

Heritage Ecosystem: Why Do We Need a New Approach?

From relationality to systemic
interdependence

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Nara 1994

- cultural context
- diversity of sources
- beyond material fabric

Nairobi 2025

- community-centred
- pluralistic and dynamic
- interconnected heritage

A further question

How are the relationships through which authenticity is sustained to be understood when heritage changes?

People · Places · Practices ·
Knowledge · Functions ·
Environments

Kintaikyo Bridge

Protected Scenic Beauty in Japan

3 central arch spans + 2 side girder spans





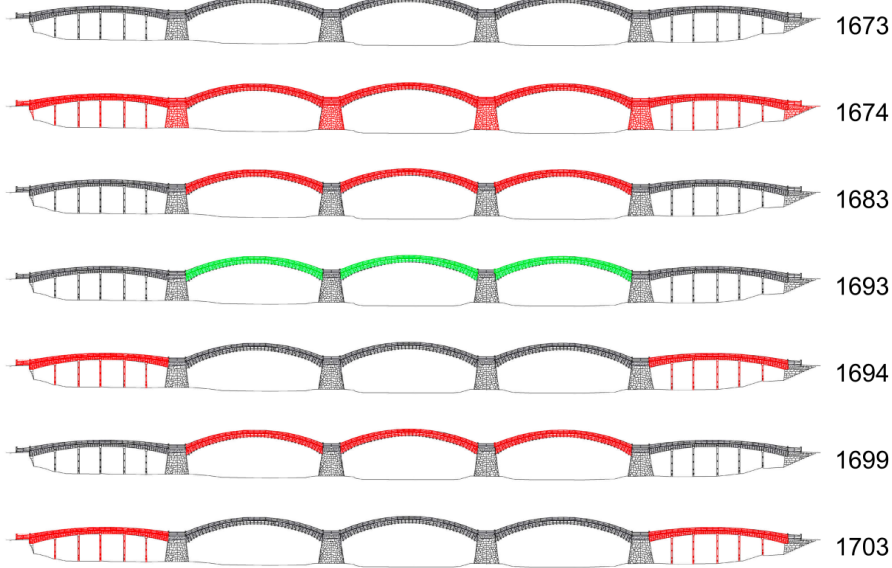
kakegae

span-by-span
renewal

reconstruction

replacement of
deck boards

repair



Source: 岩国市(2020)錦帯橋調査報告書 (modified by the authors)



kakegae

span-by-span

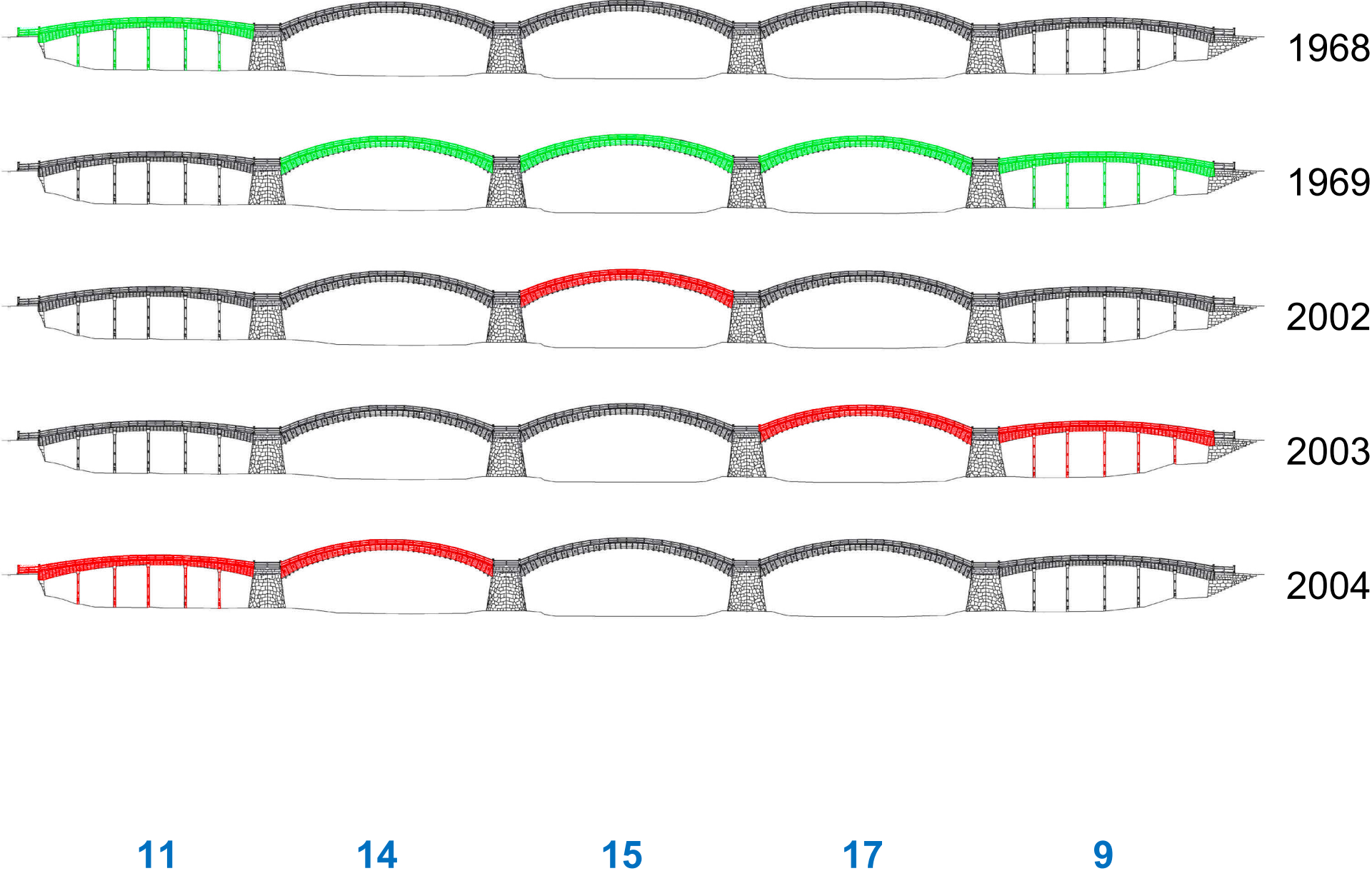
renewal

reconstruction

replacement of
deck boards

repair

total number of
reconstructions
by span



What continues when the material changes?

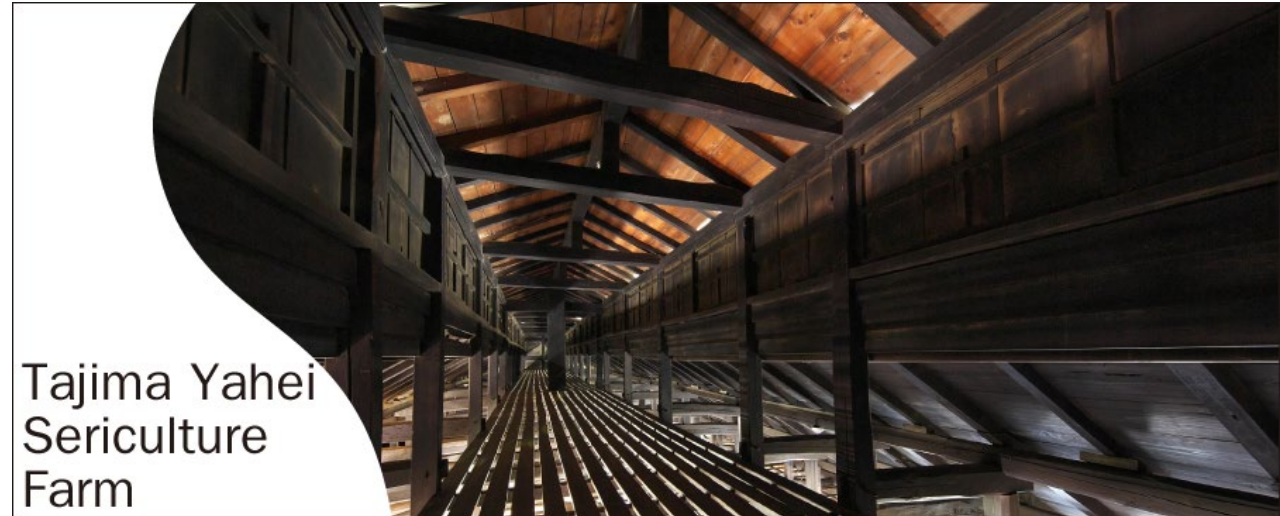
Material — Techniques —
Knowledge — Place — Function
— Community

Authenticity may depend on the continuity of relationships, not on the survival of each element unchanged.

This does not mean that material evidence is irrelevant.



Tomioka Silk Mill and Related sites (WH): Continuity beyond the property



1200

Silk Heritage sites in Gunma
Prefecture



4

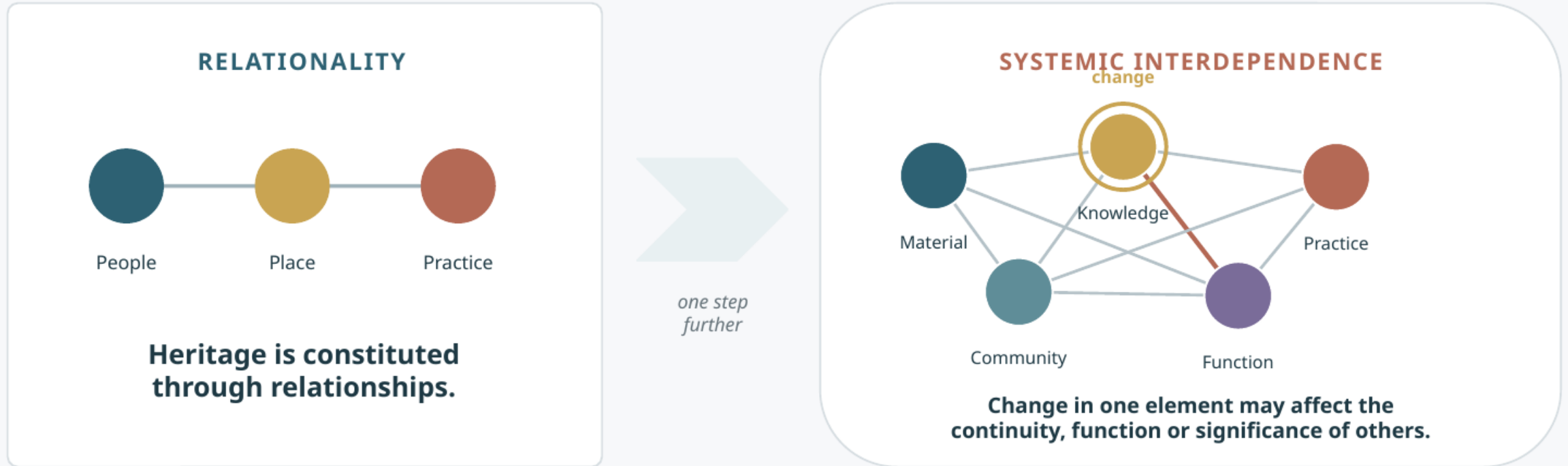
Components of a World Heritage property

Sericulture farmers; Silk reeling and weaving; Skills and knowledge; Memories; Operating industry
Communities; Related places, etc.

**Does the property's boundary also define the boundary of the relationships that sustain its
meaning?**

From relationality to systemic interdependence

The distinctive contribution of a heritage ecosystem cannot lie simply in saying that heritage is relational.



Heritage Ecosystem = Relationality + Systemic Interdependence

Substantive implications for authenticity

1. Relationships

Authenticity may reside in relationships as well as individual attributes.

2. Change

Change does not necessarily imply loss of authenticity.

3. Plural sources

Material evidence, techniques, living practices, knowledge and other sources may all be relevant.

4. Continuity as process

Values and relationships may persist, adapt or be reconfigured.

The relative importance of material and non-material continuity depends on the nature and context of the heritage.

A methodological gap - from concept to assessment

- **What constitutes the relevant heritage system?**

Elements · relationships · interdependencies

- **How does it persist and change?**

Continuity · transformation · effects across the system

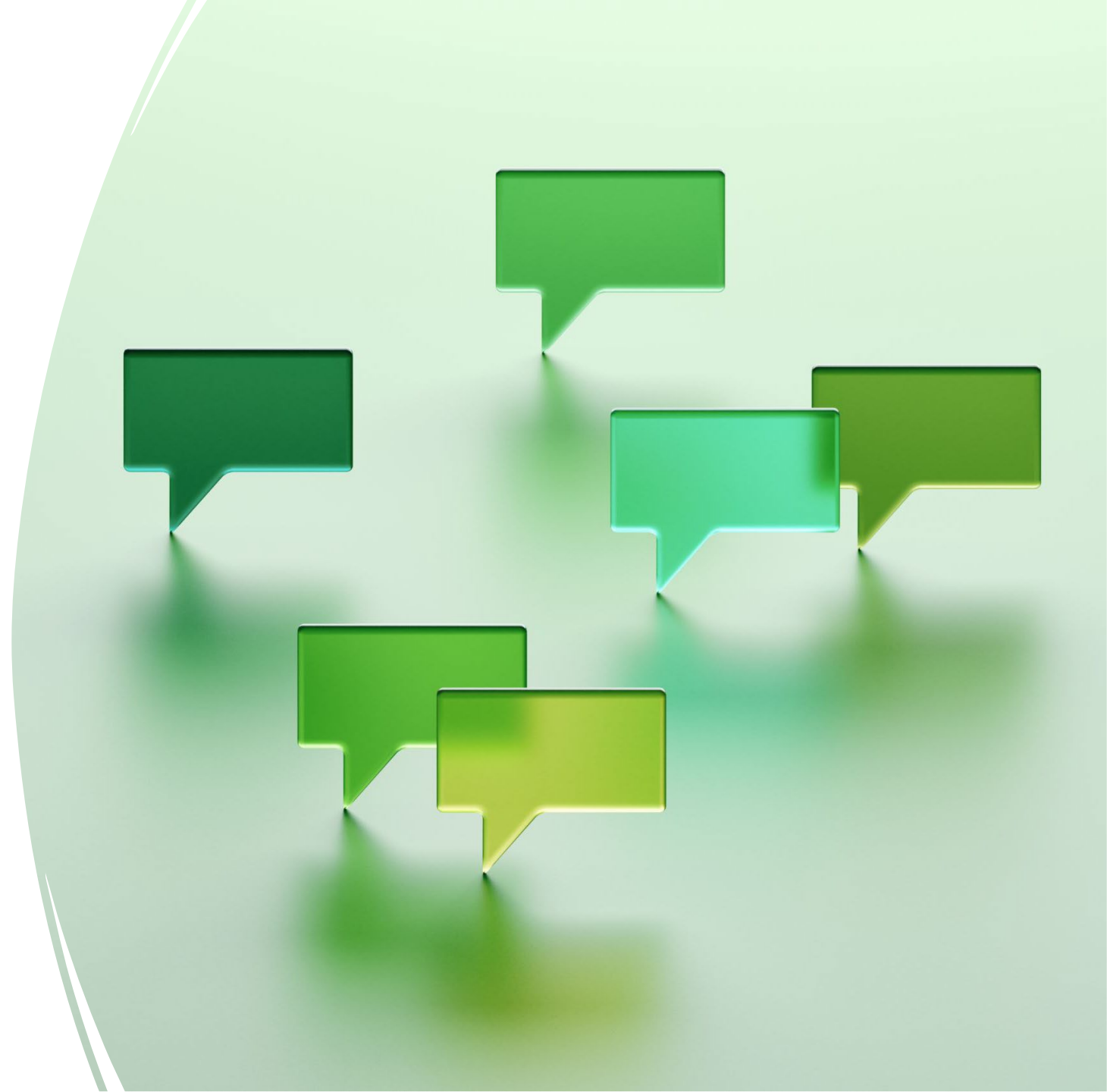
- **On what basis can we assess this?**

Sources of information · knowledge · documentation · credibility

A heritage ecosystem can help structure what we need to examine — while existing principles of credibility guide how claims are assessed.

The way forward: explore, test and develop

- **The Dialogue** may encourage ICOMOS and the other Advisory Bodies, in cooperation with UNESCO, States Parties, communities and knowledge holders, to further **explore and test the heritage ecosystem approach** as a possible conceptual and methodological framework for authenticity in a changing world.



What should be explored and tested?

1. Comparative case studies

Test how systemic interdependence operates in different types of heritage and processes of change.

2. Regional and cross-regional dialogue

Examine how relevant elements and relationships vary across cultural contexts, and what can be shared.

3. Methodological development

Develop ways to identify interdependencies, assess continuity and transformation, and evaluate relevant sources of information.

[**Aim**] to test whether the heritage ecosystem can serve as a **common analytical framework** — not a new universal model of authenticity.

Gunma Declaration on Heritage Ecosystems (2025)

22 Recommendations in 4 categories

1. Engaging and Empowering Communities with their Multiple Values and Voices
2. Heritage Ecosystems as an Interdisciplinary Commitment
3. Responding to Threats and Embracing Opportunities
4. New Technologies for Sustaining Heritage Ecosystems

Recommendation 3 (4)

“Explore authenticity through the lenses of heritage ecosystems”



<https://www.heritage-ecosystem.com/html/en/>

Authenticity: where we stand after three decades since the Nara Document

Luisa De Marco

Asia-Pacific Dialogue on Heritage and Authenticity
Rethinking Heritage Authenticity: An Asia-Pacific Dialogue for the Future of World Heritage
Na Noi, 28 – 30 September 2026

Venice Charter (1964)

...It is our duty to hand them on
in the **full richness of their
authenticity.**

...each country **within the framework of its
own culture and traditions.**

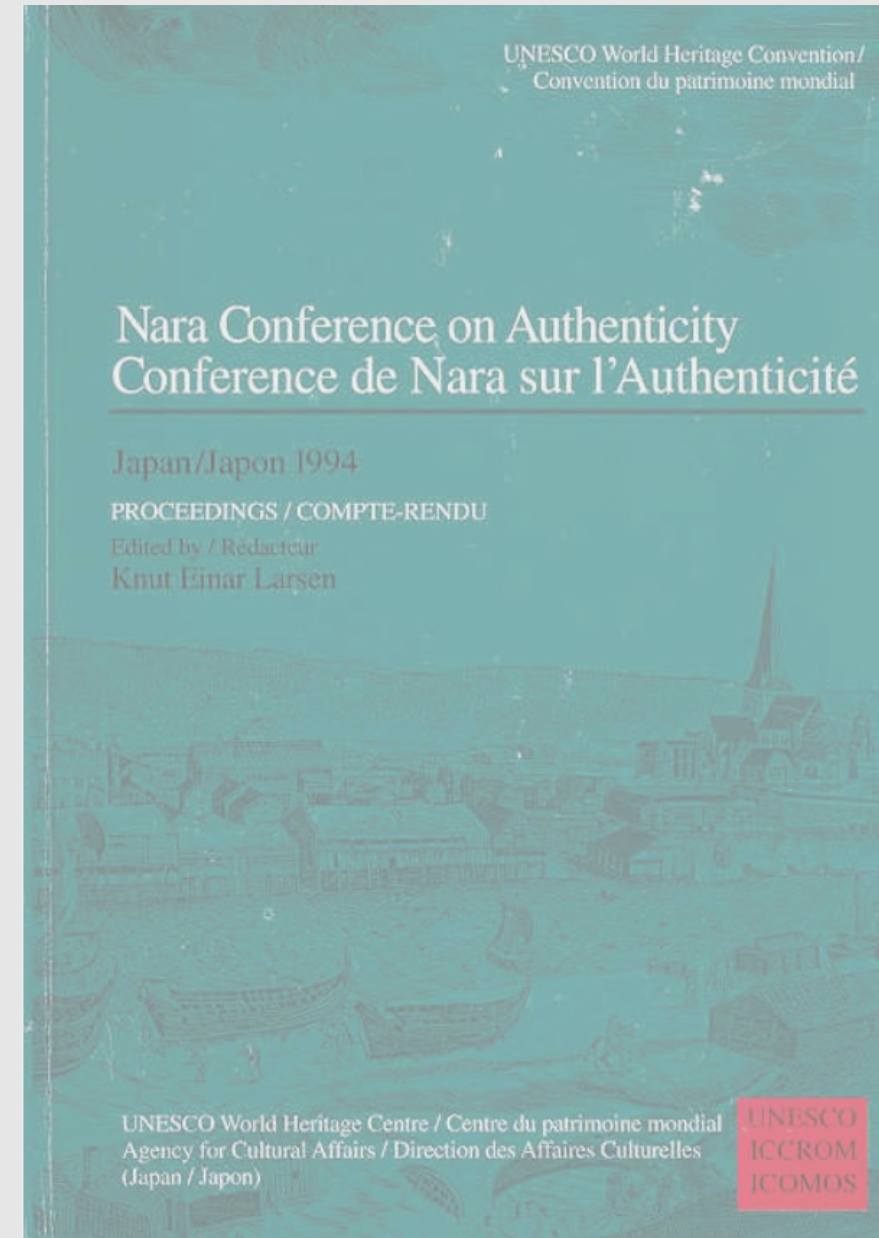


Authenticity, a stratified concept



Nara document on authenticity

- Authenticity is not an absolute term – can only be understood ‘in relation to’ something
- Authenticity is not a value per se but a qualifying condition for heritage values to be understood/appreciated
- authenticity is assessed on an expanded array of information sources
- Need for explaining how heritage significance is understood in each context is essential for intercultural dialogue

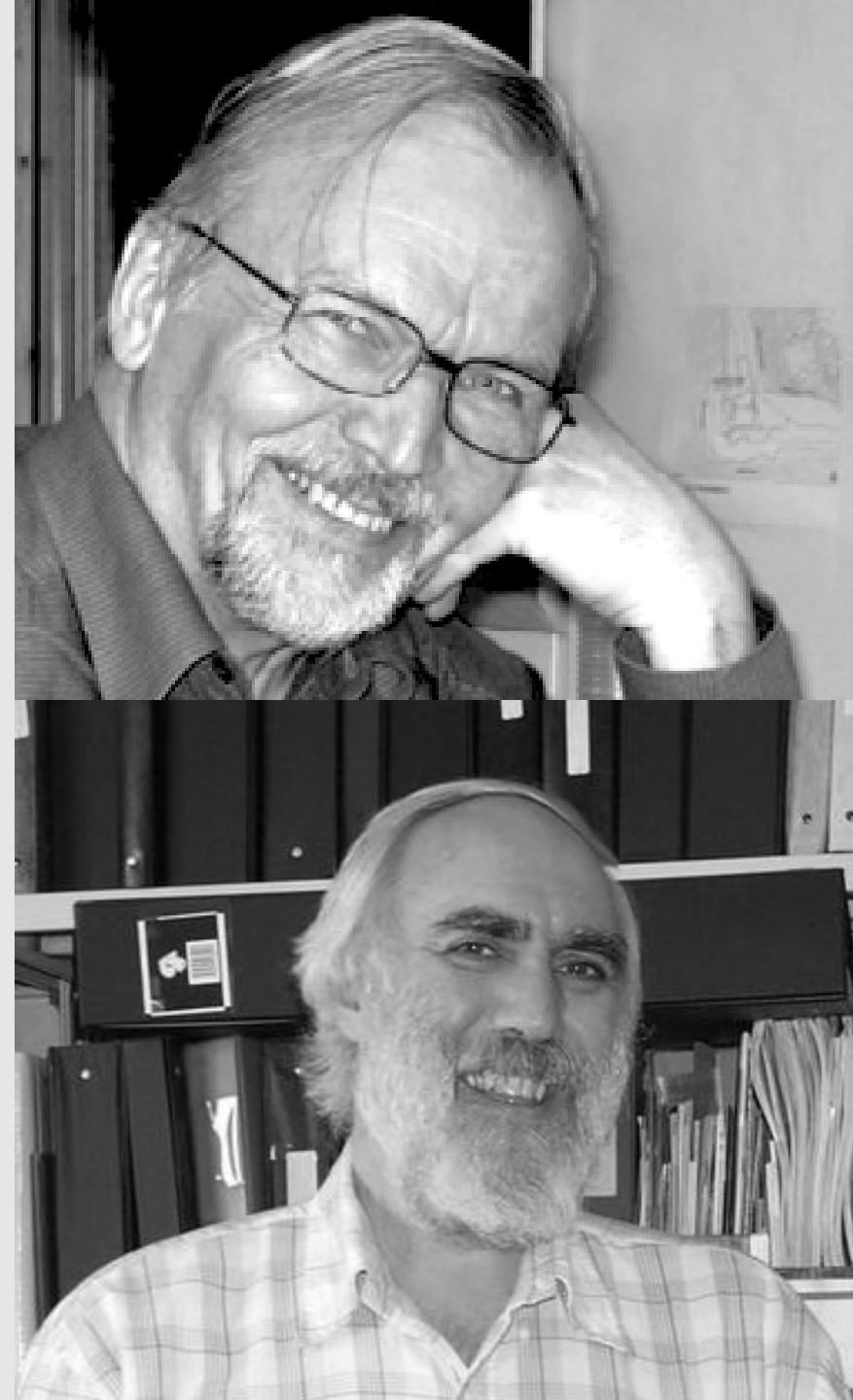


Useful steps post- Nara in World Heritage

Authenticity is looked at on two levels:

- a) *'Authentication process' of the heritage place*: value statements are proven through interrogation of 'sources of information'/attributes
- b) *Authenticity as 'essence' or 'specificity' of the heritage significance of a place* → aim of conservation: preserving its 'authenticity' = *its ability to convey its heritage values* (in management)

Attributes: a link between heritage values and authenticity



First decade post- Nara

Several regional meetings

- In Africa
- In the Americas
- In Europe

Reappraisal of what emerged is needed today

Two new conventions adopted:

- Convention on the Safeguarding Intangible Heritage (2003)
- Convention on the Protection and Promotion of Cultural Diversity (2005)



**Authenticity and Integrity
in an African Context**

Expert Meeting - Great Zimbabwe - 26/29 May 2000

Editor
Galia Saouma-Forero



**Authenticité et Intégrité
dans un contexte africain**

Réunion d'experts - Great Zimbabwe - 26/29 mai 2000

20th Anniversary of Nara Document



Nara debate

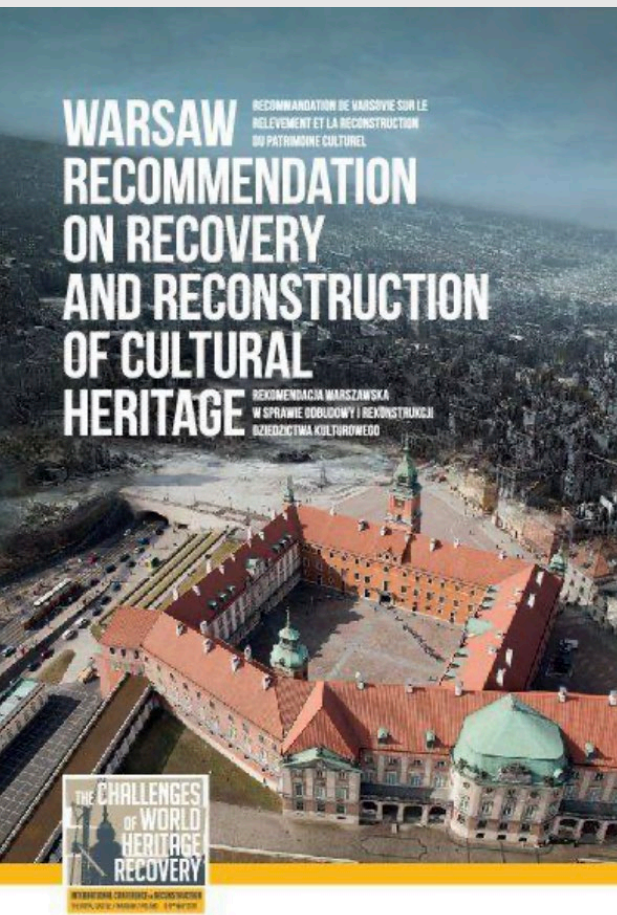
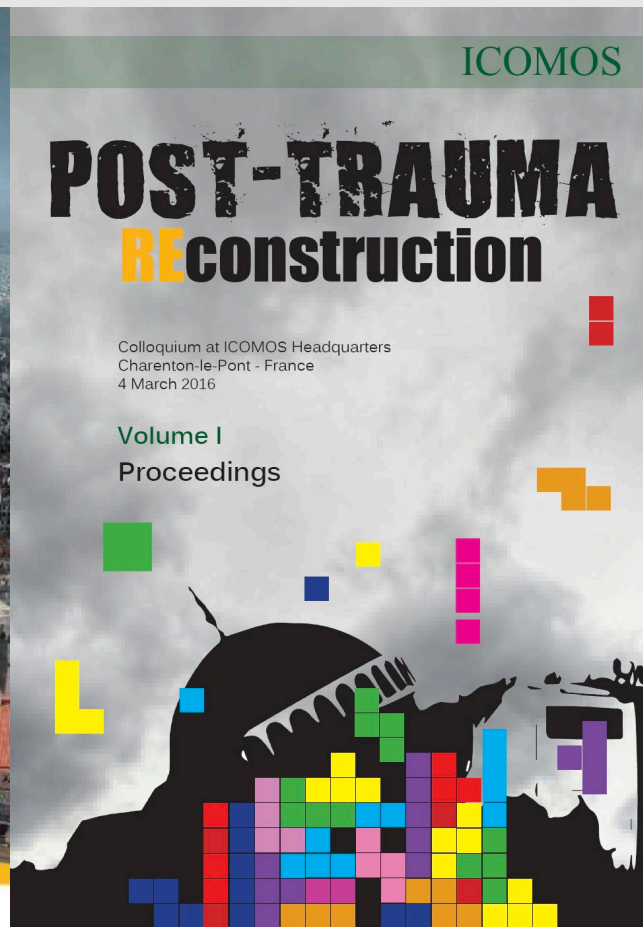
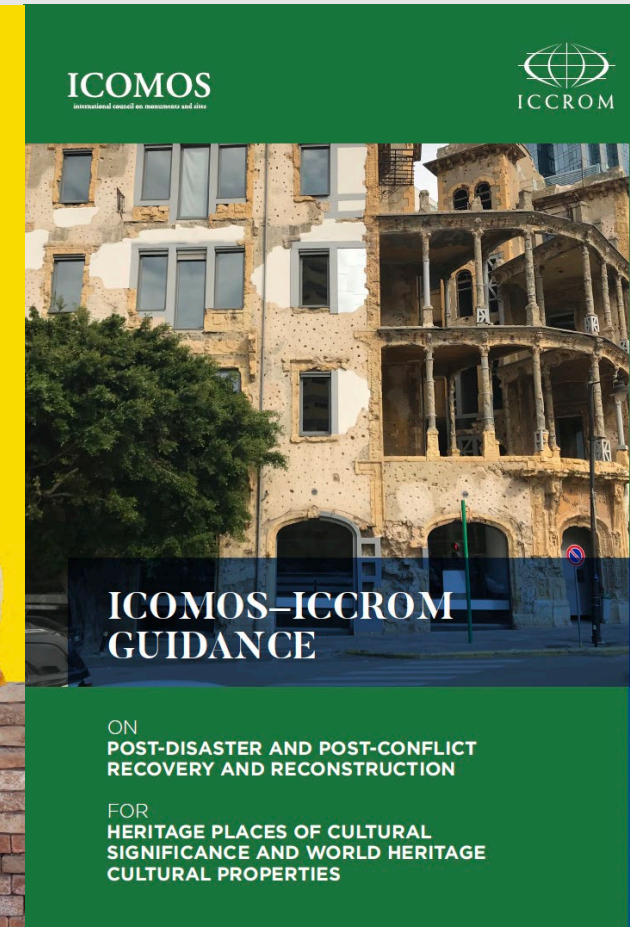
...emerging contradictions and
flaws or assumptions in heritage
conservation discipline

...as developed in Europe



Reconstruction...

a revealing challenge to the idea of authenticity in heritage



Nairobi Dialogue on the Concept of Authenticity



From Venice through Nara...



Authenticity and heritage: some key nodes

- Authenticity makes heritage deserving to be cherished
- What type of authenticity are we talking about? Clarify vocabulary
- An inclusive understanding of authenticity (heritage in the flowing of time)
- Improving our instruments in the WH system:
 - Clarifying interlinkages between OUV attributes and authenticity
 - Understanding how intangible attributes underpin OUV of WH properties
 - ...and how they can be used as sources of information to qualify authenticity
 - Involving a broader variety of interlocutors in this assessment

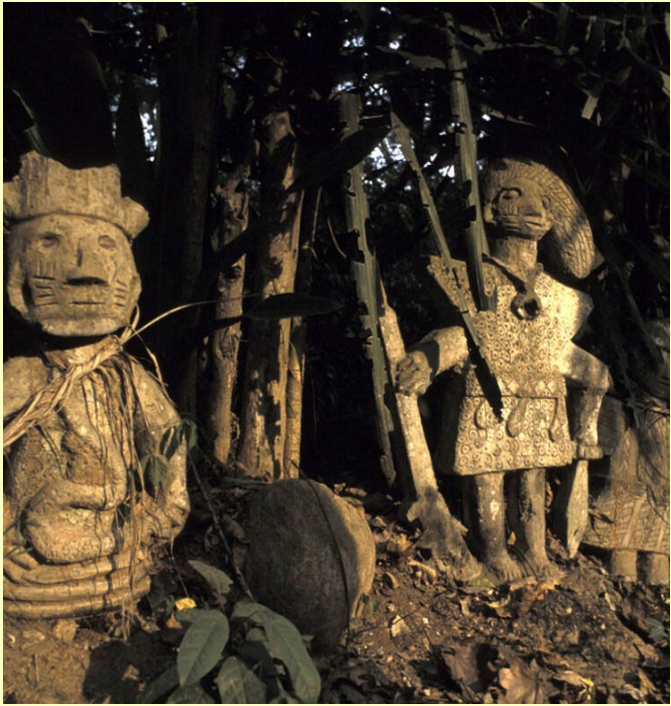




NARA

- Nara Document provides a broad basis on the heritage conservation principle for recognizing cultural diversity, tangible and intangible expressions, community responsibility, oral sources, use and function, traditions, techniques, spirit and feeling. These concepts were never invented in Nairobi.





Communities as participants in defining authenticity

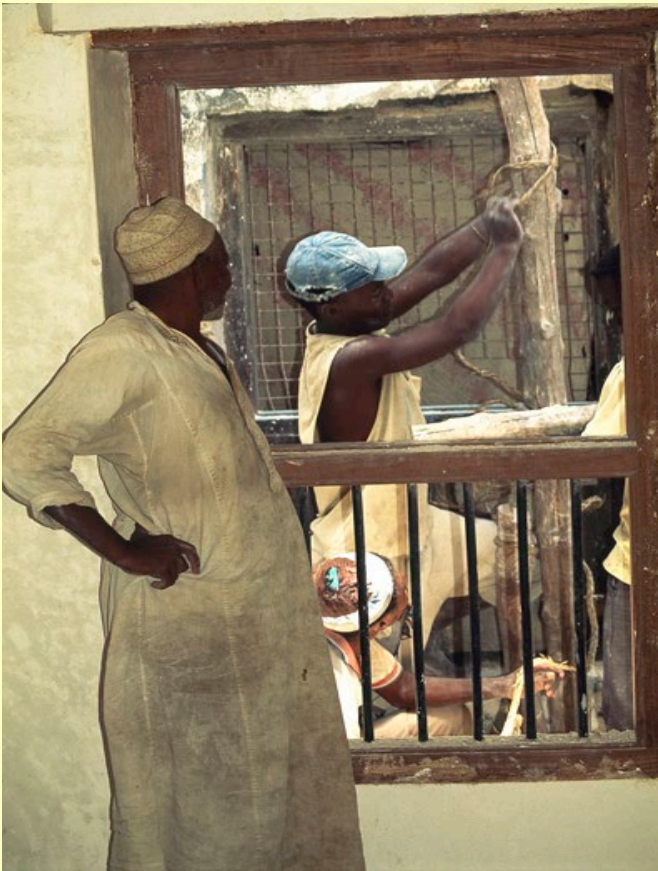
While Nara recognizes the responsibility of the cultural community that generated the heritage conservation principles, it does not establish a clear operational requirement for communities and knowledge holders/bearers to participate directly in identifying attributes, evaluating authenticity and making decisions throughout nomination, management and monitoring.

This is critical



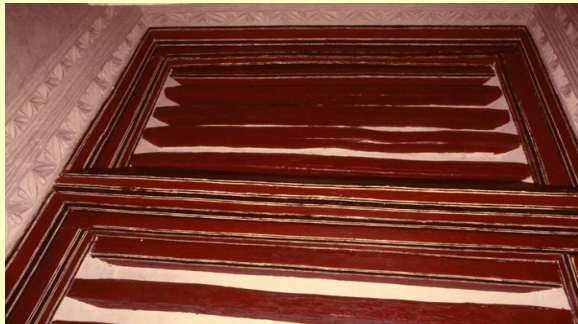
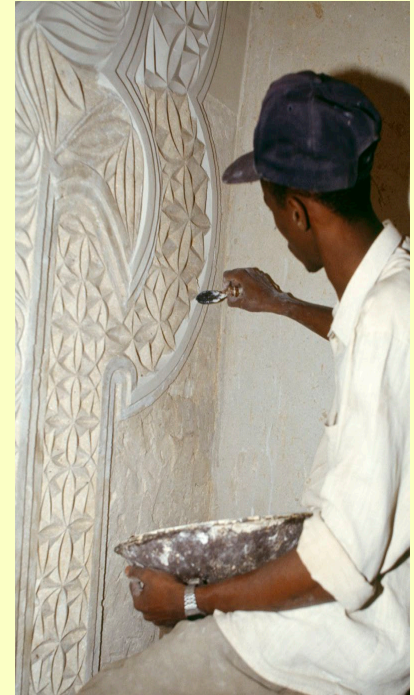
Authenticity as continuity through change

Nara refers to original and subsequent characteristics, but it does not clearly explain that transformation, evolution, adaptation and renewal may sustain authenticity rather than diminish it. Nairobi Outcome makes continuity of meaning, practice, use and knowledge—not simply the survival of inherited material fabric—a central consideration.



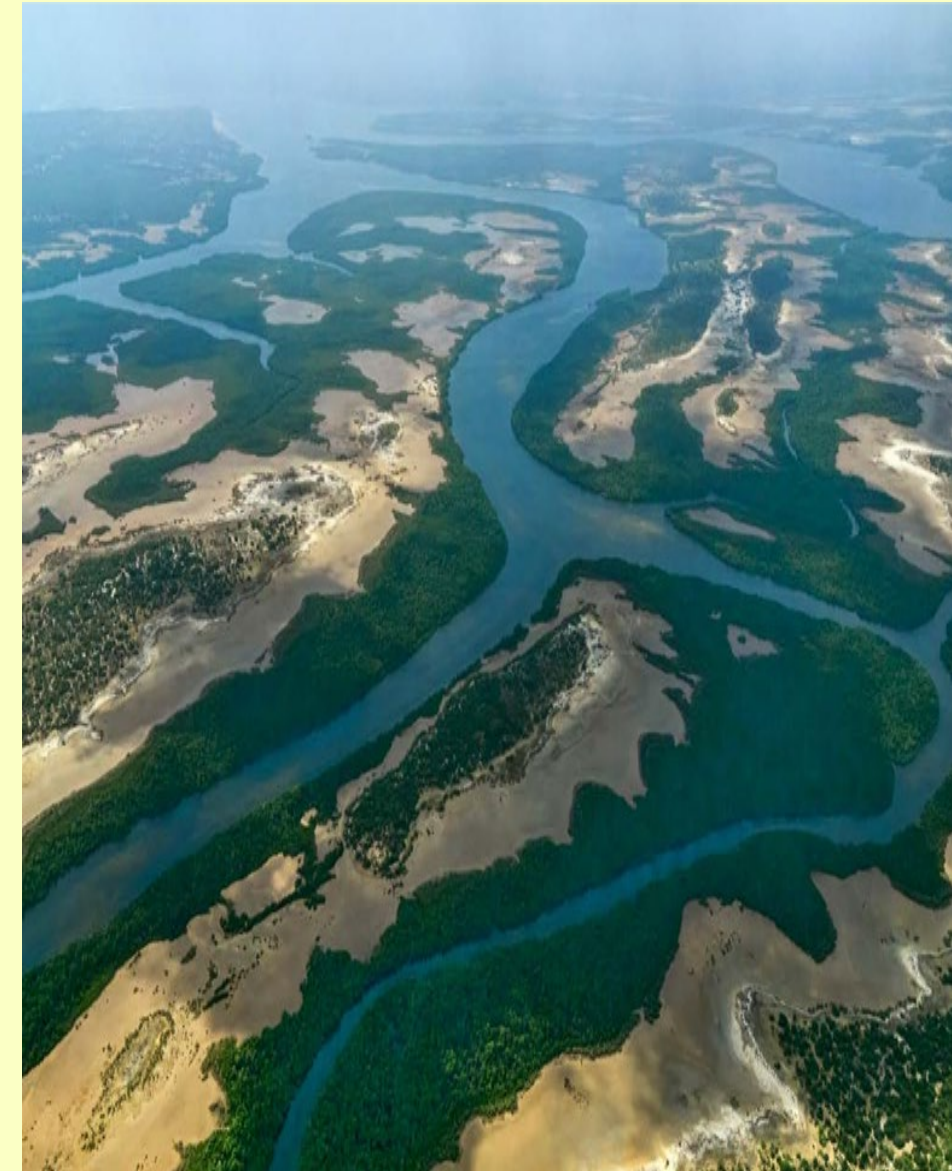
Tangible and intangible heritage as interdependent

Nara recognizes both tangible and intangible expressions, but largely treats traditions, use, spirit and feeling as “sources of information” for assessing a property. Nairobi Outcome recognizes that practices, rituals, oral traditions, skills and knowledge holders may themselves constitute attributes through which the values of a place continue.



The nature–culture continuum

This is not developed in Nara although is common in Africa, Asia, North and South America. The Nairobi Outcome stresses the indivisibility of spiritual, ecological and cultural relationships with land, water and other natural features that have direct implications for identifying attributes, defining boundaries and managing cultural landscapes and other properties.



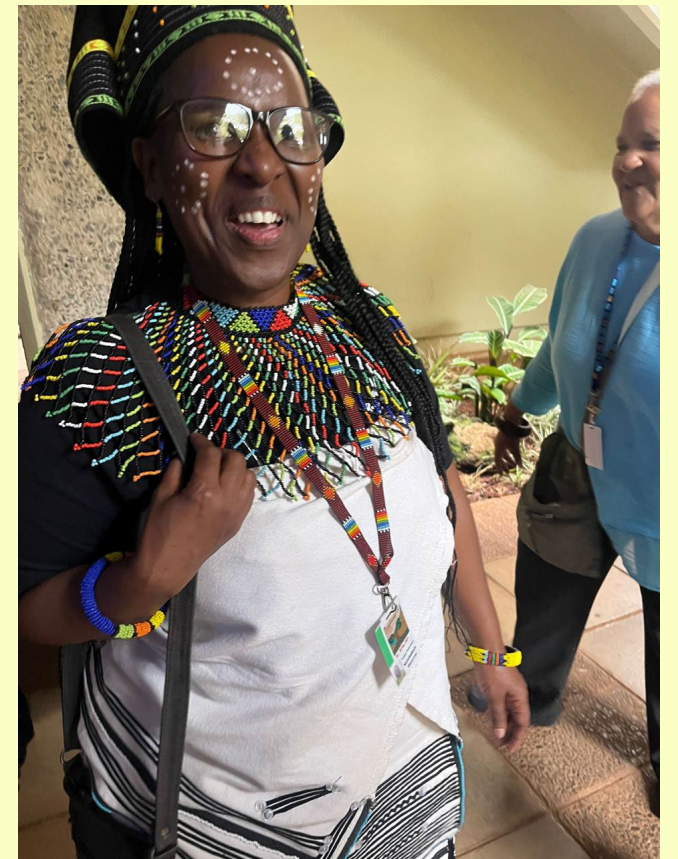
Translation into national law and institutional procedures

Nara does not require States Parties to recognize communities and knowledge holders/bearers formally in national heritage legislation, inventories, tentative lists, nomination processes or management systems. This is a significant operational gap that need to be considered in the recommendations to States Parties.



While conceptual space exists in Nara, the procedures, actors, evidence and decision points are not sufficiently specified

- **Hanoi Document should just “promote” Nairobi Outcome Document. It should identify a number of mechanisms for operationalizing the Nairobi Document including:**
- revisions or supplementary guidance concerning paragraphs of the Operational Guidelines, that particularly concern the identification and assessment of authenticity and attributes;
- a requirement to document how communities and knowledge holders participated in identifying values and attributes;
- recognition of living processes, transmission, adaptation and renewal as possible attributes supporting authenticity;
- methods for using oral, spiritual and customary knowledge as credible sources of information;
- stronger integration of nature–culture relationships;
- corresponding changes to Tentative List, nomination, management and monitoring procedures and;
- review of national legislation to ensure formal community participation.



THANK YOU