

## **“Objects, memory and cultural identity in (re)construction”**

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### **Ephemeral conservatories of Taiwanese popular culture and the fabric of local identity: perpetuating traditions in temple processions**

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#### **Abstract**

Traditions are maintained through a complex process of transmission that takes different forms. Rather than being static and immutable, traditions can be enriched or impoverished, reproduced with changes from one generation to the other, but also against the pressure of social phenomena and the state, modernity and global trends, traditions can also be recomposed or re-invented. In this paper I will examine several instances of the intangible culture displayed within southern Taiwan temple processions in order to acknowledge the channels and the means of its perpetuation as well as the change of its environment. A second focus concerns the material objects and the ritual paraphernalia that are collected by communities and groups of participants, used for the rites accomplished during temple festivals.

The empirical objects on which I will draw upon are the “processional troupes”, *tin-thau* (𪛶𪛶) 陣頭 and the “formations” they take place in, literally known as “ritual battalions” *hiu<sup>m</sup> –tin* (𪛶𪛶) 香陣, which carry out a very important role during the territorial type of processions called *koab-hiu<sup>m</sup>* (“to divide or to share incense”) in the Tainan area. The formations of the processions and their lively components are organized by villages, *chng-thau* (𪛶𪛶) 庄頭, metaphorically built around their temples in which are hosted the protective deities temporarily carried around in processions to complete exorcisms and rites of propitiation, once every three or four years. The alliance of participating communities acts in collaboration— symbolically and sociologically—to protect, revitalize and perpetuate itself. Not only is the identity of each village elaborated and re-negotiated on this occasion but it is also the collective identity of a whole region that is proclaimed, constructed and reproduced through the process that have had an important role to play in local society and history since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The corpus of knowledge linked to the troupes’ performances, gestures, rites, songs, dances and so on is conceived as belonging to the village; it is part of the patrimonial assets of the temple built in the name of the protective deities of the community. This knowledge cannot be divulged or utilized outside the community without a consensus of the local inhabitants, sometimes via the temple committee.

Territorial processions such as those in the Tainan area represent in cultural terms a lively conservatory of local popular traditions and arts, as well as a dynamic but ephemeral “museum” of tangible and intangible local folk culture. They stand for a “museum” or a “conservatory” because, on a regular basis, they encapsulate and display countless aspects of the folk culture that a locality has produced and perpetuated over the centuries. They are *living* “museums” because they are not buildings that reify and bury culture with minimal interaction with the general community. Nonetheless, this kind of conservatory can be considered “ephemeral” because, as in the case of the *koab-hiu<sup>m</sup>* processions, it usually takes place every three or four years. In the meantime, knowledge and skills associated with them, and even the channels of transmission between masters and disciples, are inactive but kept as a communal treasure.

A new interest has grown lately among young people wrapped into a narrative created by the movement for the indigenization of culture in Taiwan: the rediscovery and acquisition of ritual objects as well as ritual music like drums and percussions. This trend is expressed through the creation of numerous groups and troupes linked by a very dense network. Their members constantly talk about traditions while reshaping those same traditions, giving them a new existence and new meanings to be analyzed and emphasized here.