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A cultural approach to recovery assistance following urban disasters[1]

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ABSTRACT

Using the Kobe earthquake of 1995 and the Mid-Java earthquake of 2006 as case studies, this paper discusses the process of providing cultural recovery assistance; it also analyses the term 'civil society', a term that reflects efforts to make assistance activities sustainable. The Kobe earthquake should be seen as a point of departure for citizen activism by volunteers; because of it, cultural recovery support was vigorously provided. Since people influenced by those support efforts later became involved in providing Mid-Java earthquake recovery assistance, both earthquake recovery support initiatives can be seen as part of an ongoing chain of events. In analysing the Kobe earthquake, it becomes clear that while there are many semantic meanings for and usages of the term 'civil society', it was incorporated into policy guidelines for recovery during a period of low economic growth, and a new civil society was envisioned in this period of social transformation. Organisations participating in assistance efforts following the Mid-Java earthquake sought to make 'civil society' a reality; this continued after the earthquake recovery was complete, and it comprised an attempt to build the connections within a civil society by looking to overcome many persistent social problems. The power of communication that 'culture' holds plays a large role in this.

Introduction

Objectives

This paper has two objectives. The first is to introduce two recent case studies of cultural recovery assistance carried out in the wake of major earthquakes; the second is to consider how the work slogan that arose during the recovery projects was actually put into effect. The first discussion point, while being conspicuously 'on the ground' during disaster recovery, has been scarcely discussed within academic circles. A few such examples can be seen, for example, in the report of Ashimsa-Putra.[2] In recent years, disaster recovery programs have gained attention among social scientists, and the number of university bodies that undertake research on them has increased[3]; nonetheless, they tend to have a narrow focus, and programs extending to cultural recovery have not been systematically considered.

Other than the aforementioned report of Ashimsa-Putra, studies on the reconstruction of the two disaster-stricken areas discussed in this paper have been published by local researchers, in the form of field research reports. These reports were prepared by academics in the fields of art studies, anthropology and sociology. In the case of the Mid-Java earthquake, Adhisakti (2007) discusses the restoration of the world's cultural heritage and the re-establishment of the social and economic lives of local residents; however, that paper's focus is on the reconstruction of the world's renowned cultural heritage sites and lacks the perspective of social inclusion. Salim (2007) analyses activities such as workshops organised – for instance, by theatrical companies – from the viewpoint of psychological therapies; this approach is valuable in providing insight into the role of the arts in disaster areas. Soedjono's report (2009) can be considered a more comprehensive one, as it discusses both how disaster affects artistic expression and how artistic expression affects

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[1] Section "The Kobe earthquake and the term 'civil society' as a watchword" of this paper was written by the second author, while the latter part was written by the first author. The whole of the paper has been modified by both authors.

[2] Kobe is given as a model of collective recovery efforts by citizens; in actuality, however, as a result of assistance, a law guaranteeing citizen activities was born immediately afterwards. Soon after the earthquake in Kobe, more than one million volunteers gathered in the disaster area—an unprecedented level of activism. This was an important turning point for volunteer activities in Japan, and it led to the enactment in 1998 of the *Specially Designated Nonprofit Organisations Law*. In other words, spontaneous citizen activities became systematised on account of their results and the social acceptance thereof. However, this was a law that recognised the incorporation of activist groups, and it did not go so far as to guarantee the cultural assistance discussed here. The *Disaster Victims Livelihood Reconstruction Assistance Law* was also passed in 1998, and its aim was to provide economic assistance.

[3] For example, the Institute for the Research of Disaster Areas Reconstruction at Kwansei Gakuin University promotes research on disaster recovery in Japan.

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the victims of disaster; here, again, the effectiveness of art is emphasised. In the case of Kobe, Matsushita's (2007) report has the unique viewpoint of rescuing historical records; it shares similarities with this paper, in that it touches upon the ways in which volunteer activities can be most effectively used in disaster areas. On the topic of cultural reconstruction assistance, Shimada (1997), Shimada's work (2007) is highly thought-provoking and is therefore cited in this paper.

It is true that there are various kinds of disaster research in the social sciences, but very little such research concerns itself with arts and culture. For instance, Tierney's review article (2007) is the latest to touch upon disaster research in the social sciences, but neither arts nor culture is discussed therein. Gopalakrishnan and Okada (2007) capture our attention, because their study focuses on local culture; however, their main interest is the nature – culture nexus, and the study does not discuss the arts. Material aid – such as the supply of temporary housing – is well discussed within disaster recovery research (e.g. Johnson, 2007), but nonmaterial aid, especially that related to the arts, is rarely discussed. There is a plethora of research on mental support for individual disaster victims (e.g. Goto, Wilson, Kahana, & Slane, 2006), but culture within the community is not the sphere of psychologists. For all these reasons, we focus on cultural recovery and thus help to fill a gap in the literature.

With regards to aiding culture in a socially inclusive manner, although the subject is not restoration from disaster, Murals (2006) and Nakagawa's (2006) reports, both of which are written from the perspective of rebuilding communities, are valuable in their consideration of the role of continuous assistance following the completion of restoration.

Praicharnjit's (2006) study, although it focuses not on art but on archaeology, discusses academic knowledge and expertise regarding the topic of a community's shared property. As such, it is considered highly useful in coordinating academic knowledge and the 'on the ground' knowledge of local citizens.

The second point – which concerns what the acting guidelines should be for those involved, if they are to sustain their activities – despite being an urgent issue on the ground and an indispensable viewpoint for fulfilling recovery initiatives, has been discussed only in a fragmentary manner. In those discussions, the subject of systematising cultural recovery has arisen, but there are no signs yet of such systematisation occurring in the locations of this paper's case studies. In Japan, as before, the most important emphasis remains on the substance and execution of housing reconstruction laws (Yamanaka, 2010); indeed, the day when a systematic guarantee of cultural recovery can be given is still far in the future. For such a guarantee to be even possible, there is a need first for substantial persuasive discussion and public recognition; this paper looks to contribute meaningfully in these regards.

Case studies

Whether manmade or natural, disasters which occur in cities wreak enormous human and material damage. When a disaster occurs, the most pressing issue is, of course, recovery. In this paper, the Kobe earthquake of 1995 (also known as the Great Hanshin–Awaji earthquake) and the Mid-Java earthquake of 2006 are the two case studies discussed in line with the aforementioned objectives. The reasons for taking up these two cases are that the Kobe earthquake, as will be explained below, was both the first and biggest model case in Japan of collective recovery efforts by citizens, and the Mid-Java earthquake recovery saw the use of cultural recovery assistance groups that had been active in Kobe's recovery. A connection can be seen between the recovery assistance initiatives in the two areas.

The current population of Kobe City is about 1.5 million[4]; the city was founded in 1868 as one of the first modern port towns of Japan. The city eventually became one of the most important interfaces linking Japan with the rest of the world, before air transport became popular. The port itself became the world's top seaport for container shipments in the late 1970s, although it has now slipped in its international role due to increased competition. Kobe[5] experienced a severe earthquake in the early morning of 17 January 1995; it came to be known as the Great Hanshin–Awaji earthquake or the Kobe earthquake. The main disaster area consisted of the southern part of Hyogo Prefecture, including the city of Kobe. The death toll numbered 6434 and one estimate assessed the economic damage as totalling over US$1 trillion.

The Mid-Java earthquake occurred early in the morning of 27 May 2006, in the area around the Special Province of Yogyakarta, Indonesia. About 200,000 homes collapsed, and just under 6000 lives were lost. The fault line, whose movement caused landslides, extended northeast from Bantul District, grazing past the city of Yogyakarta; its effects were felt as far as 50 km away, in the Klaten District of Central Java Province. The city of Yogyakarta, the urban centre of the Special Province, has a population of 450,000, while the whole of the province has a population of 3.6 million. While this area is a rich grain-producing belt, it also holds an abundance of traditional industries and culture such as music (*gamelan*), dance, weaving and cloth-dyeing, stage performances, shadow-puppet plays, woodworking, silverwork, culinary arts, and silk manufacture. The everyday lives of people in this region are extremely rich in culture. Until the Republic of Indonesia became independent in 1945, Yogyakarta was the capital of the Mataram Sultanate; under the patronage of the Dutch colonial authorities and a succession of sultans, it was famous for being the nucleus of Javanese culture. Villages in the surrounding area provided both the city and the sultan's court with foodstuffs, handicrafts and labourers, and formed a remarkable community comprising villages that specialised in pottery, shadow puppets (*wayang kulit*), batik, and silk, among other cultural products. The community received a devastating blow from the earthquake, and along with the loss of lives, its culture was on the verge of extinction.

[4] To be precise, and according to the national census, this figure was about 1.48 million in 1990 and 1.53 million in 2005.

[5] In this paper, the term 'Kobe' not only refers to the city of Kobe itself but also the disaster area of the Kobe earthquake, including both the city of Kobe and the surrounding urban area.