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Eloquent Plasticity

Vernacular Religion, Change, and Namahage

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Abstract

This paper explores Namahage of Akita Prefecture as it assumes three different instantiations: 1) enactment as a private ritual within individual households on New Year's Eve; 2) performance as a public festival at a shrine in mid-February; and 3) celebration as an "element" inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. I argue that in the first instance, Namahage is part of a vernacular religious "structure of feeling" in which religious elements are inseparable from community life; in the second instantiation, religion is more explicit and codified; and in the third iteration, religion is only vaguely articulated. Tracing the "same" tradition through different forms provides insight into the changing needs of communities and into the dynamics of change itself. With this in mind, I propose a model called *hrönirism* through which to broadly conceptualize notions of change and difference within traditions such as *matsuri*.

Keywords

matsuri – ritual – festival – Namahage – *hrönir* – UNESCO

1 Akita in the World and the World in Akita

Late in the afternoon of 29 November 2018, an unusual scene unfolds in the small city of Oga 男鹿 in Akita 秋田 Prefecture. Some 120 people are gathered in Oga City Hall for a "public viewing" of a live feed of bureaucratic proceedings occurring in Port Louis, Mauritius, more than 10,000 kilometers away. The assembled crowd is a mixture of residents dressed in business attire or working clothes, with Oga city officials outfitted in celebratory red or blue *happi* 法被



FIGURE 5.1 The decision to inscribe Namahage on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity is announced. 29 November 2018
PHOTO BY OGANO MINORU

coats. Sitting among them is a small coterie of demons holding wooden staffs and large threatening knives.

Everybody watches the monitors intently, and when the decision is announced in Mauritius, the crowd in Oga cheers and applauds. The demons leap to their feet, roaring and raising their knives in victory.¹

The event in Mauritius was a meeting of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, better known as UNESCO. Specifically, it was the 13th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, a decision-making body charged with overseeing the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Intangible Cultural Heritage, or ICH as it has come to be known, is an increasingly common umbrella term for a wide range of traditions, beliefs and practices, including annual events such as rituals and festivals. As its name implies, the 2003 Convention is a legal instrument that promotes the “safeguarding” of intangible cultural heritage around the world. One conspicuous artifact of the Convention is a Representative List of several hundred

1 For an article with embedded video, see “Oga no Namahage, mukei bunkaisan tōroku kettei, Yunesuko” (2018).

traditions—or “elements” in UNESCO parlance—from 127 nations around the world. These are nominated by States Parties, essentially the individual countries that have accepted the Convention, and approved by the Intergovernmental Committee.

In 2018, as the group in Oga watched, the Committee voted to inscribe a new element from Japan on the Representative List. The element, called “Raiho-shin, ritual visits of deities in masks and costumes,” is actually a group of ten individual rituals from eight prefectures, each one structured around a visit to the community by godlike figures broadly labeled *raihōshin* 来訪神, or “visiting deities.”² The demon figures in Oga—who raised their knives in a threateningly triumphant roar—are known as Namahage. And “Oga no Namahage” 男鹿のナマハゲ is one of the ten rituals in the new inscription.

2 Oga no Namahage

In fact, Oga no Namahage is by far the most widely known of the ten traditions. It has long been famous in Japan as a quirky ritual in which men costumed as demon-deities tramp from house to house on New Year’s Eve scaring and scolding children. The 2018 UNESCO inscription became a point of pride and celebration throughout Akita Prefecture and in Oga it was greeted with great fanfare—numerous Namahage events were held on the day of New Year’s Eve itself and in the months before and after.³ In national coverage of the “Raiho-shin” inscription, Namahage was almost always given primary position, with newspapers characterizing the inscription as that of “Namahage and others.”⁴

2 “Raiho-shin, ritual visits of deities in masks and costumes” is the official English “name of the element” as noted on the nomination file. In Japanese it is *Raihōshin: kamen, kasō no kami-gami* 来訪神: 仮面・仮装の神々 (see UNESCO 2018). For an overview and video of the traditions included in the UNESCO inscription, see <https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/raiho-shin-ritual-visits-of-deities-in-masks-and-costumes-01271> (accessed 30 December 2019). For analysis of Koshikijima no Toshidon 甑島のトシドン, another tradition included in this file, see Foster (2011).

3 On the afternoon of New Year’s Eve, for example, a special procession of fourteen Namahage trudged through downtown Oga, where they greeted incoming trains at Oga station and joined the mayor and other Oga City officials on a makeshift stage to fling *mochi* 餅 (rice cakes) to crowds of residents and visitors. There have also been other events, such as a photography exhibit in various local venues and a workshop for foreign visitors to make costumes. See “Namahage ichi chūshinbu o neri-aruku, Oga-shi kankōkyakura de nigiwau” (2018); “Namahage gyōji, gaikokujin kyaku gaisōzukuri, Oga-shi de taiken tsuaa” (2018); “Songen to ifu ... dokutoku no sekai toraeru, tonai, Namahage daizai no shashinten” (2018).

4 See for example, “UNESCO mukei bunkaisan ni Namahage nado 8 ken no ‘Raihōshin’”; Sankei

Over the last two decades, I have researched and undertaken fieldwork on two of the traditions included in the “Raiho-shin” inscription: Oga no Namahage and Koshikijima no Toshidon 甕島のトシドン. In the current essay, I focus on the former—“Namahage” as it is generally called.⁵ I begin with this scene of local officials watching a faraway UNESCO meeting because it emphasizes the fact that even in a community as small as Oga, individuals and their traditions are embedded within a broader global context, and a single *matsuri* can mean many different things to many different people.

With this polysemy in mind, I particularly want to explore the role of religion or religious elements within three different but related instantiations of Namahage: 1) its enactment as a private ritual within individual households on New Year’s Eve; 2) its performance as a public festival (explicitly called “*matsuri*”) at a shrine in mid-February; and 3) its celebration as an “element” of ICH inscribed on UNESCO’s Representative List. I will argue that in the first instance, as a private ritual, we find religious elements embedded into the practice in such a way that they are all but inseparable from everyday, civic life. In the second instantiation, the public festival, religious elements become more explicit and codified—though arguably less meaningful in terms of community life. Finally, in the official UNESCO documentation recognizing Namahage as an example of ICH, religion is alluded to only in a very general, vague sense. Tracing how the “same” tradition assumes different forms and different meanings provides insight into the changing needs of the communities involved and, more abstractly, into the dynamics of change itself. By examining these different versions of Namahage, I propose a model I am calling *hrönirism* through which to broadly conceptualize notions of change and difference within traditions such as *matsuri*.

3 Namahage as Private Ritual

First, let me begin with a brief description of Namahage, focusing on the household version of the ritual. Namahage is associated with the Oga Peninsula, or more precisely with Oga-shi 男鹿市 (pop. approx. 28,000). Despite being designated as a “city” (*shi*) for administrative purposes, Oga is extremely rural,

shinbun, 11/29/2018. This is just one example of many—the phrase “Namahage nado” [Namahage and others] was almost ubiquitous in the national coverage at the time, clearly indicating Namahage’s comparative prominence in the popular imagination.

5 I have spent time in Oga intermittently since 1998, and specifically observed Namahage in different communities on New Year’s Eve of 1998, 2015, 2017, 2018 and 2019.

made up of numerous small hamlets on the west coast of Akita Prefecture.⁶ Surrounded on three sides by the Sea of Japan, the land is verdant and mountainous, and residents have traditionally made a living through farming and fishing, though today tourism is a major factor in the economy.

Historically, Namahage took place in seventy or eighty different hamlets in the region. Today it is difficult to enumerate the number of communities in which it is still a living tradition, and such enumeration also depends on how community units are defined. However, there is no doubt that participation in Namahage has declined due to depopulation and other factors, including lack of interest and the fact that there are fewer and fewer residents of appropriate age. In many cases these communities—often referred to as *shūroku* 集落 (hamlet) or sometimes *mura* 村 (village)—are sometimes no more than a cluster of a few dozen houses. Namahage is performed differently in each of these communities, with distinct masks and costumes, and varied procedures, meanings, and interpretations.⁷

By way of illustration, I describe here a recent visit to the small *shūroku* of Matsukizawa 松木沢, in the northeast sector of the Oga peninsula. Though not quite snowing, it was blustery and cold when I arrived with two companions at about 5:10 PM on the last day of 2018. By arrangement made with the assistance of friends, we were welcomed into the tatami sitting room of Naitō-san, a Matsukizawa community leader and a member of the Oga City Council.⁸ Naitō-san is a tall, distinguished, gray-haired man in his sixties, dressed formally in *kimono* and *haori*. We were later joined by his wife and four grandchildren, aged 4, 6, 8 and 10. The children were cheerful and rambunctious, but according to their grandmother, the younger ones had already been crying in anticipation of Namahage that evening.

6 Although the official designation of a city (*shi*) in Japan technically requires a municipality to have a population of at least 30,000 or 50,000 people (depending on certain circumstances), cities generally do not lose their status even if their population falls below these marks. Oga became a city in 1954 through the merger of a number of small administrative units on the Oga Peninsula. In 2005, Wakami-machi was also absorbed into Oga City (Oga-shi). For details and recent population statistics, see Oga-shi Sōmu Kikakubu Kikaku Seisaku Ka (2018).

7 For brief summaries with photographs of various versions, see *Nihon kaiiki bunka kenkyūjo* (2016). For an earlier study in English, see Yamamoto (1978). The descriptions of Namahage in the following pages are based primarily on my own ethnographic research. I have of course also drawn on Japanese scholarship, as cited in the pages that follow.

8 The visitors were myself, my friend and collaborator Ogano Minoru (who has photographed Namahage for almost forty years), and an acquaintance visiting from Germany. Naitō-san is a pseudonym. For more on Ogano and his work, see Foster and Ogano (in this volume).



FIGURE 5.2
Putting on the *kera* in
Matsukizawa. 31 December
2018
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

After a brief discussion over a cup of green tea, Naitō-san took us down the street to the Matsukizawa chōnai kaikan 松木沢町内会館 (Matsukizawa neighborhood hall), a small building positioned next to a steep stone stairway leading up to a small shrine (Hie Jinja 日枝神社) built into the hillside. Inside we met nine men—the youngest in his twenties and the oldest in his fifties. In many communities there are two or more pairs of Namahage, but Matsukizawa only has a single pair, and therefore only two masks, one red and the other blue-green. The masks in Matsukizawa are made of clay (*nendo* 粘土) and reinforced with fiberglass.⁹ The Namahage's straw coat, known locally as a *kera* (also *kede* or *kende*) had been woven earlier that day from rice straw supplied by Naitō-san from his family fields. Each Namahage also had a large knife made of wood.

⁹ According to Ogano, who has photographed hundreds of Namahage masks, these may be the only *nendo* masks currently in use. They are probably about forty years old. Other Namahage



FIGURE 5.3
Red Namahage ready to go. 31
December 2018
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

At about 6 PM, when the Namahage were dressed and ready, we walked next door to the bottom of the steps leading up to the shrine. The two men costumed as Namahage marched through the *torii* 鳥居 and up the steep stairway to the shrine building, where they bowed their heads in prayer (see fig. 5.4). Then they descended to the street and together we all walked to the “top” of the hamlet. Matsukizawa is built along a single through road with houses on either side; the Namahage begin their rounds at the top and work their way back down to the shrine at the lower end. There are approximately thirty-five houses in the *shūroku*, but currently only about twenty-five are occupied. In addition, there had been a number of funerals in the village that year and those families would not be receiving the Namahage.¹⁰

masks are carved from wood or made of papier-mâché and similar materials molded around a large round bamboo basket (*zaru*).

10 In most if not all communities, it is customary for the Namahage to avoid any households



FIGURE 5.4 Walking up the steps to the shrine before the Namahage set out. 31 December 2018
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

At each house, one man from our small entourage would scout ahead and inquire whether they wanted to receive the Namahage. When the answer was in the affirmative, the two Namahage would start to roar loudly, and tramp through the snow to the house, banging energetically on the door and the walls. They would burst into the household and, with the encouragement of the other men, rage and rampage through the room, grabbing family members, roughhousing and acting wildly (*abareru* 暴れる)—but not actually causing any injury or (intentional) damage. After a few minutes, they would settle down at a low table on which was a simple spread of food, sometimes including local specialties such as a fish called *hata-hata*. The Namahage generally did not eat the food, but would lift their masks slightly to sip the offered drink (usually *sake*, sometimes beer), and remaining in character, make jocular conversation with the householders (see fig. 5.5).

If children were present, which was the case in about half of the homes, the Namahage would act particularly rough and blustery. Often they would

in which there had been misfortune (*fukō* 不幸) in the previous year—which is cognate with, for example, the common practice in Japan of not sending out *nengajō* 年賀状 (New Year's greeting cards) when a family has experienced a death.



FIGURE 5.5 Namahage feted in a house (with no children present). 31 December 2018
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

interrogate each child about whether they had been studying hard, behaving themselves, and helping out at home. The Namahage explained that they were watching all year round from on top of the mountains nearby. Of course, each child responded differently to this attention—the younger ones often scampering into another room or fighting back tears—but all of them agreed readily to behave themselves. One unusual element of the ritual in Matsukizawa is that the Namahage would end their conversation by rubbing the flat of the wooden knife on the head of the children or older family members as a form of blessing and good fortune.¹¹

After three houses, the entourage ducked into a small garage, where the Namahage traded their *kera* and masks with two other men who assumed the role for the next three houses. All together, we visited six houses and, having

11 Ogano confirmed that he has not seen this performed elsewhere. I have also been unable to find any written records of this practice.



FIGURE 5.6 Namahage wrap the *kera* around the pillar of a *torii*. 31 December 2018
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

walked the length of the small hamlet along the one main road, arrived back at the entrance to the neighborhood hall. Before going inside, the two Namahage ascended to the shrine, where they removed their masks and placed them inside. There was some confusion as to which mask should be on which side, with the more experienced men down below shouting up instructions. Eventually, they bowed to the shrine and the masks, and descended to the first *torii* at the bottom of the stairs. There they removed their *kera* and wrapped each one around a pillar of the *torii* just above the supporting crossbar (see fig. 5.6).¹² After this rather complex procedure was completed, we all went into the neigh-

12 Although in many *shūroku*, *kera* are wrapped around a *torii*, *komainu* or trees after the house visitations, the procedures in Matsukizawa are unusual, requiring the *kera* to be wrapped in a very specific way and very high up on the pillar. I am told that the *kera* will stay in place until the Obon holiday in the summer, when they will be burned with other sacred objects. For the sake of simplicity I have excluded from my description the fact that in Matsukizawa the Namahage are gendered—red is male, blue-green is female—with the *kera* tied slightly differently. This gendering does not affect the performance in any discernible way, and all participants are male. Assigning gender to Namahage like this is not unique to Matsukizawa; other *shūroku* (including Yumoto and Anzenji) also have Namahage designated as male or female but, as far as I know, this is only indicated by mask coloration and does not extend to the way the *kera* is worn, as in Matsukizawa.

borhood hall where, with very little ceremony, everybody began to drink beer and *sake*, eat snacks, and talk about the evening's events. It was 7:30 pm—the whole experience had only taken an hour and a half.

4 Namahage and Religion

In each of the dozens of *shūroku* where the ritual is performed (simultaneously) on New Year's Eve, procedures, costumes, and narratives differ; the Matsukizawa version described here is only one of many examples. But with that caveat—and using Matsukizawa as a referential touchstone—I want to explore how Namahage might be understood within a religious context. Firstly, it is a given within Japanese religious discourses that the boundaries between Buddhism and Shintō practice are porous, to say the least. Historically, the worship of buddhas and bodhisattvas along with local *kami* 神 overlaps, intertwines and combines; as Mark Teeuwen and Fabio Rambelli note about the “combinatory paradigm” known as *honji suijaku* 本地垂迹 (which they translate as “original forms of deities and their local traces”), “originals and traces were not one-to-one associations, but complex combinations of several deities based on sophisticated semiotic operations, myths, legends, and so on” (Teeuwen and Rambelli 2003: 1–2). Similarly, Allan Grapard explains that “the various elements of the combination retained some of their pristine identity, their fundamental characteristics, but also gained by accretion and interplay (it is tempting to say, by dialectic), a mass of meaning that they did not have as independent entities” (Grapard 1992: 75; see also Andreeva 2017).

Within and beyond the formal paradigm of *honji suijaku*, combination, creation, recreation and mutual influence were certainly part of the development of religious life in Oga. In particular, *mikkyō* 密教 (esoteric Buddhism) and Shugendō 修験道 (mountain asceticism) were historically present in the region and no doubt influenced the performance and interpretation of Namahage. One of several origin legends, for example, posits that the image and actions of the Namahage are derived from the rough appearance of Yamabushi 山伏 undertaking their mountain austerities (Ine 2005: 18). Even today, masks used in the hamlet of Takigawa 滝川 famously feature a gold-colored circle on the forehead, a mark thought to represent a *token* 頭襟, the small round hat-like accoutrement traditionally worn by Yamabushi.¹³ While mountains are indeed central to the geographical and psychic landscape of Oga, the direct

13 For photos see, Nihon Kaiiki Bunka Kenkyūjo (2016: 50–51), where it is explained that “in the old days, [the Namahage in Takigawa] would visit a shrine before making the rounds,

relationship of mountain religious beliefs to Namahage is murky at best, and made all the more complex by the tangled regional history of *mikkyō* itself, with the Tendai 天台 and Shingon 真言 sects dominant at different times.¹⁴ Ogano Minoru 小賀野実, a professional photographer who has been researching Namahage for almost four decades, sums up the muddled nature of these connections: “I guess Namahage is just not all that neatly organized” (*Namahage wa, soko made seiri saretenainjanai kanaa* なまはげは、そこまで整理されてないんじゃないかなあ) (email communication, 19 May 2020).

Without delving deeper into historical complexities, I want to stress here that within common discourse in Oga today (and for at least the last century), Namahage is rarely described in terms of institutional religion. It is neither performed as a shrine festival nor as an annual rite associated with a specific temple or religious institution. Even in Matsukizawa, where institutional religious elements are evident (i.e., the shrine visits), Namahage is not characterized as a shrine *matsuri* per se. This differs from, for example, *matsuri* that feature *mikoshi* 神輿 (portable shrines), or *dashi* 山車 or *yatai* 屋台 with putative religious purposes.

Neither, however, is Namahage explicitly *separate* from institutionalized religious practices. In the case of Matsukizawa, for example, it begins and ends with a visit to a shrine, framing it as a *kami*-endorsed ritual procedure. That is, the men visit the shrine in order to inform the deities of the event and receive their blessings for safety and success. And though every *shūroku* differs, the ritual is often similarly bookended by visits to a local shrine or temple. In the hamlet of Anzenji 安全寺, for example, the Namahage pay respects to a small shrine (Hie Jinja; also called Anzenji Jinja) at the beginning of the evening, and at the end of the ritual they wrap their straw *kerā* on trees located near other buildings affiliated with Shintō and Buddhism (see fig. 5.7). In Ashizawa 芦沢, just before the Namahage begin their rounds, a Shintō priest blesses the masks, the costumes and the participants (see fig. 5.8). And in many communities, when the ritual is complete, the used *kerā* are wrapped around a *torii* or around the *kamainu* 狛犬 (lion-dog statues) at the front of a shrine (see fig. 5.9). In this way, religious institutions and the authority they project frame the activities of the Namahage as sacred behavior—validating the transformation of men into temporary deities in service to the community. These institutional

but they have abbreviated this because the shrine is some distance from the hamlet; now they visit a temple to purify mind and body before setting out” (2016: 50).

14 For a brief summary of the history of these interactions in Oga, see Ine (2005: 29–32); also Ōtsuki (2004).



FIGURE 5.7 Wrapping the *kera* around a tree in Anzenji. 31 December 2017
PHOTO BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 5.8 Shintō priest blessing the Namahage before the ritual in Ashizawa. 31 December 2015
PHOTO BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 5.9 *Komainu* (lion dog) at Hoshitsuji Jinja in Yumoto, wrapped in a *kera* from the night before. 1 January 2016
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

signifiers of religion also serve as *meaning-intensifiers* that infuse the Namahage with sacred authority and add gravitas and value to their actions within the household.¹⁵

But if the local discourse is not *about* Shintō or Buddhism or even Shugendō, and the ritual is not directed by a religious practitioner, how then do we characterize Namahage? The most prominent discourses are about community and family, about tradition, and about learning how to be part of society. Discursively, then, the ritual is positioned as a civic and civil undertaking, performed not as an obligation to the *kami* but out of a sense of responsibility to fellow *shūraku* residents. In other words, I think most Oga residents would characterize Namahage as a *community* event, a civic activity at the level of the *shūraku*, and not as a religious custom connected with a shrine or temple.

Of course, such distinctions are often fuzzy in Japan, where the relationship of secularization and religiosity has long been a subject of debate amongst religious studies scholars.¹⁶ It is no coincidence that many community centers or

15 Although procedures differ from community to community, in most cases economic support for Namahage comes directly from the householders they visit, who pass an envelope with several thousand yen to a member of the Namahage's entourage.

16 See, for example, Fujiwara (2016); Reader (2012).



FIGURE 5.10 The entrance to Hoshitsuji Shrine; the building to the left is the community center for Yumoto. 1 January 2016
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

other public gathering places are geographically adjacent to Shintō shrines, as in Matsukizawa and also, for example, in Yumoto 湯本 (see fig. 5.10). This physical proximity concretely reflects an abstract “blurring” (Porcu 2012) of boundaries between civic and religious functions, and between community and spiritual responsibilities.¹⁷ Whether such binaries, and even for that matter the concept of religion (*shūkyō* 宗教) itself, are etic (and Western) constructs imposed by scholars and theologians (and governments) is a debate too large to broach here.¹⁸ Suffice it to say, however, that for Oga residents involved in Namahage, such questions rarely emerge in on-the-ground settings. Like many annual events in Japan, Namahage occupies a place that is difficult to label within the tangled cultural forces and feelings through which human beings interact in a social context. As a practice, and as a set of ideas and images associated with this practice, Namahage is simply embedded in a habitus that encompasses, with little or no distinction, both the sacred and the mundane.¹⁹

17 Although Porcu (2012) is discussing urban *chōnaikai* 町内会, many of her observations are equally applicable to communities in Oga (and elsewhere in rural Japan). See also Kawano (2005: 9) who describes “the intertwined nature of religion and social conventions.”

18 See for example Josephson (2012); Kleine (2013); Krämer (2013); Amstutz (2014).

19 Such casual religious activities are pithily summed up by Ian Reader as “popular prac-

5 Namahage as Vernacular Religion

One way to characterize this habitus is to consider activities such as Namahage in terms of *vernacular religion*. By “vernacular religion,” I do not simply mean folk or popular religion in contrast to institutional or official religion; rather, I draw here on the work of Leonard Primiano who problematizes what he sees as a “two-tiered model ... which creates distinct categories separating ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ religion of the faithful from ‘official’ or institutional religion administered by hierarchical elites through revealed or inspired oral and written texts” (Primiano 1995: 39). Primiano suggests that “vernacular” does not replace “folk” or “popular” but emphasizes “religion as it is lived: as human beings encounter, understand, interpret, and practice it” (Primiano 1995: 44). In this sense, vernacularity demands a focus on local, native and popularly accessible manifestations of expression.

Explaining what they pointedly label “vernacular Buddhism,” Keller Kimbrough and Hank Glassman, for example, observe that *vernacular* “suggests a kind of translation into local language, a transformation of the foreign into the familiar for purposes of communication” (Kimbrough and Glassman 2009: 204). They note that “the term ‘vernacular Buddhism’ furthermore implies a kind of storehouse of Buddhist concepts, figures, and images available for use to a wide variety of authors, artists, and performers across the centuries” (Kimbrough and Glassman 2009: 204).²⁰ While Kimbrough and Glassman are speaking here about “authors, artists, and performers” of medieval Japanese literature, art and drama, we can also think of contemporary practitioners of Namahage (i.e., individuals within the *shūra*) drawing from a rich storehouse

tices, customs and household religion,” which he characterizes as “not necessarily tied in to expressed faith or membership of organised religions ... activities from acquiring amulets and talismans, to praying for good luck and worldly benefits, to taking part in cyclical events such as visiting the graves of the deceased at festival times such as *o-bon* 盆 in summer and at the spring and autumn equinoxes ...” (Reader 2012: 21). Reader suggests that these forms of practice are declining in Japan. I would add here that even when dealing explicitly with visits to a religious institution such as a Shintō shrine, we must be wary of positing religious intentionality—such visits can be, as John Nelson suggests, “a thoroughly syncretic blend” that is at once “spiritual, habitual [and] recreational”; importance is often placed “on action, custom, and etiquette as opposed to belief and structure” (Nelson 1996: 121). See also Kawano’s nuanced discussion of these issues (2005: 21–37).

20 Kimbrough and Glassman (2009: 204) also distinguish their use of “vernacular Buddhism” from “common Buddhism,” which, they explain, “typically refers to Buddhist practices and beliefs that are commonly shared throughout society, among elites, commoners, monastics, and laity alike.”

of imagery, ritual practices, narrative, and language to shape their own yearly performances.

Thinking in terms of vernacular religion allows us to highlight not only local or native interpretations but also the individual, personal and the private; it “involves various negotiations of belief and practice including, but not limited to, original invention, unintentional innovation, and intentional adaptation” (Primiano 1995: 43). Indeed, by shifting the emphasis away from religion in the abstract or religion as represented by institutions or doctrines, and focusing instead on the everyday behaviors of people in local communities, we appreciate the individual agency necessary for perpetuating a practice such as Namahage. Certainly each individual brings to the ritual a particular perspective, level of engagement, set of concerns, and understanding of what Namahage means. Similarly, communal agency is articulated as individuals work together within each *shūraku*, developing their own distinct Namahage practice, drawing on the same principles and iconography as others in Oga perhaps, but enacting something slightly different from neighboring *shūraku*. That is to say, the vernacular religious practice of Namahage entails both individual and communal interpretations of ideas and actions, and a creative engagement with material objects, ritual procedures and their meanings.²¹

Writing of China, Richard von Glahn (2004: 12) characterizes vernacular religion as “rooted in local and regional history,” but also adds that “Buddhism, Daoism, and state religion were all integrally related to vernacular religion.” Such broader engagement also pertains to Namahage: even as it is intensely local, it draws on or references more canonical religious forms—be they Buddhist, Shintō, Shugendō—and represents a constant interpretation, negotiation, and creation both on the level of the individual as well as the *shūraku*. As Faure suggests, “symbolic associations between two or more deities can be triggered by practically anything” and “the resources of analogical thought are truly mind-boggling” (Faure 2016a: 30). Significantly, I would add, such symbolic associations and analogical thought are not limited to religious ideas or iconography: popular imagery about Namahage—or demons (*oni* 鬼) more generally—inevitably bleeds back into the community from anime, film, and

21 For more on ambiguity, creativity and artistry inherent in the concept of vernacular religion, see Primiano (2012). In my discussion of vernacular religion, I am not suggesting that local expressions of Namahage are a degraded form of something else or somehow inferior to rituals with more institutional content. My point is that even while the heart of belief/religion is within the household/community, vernacular religious expressions can skillfully draw on institutions (and their architectural manifestations) such as local shrines and temples for their allusive and authorizing powers.

manga. The broader world, even a global awareness, is always present in the *shūraku*: in Matsukizawa, the men in the entourage implored the Namahage to act rougher and wilder by jokingly yelling that they had to live up to their new UNESCO status!

Such ideas dovetail with the concept of *lived religion*. As Robert A. Orsi notes: “The study of lived religion is not about practice rather than ideas, but about ideas, gestures, imaginings, all as media of engagement with the world. Lived religion cannot be separated from other practices of everyday life, from the ways that humans do other necessary and important things, or from other cultural structures and discourses” (Orsi 2003: 172). Helena Kupari further explains that “lived religion refers to religion as something that is continuously being made and remade by individuals engaging in religious activities and using religious idioms—laymen, religious specialists, and policy-makers alike” (Kupari 2016: 10). In the case of Namahage, such practices of making and remaking occur regardless of whether the people involved think of their traditions through the lens of religion, civic duty, family tradition, personal interest or community engagement.²²

Without quibbling about definitions and distinctions between vernacular religion and lived religion, I have taken this slight detour in an attempt to explore the ambiguous position of Namahage within discourse and practice in Oga. While I have never heard a resident refer to Namahage specifically as a Buddhist or Shintō ritual, I have often heard Namahage referred to as *kami-sama*, and, as already noted, temples or shrines do often feature in the events of New Year’s Eve. Moreover, it is commonly (though not universally) explained that on New Year’s Eve the Namahage descend into the villages from one of several large, sacred mountains on the peninsula. Namahage, like many festival activities in Japan, simply fits into a belief structure that reflects the reality of living in Oga.

I use the word “belief” (and its Japanese equivalent *shinkō* 信仰) with caution here because I do not want to suggest a binary between belief and non-belief, nor even a continuum between these two poles. Rather, belief is a part of a

22 I am discussing concepts in English here, but similar terminological questions also arise within Japanese discourse. In exploring the distinction between *minkan shinkō* 民間信仰 (folk beliefs) and *minzoku shūkyō* 民俗宗教 (folk religion), for example, Shinno Toshikazu explains: “*Minkan shinkō* studies always perceive *minkan shinkō*—the commonly shared, customary beliefs and notions rooted within a specific place and cultural setting—in opposition to ‘established religion,’ a religious tradition with a founder, and which is ideologically and doctrinally constructed. *Minzoku-shūkyō* studies, on the other hand, try to perceive phenomena in terms of their mutual influence” (Shinno 1993: 188–189).

much more complex “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) that includes all manner of customs, rituals, etc., but also encompasses quotidian activities such as fishing and farming, working in an office or store, shopping, gift exchange, reciprocity and all the interpersonal relations and obligations that come with living in a small rural community. Namahage is one element in all of this. Raymond Williams’ famous phrase “structure of feeling” appropriately conveys the vagueness and lack of materiality of the religious “feelings” tied to Namahage but at the same time does not deny the coherent way in which Namahage is a real part of life experience. As Williams (1977: 133–134) explains, “structures of feeling can be defined as social experiences in *solution*, as distinct from other social semantic formations which have been *precipitated* and are more evidently and more immediately available.”²³

Ontologically, then, where do the Namahage themselves fit in? Are they *kami*, envoys of *kami*, demons (*oni*), or something else entirely? In fact, depending on who in Oga you ask, they are any or all of these. Because they are not explicitly part of doctrinal tradition, their status is open to discussion and, ultimately, does not seem to be a major concern of local residents. Whether characterized as deity, demon, servant of the gods, or some sort of hybrid, there is ontological fluidity between such identities: Namahage do not fit into “the official or *explicit* pantheon” but rather “the latent or *implicit* pantheon” (Faure 2016a: 25), local spirits associated with the community and the landscape rather than a hierarchical order of religious entities. In this sense too, they are part of vernacular religion—popular, elusively vague, and resistant to formal

23 Williams (1977: 132) explains that “‘feeling’ is chosen to emphasize a distinction from more formal concepts of ‘world-view’ or ‘ideology’. It is not only that we must go beyond formally held and systematic beliefs, though of course we have always to include them. It is that we are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, and the relations between these and formal or systematic beliefs are in practice variable (including historically variable), over a range from formal assent with private dissent to the more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified experiences.” Although Williams himself does not use the word *feeling* explicitly in terms of emotion or affect, these nuances are certainly part of the lived experiences he is concerned with (see Ngai 2005: 36). I would argue that such emergent, vague, and changing structures are very much a part of the “solution” that is vernacular religion—a way of being that is neither explicitly part of discourse, nor even of practice, but that exists in the interstitial zone between institutional/doctrinal/architectural religious structures and the daily work of being part of a community. For similar ideas, drawing especially on Italian examples, see Roberto Cipriani’s concept of “diffused religion,” described “as a set of values, practices, beliefs, symbols, attitudes and modes of behavior which do not conform to official church-religion models, [and which] is typical, if not entirely, at least in large part, of substantial sectors of civil society” (Cipriani 2011: 199). See also, Cipriani (2017).

structure and system. But even as the Namahage's taxonomical label remains fluid, they are clearly associated with the sacred. The straw scattered across the floor after they have rampaged through a household is said to have magical properties—when tied around the head, for example, it can cure headaches or make one more intelligent. And indeed, the visit itself is a sacred blessing for the New Year.

If we consider the Namahage within a vernacular religious context, we can moreover observe the ways in which belief and ontology are negotiated through practice on individual levels. To a young child, presumably, Namahage are threatening transgressors from another world. An older child who has experienced the event for several years may understand that they are really just neighbors dressed in costumes, but still feel real fear and apprehension. And to adult householders who may or may not know which neighbor is behind which mask, the practice entails a mutual performance/ritual and a form of role playing, acting, and make-believe.

For the men who “act” as Namahage there is an immersion in character that, in some cases at least, goes beyond mere play. While they are masked, these men *are* Namahage. Between each household visit they may remove their masks and become human again for a moment, chatting or smoking a cigarette, but when they put on their masks again and enter a home, they *are* Namahage. Many individuals have expressed to me a feeling of awe when they play the role. In Matsukizawa, for example, one man in his early twenties, who lives in Tokyo now but returns to Oga for the end-of-year holidays, explained that when he puts on his mask, he feels as if a *kami* enters him; when he roars and speaks as the Namahage, he is voicing this *kami*. To this participant, at least, the role of Namahage entails a sense of sacredness and power, catalyzed by the physical object of the mask as it transforms the human into something else.

But the mask itself is just this—a *catalyst* that ties the wearer into an existing belief system. Interestingly, this same man in Matsukizawa casually handed me his own mask to try on as if there was nothing special about it; he simply pointed out its weight and how difficult it is to see through the eyeholes. Because, unlike him, I am not embedded in the local belief system, the mask is nothing more than an object—there is no reason I should transform into a Namahage *just* by wearing it. My overarching point here is simply that Namahage may not fit clearly into explicitly established forms of religious practice or institutionalized frameworks, but it is very much a part of a broader, substantial vernacular religious structure of feeling—religion in “solution,” as Williams might put it—that informs everyday life in the local community.

I would further emphasize the notion of “feeling” here as a deeply meaningful aspect of Namahage, and of vernacular religion in general. No matter how

much we delineate structures, find connections or ask questions of belief, at the core of people's relationships with Namahage—and with each other and with their communities—are emotions. Ultimately, Namahage is a meaningful experience for its participants not because of quantifiable structures or levels of belief but because of personal affective engagement.

6 The Objectification of Namahage

With that in mind, I also want to stress the intimacy of Namahage as a ritual. It is an intensely small-scale, private affair, literally taking place within the confines of individual households. On a superficial level, at least, the general contours of the undertaking have not significantly changed since Namahage was first described in 1811 (Sugae 2000: 146–164) and more thoroughly documented in the 1930s (Yoshida 1935). But even as the household ritual continues to be performed every year, the Namahage image has also become a public icon of the Oga Peninsula, and indeed, more broadly of Akita Prefecture. This iconicization is a long process involving a complex set of interests and stakeholders. These include the folklorists who early on identified Namahage as exemplary of *raihōshin* and *marebito* まれびと concepts. And it also includes hotel owners and community business interests, tourist agencies, government funding for *mura okoshi* 村おこし (village revitalization), and the proactive agency of Oga locals in developing the region. One effect of this touristic development is an objectification of the Namahage image—that is, the frightening face of the Namahage has literally been shaped into commodified objects that can be purchased as souvenirs or *omiyage*. You can buy hand-carved masks, all manner of amulets, keychains and other trinkets, cell phone straps, T-shirts, *noren* 暖簾 to hang over a door, *manjū* 饅頭 bean cakes and bobble-heads; there is even an Akita version of Monopoly which features red and blue Namahage (see fig. 5.11).

And the objectification of Namahage goes beyond just image. The ritual itself has become a kind of artifact sharable outside the context of New Year's Eve: visitors to Oga today can “know, see, and experience” Namahage in a museum-like setting.²⁴ The Oga Shinzan Denshō-kan (Oga Shinzan Folklore Museum) was created in 1996; from April through November, performers

24 I borrow the language of the website here: *Namahage o shiru, miru, taikan suru* ナマハゲを知る、見る、体感する. See “Oga Shinzan denshōkan”; <https://www.namahage.co.jp/namahagekan/denshokan.php> (accessed 29 December 2019).

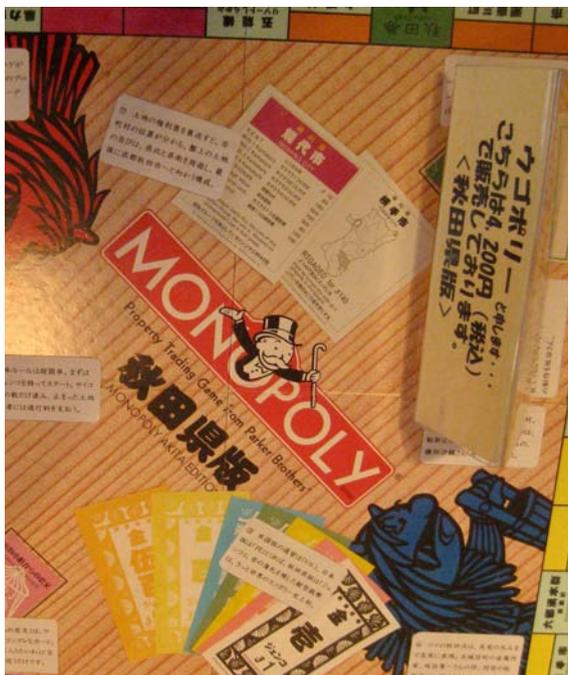


FIGURE 5.11
Akita Prefecture version of
Monopoly, featuring Nama-
hage on the game board.
5 July 2009
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

dressed as Namahage reenact the New Year's Eve ritual so that “anybody can have the experience” (Nihon Kaiiki Bunka Kenkyūjo 2016: 5; also Kamata 2007). And right next door, in 1999 the city of Oga built the Namahage-kan (Namahage Museum), which displays over one hundred masks from communities throughout Oga, shows film clips of the household ritual, and provides historical data. Visitors can even try on a Namahage costume or watch a mask-maker at work. In this setting, Namahage becomes an artifact extracted from its New Year's Eve context to be shared with visitors from outside the community. Like many other traditions in Japan, Namahage exists as a vernacular ritual with sacred dimensions for the local community, and simultaneously as a commodified public-facing touristic resource.²⁵

25 For a fascinating analogous discussion of how demonic figures were deployed for their “place-making” potential during the Edo Period in Shinano (current-day Nagano), see Carter (2019).

7 Namahage as Public Festival

In Oga, however, this process of objectification/touristification also includes the conscious development of a distinct but affiliated tradition called the Namahage Sedo Matsuri なまはげ柴灯まつり. This is the second instantiation of Namahage that I would like to explore: a new festival that allows visitors from outside the community to participate in the Namahage experience. I suggest that unlike the New Year's Eve ritual, this version is not (or at least not yet) embedded into the vernacular religious structure of the community and therefore makes very conscious, specific use of religious elements to add weight and authority to its performance.

The Namahage Sedo Matsuri was started in 1963 when community leaders—especially merchants and hotel owners—wanted to develop an event to share Namahage with visitors from outside Oga that would not require tourists to come to the New Year's Eve ritual. This *matsuri* has expanded and developed in the last half century, and today it takes place over three consecutive evenings in the middle of February (the second Friday, Saturday and Sunday of the month) on the grounds of the Shinzan Shrine (Shinzan Jinja 真山神社, adjacent to the Namahage museums discussed above). It is now advertised as one of the “big five” snow festivals of the Michinoku region.²⁶

For the small, relatively isolated community of Oga, the Namahage Sedo Matsuri is a large, public event: on each of the three consecutive nights, there are (in recent years) one thousand or more visitors. Each evening follows the same schedule of events, but every night is distinct because of the make-up of the audience and differing weather conditions. Festivities commence at 6:00 P.M. Buses and cars fill the parking lot for the shrine and adjacent Namahage Museum. Many people come from local hotels (particularly in the Oga Onsen area) which run special buses for the occasion, while some come from Akita City, about an hour's drive or train ride. The visitors proceed through the *torii*, up a long set of stone steps to the grounds of the shrine, where a large

26 For the first three years, the Namahage Sedo Matsuri was held at a smaller shrine, Hoshitsuji Jinja in Yumoto, a location of many of the hotels and *onsen* 温泉 (hot spring baths) in the Oga region, and therefore a prime destination for tourists. As the festival became increasingly popular, it was moved to its current venue at Shinzan Shrine, where there is much more space. Although the driving force behind the creation of the Matsuri was the tourist industry, shrines were chosen as the most appropriate venues because of the space they provided, their convenience, and presumably the fact that they add a sense of depth and history to the event. For the big five festivals of Michinoku, see <http://www.michinokugodai.com/> (accessed 30 December 2019).



FIGURE 5.12 The blessing of the masks and the young men who will act as Namahage.
9 February 2013
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

bonfire crackles and lights up the night. Around the perimeter of the grounds, small *yatai* stands sell *sake*, beer, and various *matsuri* foods.

In the opening *nyūkon* 入魂 ceremony, fifteen young men stand solemnly, dressed in straw *keras*; they are barefaced, with black hoods, holding their masks at their sides. The *gūji* 宮司 from the Shinzan Shrine (Takeuchi Nobuhiko 武内信彦) purifies the young men and then, together, they don their masks—and with them, the spirit of the Namahage (see figs. 5.12 and 5.13). It is a striking visual moment, as the human faces of these young men suddenly become demonic, and they begin to stamp and roar—while visitors cheer and snap photos. The Namahage then march up the hillside into the woods, disappearing into a bluff above the grounds.

Meanwhile, constant narration over loudspeakers directs the crowd to the other side of the grounds to the *kagura-den* 神楽殿, an outdoor stage set up to replicate the inside of a household. There, a different set of Namahage (dressed in masks from the Shinzan hamlet) perform a *Namahage gyōji saigen* なまはげ行事再現, a staged reenactment of the New Year's Eve ritual (see fig. 5.14). In



FIGURE 5.13 Transformation into Namahage. 9 February 2013
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

some years, I have seen this followed by a parade around the *kagura-den* of Namahage wearing masks of the different *shūroku*.²⁷

The next event is *Namahage Odori* ナマハゲ踊り, a dance performed by two Namahage holding knives, buckets, and staffs, in front of the raging bonfire (see fig. 5.15).²⁸ Returning to the *kagura-den* stage, visitors gather to watch and listen to *Namahage Daiko* なまはげ太鼓, a powerful *taiko*-drumming concert with performers dressed as Namahage, who roar and gesture threateningly as they play (see fig. 5.16). At about 7:30PM the narrator announces the *Namahage gesan* なまはげ下山, the descent of the Namahage, considered the “climax” of the festival. The fifteen Namahage who had earlier ascended the hill above the

27 Festival procedures and the order of performances differ slightly from year to year; my description is a composite based on visits in 2000, 2010, 2012 and 2013. I have also discussed the festival with numerous participants and visitors, and most recently consulted the program for the 2020 event: <https://oganavi.com/sedo/program/> (accessed 30 December 2019). For more on the Namahage Sedo Matsuri, see Nihon kaiiki bunka kenkyūjo (2016: 18–21); Saitō (1998: 63–84); Taira (2008); Kamata (2007). For an analysis of the New Year's Eve ritual and the festival version, see Foster (2013).

28 The dance was choreographed in 1961 by Akita native Ishii Baku 石井漢 (1886–1962); the music was composed by his son, Ishii Kan 石井謙 (1921–2009).



FIGURE 5.14 Crowds gather at the Kagura-den, with the bonfire visible to the left. 9 February 2013

PHOTO BY AUTHOR

grounds are now visible at the top of the ridge, each one holding a fiery torch (see fig. 5.17). They march slowly, stamping their feet and raising their torches against the (often snowy) night sky—posing for photos by the tourists down below. Then they charge, roaring down the slope to emerge onto the grounds near the *kagura-den*, where they proceed to march through the crowd and chase members of the audience.

Eventually the Namahage arrive at the other side of the grounds, near the shrine, where the priest provides them with *goma mochi*, rice cakes roasted on the *sedo* fire which, according to the announcements over the loudspeaker and the program website, are imbued with divine power (*jinriki* 神力) to prevent misfortune.²⁹ The festival concludes with the Namahage distributing pieces of this *mochi* to the visitors and posing with them for souvenir photos (*kinen shashin* 記念写真) (see fig. 5.18). By about 8:30 pm, visitors drift off to their buses or cars, and the Namahage themselves gather at the home of the shrine priest, where they change into their street clothes and sit down for a hearty dinner and lively discussion of the night's events.

29 See <http://oganavi.com/sedo/program/> (accessed 10 May 2020).



FIGURE 5.15 Namahage Odori. 14 February 2010
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

My description here is necessarily abbreviated, but I hope it shows that this is a dynamic tourist-oriented event featuring numerous rituals embedded within a highly orchestrated program. While visual aspects may be the most easily described in words or captured in photographs or video, like most festivals, the Matsuri is a profoundly multi-sensory experience. It is a potpourri of sounds: live narrative commentary, along with a recording of the distinctive roaring of the Namahage, are blasted continuously over loudspeakers. There is also the powerful rhythms of the *Namahage Daiko*, the atonal music accompanying the dance performance, the crackling of the bonfire, the crunch of snow underfoot, the constant chatter of visitors, and the excited shrieking (and



FIGURE 5.16 Namahage-daiko. 12 February 2012
PHOTO BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 5.17 Namahage pose at the top of the hill. 9 February 2013
PHOTO BY AUTHOR



FIGURE 5.18 Namahage pose in front of bonfire for souvenir photos. 12 February 2012
PHOTO BY AUTHOR

sometimes crying) of children when they see the Namahage. One experiences a haptic, embodied immersion—the chill of cold air, the wetness of falling snow, a gradual numbing of the fingers, a tensing of muscles when walking across slick ice. And of course, other senses are also engaged: the aroma of food at the stalls, the smell of the bonfire (and stinging eyes from the wood smoke), and the taste of warm, sweet *sake*.

The Namahage Sedo Matsuri is explicitly a modern construct, a spectacle, an unapologetically “invented tradition” produced by community members for external consumption by visitors from outside the community.³⁰ Although it is not unrelated to the household ritual performed on New Year’s Eve, participants are very conscious that it is a “separate” event. On several occasions, in fact, I have heard festival organizers reiterate this point to the young men employed as Namahage, reminding them that the Matsuri is *kankō muki* 観光向き (tourist-oriented). As a cooperative effort of individuals from different *shūraku*, the Matsuri attenuates specific differences between locales, effectively creating a generic or hybrid public face of Namahage.³¹

30 This does not mean that Oga residents do not also participate and enjoy the event; the third night in particular tends to attract many local residents.

31 The most obvious expression of the distinctions between *shūraku* is the great diversity

In addition, the event itself, with its scary costumes and lively performances—dancing, drumming, demons roaring down into the crowd—is consciously constructed to delight visitors with an exhilarating, thrill-a-minute show. At the risk of being crass, it is worth asking what distinguishes a tourist's experience of the Matsuri from, for example, a lighthearted visit to an amusement park. What gives the Matsuri a sense of depth and meaning that transcends the superficial “fun” of playing with demons? Of course, the answer to this question is complex, tied up with attitudes toward tradition and community and rural Japan, and concomitant nostalgic desires for an idealized “hometown” space or *furusato* 故郷. But ultimately, one way the community adds depth to the Matsuri is through connecting it explicitly with religious institutions, language, and symbols.

In fact, even though the Matsuri itself has no express religious purpose, it is fortified with religious elements that authenticate it as a significant annual event. For starters, of course, it takes place at a shrine (Shinzan Jinja) with the opening ritual officiated by the *gūji*. But more subtly, the festival is pervasively infused with the language and symbolism of belief: Namahage are described as *kami*, some of them carry with them *gohei* 御幣 (wooden staff with white paper streamers), the *mochi* has divine powers, and visitors are told that (just as on New Year's Eve) the rice straw that falls from the *kerā* possesses sacred properties. These religious allusions, as consciously presented as they are, are more than mere adornments; they are a natural way to ground an explicitly tourist-oriented event in existing vernacular religious structures, and to imbue it with gravitas as a yearly undertaking with meaning beyond simple commercialism.

Many, though not all, of these elements are part of some versions of the New Year's Eve ritual as well, such as the rhetoric of Namahage-as-*kami* and the sacred properties of the straw. What is significant is that in the Matsuri, they are codified: literally explained through the live exegesis of loudspeaker announcements, the official voice of shrine and community authority, leaving little room for independent interpretation. These religious meanings may already exist in the vernacular religious forms of Namahage discussed above, or as part of a

of the masks used on New Year's Eve. This is in contrast to those worn by the Namahage in the Matsuri; these were designed by mask-maker Ishikawa Taikō 石川泰行, and although Ishikawa himself was from the Nyūdōzaki *shūroku*, his masks are very much his own design and not based on Nyūdōzaki masks. In many ways, Ishikawa's masks have become the generic, commonly seen red and blue *oni* masks associated with Namahage. (Ishikawa's son, Ishikawa Senshū 石川千秋, has followed in his father's footsteps and continues to hand carve masks of this style.) Ironically, over the last several decades, some *shūroku*, rather than fixing their old, distinctive masks, have used Ishikawa masks for their New Year's Eve ritual.

more general storehouse of religious symbolism. However, within the context of the festival, they are pinpointed, explained, and therefore elevated in importance. In the language of Williams, we might say they are no longer part of the “solution” but consciously “precipitated” and therefore “more immediately available” (Williams 1977: 134).

Furthermore, it is worth noting here that in its very inception, the Matsuri alludes to pre-existing religious traditions. The received explanation for its origins, as noted on the Matsuri website, is that it is a “tourist event” which “combines the ‘Namahage’ folk event” with the Sedo-sai (also Saidō-sai 柴灯祭), a different festival that has taken place at Shinzan Shrine for more than 900 years (<https://oganavi.com/sedo/about/>). This Sedo-sai is a form of the *goma* (also *homa*) fire ritual, presumably influenced by Shugendō and esoteric Buddhism associated with Shinzan 真山 (Mt. Shin).³² On the third day of the new year, *mochi* is roasted over a purifying fire built on the shrine grounds, and the ritual entails offering these toasted rice cakes to the *kami* of the mountains. The original festival is still practiced in January, and although it has no explicit relationship to Namahage, some explanations work to link the two, suggesting for example that the Namahage are an incarnation of the servants of the *kami* of the mountain to whom the offering of *mochi* is made (Nihon Kaiiki Bunka Kenkyūjo 2016: 19). My point here is simply that in developing the February festival for tourists, community leaders consciously and imaginatively borrowed and adapted elements of this preexisting festival—particularly the bonfire and the roasted *mochi*—to create a new *matsuri* for the consumption of tourists, but one “authenticated” with allusions to existing religious practices.

In a sense, then, it is ironic that the explicitly tourist-oriented “invented tradition” of the Namahage Sedo Matsuri actually highlights the sacred and religious dimensions of its practice more fully than does the New Year’s Eve ritual—the version that ostensibly evokes real spiritual resonance among its practitioners. But of course, such intentionality is fundamental to the invention of tradition. Eric Hobsbawm noted long ago in his seminal introduction to the concept that when people endeavor to invent tradition, “they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past” (Hobsbawm 1983: 1). In this case, continuity is established with the past, to be sure, but also more pertinently, with suitable religious associations.

32 Shinzan Shrine has had a complex historical relationship to Shugendō, Tendai and later Shingon (Ine 2005: 30–32). For more on the *saitō goma* ritual and similar *homa* rituals in esoteric Buddhist practice, see Payne (2016, 1992); Kolhatkar and Tachikawa (2012). For more on fire rituals, see Yagi (in this volume).

8 Namahage as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Finally, the third instantiation of Namahage is the very recent designation of *intangible cultural heritage* (*mukeyi bunka isan* 無形文化遺産). While the awkward English phrasing may have been directly influenced by Japanese language discourses of intangibility and cultural preservation (Kurin 2014: 327–328), during the early part of the current century, it rapidly developed as a resonant form of bureaucratese (UNESCO-speak) and has now morphed into a generalized and somewhat sterile umbrella term for all sorts of things that used to be called folklore, folklife and tradition.

Strictly speaking, the inscription of Namahage on the Representative List is not a new manifestation of the event but really just a form of public recognition and labeling.³³ However, I would argue that this form of institutional labeling also substantially redefines Namahage as something of global noteworthiness, branded with the UNESCO insignia. The new designation recontextualizes Namahage, linking it forever with nine other traditions in Japan and inserting it into a metacultural rubric where it is now (whether appropriately or not) associated with “similar” elements throughout the world. It is perhaps somewhat ironic that a tradition such as Namahage that has so successfully maintained its local nature and vernacularity, evading the net of institutionalized religion, has now become enmeshed in another sort of institutionalized structure, and one with such global reach.³⁴

One aspect of the rebranding of Namahage as intangible cultural heritage, or ICH as it is commonly labeled in the English-language discourse, seems to be an erasure—or at least a genericization and generalization—of its religious elements. In the official Nomination Form submitted to UNESCO, reference to religion is only expressed through vague invocations of deities or folk beliefs, as in: “Such rituals stem from folk beliefs that deities from the outer world—Raiho-shin—visit communities and usher in the new year or new season with happiness and good luck” (UNESCO 2018: 4). The ambiguity of these references is perhaps fitting with the fact that the inscription is not just for Namahage but includes a total of ten traditions. But it is also significant that words such as “Buddhism,” “Shintō,” “temple,” “shrine,” even “religion,” are nowhere in the document. In one sense, perhaps, this vague description is closer to the ver-

33 I am simplifying here, but we should also note Namahage’s 1978 designation by Bunkachō (Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs) as an “important intangible folk cultural property,” or *jūyō mukeyi minzoku bunkazai* 重要無形民俗文化財, which placed it in a position to be nominated for the UNESCO inscription some four decades later.

34 I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this cogent point to my attention.

nacular religious understanding of Namahage, where such associations are not overtly highlighted. At the same time, the fuzziness of the ICH version effectively makes Namahage and the other traditions in the *Raiho-shin* nomination into somewhat generic signifiers of a mystical folk heritage—appropriate perhaps as a unique *Japanese* element on a global list.³⁵

It is possible that the lack of explicit religious terminology in the ICH nomination file reflects the official separation of state and religion (*seikyō bunri* 政教分離) as promulgated in Article 20 of the Japanese Constitution (see Porcu 2012). But I think a stronger bureaucratic influence on this characterization can be found in the nomination form itself. Unlike the Matsuri, with its codification of religious aspects, the ICH version inspires a more functional, bureaucratic and academic description of the rituals. In fact, the first step in nominating an element entails “identification and definition,” in which nominators are asked to “tick one or more boxes to identify the domain(s) of intangible cultural heritage manifested by the element.” Appropriately, the domain selected for the *Raiho-shin* nomination is “social practices, rituals and festive events” (UNESCO 2018: 3). But it is revealing that on the form itself, none of the offered domains explicitly reference religion.³⁶

Moreover, in submitting the application, the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkachō) and, by extension, members of the local communities, had to respond to such questions as: “What social functions and cultural meanings does the element have today for its community?” and “Is there any part of the element that is not compatible with existing international human rights instruments or with the requirement of mutual respect among communi-

35 Significantly, the Nomination Form explains the ritual performed on New Year’s Eve and makes no mention of the Namahage Sedo Matsuri. Presumably this is in part because, as a group nomination, the particular details of individual traditions are elided. I would also argue that there is a latent privileging of age and “authenticity” in both Bunkachō and UNESCO designations; it is not surprising that a relatively new and explicitly tourist oriented event would be elided from the official documentation.

36 Choices are: 1) oral traditions and expressions, including language as a vehicle of the intangible cultural heritage; 2) performing arts; 3) social practices, rituals and festive events; 4) knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe; 5) traditional craftsmanship; and 6) other(s). See UNESCO 2018: 3. A glance at other recent nomination forms is useful for comparison. In 2012, “Nachi no Dengaku, a religious performing art held at the Nachi fire festival” was inscribed on the list; the title of the element explicitly refers to religion and there is mention in the file of shrines and priests (UNESCO 2012). In contrast, the group submission of thirty-three traditions under the rubric “Yama, Hoko, Yatai, float festivals in Japan” (see also chapters by Tsukahara and Porcu in this volume) makes no mention of religion in its description, despite the fact that a number of the sponsoring entities are associated with shrines (UNESCO 2016).

ties, groups and individuals, or with sustainable development?" (UNESCO 2018: 5). In responding appropriately to these prompts, of course, participants are forced to objectify their traditions and practices into something that can be summarized on paper and that conforms to the particularities of contemporary global bureaucratic structures. Such summary and generalization elides the local particularities that make a ritual like Namahage, with its different performance in each *shūroku*, such a deeply embedded part of community life.³⁷

I am not necessarily expressing criticism of the ICH formulation. I simply want to highlight the fact that each distinct iteration of Namahage necessarily draws on, creates, or emphasizes aspects compatible with the particular form of presentation. In the case of the February Matsuri, the practice is phrased in terms of its religious associations. In the case of ICH, it is described in ways that conform to the requirements of the documentation itself, which in turn reflects the interests of national and international cultural policy-making bodies.

9 The Terms of Matsuri: Ritual, Festival, ICH

I hope I have clearly delineated these three manifestations of something called *Namahage*. But how do we theorize the differences here: the way in which an intensely private household ritual can simultaneously exist as a public festival and also as a documented ICH on a global listing? In previous work (Foster 2013), I explored ways to conceive of different versions of Namahage not through questions of “authenticity” or origins but simply in terms of *orientation*—either inward toward the community/family, or outward toward visitors from beyond the boundaries of the community. With the advent of the ICH designation, this external orientation becomes even more outwardly focused to a varied and distant global constituency. It also becomes virtual, as most of that global constituency will never actually visit Oga but simply read about Namahage on a website, watch a video, or glance at its name on a list somewhere. So

37 While the current chapter is not the appropriate place for a sustained comparison, I note that in the case of Japanese World Heritage Sites (i.e., *tangible* rather than intangible forms designated in accordance with the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World and Natural Heritage), religion is often overtly indicated in the nomination files. I would suggest that this may be because: 1) the 1972 Convention itself has different, and much more detailed, nomination procedures and requirements, and 2) many of the designated architectural structures and natural sites are explicitly affiliated with religious institutions. For the often problematic relationship of UNESCO World Heritage inscription to sacred sites in Japan, see for example, Blair (2011); DeWitt (2017); Rots (2019).

within this context, then, what do people mean when they say “*Namahage*”? Before attempting a model for understanding difference and change, I first want to briefly explore how we can characterize these three different instantiations on the level of language, in English and Japanese.

9.1 *Ritual*

The first version, embedded within a vernacular religious context, is what I have been describing as the “household ritual.” In English the word *ritual*, of course, carries baggage and confusion: as Catherine Bell succinctly notes, “it becomes quickly evident that there is no clear and widely shared explanation of what constitutes ritual or how to understand it” (Bell 1997: x). Accepting this uncertainty, then, I invoke the word here to simply suggest a relatively brief and self-contained “performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances” (Rappaport 1992: 249) but one with real power to construct, alter or confirm social categories. That is, the symbolic actions within the practice of ritual are also instrumental—ritual is, as Jack Santino puts it, “instrumental symbolic behavior” (Santino 2017: 5). The interaction between family members and the *Namahage*, the offering of food, the pouring of drinks, the admonishment of children: all of these acts and utterances are similar (though not identical) from house to house. Framed within the temporal and spatial parameters of the event, they take on heightened significance, meaning, affect and effect.³⁸

Strictly speaking, this household ritual might actually be called *matsuri* in Japanese, because it is a means through which humans communicate with gods; whether the *Namahage* themselves are deities or the envoys of deities, the performance within the household enacts an interaction between the human world and an otherworld. Without going into greater depth about the origins of the term *matsuri*, I would mention simply that folklorist Yanagita Kunio 柳田國男 (1875–1962) long ago correlated *matsuri* with the verb *matsurau* まつらう, meaning to serve and obey the gods; *matsuri*, he explains, is the act of “summoning and receiving [*yobimukae* よび迎え] the deities and spirits in order to make an offering [*kyōken shisa* 供献侍座] to appease and pacify them.” Moreover, he goes on, “it is the polite offering of food and drink that forms the core of the *matsuri*” (see Yanagita 1966 [1951]: 539). Orikuchi Shinobu 折口信夫 (1887–1953) similarly emphasizes this fêting of the deities. At least to early twentieth-century Japanese folklorists and those influenced by their scholarship, therefore, *matsuri* is characterized by a respectful reception

38 For a relevant discussion of ritual practice in Japan, see also Kawano (2005: 3–8).

of the gods and the proffering of refreshments (Hoshino and Haga 2006: 27). Or as Komatsu Kazuhiko (b. 1947) explains, “the basic structure of Japanese *matsuri* entails welcoming (*mukae*) gods, providing hospitality (*motenashi*), and then sending them off (*okuru*)” (Komatsu 1997: 10). The Namahage ritual performed within the household certainly fits this rubric, as the Namahage are welcomed and entertained by each family, and then sent off until the next year.³⁹

Having said that, in common parlance today, and even in historical documents from the early part of the twentieth century, I have rarely seen the New Year’s Eve Namahage referred to as a *matsuri*. Generally it is described vaguely as *nenjū gyōji* 年中行事, which might be translated simply as “annual event.” *Nenjū gyōji* itself is a term of art, as it were, within Japanese folkloristics and—perhaps because of its useful vagueness—is also commonly heard in vernacular parlance. Although *nenjū gyōji* too has a complex history dating back to the Heian period (794–1185) and has also been theorized by the likes of Yanagita and Orikuchi, we can think of it as a catchall phrase for all manner of calendrically determined and annually (or periodically) repeated events that serve to distinguish a particular day (or days) from the quotidian flow of time.⁴⁰ In the case of Namahage, I have often heard Oga residents refer to the household ritual as *ōmisoka no gyōji* 大晦日の行事, or the “New Year’s Eve event/undertaking,” which locates it within a temporal framework and also sets it apart from the event held in February.

9.2 Festival

Indeed, the *ōmisoka no gyōji* label is often used to articulate a distinction from the Namahage Sedo Matsuri held at Shinzan Shrine, which I have described as the second instantiation of Namahage. Significantly, the February event is

39 There has been much discussion of terminology related to the concept of *matsuri*, including *sairei* 祭礼 (rite), *saishi* 祭祀 (ritual/rite), *gyōji* 行事 (event/function), *hōe* 法会 (Buddhist service), *gishiki* 儀式 (ceremony/ritual) and more recently such academic constructions as *minzoku geinō* 民俗芸能 (folk performing arts) and *mukei bunkazai* 無形文化財 (intangible cultural properties). For more, see Hoshino and Haga (2006: 24–39); Hashimoto (2015); Lancashire (2011).

40 My own definition here is loosely derived from a discussion by Ichijō (2018: 28–32), whose general readership “primer” provides insight into the variety of events and associated customs considered standard *nenjū gyōji* in the contemporary Japanese imagination. These include everything from *setsubun* 節分 and *obon* お盆 to Mother’s Day and Halloween. Yanagita says of the relationship between *nenjū gyōji* and *matsuri* that the “small household *matsuri* form the main part of what is called the *nenjū gyōji*” (Yanagita 1951 [1966]: 539). See also Hoshino and Haga (2006); Komatsu (1997).

actually commonly referred to as the *matsuri*, although I have also heard participants, including the priest of the shrine, call it *kankō no gyōji* 観光の行事, literally the “tourism event.” In one sense, this use of the word *matsuri* fits with contemporary popular usages of the term in Japan, which often closely approximates the English word *festival*. That is, a Japanese festival, whether held at a shrine, temple, or as a parade through the streets of a city, often consists of numerous rituals structured together into a complex publicly staged multi-vocal event. Beverly J. Stoeltje’s general description of festivals as “public in nature, participatory in ethos, complex in structure, and multiple in voice, scene, and purpose” (Stoeltje 1992: 261), seems an appropriate characterization of the February version of Namahage. Often too, as with the word *festival* in English, a newer event or “invented tradition” such as the Namahage Sedo Matsuri, will actually include the word *matsuri* (or sometimes the katakana for “festival” フェスティバル) as part of its name.⁴¹

9.3 ICH

The designation as ICH also brings another element of terminology into the mix. As noted, this is essentially a bureaucratic phrase and acronym, but in Japan *mukei bunka isan* also has resonance with the related but older notion of “intangible cultural properties” (*mukei bunka zai* 無形文化財) as well as the more commonly known UNESCO term for World Heritage, *sekai isan* 世界遺産. Although all these terms are somewhat clumsy and bureaucratic, they are now commonly used in public discourse—newspapers, public announcements, advertisements and official documents discussing Namahage, as well as in Japanese academic writing (e.g., Hyōki 2018). They are also beginning to trickle into discussions of Namahage within a local context, as communities are very much aware that their local *nenjū gyōji* may be recorded as a *mukei bunka isan*. Of course, the long term effects of such labeling remains to be seen, but already I have heard people in Oga refer to Namahage not as *gyōji* or *matsuri*, but as *mukei bunka isan*; for better or for worse, Namahage seems to have been indelibly colored by its association with UNESCO.⁴²

41 There is in fact an Oga Namahage Rock Festival (Oga Namahage rokku fesutibarū 男鹿ナマハゲロックフェスティバル) held every Summer in Oga. In this case, it seems, the organizers have borrowed the Namahage name for its association with the region, but the festival does not have any other direct connection to the tradition. See <https://onrf.jp/> (accessed 22 January 2020).

42 During my most recent visit to Oga from December 2019 to January 2020, I heard several individuals refer to Namahage as “*sekai isan*,” the Japanese translation of “World Heritage.” Technically Namahage is not *sekai isan* but *mukei bunka isan* (intangible cultural heritage), but it may be that in vernacular on-the-ground discourse the latter will be sub-

10 Creative Continuity

So how do we grapple with this sort of change, with *one* Namahage that assumes three (or more) different forms and simultaneously means so many different things? How do we theorize variation, difference and change? In Japan and elsewhere, folkloric discourse is very often colored by a rhetoric of loss, or at least of the fear of loss. Nostalgia—a longing for those aspects of the past (real or imagined) that have disappeared or are on the verge of disappearing—was a driving force in the emergence of the study of folklore and tradition. In Japan, the desire for preservation and for continuity with the past is reflected even in the concept of the *honzonkai* 保存会, the “preservation society” or “safeguarding association,” made up of community members who actively maintain a given tradition (or, these days, an ICH).⁴³ More recently, nostalgia itself is emerging as a critical lens for folkloric analysis (see Cashman 2006; Foster 2009; Bula 2016), and it is helpful to think of Namahage in its various manifestations through this optic.

With this in mind, then, I want to suggest that with the different iterations of Namahage, we are actually witnessing not loss, but rather a sort of generation or proliferation of new forms, or at least new contexts in which old forms can mutate, expand, and evolve. A ritual like Namahage is subject to *creative continuity*, by which I simply mean that any tradition—whether religious, secular, communal, or individual—has to respond to the needs of the moment in order to persist as a tradition. Rather than place agency in the tradition itself, it is more accurate to say that the people involved with a given practice keep it relevant, and such relevance often means change. A nostalgic desire for continuity with the past does not prohibit creative change in the present. On a

sumed by the former, which is older and more familiar. Unlike the English-language “ICH,” there has yet to develop a similarly pithy Japanese abbreviation for *intangible cultural heritage*. On the power of the words *mukeni bunka isan* in another local Japanese case, see Suga (2017).

- 43 To a certain extent, these activities are part of an intellectual project congruent with the famous notion of “salvage ethnography,” in which there is an “assumption that with rapid change something essential (‘culture’), a coherent differential identity, vanishes” (Clifford 1986: 113). In the case of the “preservation societies,” the culture in question is not saved (only) in textual form but also through the semi-institutionalization of its practice. Although I do not explore it thoroughly in the present chapter, such practices, along with labels such as “ICH,” can lead to a crystallization of traditional forms and orthodoxy of practice. The case of Namahage—characterized in part by its flexibility—is just one of many possibilities. For analysis of a different kind of flexibility, see Foster (2011).

practical level, we see this with the household performance of Namahage: in Yumoto, Ashizawa, and Anzenji (and other *shūroku* as well), the masks are built around baseball catcher's masks and are therefore relatively easy to wear. Similarly, rather than trudge all the way through the snow and ice to reach more distant houses, Namahage often ride in small trucks. A strict "preservation" of past practices would not allow for basic technological updates like these, but of course such changes are only natural for a tradition to maintain its practicability in the present. Year-to-year upgrades and modifications are hardly considered "changes" by the residents.

Even the fact that Namahage is performed on New Year's Eve has not always been the case; in many communities it was performed on *koshōgatsu* 小正月, a date in the middle of January. However, with postwar industrialization and the fact that many people have to return to work by early January, all *shūroku* in Oga have now changed the date to December 31, when relatives are home for the New Year's holiday. This sort of creative continuity encapsulates the very notion of tradition itself, as something always recreated in response to present circumstances but premised on continuity with the past as well as the future. In short, community members exhibit flexibility and innovation to extend the reach and meaning of a given practice. The Namahage of 2020 is not the "same" as the Namahage of the past, nor is it "different."

The creation of the Namahage Sedo Matsuri clearly, therefore, reflects creative continuity with a powerful riff on the Namahage theme. But something more is going on here. As we see, the Matsuri is in many ways fundamentally *distinct* from the household practice—performed on a different date, enacted at a shrine, explicitly public facing, and featuring all sorts of activities (drumming, dancing, torch-holding, distribution of *mochi*) that are not part of the New Year's Eve ritual. In one sense, it is a mutation, a new species or strange offspring that diverges from the parent but establishes its own heritable line of tradition. Indeed, I would like to emphasize the radical creativity involved in the making of this *matsuri*: it took a courageous leap of imagination to move the intimate, semi-improvised *shūroku* version(s) of Namahage into the very public location of a shrine. Of course, the Matsuri developed slowly over time, but it was that initial move that was critical.

But complementary to this radical leap, the Matsuri has also inversely affected the household ritual: I have been told by more than one stakeholder that if not for the Matsuri, the New Year's Eve ritual would have eventually disappeared. The Matsuri, and its gradual development over the past five decades, not only brought external attention to Namahage but also put Namahage front and center in local discourses about history and community identity, inspiring residents to maintain the *shūroku*-level performance and even, in some cases,

to restart performance traditions that had fallen by the wayside. In other words, the offspring breathed life into the parent.⁴⁴

11 Finding *Hrönir*

In trying to understand this process, I want to suggest another heuristic term, *hrönir*, that will likely be unfamiliar to most readers but which can serve as an effective metaphor for thinking through the kind of changes occurring with Namahage—and with other religious and folkloric phenomena. Of course, *hrönir* is not a Japanese word, but actually from a very distant culture: Tlön. Jorge Luis Borges' famous short story, "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," recounts the discovery of one volume (the eleventh) of an encyclopedia describing the culture and philosophy of another planet. The details of the plot are not relevant here, but Borges' explanation of the concept of *hrönir* resonates eloquently with what we observe as the relationship between different forms of Namahage: "In the most ancient regions of Tlön, the duplication of lost objects is not infrequent. Two persons look for a pencil; the first finds it and says nothing; the second finds a second pencil, no less real, but closer to his expectations. These secondary objects are called *hrönir* and are, though awkward in form, somewhat longer" (Borges 1964: 13).

Like all Borges' work, the concept is creative and confusing and brilliant. But if we replace the word "object" with, for example, "tradition," and "pencil" with the name of a specific tradition, say Namahage, we have a perceptive if inadvertent commentary on folkloric processes and the way traditions remain a dynamic part of culture, always changing but always the same, always being lost but always being found, and becoming relevant—real, functional, meaningful—to the people looking for them. The onus of interpretation and meaning-making is on the person, whether Oga resident, hotelier, government official, or tourist.

Borges goes on to explain, in his wonderfully dry tone, that "until recently, the *hrönir* were the accidental products of distraction and forgetfulness," but their "methodical production" (Borges 1964: 13) began about a hundred years ago and "has made possible the interrogation and even the modification of the past, which is now no less docile and plastic than the future" (Borges 1964: 14).

44 Although it is too early to tell for sure and somewhat anecdotal, the ICH designation similarly seems to be breathing new life into the New Year's Eve ritual. On my most recent visit to Oga (2019–2020) I was told that at least five *shūroku* had revived the ritual explicitly because of the UNESCO designation.

It is not a stretch to interpret this as a commentary on the conscious use—the “methodical production”—of festivals and similar traditions for touristic purposes that has been a part of Japanese rural community life since the advent of folklore studies, if not before, gaining particular momentum during the *mura-okoshi* movement of the 1970s. For scholars and tourists, as well as some community members, the thing that is lost or forgotten sometimes seems more important than the contemporary emerging phenomenon. Yet, the fear (or reality) of loss is often the very catalyst for productive, meaningful change. The *hrönir* works as a metaphor for this kind of productive change. The lost object can be found again, “used” differently by different people at different times; the lost tradition is remade as something new, while the older, earlier version is also “found” and also continues to be of value. Borges goes on to describe the way objects duplicate and reduplicate, infinitely, in a process driven not by the object itself, but by the desires and expectations of the people looking for the object. The relationship of one *hrönir* to another is derivative, symbiotic, and complex: “the *hrönir* of second and third degree—the *hrönir* derived from another *hrön*, those derived from the *hrön* of a *hrön*—exaggerate the aberrations of the initial one; those of fifth degree are almost uniform; those of ninth degree become confused with those of the second; in those of the eleventh there is a purity of form not found in the original. The process is cyclical” (Borges 1964: 14).

Borges’ story is of course fictional, fantastic and tongue-in-cheek; I am not arguing that the metaphysics of this (presumably) imaginary planet called Tlön corollate to how traditions here on earth evolve. But I suggest that *hrönirism*, to coin a term, provides a fitting and productive heuristic for thinking about loss, about nostalgia and longing, and about change, both diachronically and synchronically. I would differ only in one respect with Borges and suggest that the derivative *hrönir* are not “aberrations” (Sp. *aberraciones*), for this implies a pure original, but rather that they are variant iterations—and the key process is ultimately, as he notes, “cyclical.” The point is simply that the thing that seems to be lost is never actually lost, because something different is found. And the found thing does not necessarily replace or negate the lost thing but can coexist symbiotically with it, and indeed, even make possible its (re)discovery. If the Matsuri is a second degree *hrönir*, for example, then the ICH inscription might be a third degree *hrönir* (or perhaps fourth-degree because of the *mukei bunkazai* label on the national level?), an “object” that is discovered and endowed with meaning by a new constituency. It is not identical to the *shūroku* ritual, but exists simultaneously, and inspires us to search for the *shūroku* version in the first place. The “same” tradition exists in multiple versions, and all are equally “real.”

Finally, with the notion of the *hrönir* in mind, we can also return to the religious aspects of these various manifestations of Namahage. Each different Namahage *hrönir* reveals something about the people who discovered it. As we have seen, the household ritual can be understood in terms of vernacular religion, where religious elements exist but are understated and informal, and imbricated into the context of everyday life. This is lived religion, in which “belief” is inextricable from family, community, and simply growing up in Oga.

Inversely, the Namahage Sedo Matsuri *hrönir* tends to formalize and codify religion, locating the activities on shrine grounds, explicitly signifying the Namahage’s identity as a *kami*, and clearly articulating over a loudspeaker the sacred qualities of the event. The Matsuri invokes religious references not only to authenticate the performance but also to endow it with a gravitas beyond its more sensationalist scare-the-children reputation that attracts tourists in the first place.

And in the third-degree *hrönir*, articulated through the UNESCO nomination form, there is no mention at all of “religion” or specifics such as “Buddhism” or “Shintō.” Instead, we find the description tailored to conform neatly with the terminology and infrastructure of global bureaucracy. And that is just the point: because this particular *hrönir* has been “found” by a national and global constituency, the specifics of both the first and second degree are elided for easier consumption.

Even though the concept of the *hrönir* is derived from what might seem like an irrelevant literary text, I posit it here because in my own research, it has proven to be a productive analog for understanding the relationship of different iterations of Namahage and how they mutually inform and constitute one another without cancelling each other out. Shaped by the desires and needs of the moment and place, they are created and recreated through the agency of those doing the seeking. By thinking in terms of *hrönir*, we sidestep questions of “authenticity” and focus instead on the meanings of Namahage, and who those meanings are for. Namahage is a private ritual performed in individual households on New Year’s Eve, and it is a public festival celebrated every February, and it is a global example of intangible cultural heritage listed with hundreds of others in a UNESCO database. One may have preceded the others historically, but in present-day Oga, they are all meaningful elements of lived experience. They feed each other, and each one makes the others possible.

Of course, the dynamics discussed here are specific to Namahage. At the same time, however, I hope the broader model I am calling *hrönirism* can provide insight into similar rituals, festivals, traditions, and religious events in diverse contexts—and particularly those affected by changing socio-cultural

circumstances, new media and technology, and the effects of tourism and globalization. By understanding the creative continuity of the past and the present, we can better imagine the eloquent plasticity of the future.

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