CHAPTER 4

AMACHAN: JAPANESE TV DRAMA AND HERITAGE CREATION IN A POST-DISASTER TOWN
4.1 INTRODUCTION

The popularity of the Japanese tv show Amachan is so widespread that in the months following its airtime, experts projected an increase of economic revenue in the area where it is set around 3.3 billion yen (over 30 million dollars), in addition to making everyone in Japan incessantly repeat the show’s catchphrase “jejeje”. Amachan is set in northern Sanriku, a rural area that became sadly famous for having been subjected to the brunt of the March 11, 2011 Great Eastern Japan Disaster, taking the lives of thousands of people and leaving many more homeless.

Shot in 2013, the morning show does not engage directly with the disaster for most of its run, but had a significant impact on the recovering towns: their traditional activity, ama diving. While in Korea ama divers have been added to the UNESCO intangible heritage list⁷, the few Japanese ones remaining have yet to be included. Nonetheless, through Amachan, the figure of the ama became popular all around Japan, boosting tourism and revitalizing a declining tradition.

The story starts in 2009, and portrays the issues of a small fishing village such as poverty, depopulation, and the increasing need to rely on domestic tourism for revenue. These needs lead the main characters to re-invent their everyday occupations as tourist attractions during the summer season. Although humorous in the author’s intent, Amachan offers a support to interpret how Japanese media industry re-imagines the landscape to pursue a specific narrative, where rural traditional heritage is re-invented, reproduced and re-adapted in order to cater to tourists from all over Japan.

This chapter frames the Amachan phenomenon in light of its impact for tourism in the Northern Sanriku area of Kuji city. We provide an overview of the drama, the context in which it is set and the literature on rural tourism and heritage building. We then discuss the types of heritage established after the drama impacted domestic tourism (tangible, intangible and digital), and how these

⁶ http://www.huffingtonpost.jp/2013/08/10/amachan_n_3737069.html
⁷ http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/culturesports/2016/12/01/0701000000AEN20161201006200315.html
different modalities work together. The popularity of Amachan in Kuji favoured not only the creation of new attractions and performances, but merged old traditions with new, hybrid features that enhance and make consumable for 21st century tourists the history and memory of Japan’s rural areas.

4.2 CONTEXT: FROM KUJI AND HORINAI TO KITASANRIKU AND SODEGAHAMA

The town of Kuji is located on the coast of Sanriku, which lies on the Northeastern side of the Honshu island, and stretches from the southern Aomori Prefecture to the northern Miyagi Prefecture. Kuji is served by the Sanriku Tetsudō railway (commonly referred to as Santetsu), connecting the town to the main railway and highway routes of Northern Japan, all the way to Tokyo in the South, and Aomori in the North.

Sanriku is one of the most remote and rural areas of Japan (Thompson and Traphagan 2006). In the Meiji era (1868-1912), the main economic revenue came from agriculture and fishery. With the beginning of the 20th century and the development of deep-sea fishing, the prolonged absence of the fishermen urged women to start gathering seaweed, abalone, and sea urchin for money (Martinez 2004). These women were called ama (sea woman). Around the same period, the dawn of Japanese industrialization led to a considerable drift of manpower from rural areas towards urban centres (Thompson and Traphagan 2006). This caused depopulation and socio-economic decline in peripheral municipalities, including Kuji and its surroundings. During the 1970s and 80s, both the central government and local authorities addressed countryside depopulation and economic shrinkage by promoting domestic tourism in rural areas as an alternative source of revenues. In Kuji, this phenomenon focused on ama divers. Since the 1970s, a stream of tourists from urban areas visited the town to observe the tradition of ama, who dive, collect, and sell uni (sea urchins). Domestic countryside tourism in Japan relies on feelings of nostalgia for the past, return to nature and to long forgotten communal values; all this is condensed in the term furusato, or native place (Robertson 1991). As McMorran notes, ‘while furusato can refer to one’s actual birthplace or hometown, it generally refers to an idealized rural village that is spiritual home to all Japanese people’ (McMorran 2008: 339).

A dramatic change to the furusato tourism model in Kuji came on the 11th of March 2011, as an offshore earthquake of magnitude 9.0 generated a tsunami that hit the Sanriku coast and washed away entire towns, causing massive destruction to buildings and infrastructures, and radically altering the seabed environment. For this reason, the activities of ama divers came to a halt, and so did tourism. In an attempt to carry on with the tradition, in the summer of 2011 ama dived in the waters of the nearby Kosode bay to look for sea urchins, but came up empty handed and covered in filth from the murky waters.

In 2012, amidst the on-going reconstruction of buildings and roads, and the removal of the debris from the seabed, Kuji was chosen as main setting for the morning television programme Amachan, to support recovery efforts. Japan’s national broadcasting company (NHK) has a long history of actively promoting revitalization by boosting popularity of rural regions using them as set for its shows (called asadorama, morning dramas). The director, Kankurō Kudō, native of the neighbouring prefecture of Miyagi, revealed he ‘hoped that the dorama would contribute to promoting a comeback of Japan’s more depressed local areas, especially after the Great East Japan Earthquake’ (Maynard 2016: 245). The 156 episodes of the witty and humorous story aired in 2013, and proved immensely successful, exposing Kuji and the ama divers to an unprecedented national attention.

Amachan tells the story of Aki Amano, daughter of Haruko and niece of Natsu, an ama in the village of Sodegahama, near the town of Kitasanriku, both fictional places modelled on the actual Horinai village and Kuji city. In the 80s Haruko, dreaming of becoming a singer, flees to Tokyo, never to return to her hometown. In the summer of 2009, worried about her mother’s health, she comes back,
bringing Aki with her. Aki is a gloomy and lonely young girl, with a troubled relation with her assertive and bad tempered mother, but as she enters the countryside village brightens up, quickly learns the local dialect and becomes an outgoing and talkative kid. She befriends Yui, a spoiled but popular girl, whose dream is to move to Tokyo and become a teenage singer/actress (an idol⁹). Aki joins with the local ama, a group of elderly women led by Aki’s grandmother, who warmly welcome her, as they see the possibility to lure more tourists to Sodegahama with a young girl in their midst. Naïve and pretty, Aki becomes popular, turning into the main local attraction as a young ama, and a precious resource for the town’s touristic revenues.

She forms an idol duo with her friend Yui, and eventually she receives an invitation to become a professional performer form a Tokyo producer. Aspiring to promote her adoptive hometown by becoming a starlet in the capital, Aki leaves Sodegahama and Yui, who could not join her and breaks up their friendship out of jealousy and bitterness.

When the disaster strikes, Aki returns immediately to Sodegahama to reunite with Yui, support her friends and family, and eventually goes back to her local celebrity role in order to attract volunteers, fans, and funding opportunities for the reconstruction of their beloved hamlet.

The drama weaves together intergenerational conflict, the complex dynamics between Japanese periphery and urban centres, the transmission of tradition, rural revitalization and the consequences of disaster in rural areas. Amachan superimposes on Kuji’s geography its narrative, generating physical landmarks (such as the Sodegahama train station, several local buildings, and the ama’s Kosode bay), intangible features (the ama’s activities, the local dialect), and places and activities created to cater to the drama’s fans (museums, monument, guided tours).

All these elements contribute to create a new, integrated form of heritage centered around the figure of the ama, for the fruition of domestic tourists. The emotional narrative of Amachan gave meaning to a rural area and a traditional activity, elevating it from a local and declining attraction to a national phenomenon.

4.3 METHODS
This research was carried out between 2016 and 2017, and draws upon interviews with local residents, government officials, business owners, and ama divers. We conducted semi-structured interviews focused on: domestic tourism in north eastern Japan; changes experienced by ama divers; life in rural Sanriku; the impact of the 2011 disaster on socio-economic structures; and the impact of Amachan on Kuji and the surrounding area. We carried out observant participation in Northern Sanriku, and in the town of Kuji, concentrating on the most significant landmarks relevant to the drama: the Ama-center in Kosode, the Sodegahama train station, the tunnel, the Amachan museum. The authors sourced informants through snowball sampling and convenience sampling. In addition to that, we analysed the drama itself, as well as newspaper and online articles and reviews, academic articles on Amachan and archival material. All interviews, audio-visual media, written media, and fieldonotes were analysed using critical discourse analysis.

4.4 LITERATURE REVIEW
In this section we review scholarly research on the rise of domestic tourism in rural Japan, and the growing importance of the term furusato to define this phenomenon. We outline the underlying tension between rural and urban Japan. Finally, we define the different types of heritage (tangible, intangible, digital) and their creation, features and representations in Kuji after the Great Eastern Japan Disaster on rural North East Japan.

In her book ‘Discourses of the Vanishing’ (Ivy 1995), the anthropologist Marilyn Ivy addresses the shift in meaning that the Japanese countryside underwent during the 20th century. During the Meiji era the new government heavily pushed for industrialization and Westernization of the country, excluding the peripheries, home of Japanese historical modes of production, from the national discourse.

⁹ See the Intangible heritage subsection for a detailed definition.
(Vlastos 1998), deeming Japan’s rural origins as a backwardness to get rid of in order to become a modern nation. This negative conception of the inaka (countryside) shifted again during the 1970s, as for the first time the attention of Japanese policy-makers focused on the conditions of underdevelopment and depopulation of Japanese peripheries. One of the solutions proposed was the push for domestic tourism to rural villages, now conceived as a repository of symbolic heritage amid a ‘vacuum’ of symbols of urban national identity (Befu 2001). Nostalgia for the countryside took shape in the idea of furusato, or native place (see Ivy 1995; Creighton 1997; Guichard-Aguis and Moon 2009; Robertson 1991). While furusato can refer to one’s actual birthplace or hometown, it generally refers to an idealized rural village that is spiritual home to all Japanese people (MacMorran 2008:339), a place of simpler, more intimate lifestyle, and reassuring past (Lowenthal 1995). Furusato usually conjures emotional images or memories of childhood, and in popular imagination it always refers to a rural landscape (Creighton 1997).

As McMorran highlights ‘furusato heritage can be said to consist of three key aspects, all of which are considered absent from city life, yet crucial to Japanese national identity: (1) a proximity to nature; (2) an architectural cohesiveness and familiarity; and (3) a sense of co-operation and community’ (McMorran 2008:339). Domestic tourism to rural areas is still popular nowadays as a means to reunite with Japanese identity, and to overcome the sense of ‘homelessness’ felt by many urban Japanese (Creighton 1997), in response to cultural transitions10 that leave masses of people with feelings of loneliness and estrangement from others (Davis, 1979:141).

The Great Eastern Japan Disaster in 2011 interrupted the flow of rural tourism in the area. Disasters have been explored as contexts for the development of political and social agendas, as well as ground for activism, solidarity and new power relations (Oliver-Smith, 1996:310). Disasters have a social dimension, as they harness collective action and sentiment (Kleinman and Kleinman 1997:1), and manipulate narratives of tragedy to promote or hide interpretations of events (Forgash 2011). Such interpretations foster a complex dialogue between memory and history, in which memory ‘poses questions to history in that it points to problems that are still alive or invested with emotions and value’ (LaCapra 1998:8). Memory, materialized through heritage, is important to history because of the centrality of trauma and the importance of traumatic events in the construction of identity (Athanasiou et al. 2012). Heritage production is, thus, a continuous process of presentation and interpretation (McCabe 1998:233), a projection in the present of certain elements of the past, shaped to cater to nostalgic longings and celebrate aspects that still hold value in present social and political discourses (Ashworth and Larkham 1994). Landscape, events, buildings, categories of people, or jobs, can all receive a new meaning and value, to reflect society’s collective memory (McMorran 2008). Collective memories, in turn, shape national and local identity and can be crucial in including or excluding minorities from identifying with that heritage (Rose 1995).

Heritage can be formally classified according to its material output: tangible or intangible. Tangible heritage refers to ‘buildings and historic places, monuments, artifacts, etc., which are considered worthy of preservation for the future’ (UNESCO, 2003a). These include objects significant to the archaeology, architecture, science or technology of a specific culture (ibid.). Intangible heritage includes ‘practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their Cultural Heritage’ (UNESCO, 2003b). The development of new technologies prompted the emergence of a new type of digital heritage, made up of computer-based materials of enduring value that should be kept for future generations (UNESCO, 2003c).

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10 Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka, who expressed in his 1973 bestseller Nihon rettō kaizō ron ( ‘Proposal for remodeling the Japanese archipelago’) his worries about the current state of depopulation and decline of the countryside. His plan for the rebirth of rural Japan consisted in the ‘remodeling of the physical landscape’ (Robertson 1991: 28) through relocation of industries and the construction of transport infrastructures in the countryside.
4.5 DISCUSSION
Heritage can manifest itself in unexpected ways. In every town in Japan a system of loudspeakers is used to air musical tunes at 8am, 12am and 5pm. It’s part of the cultural soundscape of Japan. In Kuji, after 2013, the chime morning chime is Yoshihide Ōtomo’s Amachan opening theme, turning every morning in the northeastern town into the beginning of a new episode. The programme gave a major contribution to tourism-related revenues in the northern Sanriku, but after 4 years the initial momentum is dwindling. This made necessary the institution of a more structured tourism circuit that would keep attracting people from all over Japan and overseas. In this section we discuss the processes of heritage building in Kuji since 2013, and how locals and visitors experience and negotiate the impact of Amachan on the coast. The discussion will be divided in 3 areas of interest: the drama itself as a form of digital heritage; the creation of tangible heritage such as landmarks; the creation of intangible heritage such as a hybrid dialect, and the transformation of the figure of the ama. All these types of heritage are combined in a synthesis of peripheral traditions and contemporary trends aimed at closing the gap between pre and post-disaster Sanriku, past and present, and ultimately between rural and urban Japan.

4.5.1 TANGIBLE HERITAGE
According to an informant from Kuji: «Everything revolves around Aki. [Tourists] want to see what Aki saw, they want to stay where Aki lived. That’s why people come here». Except, Aki’s village, Sodegahama, does not exist. Both the village and the nearby town of Kitasanriku are fictional settings based on the real Horinai and Kuji. Actions taken by local municipalities and tourism companies in order to provide a tangible, consumable experience for Amachan fans, generated three categories of places:
1. Locations significant to pre-Amachan local tourism which were enhanced by how they were portrayed in the drama (the Kosode Bay, the Kuji Ekimae building, the Sanriku railway)
2. Locations already existing but not relevant for tourism, that gained significance as recognizable features of Sodegahama and Kitasanriku (the Horinai station and train tunnel).
3. Attractions specifically created to cater to Amachan’s fans (the Amachan Museum in Kuji, Amachan-related gadgets, events, memorial plates, etc.).

The inhabitants and the municipality of Kuji see tourism as one of the main revenues for the town. They created and reproduced a tourism circuit, performances and attractions that can keep people coming, potentially even after Amachan’s popularity wanes. When visitors heading to Kuji climb on the Santetsu train, they have already started their tour. Indeed, the train car itself looks familiar, if one has watched Amachan: creme-coloured interiors, bright red seats, and the comfortable simplicity of countryside trains. Gently creaking and rocking the two cars ride beside the coast: now a fast succession of concrete seawalls, constructions sites, temporary housing; a common view after the Geat Eastern Japan Disaster. Before reaching Kuji, visitors pass by the Horinai station and are greeted by the sign of the fictional Sodegahama stop, and a blue bench where Aki and Yui used to often sit in the drama. Horinai and Sodegahama overlap in tourists’ imagination and the addition of the sign and the bench, that belong to a fictional world, enhance this superimposition. Next to the station, a tunnel portrayed many times in the drama which has become the goal of a specific intangible practice (see next section).

Once in Kuji, the reminders about the drama are omnipresent: posters and flyers are everywhere, together with a framed picture of the drama stationmaster Daikichi with his comical sidekick, Yoshiba. In a corner mannequins wear an ama’s kasuri, the official kimono of the diving women, dark blue with a red and white geometrical pattern, and Aki’s idol costume; an acoustic guitar signed by Otomo Yoshihide, the composer of the drama’s music, sits in the corner. In front of the station stands the Ekimae building, where Daikichi and Sugawara, the head of Kitasanriku tourism bureau, often plotted to revitalized their beloved neighbourhood. An Amachan museum has
been opened in 2014 and souvenirs are available anywhere in town: key-chains, pins, stickers, most of which have the dialectal expression “je” or “jejeje” on them. The “Jejeje”, a local dialectal exclamation of surprise, has become so popular that a dedicated plaque has been placed at Kosode Bay, where ama work and perform for tourists, to mark the place where Aki first learned this expression, eating sea urchins and laughing with the divers in the first episode of the drama.

All these diverse forms of tangible heritage participate, on one hand in perpetrating the illusion of visiting the fictional towns where Amachan is set, while on the other hand, they create tangible attractions that ground the tourist experience in the intangible traditional practices and performances of Kuji and Horinai.

4.5.2 INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

One of Amachan’s most effective narrative devices is to juxtapose the ama with one of the most popular contemporary female figures in Japan: the idol. In one of the first episodes of the show, Aki meets her soon-to-be best friend Yui, whose dream is to leave Kitasanriku and become a star in Tokyo (just as Aki’s mother did years before). The scene climaxes with Yui stepping into the Sodegahama station tunnel and screaming on the top of her lungs “Aidoru ni naritai!” (I want to become an idol). A Kuji town employee pointed out how many young girls come all the way up from Sendai, Tokyo, or even Taiwan, just to make a brief stop in Horinai station, reenact that liberating yell and go back home.

Japanese idols are described as a mediatic oddity, without singing or acting talents or remarkable beauty (Sakai 2016), and yet incredibly popular as media personalities for their cheerful and inspiring cuteness. Since the 80s idols became the main role model for teenagers, epitomizing the possibility to conquer the showbiz with sheer motivation.

Idolhood is a recurring theme in Amachan as both Aki and Yui end up pursuing a career as idols, with opposite outcomes. Yui’s excessive egoism leads her to a bitter failure, while Aki’s experience as an ama apprentice in rural Sanriku, imbues her with a set of specific virtues: ‘pure-hearted ambition and eagerness to please – the definition of idolhood’ (Sakai 2016).

The overlapping of the characteristics of idolhood and the ama, represented by Aki, becomes crucial for the heritage creation in Kuji, where women divers have always been the main tourist attraction. Amachan’s ama are narrated not as a romanticised object of fruition (such as the classic diver figure all over Japan), but as the sunburned elderly matrons, who welcome Aki in their midst and initiate her to the divers ways. The viewers experience directly their everyday life and experiences, and through Aki’s journey into idolhood, learn to associate the ama’s spontaneity and determination to the virtues of the Japanese postmodern heroine per excellence – the Idol. The hybrid figure of Aki, who embodies both the idol and the ama, is the driving force behind the revitalization of Sanriku’s ama practices. It managed to repopularize ama, reintroducing teenagers to the ama tradition and at the same time providing much needed tourism revenues in post-disaster Kuji. The novelty of ama heritage after Amachan is in how traditions and practices are presented and interpreted in a new way by associating ama and idols, creating a hybrid figure that embodies values of both urban and rural Japan packaged with the expectations and interest of young Japanese urbanites.

Another central intangible feature of post-Amachan heritage in Kuji is the fictitious dialect depicted in the drama. The dialect spoken in fictional Sodegahama approximates the dialect of the region (Maynard 2016: 248-249), and enhances easily recognizable and reproducible expressions, such as “jejeje”. “Je” is a surprise exclamation, omnipresent in the episodes of Amachan. This expression was not common in Kuji, and only kept alive by the elderly of Kosode in a slightly different form, “je jee” (Tsuchiya 2013). Now the exclamation “jejeje” has become popular all over Japan, and awarded “Buzzword of the Year” in 2013. “Jejeje”, initially a provincialism locals were embarrassed to be associated with, became the symbol of a heritage to be proud of, to the point of being adopted all over the country. Aki absorbs almost immediately the fictitious Kitasanriku dialect, which is a stand-in for everything rural Sanriku and the ama
represent. Tokyo-born Aki learns the local dialect together with the audience, which establishes an emotional connection with the rural town of Sodegahama and the ama, and throughout the rest of the dorama, she will often be identified by secondary characters as «that girl with the Sanriku accent» – significantly Yui, who was born in the countryside, speaks only standard Japanese, to reassert her separation from the periphery and her aspiration to move to the capital.

4.5.3 DIGITAL HERITAGE
National television dramas featuring young and cheerful heroines in rural settings are not a novelty in the Japanese media industry. These productions are explicitly aimed at promoting a comeback of Japan’s more depressed local areas. [...] This coincides with NHK’s policies, which actively promote the broadcast of programs featuring rural communities. Such programming is expected to support tourism and the economic revitalization of regions where, due to the absence of young residents, the population decline is severe.’ (Maynard, 2016).

Amachan is the 88th of these morning drama, and although it may not be considered a proper form of heritage, it narrates many vital aspects of the everyday life and practices of the Kuji municipality. Tangible and intangible aspects of pre-Amachan heritage, especially ama traditions and practices as well some dialectal forms, are depicted in detail and present a durable, digitalised testimony.

As in all heritage building, narratives are strongly oriented and interpreted, and aim at romanticising ama divers and bucolic life in rural towns. It is not different from what has been done in hundreds of other villages all over Japan, and follows the patterns used to create furusato, and mura okoshi (village revival). It offers Kuji and Horinai an unprecedented visibility, used to enhance tourism in post-disaster areas. Fans and interested tourists not only are already informed through the drama about ama activities and practices, as well as the regional language, and emotionally involved, but they are also in the position of actively take part to an ideal continuation of Aki’s adventure in Kitasanriku by visiting and supporting Kuji. In this sense, they do visit a narrative space, as Tzanelli (2004) notes,
Amachan, then, provides a narrative undertext to the fruition of ama practices and traditions, as well as the Sanriku railway and Kuji as commodities.

4.6 CONCLUSIONS
Amachan and its effects and impacts on the tourism industry in Kuji and the nearby Horinai represent a unique configuration of heritage creation and representation. Previous studies (Tzanelli 2004; Watson and Waterton 2010) examine how modalities of representation tend to alienate the social milieu from the construction of touristic heritage, and to model a dimension that is separated from the heritage construction discourse and the ‘secret life’ (Watson and Waterton 2010:83) or actuality, of the places, practices and objects that constitute the space of tourism consumption (Watson and Waterton 2010). We propose that it is possible, in Amachan’s case, to add a layer of significance to such studies. In a world where news, shows, images are instantly reproduced, we show throughout the paper that Amachan is informed by places, performances, and traditional heritage in Kuji just as much as some features used for tourism in post-Amachan Kuji and Horinai are re-shaped and modelled to represent the fictional towns of Kitasanriku and Sodegahama.

We thus argue that Amachan in Kuji as a phenomenon of heritage creation operates on a more subtle level, by discoursifying for entertainment and tourism purposes precisely the aspects of Japanese countryside perceived as negative (backwardness and depopulation), and the tragic effects of the 2011 Great Eastern Japan Disaster.

In the fictional universe of Amachan, as the disaster hits Sanriku on 11 March 2011, Aki is in Tokyo, rehearsing for her debut show as an idol. Immediately she goes back to Sodegahama, and after finding her grandma alive and well, she decides to stay, reunites with Yui to for their old singing duo, and perform to gather reconstruction funds. The show ends with the two cheerily singing on the Santetsu train car, surrounded by fans, friends and family, as three couples are married (Aki’s producer Aramaki and his fiancee, Aki’s mother and her former husband, the stationmaster Daikichi and the ama Sayuri), and Kitasanriku town rejoice with the reconstruction efforts. At the same time Aki, in real Kuji, extends her own agency outside the narrative dimension and becomes the motor through which ama divers, local dialects and tangible features of the landscape become a commodity for tourists.

To conclude, Kuji’s local heritage before Amachan and the disaster, together with neutral elements belonging to local culture, are integrated by Amachan in a cohesive discourse. This discourse produces new forms of heritage that are enhanced, revitalized and re-popularize by the diffusion in national conscience. This process of heritage creation has an impact also on the residents, and the way they perceive Kuji and themselves. An unpublished study by Tohoku University researcher Miwako Kitamura, shows how locals received very positively the drama and its direct outcomes, mainly in terms of increased presence of tourists. Notably, Kitamura reports a significant improvement in satisfaction with local image, local traditions, and even disaster prevention measures, after the airing of Amachan. Many of Kitamura’s informers stated they not only found new pride in living in Kuji after the television drama made it famous nationwide, but also strengthened their resolve to rebuild the town and villages damaged by the 2011 disaster.

REFERENCES


