

Catastrophic Disaster Causing Separation of Culture and Loss of History: Museum Activities by University Students for “Build Back Better” of Local Culture

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In the Great East Japan Earthquake, the tsunami triggered by the earthquake caused serious damage in the coastal area of Tohoku. The disaster caused damage not only to humans, but also to many collections of historical, cultural and natural value stored by museums. Under the Cultural Assets Rescue Program, restoration efforts were made at more than 50 sites in Miyagi Prefecture alone. As a curator of the Tohoku Gakuin University Museum, I have been engaged in rescue, treatment, and classification of archaeological, ethnographical and geographical artifacts, old documents, and historic research data together with our university students.

Today, residents of the tsunami-hit region are clearly expressing their longing for the image of their past daily lives. This is because these residents cannot feel the sense of time of the past, present and future about their hometown in the process of restoration through which their community landscape is changing drastically. In addition, construction works to raise the ground level are underway to establish a safer community, but there is a delay in construction. In such situation, the residents are beginning to lose even their memories of the past scenery of their hometown.

For people who have decided to continue living in the tsunami-hit area, the separation of their culture and the loss of their history as a result of the catastrophic disaster are serious problems. It is of course the issue of local residents, and it is also the issue of ethnographer. People are trying to find meaning in the past, find connection to the present, and draw a near-future vision of their community. I believe that it is important for cultural property rescue and museum activities efforts to contribute to ensuring that many more local cultural resources are utilized than had been before the disaster, and to serve as opportunities to identify and discover new cultural resources. I call this approach “Build Back Better” of culture.

Keywords

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Build Back Better

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I Introduction

The role of contemporary museums have changed from representing the history and culture in a traditional academic context to creating public space for social practice by diverse actors. Conceptualizing the exhibition of culture is closely connected by our understanding of how our society sees itself. It is not our job to represent them. We should rather give them the space to represent themselves. Today, the museum is no longer a place to present curatorial research results, because more active involvement in social practice by curators, is one of the social demands of museums.

In the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011), the tsunami was triggered by the earthquake that caused serious damage in the coastal area of Tohoku Region. At that time, I engaged myself in the rescue activities of cultural property. Talking about these activities in brief, such as protecting the collections of history, culture and natural sciences documents owned by museums. Many cultural assets and valuable museum collections were damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake. The Committee for Cultural Assets Rescue program had worked to rescue a wide variety of cultural properties owned by the disaster affected museums. More than 50 museums and repositories were damaged at a time. Immediately, after the earthquake took place, Tohoku Gakuin University came forward to involve themselves in the project to rescue all the collections of disaster affected museums. Then the University had accepted an archaeological and folklore collection of the Ayukawa Repository in Ishinomaki City, located on the Oshika Peninsula. From the repository center, eight truckloads of artifacts were carried into the University campus.

A large amount of severely damaged artifacts had cleaned by the university students for two years. Since tsunami-affected cultural assets had been exposed to the weather for three months until they were rescued by the University, These properties

were deteriorated and damaged so severely that many of them no longer retained in their complete form. To improve this condition, I conducted desalinization and pest control using carbon dioxide, under the guidance of the National Museum of Ethnology. The aim of the primary cleaning, is to remove the dirt. I took the lead role in providing information on the condition of each material and to instructing others how to clean those artifacts. There were forty students, engaged in the cleaning process at a time.

During the period of disaster reconstruction, I carefully thought what meaning could be found in these objects that would be valuable for communicating local history and culture. Besides that, I also thought about the things that disaster survivors most want to cherish, and how curators can make these things, while encouraging an interactive dialogue.

I thought that rescued artifacts should not be returned directly to storage room, but rather should be shown and displayed to local residents, in order to understand and discuss social practices through a dialogue involving both citizens and the researchers. Along with university students, I designed exhibition for people to make a conversation on these displayed artifacts and express their true feelings about “what they want to tell” about these rescued artifacts. Then, by using the qualitative data gathered from the interviews, we held discussion with the local residents and finally we found the theme of our next exhibition. It was an attempt to seek “What do they want to talk about next”. We conducted more interviews. The exhibition held in the autumn of 2020, it is the 24th exhibition since the disaster took place and our rescue activities are still ongoing.

I think that sharing one’s disaster experience in words was not an easy task for many survivors. I was invited to visit Houston and New Orleans as the hurricane Katrina affected areas to witness various survivor’s practices. I think people in the United States, spoken expression seems to be more

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powerful healing tool rather than material expression. However, comparatively in Japan, positive power of substance and sound seems to be reversed more. I think we can potentially understand the local culture of disaster affected areas from material cultural resources in a more effective way.

II Museum Activities and Folklore Research for the Reconstruction of the Affected Areas

Ayukawa, in Ishinomaki City, is located near the tip of the Oshika Peninsula on the Sanriku Coast of the Tohoku Region in Japan. It is to be noted that Ayukawa was the nearest land area to the epicenter of the Great East Japan Earthquake (2011). This place was suffered a devastating damage from the tsunami. Today, ten years since the Earthquake, residents of

the tsunami-hit region are clearly expressing their longing for the image of their past daily lives. This is because these local residents cannot feel the sense of time of the past, present and future about their hometown in the process of recovery through, which their community landscape is changing drastically.

For people who have decided to continue living in the tsunami-hit area, as a result of catastrophic disaster, the separation of their culture and the loss of their history are the serious problems for these people. People are trying to find meaning in the past, find connection to the present, and draw a near-future vision of their community.

We exhibited old pictures, old documents, maps and art works related to local culture and *Mingu*. In Japanese folklore study, the tools of folkways are called *Mingu*, which means materials of common people's day to day life. At an exhibition, our students conducted interview to the visitors about their life/ For an example, food, clothing, shelter situations, fishing and farming skills, social relationships, families,



Figure 1. Ayukawa Port (2019)

kinship and the local community, local folkloristics beliefs, annual events as well as many other issues. The accumulation of narrative records from local residents, helped a lot to reveal how they used to live in their local community before the tsunami disaster affected their lives.

Ishinomaki/Sanriku-Kinkasan is considered to be one of the world's three best fishing fields. It is to be noted that this area attracts many whales. Since it is being used to hunt a wide variety of whales, a large number of whaling companies were allowed to establish their offices about 100 years ago. In addition, local land owners also jointly started to invest in coastal whaling and began to hunt minke whales. On the Oshika Peninsula, a rich fishery culture was formed, whaling, deep-sea fishing (ocean fishing), large-scale set-net fishing, aquaculture of oysters, wakame seaweeds, ascidians etc.

According to the collective memory of the local residents, the "golden age" of Ayukawa was from around 1955 to 1960, which was the heyday of commercial whaling and deep-sea fishing. Located at the tip of the peninsula, the town attracted many young aspiring people to find jobs there. They dreamed that they could gain an opportunity to make big profit, but in reality it was not so easy. In those days, people were competing with each other to make a fortune through the network, they had established while working.

The end of the "golden age" was brought by the adoption of a commercial whaling moratorium by the International Whaling Commission (IWC) from the perspective of international resource management (1982) and the establishment of a 200-mile fishing zone (1977). As a result, the main fishery industry of the Oshika Peninsula was replaced by the tourism and aquaculture. Later on, the industrial structure of the Oshika Peninsula was characterized by settlement and stability. Like many other areas of Japan, the peninsula began to face such social problems. Such as population outflow, a declining birthrate and an aging population, the sluggish performance of primary industries. Their culture was enriched through

mobility. But, in the process of restoration from the Great East Japan Earthquake, life spaces are being separated from the seashore, due to the relocation of their settlements to higher ground areas and aquaculture is being recommended.

III Exhibition with Local Residents to Rediscover Local History and Culture

I have introduced some of the exhibitions organized by University students and local residents. Our partner includes temporary shopping street, fishing and whaling companies, community councils for revitalizing the town, women's associations, folk performing art groups, local hotel owners, schools, welfare facilities for elderly and a working environment for people with disabilities.

3-1 Topic: People Connected through Labor

One of the world's top three fishing fields, the Ishinomaki/Sanriku-Kinkasan is rich in abundant resources. At this forefront location of modern fishery, residents were brimming with enterprise and eager to accept advanced techniques. Many people came to the peninsula to make a good fortune. Priority was placed on the co-worker relationships even over their family relationships.

Fishery managers and ship owners accept young men who came to work from outside through a fiction parenthood. It's called EBISU-OYA. When accepting family migrants, wealthy families sometime become relatives. It's called WARAJI-NUGI. People called the relationship SHINSEKI (relatives) even though there was no blood connection.

Today, fishery trainees invited from Indonesia are in charge of fishery labor. Fishery companies treat Indonesian people, like their children and now trainees became an important actor for local shrine festivals.



Figure 2. Students interviewing local residents

3-2 Topic: Kinkasan, Holy Place for Fishermen

As an isolated island located in the Oshika Peninsula, Kinkasan is a sacred place of faith for the fishermen. In the Edo Period, this island was a training place for followers of mountaineering asceticism. Therefore, women were not allowed to this place. In modern times, tourism has developed, with the number of visitors to the shrine. Many people come to visit this shrine, to pray for long-life and the happiness of their family members.



Figure 3. Kinkasan Island

3-3 Topic: Whaling Companies and Sports Culture

During the period of the Japanese restoration from the Second World War, Japanese people depended on whales for their intake of animal protein. This was the background to the prosperity of Ayukawa, which attracted many young aspiring people to find jobs through their connections with whaling companies from across the country. In those days, baseball players were hero. Baseball teams were organized

according to whaling companies and public offices. The baseball competition was so common at that time. We exhibited about the connection between the whaling industry and baseball culture.



Figure 4. Booklet on sports and whaling

3-4 Topic: Entertainment Provided by Companies

In the middle of the 20th century, the heyday of commercial whaling, large-scale set-net fishing, and deep-sea fishing, fishing companies served as a provider of entertainment for the local community. These companies served as an important sponsor for the Oshika Whale Festival, an annual grand festival featuring the passage of a portable shrine to celebrate the local deity of the Kumano Shrine. Not only this, many other local festivals and events were often sponsored by these companies. Many shops lined the streets, including general stores, hardware shops, bicycle shops, movie theaters, cabarets, and many restaurants serving Japanese dishes, Western dishes and Chinese dishes.



Figure 5. Oshika Whale Festival in 2019

3-5 Material Culture and Narrative

University students interviewed local residents about their memories and stories of their daily lives, which is reminded through the exhibited materials. Some stories were selected for developing illustration works. The exhibits made visitors feel at home, encouraging them to share their own narratives. Resonating with such narratives, other visitors remembered their own daily lives and discussed with each other.



Figure 6. Exhibition of illustrations based on interviews

3-6 Souvenirs for whalers

In Ayukawa, many men have experience for working in the Antarctic Ocean. They brought back some interesting souvenirs from the Antarctic Ocean and many people cherish them as family treasures. Sush souvenirs are Antarctic ice, creatures, exotic shells, animal specimens and whale bone art etc. In addition, whalers worships and dedications for hunting big size whales at Ayukawa/s several shrines and temples are also valuable materials that help us to understand and represent the life of past communities.



Figure 7. Flyer for an exhibition of souvenirs brought back by whalers

3-7 Workshop with elementary school students

Activities with elementary school students are also one of our important projects. such as elementary school students and University students engage themselves in conducting several interviews with the elderly people and to conduct workshops and exhibitions. For those children were raised in the affected areas, this is a valuable opportunity for them, to relink their past memories of the region with the current life. We created a Ming battle card game. We also wrote a drama based on a folktale of a fishing village and performed this drama.



Figure 8. Workshop with elementary school students

IV Conclusion

I believe that it is important for cultural property rescue and museum activities, to contribute and to ensure that many more local cultural resources are utilized than had been before the disaster and to provide several opportunities to identify and discover new cultural resources. I call this approach “Build Back Better” in the field of culture. To this end, local museums can play an important role by demonstrating their ideas and techniques developed after the end of the war in the fields of collection, classification, preservation, and use of historical materials, which serve as local cultural resources.

History and culture are not fields that should be addressed only by specialized researchers. To draw a future vision of local culture and history, collaboration is essential among the public sector involved in cultural administration, social education, NPOs, NGOs, companies, citizens, and others.

Even after the completion of the restoration work, we should continue to collaborate with a wide variety of local people. We will organize an exhibition on a theme based on local residents interest and we will continue to discuss a theme for the next exhibition at the venue. The main purpose of these exhibitions is to create an active environment, where we can easily identify what people would like to cherish, discuss and share their viewpoints through something specific topic.

Human-size and community-size issue are also the

important, to think about survivor’s wisdom for living with natural disaster. Recovery and reconstruction policy from natural disaster and development policy of affected areas are going side by side. We have to pay attention both human-size and community-size issue as well as economic and politic-size issues.

The purpose of my research is to bridge people’s separated history by using ethnographical and museum skills. I believe that it is important for cultural property rescue and museum activities efforts to contribute and to ensure that many more local cultural resources are utilized than had been before the disaster and to provide an opportunity to identify and discover new cultural resources. I call this approach “Build Back Better” in the field of culture.

Finally, I would like to conclude that local museums can play an important role. We will organize an exhibition with a theme selected based on local residents’ interest and discuss a theme for the next exhibition at the venue.

In the year of 2019, October a new town was opened in Ayukawa, named Whale Town Oshika. This town includes a new permanent shopping street, a memorial museum, a national park visitor center and a whale museum. In these museums, I would like to show the process of rediscovery of history and culture in which students and local residents have continued after the disaster.

I will continue my research to write ethnography as a folklorist and continue to share cultural resources with local residents as a curator. I want



Figure 9. Sanriku National Park visitor center



Figure 10. Oshika Whale Museum

to make a bridge between the past and present, separated by the tsunami disaster of local residents who have decided to remain in the affected areas.

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