Overview

Gender within intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a potentially contentious topic, as some traditional practices feature gender discriminatory elements. In the context of heritage preservation systems, this means that there is a risk of conflict of interest between the preservation of traditional practices and the assurance of freedom from discrimination. As such, gender tends to be a topic that is easier to avoid than to address. This is reflected in the way gender matters have been handled within the framework of UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (hereafter, the Convention).

The Convention sets out to safeguard a broad spectrum of traditional practices while adhering to human rights considerations such as gender equality and non-discrimination. The Convention's definition of ICH includes a set of criteria declaring that

> [f]or the purposes of this Convention, consideration will be given solely to such intangible cultural heritage as is compatible with existing international human rights instruments, as well as with the requirements of mutual respect among communities, groups and individuals, and of sustainable development. (UNESCO 2003, article 2.1)

However, as Blake has pointed out, it can sometimes be difficult to determine whether a traditional cultural practice falls within the 'human rights line' or not (2015, 286).

In connection with this, it may be mentioned that Shaheed, former UN Special Rapporteur on cultural rights, has expressed concern that human rights violations pertaining to gender are often defended on the basis of culture, tradition and religion. Whilst not specifically referring to the 2003 Convention, Shaheed has argued that 'it seems safe to conclude that no social group has suffered greater violation of human rights in the name of culture than women' (2014, foreword). Shaheed stresses that simply viewing culture as an obstacle to women's human rights is over-simplistic, since it fails to recognise the role of the various actors, institutions and rules upholding patriarchal structures; she instead argues for a paradigm shift towards a view focusing on the realisation of women's (equal) cultural rights (Shaheed 2014, foreword). On a similar notion, Moghadam and Bagheritari have criticised the Convention's lack of consideration for the human rights of women, and they have argued that 'there must be agreement that "culture" is not a valid justification for gender inequality' (Moghadam and Bagheritari 2007, 11).

An evaluation of the Convention conducted by UNESCO's Internal Oversight Service was published in 2013. In this evaluation, the question of integrating gender equality into the mechanisms of the Convention is described as 'the elephant in the room'. The evaluation states that everyone is aware of the importance of the issue, but no one is willing to address the matter (UNESCO Internal Oversight Service 2013, paragraph 72). The sensitivity of the issue, and the reluctance to address matters of gender equality within the framework of the Convention, is attributed to the fear that many ICH elements might be excluded if the tests were applied too strictly (UNESCO Internal Oversight

Service 2013, paragraph 72), an analysis echoed by Blake, who also contributed in conducting the evaluation (Blake 2015, 182–183). The evaluation describes an 'apparent lack of consonance between the human rights values of gender equality and non-discrimination' and the aforementioned concern about excluding elements (UNESCO Internal Oversight Service 2013, paragraph 72).

However, the topic of gender has been receiving increased attention in recent years within the framework of the 2003 Convention. In the years following the evaluation, a number of changes were introduced to the tools of the Convention, such as revisions of the forms for nominations and periodic reporting, the publication of a brochure on gender and ICH, revisions of and additions to the operational directives and the development of two training units for the capacity building programme. In 2019, UNESCO presented a new policy document in the form of an information sheet on ICH and gender equality developed for facilitators of the 2003 Convention, which was made publicly available in 2020 (UNESCO 2019).

1.2. Japanese float festivals and gender

In the interest of deepening understanding about the interaction between heritage and gender, this study examines the dynamics of gender roles in ICH by focusing on changes in gender roles that have occurred in a certain type of festival in Japan – the Yama, Hoko and Yatai float festivals. This paper presents the results of an interview study conducted with a selection of preservation associations connected to the festivals.

The Yama, Hoko and Yatai float festivals are interesting for the study of the dynamics of gender roles and ICH. These festivals are generally considered to be male arenas, traditionally with restrictions in place prohibiting women and girls from participating. However, a number of festivals have seen changes in the gender restrictions in recent years, allowing for (increased) female participation. In the oldest and arguably most famous of the float festivals – the Kyoto Gion festival – the exclusion of women was a feature that was probably not present in the early days of the festival but was likely introduced later (Wakita 2016, 215). As such, Suzuki writes that the *nyonin kinsei* (the traditional prohibition of women from participating in certain practices or accessing certain spaces) custom of the Kyoto Gion festival might be considered an invented tradition (Suzuki 2002, 12f). According to Wakita's research on medieval Japan, women probably participated in the early days of the festival, as there are depictions showing women riding on top of *hoko* floats from the early Edo period (Wakita 2016). The custom of *nyonin kinsei* also affected the world of festivals as it gained traction in society in the late Edo period (Wakita 2016, 215). An underlying rationale of the *nyonin kinsei* custom was the *kegare* belief, harbouring the idea of blood pollution, associating the blood from menstruation and childbirth with defilement or uncleanness, which led to exclusion and discrimination of women (Wakita 2016, 215).[1]

While the festivals are traditionally seen as male events, there are discussions being raised among local stakeholders. Gender-restrictive rules have been and are being questioned, challenged and lifted in a number of float festivals. One of the more famous examples of this can be found in Kyoto, in the discussions about allowing female participation in the Kyoto Gion festival. In 1996, the Heisei Onnaboko float was created, intended to carry an all-female troop of musicians. However, while taking part in a dedication ceremony every year at the Yasaka Shrine, the troop has yet to participate in the main events of the Gion festival (Heisei Onnaboko Sayanekai 2016). An important change towards allowing female musicians occurred in 2001, following a public panel discussion in which a member from one of the float neighbourhoods accidentally revealed the semi-open secret that women had in fact been participating as musicians in that float neighbourhood for years (Brumann 2012, 198). Other examples of where the gender restrictions have been challenged include the Hakata Gion Yamakasa festival in Fukuoka and the Hita Gion festival in Oita prefecture (Lancashire 2016, 179; Nishi Nippon 2017 and 2018).

How does the access to participation affect the participants and non-participants? Roemer's research underlines the social significance of festival participation, pointing to the benefits of the social support networks and communal bonds established among the participants (Roemer 2007). Morinaga and Doi's study on the Hakata Gion Yamakasa festival shows how the perception of the festival differs between men and women, who have different roles in relation to the festival (Morinaga and Doi 2016). Traphagan's research, while focusing on another type of festival, suggests that ritual performance can function to uphold certain power structures. Specifically, the festival practices were found to uphold elder male power (Traphagan 2000). Gender restrictions in heritage practices have consequences outside of heritage spaces,

as they can affect people's livelihoods and opportunities (Shaheed 2016, interview). As such, it is important to deepen the understanding of how and why these roles and restrictions change.

2. The float festivals and the interviews

2.1. The float festivals

The oldest of the festivals – the Kyoto Gion festival – is widely believed to stem from the *goryō-e* events held to appease the restless spirits (*goryō*) associated with the spread of disease during the hot summer months. Today, various float festivals, with their own local history and meaning, can be found throughout Japan. While all the festivals have individual and unique features, they all centre around a procession of large and often lavishly decorated floats paraded around town (or on water, in the case of some festivals). The floats are temporarily inhabited by deities and by entertaining (or placating) these deities, the festivals act as prayers for prosperity, staving off epidemics or providing other such blessings for the community.

The floats vary in construction and shape. Many of the floats are pulled forward by using ropes attached to the front of the floats and/or pushed by the use of steering poles attached to their platforms. The processions are usually accompanied by drum, bell and flute music played by musicians riding on top of or inside the floats. Some festivals feature dance performances, mechanical puppets, kabuki performances or other types of performances taking place on top of the floats. The music and the performances are regarded as entertainment for the deities that are temporarily housed in the floats.

The float festivals are traditionally managed and organised by local communities. Mainly, it is the local residents living in the concerned float neighbourhoods who organise the festivals. Nowadays, these festival communities have a formal organisational structure, as recognised preservation associations (*hozonkai*). On a national level, the National Association for the Preservation of Float Festivals represents the local preservation associations of 36 float festivals that have been designated as Important Intangible Folk Cultural Properties under Japanese heritage legislation and are, as such, protected cultural properties. In 2016, 33 float festivals were also inscribed as a group on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

2.2. The interviews

The interview study was conducted as a part of my doctoral research (Janse 2020). Due to the volume of the information gathered through the interview study, this article presents a shortened and summarised version of the results. The interview results are presented at length in my doctoral dissertation (Janse 2020). It should also be noted that the interviews were conducted as a follow-up study preceded by a survey study conducted among the previously mentioned 36 festivals (Janse 2019). While the survey resulted in the identification of broad patterns regarding gender roles and restrictions, triggers of change and the preservation associations' organisational structure, the interview study was conducted to examine the local circumstances in more depth to understand how and why changes in gender roles or restrictions can happen.

Interviews were conducted with seven preservation associations. The number of informants (interviewees)

Table 1.
Information regarding the conducted interviews.

Festival affiliation of the preservation association	City	Prefecture	Region	Interview date
Inuyama Matsuri no Yama Gyōji	Inuyama	Aichi	Chūbu	Nov. 2018
Kakunodate Matsuri no Yama Gyōji	Senboku	Akita	Tōhoku	Jan. 2019
Ōtsu Matsuri	Ōtsu	Shiga	Kinki	Feb. 2019
Karatsu Kunchi no Hikiyama Gyōji	Karatsu	Saga	Kyūshū	Feb. 2019
Uozu no Tatemon Gyōji	Uozu	Toyama	Chūbu	Mar. 2019
Seihakusai no Hikiyama Gyōji	Nanao	Ishikawa	Chūbu	Mar. 2019
Furukawa Matsuri no Okoshidaiko Yatai Gyōji	Hida	Gifu	Chūbu	Mar. 2019

at each location varied between one and four. In total, 13 people were interviewed – all of them men.[2] Regarding selection criteria, the preservation associations were selected based on a set of factors, namely: a) festivals where a change in the gender roles or rules has occurred (requirement), b) amount of information provided in the questionnaire (priority), c) wide geographical spread (priority) and d) wide variety of attitudes (priority).[3] I contacted the selected organisations with the help of the National Association for the Preservation of Float Festivals, which provided the contact information.

The interview questions were aimed to understand the local circumstances and what had happened in the festival communities, rather than inquiring about personal opinions. At the same time, it is reasonable to assume that factors such as social gender and age, affecting a person's role availability and position within the festival organisation, have an influence on their point of view and perception of the situation within the festivals. As such, in further studies, it would also be relevant to address how the situation is perceived by those excluded from participation. Furthermore, as the neighbourhood associations are usually largely independent, it is reasonable to assume that the perception of the situation in the overall festival community might differ somewhat depending on affiliation. The main focus of this study is not the festivals in themselves, but the contemporary role of gender in traditional practices – a topic that is examined *through* these festivals as case studies.

2.3. The previous survey findings

The survey study, which had a response rate of 64 per cent, found that nearly all of the preservation associations were male-dominated, and around half of them had an all-male membership tally. The survey replies also reported that changes in the gender restrictions had occurred in around half of the festivals. A shortage of (eligible) participants was reportedly the primary trigger for the changes, but a change in consciousness regarding female participation was referenced in some of the festivals, in combination with a shortage of participants. The survey study further found that the centre-stage roles primarily available to women and girls were *hayashi* (musician), *hikite* (the role of pulling the ropes of the floats) and dancer, and that several preservation associations mentioned women's participation in connection to tasks carried out behind the scenes (Janse 2019).

3. Changing aspects of gender in the float festivals

3.1. Traditional gender roles and restrictions

In the Inuyama float festival, the role of musician is performed by children; today, both girls and boys perform this role. The musicians sit inside the floats and are looked after by the *wakai shu* (youth or young men). Because the musician children often go on to become *wakai shu*, this role is also now performed by both girls and boys. The floats in the Inuyama festival are not pulled by ropes but are manoeuvred by the use of levers attached to the base of the floats to push them forwards. The levers are called *teko*, and the role of manoeuvring the floats with the levers has the same name. The role of *teko* is (currently) only performed by men. An informant told me that this was not because of a reluctance towards female participation, but more of a practical matter, because the floats are heavy and the role of *teko* requires considerable physical strength.

In Kakunodate, the role of pulling the ropes of the floats is mainly performed by the local residents, while many of the musicians and dancers are hired from 'outside' – neighbourhoods outside of the float neighbourhoods or from other towns. The role of musician is now performed by both women and men, and because there are no age restrictions, the age range of the musicians is wide. The role of dancer, on the other hand, is performed only by women. The dancers are generally young, and my informant told me that once you get married, you stop dancing. The top positions and the *sekininsha* (person in charge) roles in the festival organisation are closed for women. My informant explained that this was because these positions entail significant responsibility, and, as such, it might be hard for women to perform these roles.

In Ōtsu, volunteers are now taking part in pulling the ropes of the floats because of a shortage of available participants. There are no formal gender restrictions for the volunteers, and both women and men take part. However, there is reportedly a resentment among some of the older preservation association members towards female participants, and efforts have reportedly been made to limit the number of female volunteers. All other (centre-stage) roles are performed by men only.

The float festival in Karatsu – the Karatsu Kunchi – is also almost entirely limited to men. Some of the float

neighbourhoods allow girls to participate in pulling the ropes of the floats. Some neighbourhoods allow girls up until the age of junior high school to participate in this role, while other neighbourhoods set the age limit after elementary school. Other neighbourhoods prohibit girls of all ages. Onset of menstruation is a factor is some neighbourhoods, according to my informants. Adult women are reportedly strictly prohibited from participating (in any centre-stage roles) in all the float neighbourhoods. Married women have other duties, such as preparing food for and taking care of relatives and guests coming to visit for the festival, keeping them busy in the house.

In Uozu, the ropes of the floats are pulled by both women and men; today, the role of musician is performed by girls too. However, the role of manoeuvring the floats by using the steering poles jutting out from the platforms of the floats is performed only by men, as is the role of handling the ropes attached to the top of the sail-like constructions crowning the floats to keep their balance. Handling these ropes involves a lot of running and requires considerable physical strength and balance, and one of my informants pointed out that the roles that women and girls are unable to participate in are all somewhat dangerous.

In the Seihaku festival in Nanao, women are allowed to participate in pulling the ropes of the floats, and two of the three float neighbourhoods have designated women's groups. The third float neighbourhood is reportedly opposed to female participation. All other (centre-stage) roles are performed by men. My informants explained how women assume backstage roles such as preparing meals and refreshments for the working men during the assembling of the floats. While women can pull the ropes of the floats during the festival, they cannot touch the floats while they are being assembled.

The floats are reportedly considered to be female; in the traditional way of thinking, letting women ride the floats could cause jealousy that could lead to unfortunate events, such as accidents. This was one of the reasons for restricting women from participating in the festival. When asked whether the floats were considered sacred, and if this was also a reason why female participation was restricted, my informants confirmed that this is also the case. One of my informants compared it to the traditional custom of prohibiting women from riding boats.

The Furukawa float festival consists of several events – the two main events being the float procession and a drum event taking place later in the evening. Regarding the float procession, girls are now allowed to participate as musicians (there might, however, be some populous neighbourhoods that do not let girls participate). Women are also allowed to participate in pulling the ropes of the floats. However, the number of women participants are few, as adult women reportedly have work to do in the house, such as preparing food and taking care of guests that visit during the festival. Other (centre-stage) roles are performed by men.

The drum event is performed by (half-clad) men only, and women are prohibited from participating. My informant told me that, because it is a dangerous event, even for men, women were naturally not allowed to participate. My informant also emphasised the nakedness of the participants as a rationale for excluding women. However, a feast and drinking party is held in connection to the festival, and women reportedly help with drinks and serving tea behind the scenes.

3.2. Changes in gender roles and restrictions

The Inuyama festival used to be *nyonin kinsei*, but, through an initiative of the preservation association, a decision was made to lift this rule around 1997. The roles that have *de facto* changed are the role of musician, performed by children, and the role of *wakai shu*, who look after the musicians. The role of manoeuvring the floats is, however, still only performed by men. According to an informant, this was not because of women being officially prohibited from participating in this role, but instead a result of practicalities. Because the floats are heavy, considerable physical strength is required to move them around. The informant acknowledged that, while there might be women fit for the task, the physical proximity of the *teko* was a cause for caution, as a mixed group might make some of the participants nervous.

The decision to change the rules was reportedly primarily based on considerations of gender equality. The reason for the change, according to the informant, was a will to cease a custom that was deemed to be outdated and no longer justifiable. *Shōshikōreika* (declining birth rates in combination with an ageing population) was, to some degree, a contributing factor, but the primary reason for the change was reportedly gender awareness.

The preservation association's decision to lift the

nyonin kinsei rule was initially met with resistance by some of the residents in the float neighbourhoods – reportedly especially elder women. However, the resistance disappeared after a few years. My informant mused that the reason the resistance disappeared so quickly was that many people probably found the *nyonin kinsei* rule strange. While the *nyonin kinsei* custom was seen as strange, it had been going on for centuries and had become a tradition, he told me.

The preservation association also consulted with a scholar on Shintoism before making the decision. The scholar reportedly told them that there were no grounds for ostracising women in Shintoism itself. The *nyonin kinsei* custom came later with the *Sangaku Yamabushi* mountain worship creed and mistakenly spilled over to the festival world, the scholar had told them. After discussing the matter, the preservation association concluded that the *nyonin kinsei* practice could not be justified and would cease. Today, girls' participation has reportedly become normalised.

Concerning the gender roles and restrictions of the Kakunodate festival, women were allowed to start participating as musicians around 20 years ago, because of a shortage of participants. The change to allow for female musicians had reportedly not caused any discussions or resistance, and there had been no problems in particular. My informant told me that this was probably partly because the musicians and dancers were already training together with the same teacher. Another reason was that women dancers were already riding on top of the floats – as in other festivals, the *yama* is the place where the gods ride – and as such, people did not think it was wrong to let women ride on top of the floats as musicians. After the idea of starting to let women participate as musicians was first raised, the change reportedly happened rather quickly.

In the Ōtsu festival, a shortage of people triggered a call for volunteers to help pull the floats. This started after the float association changed its organisational form in 1988 and continues today. There are no gender restrictions specified in the announcements for volunteers, so both women and men apply. However, there is reportedly a reluctance among some senior members in some of the neighbourhoods to welcome female volunteers, as they wish for a decrease in the number of female participants.

On the other hand, there are reportedly some people who want to start allowing female musicians as well, thereby also allowing them to ride on top of the floats. However, my informant pointed out that, while there is some talk about allowing female musicians, there is also a strong resistance towards allowing women to ride on top of the floats. Comparisons were made to the sumo sport, which traditionally bans women from entering the ring. Regarding whether there had been any resistance when first deciding to allow women to participate in pulling the floats, my informant explained that, because the volunteers are only pulling the ropes and not riding on top of the floats, it is generally considered fine. This had reportedly been the general stance since after the war. Women are now allowed to touch the floats, but they are not allowed to climb on top or enter.

In Karatsu, my informants told me about two changes that have taken place regarding the gender restrictions of the festival. The first change happened during the war years, when many men were away serving in the military. During this time, women participated in pulling the ropes of the floats. However, this arrangement was only temporary; after the war, women's participation was prohibited again. The second change reportedly happened around 1967. Around this time, some of the float neighbourhoods started to allow girls to participate in pulling the ropes of the floats.

When asked about the reason for the change, my informant replied that they were not sure, but mused that it probably happened because children expressed a wish to participate to their parents. When returning to the topic later during the interview, one of my informants also mentioned the effects of the gender equality movement after the end of the war, when words such as 'equal rights for men and women' started to surface. He told me that not many girls had participated during his school years, but then gender equality and suffrage gained ground, and it gradually became more common for girls to be able to participate in some of the float neighbourhoods. Finding enough participants is reportedly not a problem in Karatsu.

It is unclear whether there was any resistance when girls were first allowed to participate as *hikiko* (the role of pulling the ropes of the floats). My informants told me that, because they were rather young at the time, they did not know how the discussions had unfolded among the people

in the top positions. The festival organisation reportedly has a pyramid-like structure, where the people at the top make the decisions, and each neighbourhood has its own sub-organisation. The float neighbourhoods are largely independent. My informants told me that they imagined that there had been discussions at the time among the people in the top positions, and that the neighbourhoods that were opposed to the idea of allowing girls then were not allowing girls today either.

When asked whether the participation of girls as *hikiko* in some of the neighbourhoods was now seen as normal, or if there were some people opposing this within those neighbourhoods, my informants told me that there was no opposition and that this was simply a matter of following the rules that have been decided. They explained that the festival has a strict top-down hierarchy, and that rules are followed without being questioned.

The same principle of 'the rules are the rules' also reportedly applied to the prohibition of adult women's participation. My informants acknowledged that there were of course women who would like to participate in the festival, but that they were unable to raise their voices, because 'the rules are the rules'. Therefore, there would be little point in challenging the rules, and individuals engaging in such behaviour were likely to be given the cold shoulder when they returned home.

In Uozu, there have been two changes in the gender restrictions of the festival: first, the role of *hikite* (pulling the ropes of the floats) was opened for female participation and later the role of musician as well. My informant estimated that women started participating as *hikite* in numbers around 50 years ago. The floats used to be smaller earlier, and therefore also lighter. However, as the floats grew bigger and heavier, having only men pulling the ropes of the floats was probably not enough. The change to allow female musicians reportedly occurred around 35 years ago, due to declining numbers of children playing the flute and drums. My informant also told me that women have been helping to assemble the floats since the old days.

The changes reportedly happened rather naturally, and my informant told me that he did not think there had been any discussions in particular among the float neighbourhoods. There had neither been opposition nor support. While new roles had opened up for women, female participation in itself seemed to be considered quite natural and nothing new. One of my informants in Uozu told me that he believed that the festival had not been completely *nyonin kinsei* – even in the old days.

In Nanao Seihaku, a significant change has been the creation of women's groups in two of the three float neighbourhoods. The reason for creating the women's groups, one of my informants told me, was to get more young men to join too. My informants also mentioned other reasons, including those relating to the *hanayakasa* (gorgeousness) of the festival, raising the festive atmosphere, as well as securing succession. One of the three float neighbourhoods is opposed to allow women to participate. They explained that it was a matter of protecting tradition and that this feeling was particularly strong in that neighbourhood.

In Hida-Furukawa, two changes have occurred in the gender restrictions pertaining to the float procession. While the festival used to be *nyonin kinsei* and women used to be unable to touch the floats, a change to allow girls to participate as musicians occurred around 30 years ago. A change to allow women to pull the ropes of the floats occurred around 20–25 years ago. Both of these changes reportedly happened because of a shortage of participants, caused by population decline. As the number of children declined, a plea was made to let girls participate as musicians. While the change initially met with some resistance, my informant told me that he thinks that there is no resistance towards female participation in the float procession today and that people are used to it nowadays. Nevertheless, female participants are reportedly few in number even now.

When asked whether, at the time of the change, there had been girls voicing a will to participate, my informant said that had naturally been the case. As young girls saw their brothers and other boys participate as musicians, it was only natural that the girls wanted to participate too. Similarly, there were reportedly also women who wanted to participate in pulling the ropes of the floats before the change, but they were unable to do so because of the rules. While women had work to do behind the scenes, the centre-stage roles relating to the deities were naturally considered men's work. Furthermore, my informant told me that there are probably some women thinking that, if they had been men, they would have wanted to participate in the festival too, but that they know that it is a men's festival.

3.3. Changes in values and meanings of the festivals

The informants were asked whether the changes in gender restrictions had impacted how the festival community perceived the festival, such as weakening the religious meaning or strengthening community bonds. In Inuyama, the religious meaning had reportedly not weakened, and my informant explained how the religious meaning was unrelated to *nyonin kinsei*.[4] Regarding whether the community bonds had strengthened, my informant replied that he believed that this was the case. Prohibiting women from participating meant that only half of the community was taking part; so by allowing women to participate, community bonds had strengthened.

According to my informant in Kakunodate, it seems that the change in gender restrictions in the festival has not had any noticeable impact on the meaning or value of the festival.

In Ōtsu, the festival organisational structure has changed, which has also affected women's participation. While the festival organisation had once been religiously affiliated, the festival is now managed by neighbourhood councils (*jichikai*). My informant told me that, in the old organisational structure, women were kept away. However, in the current organisational structure, women are reportedly increasingly encouraged to participate in behind-the-scenes roles (*urakata*). Tasks that women are encouraged to perform include helping with preparations, repairing gear, selling merchandise and serving tea, for example. While the festival organisation had earlier reportedly been a gathering for senior men, the new festival organisation has brought the festival closer to the residents.

Based on the replies from the interview in Karatsu, the change in gender restrictions does not appear to have affected the value or meaning of the festival as perceived by the festival community.

In Uozu, one of my informants told me that, because girls are now able to participate in the preparations to a larger degree than before, the festival had become more fun for them. Girls had previously only been able to participate during the festival day, and during the preparations before the festival they had mainly helped with tasks such as serving tea. However, girls are now able to help more in the preparations, and one of my informants concluded that this was a good thing.

In Nanao, while my informants did not mention any impacts on the value or meaning of the festival, they instead explained the origin of the festival and the religious ritual at the heart of it. They also mentioned other impacts of the change in gender restrictions. One of my informants told me that the decision to allow women's groups had proven to be a good idea, as the inclusion of women had led to an increase in young men taking part as well. Reportedly, the young men seem to enjoy participating together with the women in the women's groups, and several romantic relationships had resulted from this, a number of which also led to marriage. My informant told me that, when these couples have children, the children would be sure to join the festival too.

Concerning whether the meaning or value of the Furukawa festival had changed since allowing female participation, my informant replied that it had not changed very much.

3.4. Secret participation and the UNESCO inscription

Several of the informants (in Inuyama, Ōtsu and Hida-Furukawa) mentioned instances in which women had participated in the festival despite the restrictions in place, but in secret – either sanctioned or unsanctioned. According to my informant in Inuyama, women were and are allowed to participate in secret in many places that implement *nyonin kinsei* rules. In these instances, this practice appears to be (or has been in the case of Inuyama) an open secret. In Hida-Furukawa, my informant told me about unsanctioned secret participation. Once, a woman had tried to participate in the Okoshidaiko event in secret, but she was reportedly quickly revealed.

The informants were also asked about the impact of the UNESCO inscription on the festivals. The results of the interviews suggest that, while expectations varied between the festivals, in general, the inscription has not had any major impact on the practice of the festivals.[5]

4. Discussion

4.1. Expansion of the festivals' roles and their sociocultural factors

The results of the interview study show that there is a pattern in the roles made available to women. When roles that were previously limited only to male participants are opened up for women, it is generally the roles of *hayashi*

(musician) and *hikite* (the role of pulling the ropes of the floats). Other roles – including the top positions – seem to continue to be male domains. In other words, there is a limit to the (centre-stage) roles made accessible to women. The results of the interviews suggest that this limit is conscious, rather than purely a lingering structure from earlier days. There is an underlying rationale to the intentional exclusion of women. Regarding this underlying rationale, a number of commonly referenced factors can be discerned. Some factors are of practical character, such as that of physical strength. This factor was highlighted in the interviews in Inuyama and Uozu, where some of the roles were deemed to be difficult for women to perform due to the requirements of physical power. At the same time, the informants acknowledged that it was possible that some women might possess enough physical strength to perform the roles. The factor of physical strength is arguably also connected to another referenced factor – namely, an element of danger – that was mentioned by a number of informants.

Another factor of a more social and cultural character is the burden of (public) responsibility connected to certain roles. The interview in Kakunodate showed that positions of (public) responsibility within the festival organisation were deemed to be difficult for women to hold, because women would have a hard time bearing that burden, especially if, for example, an accident were to occur. However, the burden of responsibility in connection to the domestic sphere seems to be easily entrusted to women, as is visible through the informants' references to women's work behind the scenes and in the house. It can arguably be assumed that this is connected to societal hierarchical structures and the social and cultural status and 'place' of women and men in Japanese society in a wider context.

In connection to this, it can also be mentioned that several of the informants referenced *yomeiri* during the interviews when talking about the households in the float neighbourhoods. The notion that the normal is for a woman to move into the household of her husband when they get married was voiced several times in the interviews. Japan traditionally uses a family register (*koseki*) which indicates that the main unit is the household rather than the individual: the household is registered under one surname, and one person is listed as the head of the household. Because of this, power hierarchies are arguably 'administratively ingrained', and spouses do arguably not enjoy equal status. While spouses are free to choose either surname as their common surname when getting married, it is usually the husband's surname that is chosen. While there are cases of men moving into the household of the wife's family, these cases are comparatively rare, and statistics show that 96 per cent of the couples married in 2015 registered under the husband's surname (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2017). Because women are generally expected to enter the households of their husbands upon marriage, this also means that legacy is commonly inherited through male succession. This has implications for the transmission and succession of traditions and the skills related to them, as daughters and sons are faced with different expectations.[6]

Yet another factor is religion. From the interviews, it was clear that the festivals continue to carry a religious significance. However, the interpretation of what this entails in regard to gender roles and gender rules differed. In some of the festivals, it seemed that concern was or had been placed on women (not) touching or riding on the floats. Several references were also made to the sumo sport, which traditionally prohibits women from entering the ring, because that space is considered sacred. As such, it appears that some notion of inappropriateness regarding the female presence in sacred spaces lingers.

The rationale underlying the *nyonin kinsei* custom – the *kegare* belief that associates blood from menstruation and childbirth with 'pollution', thereby ascribing to female bodies an innate uncleanness – is arguably at odds with modern society. Also, a point in question is the awareness of the background of the restrictions among the members of the local communities. None of the informants made direct reference to any notions of pollution, but menstruation was mentioned as a factor in Karatsu in regard to the age limit to girls' participation in the festival. However, several references were made to tradition as a reason for prohibiting female participation.

It would seem reasonable to assume that the *kegare* belief itself cannot be easily justified in today's Japanese society. Even so, the *nyonin kinsei* custom is upheld and kept alive in some locations by reference to tradition and religious custom (or by citing danger). In connection to this, it may be argued that this echoes Shaheed's observation that gender discriminatory practices are often defended by explaining them in terms of tradition, culture and religion (Shaheed 2014, foreword).

It is interesting to note the differences between the festivals regarding how and whether a connection is made between religiosity and forbidding women to touch, enter or ride the floats. Inuyama stood out among the examined festivals, as this festival was the only place where the *nyonin kinsei* rationale itself appeared to be questioned. As such, it is clear that there are differing views regarding religiosity and gender among the festivals.

4.2. Female inclusion and inheritance of ICH

There are several important aspects to consider regarding gender-based restrictions within ICH, such as discrimination and issues relating to the binary gender system. These include legal aspects, ethical aspects, human rights aspects, cultural aspects and political aspects. In this section, I will focus on the aspect of continuation – in other words, what role gender-based restrictions play for the continuation and transmission of this traditional practice.

Regarding what the presence of gender roles means for the continuation of the practice, the results of the interviews suggest that lifting existing gender roles has yielded positive results in the examined festivals. As many festivals are facing a shortage of participants, the inclusion of women has, in these cases, helped to secure the continuation of the festivals. Looking at the festivals where women have started participating as *hayashi* and *hikite*, it seems clear that the previously existing gender restrictions regarding these roles were not indispensable for the continuation of the festival practice. It might be argued that gender restrictions can be expected to be similarly dispensable for the other roles of the festival as well. Furthermore, the interview results indicate that the inclusion of women has not adversely affected the value or meaning of the festival as perceived by the festival community. On the contrary, several informants gave voice to the positive effects that the inclusion of women has had on the festival communities' experience of the festival.

The results also indicate that it is not uncommon for women to participate in secret. The occurrence of women participating despite restrictions – either sanctioned or unsanctioned – is interesting. Women's unsanctioned participation in secret would suggest that some of the local residents are or were discontented with the restrictions and were also willing to contest them. It also shows that there are differing views among the local stakeholders about who should be allowed to participate. Put in context of the Convention, this serves as a reminder that the concerned communities are not homogenous in terms of opinion.

The occurrence of women participating in secret while sanctioned questions the validity and necessity of the restrictions. If women are allowed to participate unofficially, what is the rationale for upholding the restrictions officially? This would suggest that the gender restrictions were not that important, and further, that they were serving a purpose different from concern for the continuation of the practice.

The results of the study suggest that women's participation is conditioned and often auxiliary. While some change has allowed for increased female participation, there is a limit to the roles opened up to women, and the top positions continue to be male domains. This highlights the gender factor in the social structures underlying the festival organisation. There is also a gendered separation between the domestic and public spheres, with a male coding of the centre-stage roles of the festivals, and a female coding of *urakata* (behind-the-scenes) work taking place inside the home and tasks involving food, service and caretaking. The gender structures of the festivals arguably echo gender norms and social structures pervasive in wider Japanese society.

Women's participation in centre-stage roles (with a possible exception for the role of dancer) is similarly auxiliary, as well as conditioned. It is conditioned in the sense that there is a clear limit to the roles made available to women, and this limit is different from the limits that govern the roles available to men. In general, women are allowed to participate, as opposed to entitled to. Women's participation is auxiliary in the sense that they have primarily been invited to participate when there is a shortage of men to participate, and they are expected to work behind the scenes to support the male participants who appear to be perceived as the main actors. As such, it would seem that women's participation is seen as a secondary priority compared to that of men. Similarly, female participants regularly appear to be second choices.[7] In general, it would appear that women's participation in centre-stage roles is commonly referenced in terms of a backup or special addition to the main participants, as well as sometimes as an element helping to increase the visual appeal of the festival, and in some cases as a means of attracting male participants to join the festival

organisation. It is clear that the festivals, despite changes in the direction of increased inclusion, thus far continue to be primarily male events. While it is not surprising to find lingering power structures in a traditionally gender-restricted practice, it is interesting to note how the power structures are maintained throughout the changes that have occurred, even as those changes were commonly prompted by a need for participation by the previously excluded group.

A point in question is how the situation is perceived by those who are excluded or restricted by the gender rules. What do the women restricted from participation think about the festival? How do the women allowed to participate perceive the conditions for their participation? Are there social networks among the *urakata* actors, and how do they impact the livelihoods, opportunities and life choices among those actors? These are relevant questions to address in further studies.

Conclusions

While changes have occurred in the direction of increased inclusion (i.e. allowing women to participate in roles that were previously only available to men), the results of the interviews indicate that there is a limit to the roles opened up to women, and that the top positions in the festival organisations continue to be male domains. As such, it would seem that the changes that have occurred in the gender restrictions have yet to impact the underlying power structures. It can be argued that the restrictions pertaining to women within the festivals can be seen as reflections of existing gender structures pervasive in wider Japanese society. As such, the findings of this study underline the connection between societal structures and heritage practices. In particular, the findings emphasise the contemporary nature of traditional practices and serve as a reminder of how heritage is created in the present.

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ENDNOTES

1 For an (English-language) background on the tradition of female exclusion, see, for example, DeWitt 2015 and Kobayashi 2017. For a background on the concept of blood pollution, see, for example, Kurihara 2003 and Namihira 1987.

2 This was not by design. When contacting the preservation associations to arrange interviews, I did not express any request or preference concerning whom within the preservation associations to talk to. As such, I did not choose whom to meet – that choice was left to the associations.

3 As indicated through the results of the survey study.

4 See details in my doctoral dissertation (Janse 2020).

5 See details in my doctoral dissertation (Janse 2020).

6 For a background on the Japanese family system, see, for example, Ueno 1987.

7 See also Janse 2019.

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Table 2.
Interviews

Festival affiliation of the preservation association	City	Prefecture	Region	Interview date
Inuyama Matsuri no Yama Gyōji	Inuyama	Aichi	Chūbu	Nov. 2018
Kakunodate Matsuri no Yama Gyōji	Senboku	Akita	Tōhoku	Jan. 2019
Ōtsu Matsuri	Ōtsu	Shiga	Kinki	Feb. 2019
Karatsu Kunchi no Hikiyama Gyōji	Karatsu	Saga	Kyūshū	Feb. 2019
Uozu no Tatemon Gyōji	Uozu	Toyama	Chūbu	Mar. 2019
Seihakusai no Hikiyama Gyōji	Nanao	Ishikawa	Chūbu	Mar. 2019
Furukawa Matsuri no Okoshidaiko Yatai Gyōji	Hida	Gifu	Chūbu	Mar. 2019