Bound by Mount Beidawu: How a Wedding Tradition Revitalized Communities and Culture

Maolin National Scenic Area, Taiwan
Maolin National Scenic Area Headquarters
Local Destinations (including villages, cities, municipalities, islands)
People & Community

Summary of Good Practice Story
In Taiwan's Maolin region at the foot of Mount Beidawu, home to the Paiwan and Rukai peoples, traditional multi-day wedding ceremonies were fading as modernization and changing religious practice disconnected younger generations from cultural roots. The Maolin National Scenic Area Administration's 2005 Austronesian Wedding Festival, initially staged at a cultural park, drew visitors but risked becoming performance rather than living tradition — until tribal elders asked "is this really our wedding?" prompting the 2007 return of the ceremonies to the villages themselves, with a Tribal Family Fostering Program letting visiting couples live with host families and a rotational hosting system across Sandimen, Wutai and Majia townships. Even after Typhoon Morakot devastated the region in 2009, communities rebuilt around the principle that cultural preservation must take priority over visitor growth, later adding Taiwan's first on-site indigenous wedding marriage registration in 2014. The festival drew over 40,000 visitors and generated roughly NT$50.4 million in economic value in 2014 alone, with 97.9% of visitors recommending it, and helped revive traditional songs, dances and vava millet-wine brewing. The core lesson: culture survives not through staged events but through the people who choose to practice and pass it on — tourism can support preservation only when local communities remain the true owners and storytellers of their own heritage.

Setting the Scene: Destination & context
At the foot of Mount Beidawu, within the Maolin National Scenic Area of southern Taiwan, lies the ancestral homeland of the Paiwan and Rukai peoples. Rich in Indigenous traditions and natural beauty, this region was profoundly affected by Typhoon Morakot in 2009. In response, local communities chose a path of renewal that combined ecological recovery, cultural revitalization, and community-led tourism.

What makes this destination unique is the way culture is lived rather than displayed. Concerned that traditional wedding ceremonies were becoming detached from community life, tribal elders and residents worked with the Maolin National Scenic Area Administration to return cultural ownership to the villages. Through a community adoption program, visiting couples are welcomed into tribal families, participate in ancestral wedding traditions, and experience daily village life. Beneath the sacred swing of Mount Beidawu, culture is not a performance for visitors—it is a living tradition passed from one generation to the next.

The Turning Point: Why change was needed
Behind the celebration of Indigenous weddings lay a growing concern: the gradual loss of cultural traditions. As modernization and changing religious practices reshaped community life, traditional Paiwan and Rukai wedding ceremonies—once sacred events lasting several days—became increasingly rare. Younger generations were growing disconnected from their cultural roots.

In an effort to promote these traditions, the weddings were initially staged in the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Cultural Park. While the events attracted visitors, they also revealed an uncomfortable truth. Removed from their tribal setting, the ceremonies risked becoming performances rather than living traditions. Community participation remained low, raising a difficult question: were we preserving culture, or merely showcasing it?

The turning point came in 2007, when we realized that culture could not survive without its people and place. The weddings were returned to the villages, tribal elders, and Indigenous community members regained the leading role in interpreting their traditions.

Just as this transformation began, Typhoon Morakot struck in 2009, devastating communities and collapsing the local tourism economy. Faced with cultural loss and economic hardship, we were challenged to find a new path—one that could support recovery while protecting the authenticity and dignity of Indigenous culture.

The Vision: What you set out to do
Our vision began with a simple belief: that one of the most beautiful milestones in Indigenous life could become a living bridge between cultural heritage and community pride.

In 2005, the Maolin National Scenic Area Administration took the first step. As traditional Paiwan and Rukai wedding ceremonies gradually declined due to changing lifestyles and religious influences, we saw an urgent need to keep these traditions alive. By connecting Indigenous weddings with community-based tourism, we hoped to create a platform where culture could be experienced, practiced, and passed on, while introducing the unique heritage of southern Taiwan to the world.

Our goal was not only cultural preservation, but also community revitalization. Through annual wedding ceremonies, tribal elders could pass on songs, rituals, and traditional knowledge to younger generations, while local homestays, cuisine, crafts, and tourism businesses could benefit from sustainable economic opportunities. Most importantly, we hoped future generations would see a future in their homeland—one where cultural identity, community wellbeing, and local prosperity could thrive together.

The Journey: How change happened

The Austronesian Wedding Festival began in 2005 as an initiative by the Maolin National Scenic Area Administration to promote Indigenous culture and local tourism. Initially held at the Taiwan Indigenous Peoples Cultural Park, the event attracted visitors and newlyweds from across Taiwan. Yet after two years, tribal elders and community members raised a critical question:

“Is this really our wedding?”

For the communities, weddings were not performances but sacred cultural traditions rooted in village life. Their voices sparked a turning point. In 2007, the festival was returned to the villages, and local communities took the lead in planning and hosting the ceremonies. A Tribal Family Fostering Program was also introduced, allowing visiting couples to live with host families, learn traditional customs, and experience Indigenous culture firsthand.

Just as this transformation began, Typhoon Morakot struck southern Taiwan in 2009, devastating villages and halting the festival. During the recovery period, tribal elders, local leaders, scholars, and government agencies came together to rethink the event’s future. A shared consensus emerged: cultural preservation must take priority over tourism growth.

This led to the creation of a Rotational Hosting System, allowing Sandimen, Wutai, and Majia Townships to host the festival in turn. Academic research was also commissioned to document traditional wedding rituals, attire, and cultural practices, ensuring authenticity remained at the heart of future celebrations.

As the festival grew, community development associations became key partners. Together, they introduced initiatives such as the Tourism Reward Passport, shuttle services, and local tourism packages that connected visitors with community businesses. In 2014, a pioneering partnership

with the Neipu Household Registration Office enabled couples to legally register their marriages during the ceremony itself.

Over time, the festival evolved beyond a wedding celebration. Traditional practices such as vava (Traditional Millet Wine with Red Quinoa), ancient songs, and naming ceremonies were revived, while generations of tribal members and visitors formed lasting relationships. What began as a tourism event became a community-led platform for cultural revitalization, strengthening both local identity and sustainable development.

The Breakthrough: What you achieved
A decade after the journey began, the most meaningful achievements beneath Mount Beidawu are not found in statistics alone, but in the renewed pride, identity, and vitality of Indigenous communities.

The Austronesian Wedding Festival successfully transformed cultural heritage into a driver of local development. In 2014 alone, the festival attracted over 40,000 visitors and generated approximately NT$50.4 million in economic value. Homestays, local markets, cultural tours, and community businesses all benefited from the growing demand for authentic cultural experiences.

More importantly, the festival strengthened cultural identity. Visitors no longer came merely to observe, but to participate and learn. Survey results showed that 97.9% of visitors would recommend the experience to others. Many described the ceremonies as deeply moving, while community members reported increased pride, stronger local identity, and greater willingness to pass traditions on to younger generations. Traditional songs, wedding rituals, warrior dances, and vava (Traditional Millet Wine with Red Quinoa) making practices were revitalized through active community participation.

The destination itself was transformed. What began as a government-led cultural showcase evolved into a community-led “living museum,” where Indigenous families welcome visitors into their homes and traditions remain part of everyday life.

Today, the Northern Pingtung Indigenous Townships are no longer simply places to visit. They are living cultural landscapes where heritage, community wellbeing, and sustainable tourism continue to thrive together.

Reflections: What you learned and what others can learn
Looking back on a decade of transformation, our greatest lesson was that culture is sustained not by events, but by the people who choose to practice, value, and pass it on.

In the early years, the festival was held in an Indigenous cultural park. While it attracted visitors, community participation remained limited and local benefits were minimal. This taught us an important lesson: when culture is removed from its living context, even a successful event may fail to create meaningful impact. Returning the weddings to the villages in 2007 became a defining turning point.

Another lesson emerged as visitor numbers grew. Community members reminded us that tourism should not come at the expense of cultural integrity or daily life. This led us to place cultural preservation ahead of visitor growth and to adopt a more community-led approach.

Our greatest surprise was the creativity that emerged when decision-making power returned to tribal communities. Many of the festival's most meaningful initiatives—from host-family programs to cultural activities and traditional knowledge revival—were created by the communities themselves.

Our advice to other destinations is simple: let communities lead. Tourism can support cultural preservation, but only when local people remain the owners, storytellers, and guardians of their own heritage.

The Ripple Effect: Lasting impact

Perhaps the most remarkable legacy of the Austronesian Wedding Festival is not the wedding itself, but the relationships it continues to nurture. Through the Tribal Family Fostering Program, many couples remain connected with their host families long after the ceremony. In 2015, former participants returned to Rinari Village with their children—known as the "Austronesian Babies"—to receive Indigenous names through the traditional Pukizing ceremony, symbolizing their place within the community.

The festival has also inspired broader change. In 2014, it introduced Taiwan's first on-site marriage registration service at an Indigenous wedding, demonstrating how traditional culture and modern public services can work together.

Beyond tourism, the festival has helped revive traditional practices such as djulis cultivation and vava millet wine brewing, strengthening cultural identity and community participation.

Today, the Northern Pingtung Indigenous Townships continue to evolve as a living museum where culture is practiced, shared, and passed on, ensuring Indigenous traditions thrive for future generations.

Awards or Certifications

1. Gold Award, Asia Destination – Culture & Arts, 2024 Magellan Awards (USA)
2. Bronze Award, Travel/Tourism/Nature Film, 2024 SIA Summit Creative Award (USA)

Web Articles

1. Taipei Times (2016)

An English-language media report featuring the Austronesian Wedding Festival highlighted the event as a unique cultural experience that had attracted growing international attention. The coverage demonstrated the festival's value as a platform for cross-cultural exchange and its significance beyond that of a local celebration.

https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2016/03/03/2003640716

2. TITV News (2024)

According to Indigenous media outlet TITV News, the Austronesian Wedding Festival had reached its 17th edition by 2024. The report noted that many participating couples joined specifically to learn about Paiwan culture and traditional wedding customs.

The festival also featured a special "Homecoming" program for former participants, highlighting the enduring relationships between newlyweds and their host families. The report described how many couples continue to maintain close ties with the communities long after their wedding ceremony, reflecting the festival's lasting social and cultural impact.

https://news.ipcf.org.tw/119431

3. Austronesian Wedding Festival Video Wins Two International Awards, Captivating Global Audiences

https://tw.news.yahoo.com/%E5%8D%97%E5%B3%B6%E6%97%8F%E7%BE%A4%E5%A9%9A%E7%A6%AE-%E5%BD%B1%E7%89%87%E5%A5%AA%E5%9C%8B%E9%9A%9B%E9%9B%99%E7%8D%8E-%E9%A9%9A%E8%89%B7%E5%85%A8%E7%90%83-024029178.html

Other Relevant Links

1. Austronesian Wedding Festival Official Facebook Page

The official Facebook page of the Austronesian Wedding Festival provides updates on festival activities, participant stories, cultural highlights, and community engagement. It serves as an important platform for sharing the festival's ongoing efforts in cultural preservation and Indigenous tourism development.

https://www.facebook.com/maolinAustronesianWedding/

2. 2024 Austronesian Wedding Festival Official Website

The official English-language website introduces the 2024 Austronesian Wedding Festival, including its cultural significance, program highlights, wedding ceremonies, and related activities. The website showcases the festival's international outreach and commitment to promoting Indigenous cultural heritage through sustainable tourism.

https://theme.maolin-nsa.gov.tw/wedding2024/en/page-1.html

3. 2023 Austronesian Wedding Festival Promotional Video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pD4lTJer6Bc

4. 2025 Austronesian Wedding Festival Promotional Video
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/10gAAf7wXSDc2GEM6smGqFUDsP5lt-eh-?usp=sharing

5. Building a Sustainable Indigenous Tourism Network
To extend the impact of the Austronesian Wedding Festival, the Maolin National Scenic Area Administration launched long-term tribal tourism development and capacity-building programs. These initiatives support Indigenous communities in developing tourism experiences rooted in local culture, food traditions, ecology, and traditional knowledge, creating new opportunities for community-led development and sustainable livelihoods.
https://www.sdgs-asia.com.tw/%E8%8C%82%E7%AE%A1%E8%99%95%E8%BC%94%E5%B0%8E%E9%83%A8%E8%90%BD%E7%94%A2%E6%A5%AD%E6%9C%89%E6%88%90%EF%BC%8C%E7%A5%9E%E5%B1%B1%E9%83%A8%E8%90%BD%E5%BB%9A%E8%97%9D%E5%AD%B8%E6%A0%A1%E7%8D%B22023/?utm

Quotes or Testimonials
Perhaps the most valuable outcome of the Austronesian Wedding Festival is not the number of participants it has attracted, but the way it has allowed people from different backgrounds to experience the power of culture.

For many visitors, the festival became far more than a tourism event. After witnessing elders singing ancient songs and participating in traditional wedding rituals, one visitor in her sixties shared:
“I loved it. It was deeply moving. I hope Indigenous culture continues to be passed on, and that one day our children could be married in this way.”

Another visitor reflected:
“Seeing it with my own eyes felt both solemn and educational.”

The experience also resonated with Indigenous community members. Two tribal participants admitted that, despite growing up in Indigenous families, they had rarely experienced a complete traditional wedding ceremony before.
“It helped us better understand our traditional culture. I had never attended a traditional wedding before. This is a wonderful event.”

For the newlyweds themselves, the wedding became a journey of cultural discovery. An Indigenous groom simply said:
“It helps people understand our culture.”

A non-Indigenous bride shared:
“I never knew about these wedding customs before. Experiencing them firsthand gave me a completely different understanding.”

These voices reveal the festival’s true impact. More than a celebration, it has become a platform where culture is understood, felt, and passed on—strengthening respect for Indigenous heritage while fostering pride, connection, and cultural continuity across generations.