

# Echoes of the Ochaya: Transmedia Storytelling as Cross-Cultural Design for Reframing Geisha Perceptions

**INDURANPITIYA I.K.V.M. A.<sup>1\*</sup> and SEMASINGHE S.M.I.D.B. B.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Integrated Design, Faculty of Architecture, University of Moratuwa, Moratuwa, Sri Lanka  
induranpitiyavidasha@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Creative Department, Omni-J Pty Ltd, Canberra, Australia  
dharana.ac@gmail.com

---

**Abstract** – *The culture of geishas holds a disputed place in world awareness, frequently misrepresented by Orientalist media and reductionist discourse that narrows it down to exotic display or spectacle. These misconceptions mask the philosophical, psychological, and aesthetic aspects of the geisha tradition, all an intangible heritage based in the art of discipline, of transformation, of subtlety in social art. In response to the cultural and academic gap, the present paper studies Echoes of the Ochaya, a transmedia cultural project that reinterprets the living tradition of Kyoto geishas by reimagining them in the discourses of contemporary storytelling frameworks. Applying ethnographic study, cultural analysis, and narrative methodology, the project examines the geisha psyche, representing discipline, flexibility, and impermanence and the client's psychology, defined by expectation, social acting, and the quest for evanescent beauty. The project puts beauty, instead of being an unchanging standard, as a transformative cultural system at the intersection of discipline, performance, and seeing. In that context, Echoes of the Ochaya shows how visual and emotional beauty are social contracts and cultural stories that define human relation. The research demonstrates that transmedia storytelling can reimagine geisha culture as active cultural philosophy instead of passive iconography, generating new systems of cross-cultural understanding. The study concludes that the study offers the potential for transmedia design as an intervention in cultural diplomacy and active engagement, allowing designers to re-interpret intangible heritage ethically in the contemporary world.*

**Keywords:** *Geisha Storytelling; Cultural Communication; Conversational Strategies; Narrative Practices Japanese Traditions; Transmedia*

---

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

## I. Introduction

Geisha culture has a contradictory place in the world's imagination. Whereas in Japan, geisha is apprehended as a sophisticated culture of art, discipline, and accommodation, abroad, geisha has very often been reduced to the cliché of exotic entertainers. This misapprehension, springing from Orientalist misrepresentations as well as from post-war popular culture, has concealed the cultural wealth of geisha performance. This persistent distortion highlights a critical research gap: the need to reframe geisha perception through contemporary frameworks that emphasize authenticity, depth, and cultural empathy.

Against the background of growing worldwide interconnectedness, transmedia storytelling presents itself as an instrument capable of bridging cultural gaps. Unlike linearity, transmedia processes enable the audience to confront culture through diverse platforms - a game, virtual installation, mobile app, or live storytelling encounter each bearing shards of a whole narrative. Herein lies the potential to change cultural orientation, to evoke empathy, as well as to invite people to participate. This research places the project *Echoes of the Ochaya*, a transmedia project based on the cultural traditions of Kyoto's geisha districts, in the form of a design-based study that examines how transmedia can redefine cultural meaning. The project is even more relevant in that it positions itself at the crossroads of Sri Lanka–Japan relations, illuminating how cultural heritage can be exchanged between contexts in which local audiences are minimally exposed to geisha traditions.

## II. Research Problem

In spite of how the world finds geisha culture fascinating, its representation often remains confined to surface-level aesthetics, entertainment, and exoticism. Most narratives surrounding the geisha world overlook the deeper psychological and cultural dimensions of beauty as transformation, discipline, and social negotiation—a core value embedded in geisha practice. However, existing portrayals tend to be distorted and fragmented, obscuring the authentic concept and lived experience underlying this tradition. This forms the central challenge of the study: How can design and transmedia storytelling frameworks ethically engage with the lived values of geisha culture, particularly its conception of beauty, to move beyond exoticism and foster genuine cross-cultural empathy?

### Research Questions

1. How might transmedia design correct or complicate existing stereotypes of geisha?
2. What is the potential of such a practice to foster cross-cultural empathy and cultural preservation?

## III. Literature Review

Academic literature on geisha culture emphasizes their strict patterns of preparation, ritual, and social finesse. Anthropological scholarship (Dalby, 1983; Downer, 2010) has documented *shikomi*, *maiko*, and *geiko* training, stressing the discipline in dance, music, and bearing upon which the

---

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

geisha profession is founded. Academic literature characterizes geisha as custodians of intangible cultural heritage rather than entertainers, highlighting artistry and hospitality as methods of cultural preservation. Investigation into customer psychology within the *ochaya* (tea house) setting (Occhi, 2008; Ashkenazi, 2015) reaffirms the value of exclusivity, nostalgia, and refined sociability. Patrons value performance as much as verbal finesse, subtle humor, and emotional atmosphere offered by geisha. These discoveries underscore the psychological and social frameworks that define geisha culture. From the perspective of cultural and media communication, geisha stereotypes have been promoted in Western literature and film, best exemplified in books such as *Memoirs of a Geisha*, whose critics (Creighton, 2009; Iida, 2015) argue compress geisha identities into sexy exotica. To dispel these misconceptions requires new storytelling frameworks that emphasize complexity, realism, and cultural empathy. In this context, transmedia storytelling theory (Jenkins, 2006) provides an important framework to rearticulate cultural meaning across multiple media platforms. Through the dissemination of storytelling content across different channels, transmedia enables participatory engagement and cross-cultural dialogue. Recent scholarship on transmedia heritage communication (Díaz-Kommonen, 2021; Nofal & Sabiescu, 2022) further supports its potential in preserving intangible heritage by fostering audience co-creation, sensory immersion, and emotional connection to tradition. Building on earlier applications in museum storytelling (Moloney, 2011; Freeman, 2018), these newer approaches demonstrate how transmedia can extend heritage interpretation, cultural teaching, and intercultural communication. This study thus borrows from ethnographic descriptions of geisha practice, studies in cultural psychology, and theories from transmedia and perception transformation in media. It presents Echoes of the Ochaya as a cross-cultural design experiment that bridges traditions between Sri Lanka and Japan through multimodal storytelling.

#### IV. Methodology

The study employed a design ethnographic approach combining qualitative research methods and iterative design practice.

##### Research Phase:

- In Kyoto, ethnographic observation focused on the *ochaya*, Gion, the tea ceremony, the *maiko* transformation, and other interactions with the culture, including shopping. A total of 162 participants were engaged in this phase, including 71 residents of Kyoto, 7 geisha-related experts, and 84 international visitors. Interviews on the subject of geisha culture and the prevailing stereotypes were carried out with these participants to capture both local and global perceptions. The dominant cultural narratives were constructed through the analysis of literature which included scholarly work, travel writing, and media representation.

---

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

**Figure 1**

Participant experience during the tea ceremony at Gion Maikoya, highlighting the performative and participatory dimensions of cultural storytelling.



**Figure 2**

Locals and tourists interacting in Kamishichiken and Gion streets, Kyoto - capturing movement patterns, engagement with cultural sites, and social dynamics in the area.



### Design & Transmedia Development Phase:

- The project had three transmedia entry points – a card game (*Mask of the Ochaya*), a mobile platform (*What is Beauty?*), and an immersive installation (*Beauty as Transformation*). Each medium was crafted to highlight certain facets of geisha culture—rituals and roles, along with the storytelling methods—while driving audience involvement. Iterative testing was refined through five rounds of playtesting with approximately 30 participants in both Kyoto and Sri Lanka, including tourists, students, and museum visitors. The process included ongoing refinement of mechanics, aesthetic direction, and narrative framing based on feedback.

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

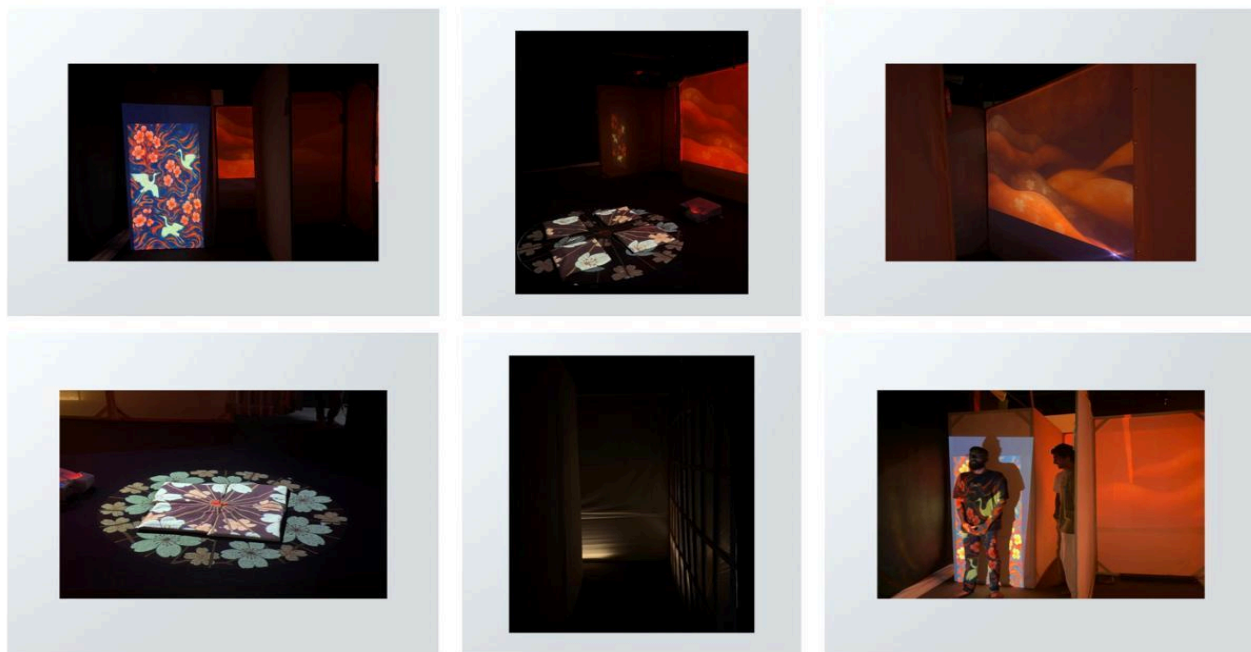
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Echoes of the Ochaya's transmedia framework are constructed around the premise of Henry Jenkins' (2006) framework for transmedia storytelling, identifying the ways that stories can evolve through differing platforms, with unique but related experiences. The framework shaped the design process for the project through the adoption of Jenkins' four central principles—spreadability, drillability, worldbuilding, and performance, to reinterpret the cultural phenomenon of the geisha as an active, interactive story. The system of transmedia, structured around the Gion Kagai Art Museum as the main narrative universe, stayed coherent but allowed each medium (card game, mobile application, and installation) to reveal differing aspects of the aesthetic and transformative philosophy of the geisha. Jenkins' notion for participatory cultures dictated the iterative process, through the adoption of user interaction, playtesting, and cross-cultural feedback, to support refinement. The end result ensured that transmedia design operated not merely as extended storytelling, but as an ethical framework for cultural translation, promoting empathy, authenticity, and dialogue between Japanese and Sri Lankan audiences.

**Figure 3**

*Immersive installation setup at the University Studio - showcasing the spatial arrangement and interactive elements designed for audience engagement.*



**Analysis Phase:**

- Data from field notes, interview transcripts, and playtesting feedback were analyzed thematically. The analysis sought to identify recurring cultural perceptions, shifts in understanding, and the role of transmedia in shaping audience engagement.

The analysis sought to identify recurring cultural perceptions, shifts in understanding, and the role of transmedia in shaping audience engagement.

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

## V. Data Analysis and Results

**Table 1**

Key Data Archive Table for *Echoes of the Ochaya*

Category	Source / Archive	Method / Format	Purpose / Application	Key Data / Numbers
Ethnographic & Observational Data	Gion districts, ochaya, tea ceremonies, street interactions	Field observation, participant shadowing, sensory documentation (video, audio, notes)	Understand real-world Geisha practices, tourist behavior, cultural atmosphere	162 participants observed: 71 Kyoto residents, 7 Geisha experts, 84 international visitors
Interviews & Personal Narratives	Local Geisha, Maiko, museum staff, tourists	Semi-structured interviews, storytelling sessions	Capture insider perspectives, personal anecdotes, and external perceptions	~162 interviews/testimonials conducted (overlapping with observations)
Cultural & Historical Research	Gion Kagai Art Museum archives, academic articles, books	Literature review, archival research	Understand Geisha roles, hierarchy, rituals, and traditional storytelling methods	Multiple books/articles: e.g., <i>Geisha</i> (Mineko Iwasaki), <i>The World of the Geisha</i> , scholarly papers (~10-15 key references)
Prototype & User Testing	Card game ("Mask of the Ochaya"), museum visitors	Playtesting, feedback cycles, iterative refinement	Test narrative delivery, mechanics, visual style, and engagement in a transmedia format	Playtests with 20-30 participants per iteration, 3-4 design iterations completed
Multimedia & Sensory Assets	Photographs, videos, ambient sound recordings	Visual documentation, audio capture	Support immersive experience, design cards and spatial installations, preserve sensory context	100+ photos, 20+ video clips, 10+ audio recordings
Transmedia Framework & Theory	Henry Jenkins' <i>Convergence Culture</i> , transmedia articles	Literature review, applied framework	Ensure multi-platform storytelling consistency; define narrative hub and entry points (card game, app, immersive installation)	Applied across 3 main platforms: card game, mobile app, immersive installation
Literature Archives	Geisha-focused books (Mineko Iwasaki, etc.), cultural	Academic reading, visual analysis, theoretical study	Provide historical context, narrative techniques, design	10-15 core books/articles, multiple visual references for ukiyo-e style

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

	studies, design theory, Ukiyo-e resources		inspiration, and theoretical grounding for project	
--	---	--	--	--

All the feedback gathered through participant observations, interviews, and playtesting was examined by employing thematic coding. Raw data (notes, transcripts, and statements) were first read and divided into meaningful segments. Codes were then attributed based on regular patterns, for example, visitor engagement, understanding of the role of Geishas, enjoyment in the narrative, and aesthetic appeal. These codes were then iteratively grouped into higher-level themes in order to identify general trends, for example, "clearness in the cultural narrative," "interactive engagement," or "emotional resonance." Through such an interpretive step, a systematic understanding was achieved of the user experiences, guiding adjustments to the card game, immersive installation, and app in the next iterations of the design.

The research yielded insights into three key dimensions: geisha psyche, customer psychology, and cultural rituals.

### **1. Geisha Psyche:**

The dedication, creativity, and hard work involved in the practice of being a geisha were explained through interviews and observations. The narratives around training were centered around sacrifice, hard work, and the importance of culture. Geisha expressed and described their work in a manner that transcends to the performance of art; instead, they saw it as a lifelong commitment to presenting beauty and legacy.

### **2. Customer Psychology:**

Clients partaking in the ochaya rituals described their reasons as nostalgia and the sense of being part of something special. For the Japanese patrons, their engagement with the geisha was a connection to their culture, and the other guests were searching for a brand of 'real Japan.' The need for elite company was more than for mere entertainment, which was the essence of the client's experience.

### **3. Cultural Rituals:**

Some guests were familiar with tea and other rituals, which come from the culture of the Sri Lankans. The showering of guests with shamisen and controlled speeches, and the rituals of tea, underline artistry and the Sri Lankan tradition of hosting. For those guests who were crossing the borders of Japan, those rituals provided the framework for a wider appreciation of the virtues of grace and respect.

### **Through transmedia design, audiences engaged in cultural perception shifts:**

- Initial stereotypes (e.g., geisha as entertainers or courtesans) were replaced with recognition of their roles as cultural practitioners.

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

- Audiences reported greater appreciation for the subtlety of humor, group participation, and emotional storytelling embedded in geisha practice.

The results indicate that transmedia storytelling can reshape cultural understanding by distributing intricate narratives over various modes. Collaboratively, through the card game, audiences were prompted to investigate the roles of geisha, the articulated immersive installation accentuated beauty as a metaphor for transformation, and the mobile platform engaged in a global discourse regarding cultural perspectives. This allowed the audiences to reconstruct geisha culture as an ecosystem of artistry, hospitality, and the preservation of heritage. This shift in perception by both the Sri Lankan participants and the international audience underscores the capacity of transmedia as cross-cultural design, moving away from rigid representations to participatory engagement. On a wider scale, the project impacts

Sri Lanka–Japan cultural relations by providing a space for reciprocal dialogue. Sri Lankan audience members—many of whom were previously unfamiliar with geisha traditions—were positioned to engage with complex narratives and consider alignments in their own cultural practices. This exemplifies the capacity of design research to serve as cultural diplomacy, building understanding and empathy across different heritages.

This study has examined the potential of transmedia storytelling to reframe global perceptions of geisha culture. Through ethnographic research and iterative design, Echoes of the Ochaya demonstrated how transmedia entry points can dismantle stereotypes and foreground the artistry, discipline, and cultural significance of geisha traditions.

**The project highlights three key contributions:**

1. Demonstrating the capacity of transmedia storytelling to act as a bridge between cultural heritages.
2. Providing insights into geisha and customer psychology, with implications for heritage preservation.
3. Opening pathways for further cross-cultural design research that positions transmedia as a form of cultural diplomacy.

From the study, several actionable design principles emerged that can guide future transmedia projects in cultural contexts. These include: centering cultural authenticity by grounding narratives in ethnographic research; layered storytelling, where each medium highlights different facets of a tradition while maintaining narrative coherence; participatory engagement, enabling audiences to explore and embody cultural values; iterative testing, using feedback to refine narrative and interaction; and cross-cultural sensitivity, ensuring that content resonates with diverse audiences without exoticizing or oversimplifying. Together, these elements form a practical toolkit for designers seeking to ethically translate intangible heritage into immersive, transmedia experiences.

---

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka

Future research may continue this work by applying similar methodologies to other cultural traditions that are at risk of misrepresentation. It can also explore the scalability of transmedia as a framework for fostering cross-cultural empathy. Beyond academic inquiry, the framework established in *Echoes of the Ochaya* can guide designers in developing toolkits for translating intangible cultural values, such as beauty, subtlety, and transformation into participatory experiences. Future designers can use this approach to engage ethically with cultural narratives, creating design systems that preserve authenticity while allowing global audiences to experience, reinterpret, and interact with cultural traditions in new contexts.

### **Acknowledgment**

*I am profoundly thankful to everyone who has assisted and directed me during the journey of my research and the creation of this dissertation. I am deeply grateful to Ankyuu Mahiro, who significantly contributed to helping me collect information from Japan and establishing connections with people pertinent to my research. I extend my heartfelt thanks to the staff and fellow students of the Department of Integrated Design, Faculty of Architecture, for their invaluable insights and support during this journey. Their teamwork and constructive criticism have significantly enhanced my work in numerous ways. I extend heartfelt gratitude to my parents for their constant love, support, and motivation. Their faith in my abilities provided me with the courage to keep going, even in the toughest moments of this journey. In conclusion, I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who took part in this research and shared their valuable experiences and perspectives. This study would not have been feasible without their openness to contribute. This dissertation represents a collective achievement, and I am deeply grateful to all those who played a role in bringing it to fruition*

### **References**

- Dalby, L. C. (1983). [Geiogle.com/books?id=leBpZePaZa0C&pg=PA318&dq=shirokiya#v=onepage&q=shirokiya&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=leBpZePaZa0C&pg=PA318&dq=shirokiya#v=onepage&q=shirokiya&f=false)
- Friday Nyimbili, L. N. (2024, February 16). Types of purposive sampling techniques with their examples and application in qualitative research studies. *British Journal of Multidisciplinary and Advanced Studies*.
- Iwasaki, M. (2012). *Geisha of Gion: The true story of Japan's foremost geisha*.  
<https://books.google.com/books?id=hAv6jJ-eumlC&pg=PT287>
- Jin, J. (2011). *The discourse of geisha: In the case of Memoirs of a Geisha*.  
<https://lup.lub.lu.se/student-papers/search/publication/2165854>
- Lebra, T. S. (1987). The cultural significance of silence in Japanese communication. *Multilingua: Journal of Cross-Cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 6(4), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.1515/mult.1987.6.4.115>
- Maynard, S. K. (1987). Interactional functions of a nonverbal sign: Head movement in Japanese dyadic casual conversation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11(5), 589–606. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(87\)90181-0](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(87)90181-0)
- Mineko, I., & Brown, R. (2003). *Geisha: A life*. Washington Square Press.
- Simpson, H. E. (2013). Polly E. Szatrowski, *Storytelling across Japanese conversational genre*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010. *Language in Society*, 42(3), 349–350. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404513000341>
- Szatrowski, P. E. (2010). Introduction: Storytelling across Japanese conversational genre.  
<https://experts.umn.edu/en/publications/introduction-storytelling-across-japanese-conversational-genre>
- Watanabe, S. (2012). Book review of *Storytelling across Japanese conversational genre*. *The Modern Language Journal*, 96(2). [https://works.bepress.com/suwako\\_watanabe/11](https://works.bepress.com/suwako_watanabe/11)

---

\*Contact: Phone +94-705567055

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31705/IDR.2025.14>

Copyright © 2025, Integrated Design Research, Department of Integrated Design, University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka