

Wars and Disasters as Matters of “Anthropology of Heritage”

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Japan’s Experience of the Great Earthquake and Tsunami in 2011

I’d like to begin my talk with the Great Earthquake in 2011. It was the most powerful ever recorded in Japan, and there was a death toll of more than 18 thousand. Because of the tsunami and the nuclear plant’s accident, hundreds or thousands of communities were obliged to disperse.

Just after the earthquake, our museum dispatched a group of conservation specialist to repair tangible cultural properties, who would work together with administrative officials. At this moment, I didn’t expect personally that the victims would demand for specialist group of intangible heritage, firstly because administrative officials cared more about tangible heritage, and secondly because citizens were thought to be occupied to survive, rather than mind other generations.

However, in actuality, the heritage was not only a matter of the future or the past, but also a matter of the present. There were many people who needed the local festivals, and accompanying music, dance, and performing arts, to have conviction that they returned to the everyday routine. To their idea, even refuged people would get together to celebrate the festival, and to rebuild the community as a result.

This was an idea I hadn’t expected. However, some of the communities which restarted the festival were really successful in rebuilding itself. This case changed my notion of heritage; it is a matter of the present, not only of the past or the future; not only communities make heritage but, on the contrary, heritage also makes communities; finally, anthropologists can contribute to the heritage studies apart from UNESCO or national agency of cultural heritage.

From here on, I would try to answer the two questions. One is how anthropology can problematize cultural heritage. The other is why this new field of “Anthropology of Heritage” focuses on wars and disasters.

What is “Anthropology of Heritage”?

Interdisciplinary heritage studies already have a history of more than 20 years. A specific journal titled International Journal of Heritage Studies launched its first

issue in 1994. It was annual in the beginning but became quarterly from 1996 on. However, to my view, contribution from anthropologist is still limited. This is strange because, in American anthropology of the former half of 20th century, cultural transmission was a matter of central focus. If anthropologists maintained their interests in cultural transmission, they would have played a significant role in heritage studies.

Of course, heritage has a connotation which cultural transmission doesn't have. That is, heritage is something valuable for a group of people. This characteristic is not significant when the heritage is recognized among a small number of people. However, as the group size enlarges, disputes arise as to what is suitable as heritage. This tendency accelerated after the 20th centuries, when national or international agencies began to define the heritage. This is why heritage studies has been involved more in this political aspect of heritage, rather than the trans-generational aspect.

Sure, such political aspect is an important issue for anthropology too, because we anthropologists have been interested in politics of identity. However, this is only a part of "anthropology of heritage." In addition, the political aspect is sometimes more clearly analyzed by approaches of political sciences than anthropology, because the actual political arena often extends in a national or global scale. Community-based analysis is nevertheless essential, but anthropologists are not good match for political scientists deeply involved in community research.

On the other hand, in the analysis of the trans-generational character of heritage, anthropology has an advantage over other disciplines. Anthropology has struggled to conceptualize general theory of culture as a collective and consistent phenomenon. In this field, such questions as the followings have been poled repeatedly: How do the people find something to be passed from generation to generation? How is this transmission achieved in the mobile, fluid, and unstable situation? Who has the skills to repair the damage of tangible heritage? Are these skills sustainable? Who has the knowledge to produce and perform intangible culture? What is necessary for them to do so?

To answer these questions, the researcher has to be deeply involved in the context of the people's everyday communication. And more significantly, such researches can contribute to make new answers to the old general question: how and why do cultures make humans creative? This is the central question of 20th century American anthropology.

In short, studying trans-generational essence of heritage brings about a great advance in the understandings of human culture. This topic is important particularly

in the actual condition of super-modernity where things and human lifestyle change easily. The Minpaku core research project of Anthropology of Heritage thus brings the universal and actual problem into perspective.

Let me take an example. This is the only pictures in my presentation slides. These pictures were taken in one of my research sites in Madagascar. On the eastern edge of the Madagascar central highlands, there lives a very small group called Zafimaniry, who has been well documented by a British anthropologist Maurice Bloch. Zafimaniry wooden houses have an absolutely unique style in Madagascar, partly because valuable log resources are still plenty, for reasons of bad access. They put minute geometric motifs on wooden windows of their houses. Their woodcarving knowledge became included among UNESCO masterpieces of oral and intangible heritage of humanity in 2003. It is now designated as UNESCO intangible cultural heritage.

For these ten years, the life of Zafimaniry people has undergone great changes. Tourists increased in number, and the carvings are getting industrialized more than ever. Demands for guides and porters increased too. For reasons of forest protection, traditional swidden agriculture is reducing in scale. Permanent fields newly opened on the slope are easy to lose the fertile earth because of heavy rain, thus decreasing their annual harvest. Improvement of transport resulted in a great influx of factory-made products, and marginalization of self-sufficient handicrafts, though woodcarving production is still active, for it is stimulated by tourism industry.

As far, Zafimaniry people know very little of UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage, though they recognize its brand power to publicize their ethnic symbol. In this situation, people are more concerned about changes in their life than international and national cultural administration. So, overemphasis on national or international political aspect causes separation of people's and researchers' concerns. This is not a very "anthropological" strategy.

Rather, I'd like to define "Anthropology of Heritage" as studies of the recipients' practices to assure the heritage's consistency by any means. I don't exclude the study of political aspect of heritage, but it should be discussed in relation to local practices.

Intangible Turn: Consideration of Ignored Heritage

By defining so, another question must come up: what is heritage? I won't define heritage, as Alfred Gell didn't define art in the argument of anthropology of art. In reality, heritage is what somebody regards as heritage. This statement might have been wild twenty years ago, but the current has been changing these ten years. This

change relates to the difference between UNESCO World Heritage in 1972 and UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2003.

The World Heritage, natural or cultural, has to have an outstanding universal value from certain viewpoint. On the other hand, Intangible Cultural Heritage is what some community or group recognizes as part of their cultural heritage. That is, World Heritage is universally valuable whereas Intangible Cultural Heritage is locally so. This difference derived from debates after adoption of World Heritage Convention in 1972, opposing side claiming that the World Heritage makes too much of Western notion of heritage. This side argued that it is little-known heritage, but not universally respected one, that requires safeguarding, because the globalization process could possibly homogenize world cultures, regardless of local cultural movements. This is why the Intangible Cultural Heritage doesn't make much of universal outstanding value, and why intangible heritage doesn't require special screening or evaluation which ICOMOS or IUCN does for World Heritage.

According to intangible notion, cultural heritage cannot exist without people. Actually, intangible heritage is transmitted to the next generation by repetition in a way loyal to the past performances. Even tangible heritage cannot exist without people, if there were no support from national states of UNESCO, because it is transmitted by physical repairation. Such notion began to spread among cultural activists, who came to make more stress on local value than universal one. Recipients of local heritage are also beginning to assert that theirs should be called heritage as well, even without UNESCO's authorization. It seems a kind of anarchist revolution of heritage concept. I am affirmative to this current, because it is a good opportunity to take a glance at local cultures which have long been ignored.

Based on such trends, the Minpaku project keeps unauthorized heritage in sight. Especially, self-proclaimed heritage during the formation is significant for anthropological study of heritage. According to the theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation, a community needn't have a clear boundary, and can have a structure of concentric circles. This idea is suitable for communities concerning heritage: inner circle corresponding to the recipients in a narrow sense, where outer circle to juveniles or outside supporters. In such stratified communities, participants are involved in practices of receiving heritage from older generation and transmitting it to younger generation. More accurately, the community is formed and maintained by heritage practices which bridge generations. This is why heritage is not only a trans-generational matter but also present. People make practices in the present, but referring to the past, and seeing into the future.

Sufferers' Challenge to Communicate with Other Generations

Case of heritage suffered by wars and disasters might be extreme in many senses: There are very few recipients, or they might not be existent any longer; They have become conscious of their heritage just recently; They might be annoyed to find their collaborators; They may not have enough resources to repeat the performances, or even have lost ritual objects. Nevertheless, only if they make practices to receive heritage and transmit it, such cases reflect strong will of cultural transmission. And this is the answer of the second question that I arose in the beginning of this talk: why does "Anthropology of Heritage" focus on wars and disasters? It does so because such an extreme situation could bring about essential knowledge on human cultural transmission.

Such heritage is crucial topic for our field, even though it is not officially recognized by UNESCO or any states. Rather, the less the heritage is recognized, the more important it is for Anthropology of Heritage, which should focus on what global media have ignored. This is another reason why our field focuses on wars and disasters.

For recipients of the heritage, recovery from wars and disasters is a practical issue. For anthropologist, on the other hand, this issue is not only practical but also theoretical, because problems of sufferers from wars and disasters are essentially problems of cultural transmission which American anthropology once struggled with. I will show the questions concerning it again. How do the people find something to be passed from generation to generation? How is this transmission achieved in the mobile, fluid, and unstable situation? Who has the skills to repair the damage of tangible heritage? Are these skills sustainable? Who has the knowledge to produce and perform intangible culture? What is necessary for them to do so?

To make answers to these questions, sufferers from wars and disasters is possible to give critical hints to anthropologists. And anthropologists, in turn, should accumulate experience from all over the world to share the human wisdom to communicate to other generations.