KATARIBE

Minamisanriku-cho 2011.3.11-Future

Story teller

The Tree Rings of Time Tell Stories of Nature

"I want to live watching the sea"
People who have lived with nature feel that way.
Even while knowing that nature can show its fangs.

Minamisanriku lies on the Sanriku coast of Miyagi Prefecture, in the part of Japan known as Tohoku—the part of Japan worst hit by the Great East Japan Earthquake. The town's name is new, dating back only to the October 1, 2005 merger of Utatsu and Shizugawa, but both were long established settlements in their own right, deeply steeped in history, rich in tales and legends.

Today, Minamisanriku is home to two storytellers. It's a role they took on after the earthquake, in the hope of understanding and conveying what the tsunami meant for the town, a way of life, and the future.

They spin words to tell the story of the region, in narratives that range wide: the natural world, local history and culture, the earthquake and tsunami; and a reconstruction moving in a direction that no one wants.

Two people who do all in their power to explain a world devastated by disaster.

Kazuma Goto

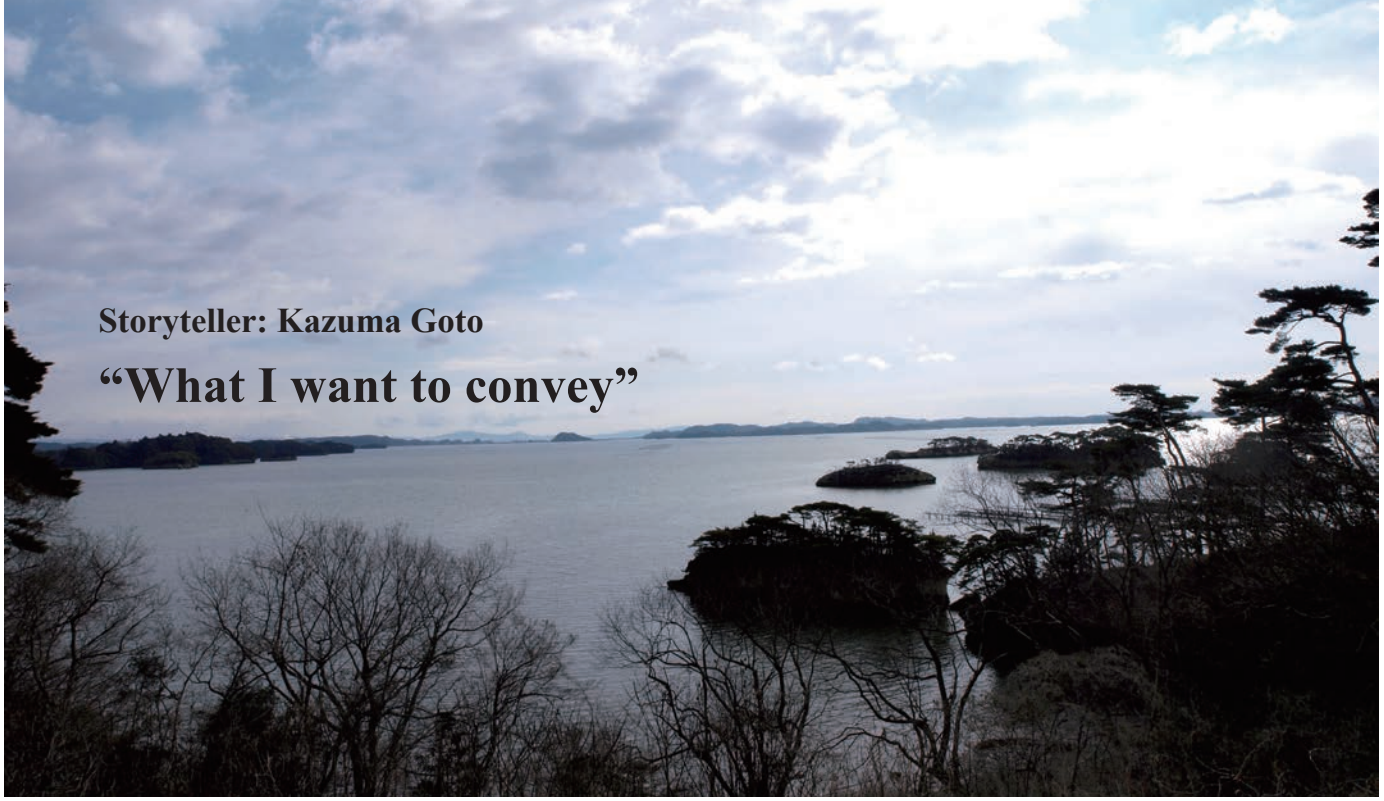
Fukko Minasan Kai

A local to his bones, Kazuma Goto was born in Togura, Minamisanriku in 1947. After working as a bank teller, he became secretary to his father, a member of the prefectural board member for 20 years. Today he serves on numerous committees in the town, including as a director of Fukko Minasan Kai. He is also a kataribe instructor.
Losing his home to the tsunami inspired Goto to become a kataribe. He draws on his vast store of regional knowledge, from pre-history to nature, and is known as one of the mast engaged kataribe, a promoter of the activity as home and overseas.

Hiroshi Onodera

Utatsu Fukkoshien No Kai Itoo

A lifelong resident of Utatsu, Hiroshi Onodera is dedicated to his community. His determination to preserve the local heritage and build a new future inspired him to become a kataribe, and to mentor others who want to become storytellers. He is also the head of the Utatsu Fukkoshien No Kai Itoo, a community association that supports recovery.



Storyteller: Kazuma Goto

“What I want to convey”

Geologically, our planet is a puzzle of bedrock plates, floating on molten magma, moved by convection. In Japan, the Philippine and Pacific plates are grinding against and under the North American plate, building up immense stresses. A sudden shift released that energy and the devastation of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

Part I

The land, the people

The mountains live, they breathe

In the work of nature, there is flow without change. “We are part of it,” says Goto. He looks into the unfolding landscape, “We can never control it.

Kazuma Goto

How long have people lived here, on this land? Discoveries of early Jomon pottery say at least 6,000 years. Some say major earthquakes occur every 1,000 years, but a major quake in the third year of Keicho tells us the strains build up over an average of 600 years. Is that where we are, our rule of thumb? Will it happen again in 600 years? Will people here have to adopt this historical perspective?

Earthquakes remind us our power as humans is limited, that we live because nature lets us. There’s a lot to talk about “nature conservation,” about protecting nature from destruction by people. The fact is, conservation protects us more than it does nature; it is more like human conservation. The earthquake taught me this. A slight change in perspective can show us a much different landscape.

An environmental study I read brought home to me how the rains nurture the land, how nutrients flow into rivers and to the sea, where they feed the plankton that sustains life and the fish that we eat. Life is a circulatory system, and we are connected to it. We cannot live without these links, without other creatures. Isn't the real concept of nature conservation about living in a way that serves other people and that gives back to other creatures?

We live our lives today looking only to the near term.

Historically this Minamisanriku was a poor place. People did everything for themselves. They had to. But though poor, we could live from the forests, the villages and the sea. Now, people are abandoning the forests.

Back then it was retired old men who cared for the forest, who walked the mountain stroking the bark to nurture trees. They watched saplings they planted in elementary school grow tall, and knew that what they planted would be used by their sons and grandsons. The generations were connected. The person who cut down a tree to build a house planted another, and looked 50 to 60 years into the future. Now it's different. There's no attachment to the tree, it's all about value: its age and diameter at a man's chest, its cubic volume. Apparently, we have lost the perspective of looking forward.

I regularly give talks on the earthquake at a high school here in Minamisanriku, from the perspective of history and nature. It's very different if you think of this a poor place where you can live with nature. What does it mean to live here in the Sanriku region? That's what I want to explain to young people, so that they approach nature with a sense of awe.

Part II

The Aftermath

A disaster called reconstruction

'We will protect lives and property' was the promise of reconstruction and the money spent. "The truth," says Goto, "is seawalls that are killing the rejuvenated sea."

A few months after the disaster, the captain of the "Shinkai," a manned submersible surveying the impact off the Sanriku coast, told me that the sea floor was carpeted in white bacteria feeding on sludge and organic matter. Oysters that take two years to harvest were maturing in just six months. Analysis showed the sea water was rejuvenated, 50 years younger! The tsunami is widely seen as an evil that killed many. But below the surface, it had tremendous power to revive and regenerate nature. Mightn't that have been nature's self-cleansing?

But now the rejuvenated sea is growing old again. The land no longer meets the ocean. The natural coastline is replaced by huge seawalls and concrete wall blocks that extend for several hundred kilometers and stop the flow from land to sea. Only rivers maintain the natural circulation. For all the lessons we have learned from nature, we are building seawalls that are robbing the water of its richness. Human reconstruction is destruction.

The national and prefectural governments tell us the new river embankments and coastal fortifications protect lives and property. But the waves that hit here averaged 16 meters, and the wall is a level 1, L1, 8.7 meters high; good for medium-sized tsunami. Even an L2 wall would not have held back the tsunami. Anybody who believes they are protected by the new seawalls, anybody who does not run away, may well find themselves in heaven.

The rebuilding was initiated without asking locals about the future they envisioned. Of course, we had lost everything and wanted recovery, and there was also the pressure of media attention, but was it really okay not to ask? Now, after years have passed I think no

good came from rushing. What do I think now? That construction should have been postponed for three years. During that time, there should have been support for the lives and livelihoods of the victims. We should have researched what the earthquake was and meant, and how we live in nature. And then we should have reached a vision for the future. That would have been better.

The laws and systems have not changed to support new needs. Suggest something new, and you are told the law prevents it. Ask for a new system, and the answer is no. Maybe if we had money we could change things, but we don't, and we must rely on the country and its systems. That's why it's important to be calm when deciding what to do first, what to do next. This is clear in the disaster zone, where we can see people losing family members, their homes…

We hear "reconstruction" everywhere, but what does it mean? Restoration brings things back to what they were, but reconstruction… What is its purpose? For those of us who live in rural areas, our livelihoods are the basis for survival, and we live and rely on the land. Are those livelihoods returning?

If life is a race, it is a marathon, not a 100 meter sprint. It's not all about speed. If you don't feel like you are running a marathon, and have no idea how to handle the end, the last 100 meters of the 42.195 kilometers, you are missing a lot. During the first three years after the disaster, maybe it wasn't possible to look ahead. But now we must find our course, and rely on human wisdom.

First, we must know that we are not nature. Nature is unfeeling, it always has been. It is we who must make the effort, change how we live and behave, and understand that nature is also alive.

Part III

The Narrative

Do what you can as a storyteller

Goto's first stories were of the disaster. Now they extend from past to present and beyond. After eight years, his stories tell of what he's learned, and how to live in future.

The stories we tell must evolve. First we talked of disaster and survival. Now it is not just about 3/11 but every day. What can our stories give to the people of the future, to people overseas who have not seen disaster? The earth turns and nobody knows what will happen next, or where. But we have this chance to help others. That is our task as storytellers.

At first, stories were about the terror of the tsunami, of loss and sadness. Then also about how, the earthquake's mechanism, and helping to reduce sadness, loss and pain. And so the stories turned to "disaster prevention." I will not hear this. Since the tsunami, there have been major earthquakes in Kumamoto, Tottori, Osaka, and Hokkaido. Mt. Ontake erupted, torrential rains devastated western Japan. Nobody, no experts, predicted or prevented these disasters.

Even if one day we can predict disasters, can we prevent them? No. The Earth is too powerful, much more powerful than people know. We build seawalls for prevention, but isn't true wisdom to understand that there are things we cannot prevent, and to think about how to reduce them? I see this as a change from the original story.

My initial perspective was wrong. My first concern was photograph albums and other important things washed away from closets. But that gave way to something different. If I can explain this realization to the next generation and make a connection, that would be something. Disasters hit people everywhere, and how we deal with them...I think this is a fundamental and important element of life.

We had a bubble economy, where we thought that as long as we had money we could live rich lives. Then the bubble burst, and we lived on, until the time of the disaster. After that, the word on everyone lips was “kizuna,” the bonds between people. It was even Japan’s word of the year. There was a realization that wealth is important, but more important, the root of human life, are our relationships. Kizuna is our greatest strength. The earthquake taught me this, but eight years later I had forgotten it. Is that also human?

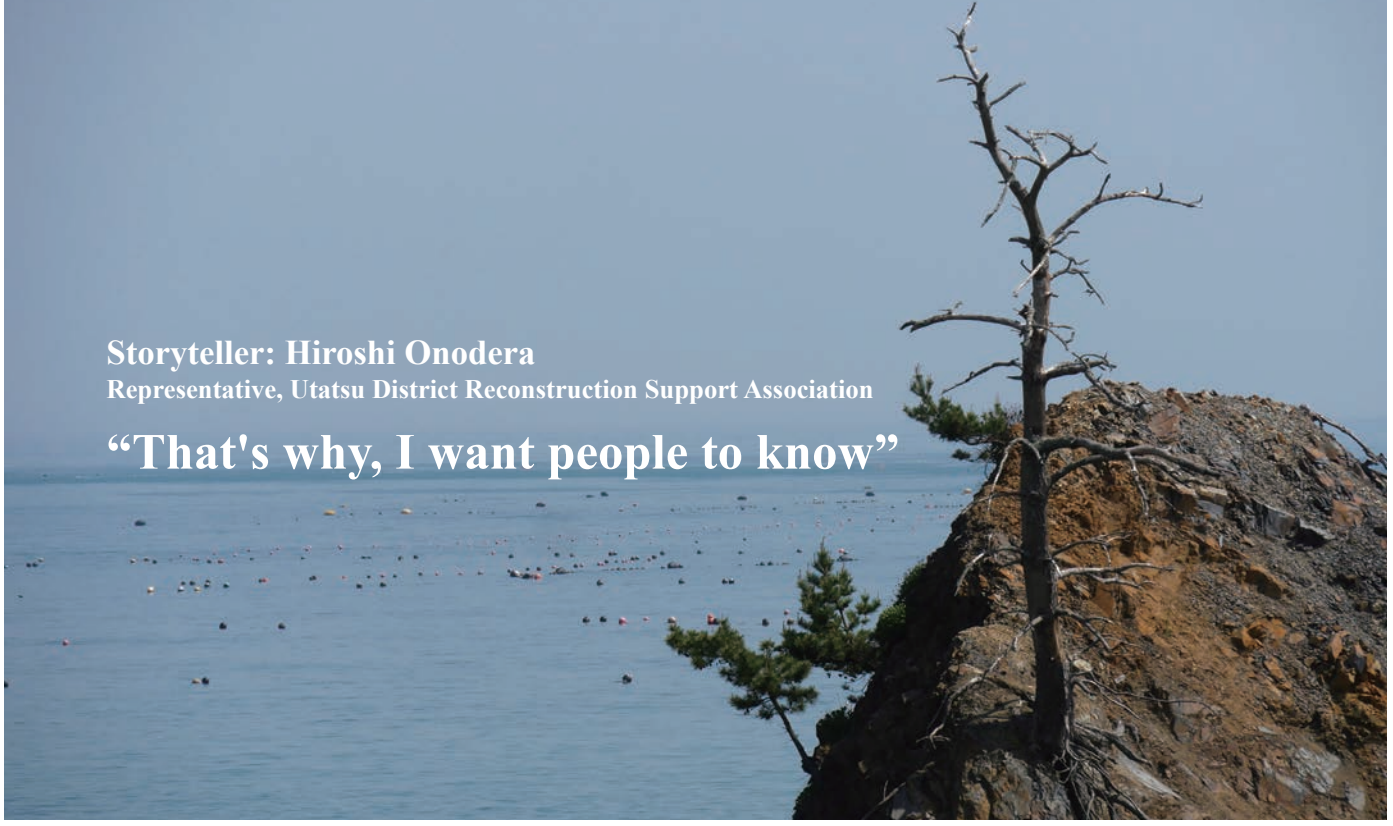
After the earthquake, when we had no food, water, heat or electricity, we shared. We shared wisdom and things. But with time, and greater sufficiency, that changed. We gradually become more concerned with self-enrichment. Even at the expense of other people.

Inequality is returning, people are dying alone and lonely. The lessons we learned only eight years ago are slipping away. In the end, what we learned from the disaster may be philosophical: what is it to live, what is happiness?

The earthquake and tsunami showed us reality, and my job as a storyteller is to communicate it to other people. If I end up alone, nothing will be born. I want to win sympathizers, one-by-one, people who do not see rubble, but a place where people lived, which they used, where they ate…where stories are buried.

If this happens, I think society and the world can change.

Interviewed May 2019



Storyteller: Hiroshi Onodera
Representative, Utatsu District Reconstruction Support Association

“That's why, I want people to know”

Local governments said they were ready for disasters, but I always doubted them, even before the earthquake. Now many researchers visit here, and I want them to find ways to save people from sudden natural disasters. My duty as a storyteller is to look at the truth, to tell as many people as possible, and to look to the future.

Part I
Roots

Knowing our origin

When we look to where we came from, how we arrived here, there are things that can be seen together with the times - human activities and stages of prosperity.

Hiroshi Onodera

Japan is written as “sun origin.” We humans need the sun and nature to survive; we live in nature, nurtured by the sun. In Japan, we also have the idea that 8-million gods, who dwell in the majestic natural world of the heavens, mountains, seas, earth and trees, also help to sustain our lives.

There are ancient rocks in Utatsu. Coastal strata 250 million years old have attracted geologists ever since the visit of Edward Naumann, the German founder of geology in Japan, during the Meiji era. The Utatsusaurus, an ichthyosaurs, was discovered here in 1977, and coprolites from another ichthyosaur confirmed a theory that spiny fish lived in Japan’s seas as long as 247 million years ago. The tsunami changed the coast and new discoveries

are still being made. This region has been a treasure trove since Meiji, and geologists today still say, “Go study in Utatsu.”

There are theories about the name. Place names are themselves historic fossils, long ago used by our ancestors to tell a story to others. Mount Tatsugane looks over Utatsu, and some say the name comes from the town’s direction, south-east from the mountain. The other etymology says that it came from the Ainu language, where otaetsu means sand, and refers to Nagasuka Beach. Beautiful, sandy, about 2km long, Nagasuka was destroyed by the earthquake.

Mount Tatsugane spans Kessenuma and Minamisanriku, in the past known together as Motoyoshi, and was long sacred to the Northern Fujiwara clan. High quality gold from Motoyoshi, Kesen and Iwai, all on the coast, allowed the Fujiwara clan to establish an almost independent kingdom, Oshu, with its capital inland at Hiraizumi. The city was the heart of a gold culture and is today a world heritage site. Oshu lasted for 100 years, until 1189, and rivaled Kyoto. During that time, Mount Tatsugane was home to over a thousand Buddhists priests, who served as warrior monks and supported the Fujiwaras.

From Mount Tatsugane to the sea is little over ten kilometers. The mountains approach the coast, and from them rivers suddenly flow to the sea. Valleys are formed by deformation and erosion, and their partial submergence forms the stunning, complicated inlets of the ria coast. It is beautiful landscape, created by nature as it has unfolded since ancient times.

This rocky coastline also allows seaweed and fish to thrive, with seafood such as abalone and sea urchins particularly abundant. Minamisanriku is famous for them, and even supplied dried abalone for the coronation of the Showa Emperor.

So Utatsu is surrounded by nature. Its rivers bring great benefits and are indispensable to life. Of the three rivers in this area managed by the prefecture, the longest is Isatomaegawa. "Isa" means whale in Ainu, and the name means "whale gathering place." Its pure, clear waters flow out into the bay, where every year traditional sardine fishing using zawa, a method unique to Utatsu, announces the start of spring. Seaweed, oysters and scallops in the sea are nurtured thanks to water flowing from the mountains into rivers, and from the fields and rice fields along their courses.

But this landscape is susceptible to disaster: strong against earthquakes, but weak against tsunamis.

From Minamisanriku to the furthest river headwaters is 13km, and to most it is just 7-8km. Moving away from the sea, the wide bays and inlets quickly narrow and shallow. When a tsunami hits, the waves rise, and the damage increases as it advances into the back country.

Now a seawall is being built. What will happen with a concrete structure in the natural environment I've talked about? Sediment brought from the upper reaches is being deposited, the river is getting shallower. Building a river embankment will channel and accelerate tsunami — the flow of the last tsunami was fastest in places where the banks were paved over. Natural rivers have resistance, the flow is slower, but those artificially created by people are the opposite. They cause secondary disasters.

Any future tsunami will rush ahead of people in the blink of an eye. There are roads and settlements along the river, but the tsunami will really start to spread out at Shizugawa interchange, where the river embankment is cut short. This will result in vehicles being washed away before they can get on the expressway. There are no river gates, and the river embankments and piled up concrete blocks being built will invite tsunamis to travel upstream. People working on the coast have no choice but to flee to the mountains when a tsunami hits, but they must first return to their cars, parked at the coast. But really, you have to escape to the mountains without going to the coast. If we do not do this differently from in the past, the lives of fishermen and children will be lost.

Part II
History

The flow of time

To be able to tell people what kind of place Utatsu is, it important to know its history, culture and identity. History transmits our inheritance of values and culture.

When did people start living in Utatsu? From the mountains and villages to the coast, Minamisanriku is filled with materials that answer the question; shell mounds in Utatsu and many other places; earthenware and arrowheads, one on a 13-centimeter fish bone; an ancient village excavated in a forest, built around a natural stone pillar where a spiritual people performed rituals. It all dates back over 5,000 years, to the Jomon people.

The shell mounds are on ground above the ria coast. Perhaps to escape tsunami?

Three shrines to Hachiman, a Buddhist Bodhisattva, one in Tanoura here in Utatsu, all brought from Kyoto, remind us that many years later people came north to conquer the Emishi tribes who succeeded the Jomon people. Among them were the Northern Fujiwara, who consolidated power. They stood apart from the central aristocracy and maintained independence from the capital, and gradually took on the form of an imperial court.

This was the age of the gold culture centered on Hiraizumi, Oshu then. Many place names recall gold production. One is Jumaisan, Mount Ten Pieces, which yielded 10 oban, the large coins used in feudal Japan. There are other marks too. Gold panning was a difficult task that needed lots of water, and sluice runs incised on mountain sides can still be seen. They are known as Golden Waterways. You can still feel the gold culture.

Oshu, created by Kiyohira Fujiwara, prospered as the largest city after the capital. That lasted until Minamoto no Yoritomo, first shogun of the Kamakura shogunate, sacked it in the Oshu War of 1189, most likely for its gold. The Fujiwaras prospered from gold and were destroyed for gold.

Yoritomo brought warriors from Kanto into the region as stewards, and with them Kanto culture: the Chiba clan from Chiba, the Miura clan from the Miura Peninsula, the Kumagaya clan from Kumagaya, the Onodera clan of Tochigi, and the Kajiwara and Hatakeyama clans from Kamakura. With them came Date Masamune, whose martial skills earned gifts of land. Thus was born the Date or Sendai Domain, Japan's largest, which survived until Meiji.

There are many stories about Date. He sent his vassal Hasekura Tsunenaga as an ambassador to Mexico, Spain, Italy and Rome. There is a theory that perhaps he planned to take over the entire country with the help of Spain, the world's strongest country at the time. Negotiations did not progress, but the fact that a Japanese traveled to Europe and opened fully-fledged diplomacy is itself a milestone.

The ship that took Tsunenaga to Mexico was built in Ishinomaki, the town next to Minamisanriku. It was a based on the “San Francisco,” the galleon that brought Sebastian Vizcaino to Japan as Spanish ambassador. When it was wrecked by a tsunami, Date’s people worked with Vizcaino’s shipwrights to build a replacement. Perhaps Masamune was also affected by the tsunami, and dreamed of creating a new global nation, his very own form of "reconstruction."

Looking back across history we see a flow of people. The Jomon people settled coastal hills and lived on animals, fish from the sea and the bounty of the mountains. With rice farming, people moved to the flat land, water and sunlit places that rice needs. As numbers grew, people moved nearer the sea to grow more rice and wheat, and settled down. From hunter gatherers, they became agriculturalists. In the era of money, of gold, they again moved, this time closer to the mountains, because of the power gold brought. When the monks came, they built temples on the mountains, and the people went to them. When the gold was exhausted, the people moved back to the villages, and the temples followed them. Temples that were long ago in the mountains are now along the roads. In history, we can see prosperity and decline.

Part III

Then, now, tomorrow

Traces of disaster

The word disaster has many meanings, but whether direct or secondary, it causes damage to the land and in the hearts of people

The tsunami of the Great East Japan Earthquake is said to be a 1,000 year event, and we know there was one in 869. Records show over 1,000 people died in Tagajo, near Sendai. But we also know that earthquakes off Sanriku, and off Peru and Chile, generate tsunami here roughly every 20 years, with fatalities roughly every 50 years. In the Meiji era, a 38.2m tsunami killed 20,000.

Tsunami have come and will come. We who live here do so with that in mind.

The school yard of Isatomae Elementary School after the inundation. The tsunami rose 50cm above the roof.

But we know that tsunami in the Yayoi period (300 BCE-300 CE) and in Keicho (1611) also reached the backcountry. That's why I think we need to re-examine this tsunami.

The tsunami flowed into Mimanisanriku from both sides of the peninsula. It was highest at Togura Junior High School, at 22.6m. In Utatsu it was 15-18m. Bridges collapsed, route 45 was cut off, and we were inundated. Only a part of the peninsula and a few isolated places were visible.

There were those who fled, and those who did not. We must understand that this is a terrain that amplifies disasters and plan accordingly. People near the sea knew from the beginning and escaped. Those who lived along rivers, with no view of the sea, died believing the tsunami would not reach that far. In all, 831 died, 119 in Utatsu. 211 are still missing.

Most stories of being “washed away” come from the Meiji and Showa eras. My family is among those whose houses were swept away three times: first in Meiji, then in Showa, after which we build a house that was washed away by the Heisei tsunami. Long ago, there was nothing about not building in designated disaster zones, and even if your house disappeared you carried on living by the sea. Timber for building was distributed free, a form of “reconstruction” unique to that time.

The tsunami destroyed 3,321 buildings in Minamisanriku, 62% of the total. Miyagi prefecture offered two support plans for people who lost homes: Disaster Public Housing and Disaster Prevention Relocation, basically a move to higher ground. It initially covered 1,873 households, over half of the destroyed total, and 930 households selected public housing and 943 relocated. Others carried out reconstruction for themselves, and some rebuilt houses on their own land.

In Utatsu district, about 700 houses were washed away, and 500 have been rebuilt. The owners of the others are renting or have left. In fact, the population here is down 12-13% and other parts of Minamisanriku have seen falls of over 30%. Only one district has seen an increase, of 8%, and that is Iriya, near the mountains. Each survivor has searched for a place that seems safe, where they could live.

A monument to the 1933 tsunami

The prefecture eventually built 1,565 reconstruction houses for victims, but few people applied for them and many were left vacant. In the end, volunteers, migrants, and people whose houses weren't washed away moved in. In fact, people who come to Utatsu from outside are told, "We will give you 330 square meters of land," and even residents whose houses were not washed away are currently also offered land.

How is life in the reconstruction housing now? Of 113 in Utatsu, 46 have single occupants, half of them men. Various problems have emerged, such as eating habits.

These are rented properties, not traditional homes, with rules as thick as walls. Can thumbtacks be used to hang things? Where should the home shrine be placed, the Buddha? Residents are told not to put plants on verandas and block emergency escape routes. Life is hard in rented accommodation for men in their 90s, and the issue to how to support the elderly in this lifestyle has not been solved. For instance, you could form a residents’ association, but then nobody wants to lead it. Some need care, but there is no one to provide it.

All we can do is patrol the neighborhood and keep watch.

Senior citizens at a sports event sponsored by Onodera at the Utatsu District Reconstruction Support Association

Even people who built on high ground are affected. They find themselves in urban estates, something they never imagined. Their privacy is protected, there is no interference from others, but these are places where communication is impossible. Living in isolated spaces behind closed doors is hard for country folk. Even when creating environments where people do not have to be involved with their neighbors, it is still important to form a community. The elderly are anxious. “I don’t know who to ask for help,” they say. “I’m afraid of nights…”

Nobody thought about how people lived here, on this land. Instead, they just delegated problems to the government’s Urban Renaissance Agency and other builders, and so we have houses built to urban concepts. Just because something looks stylish doesn’t mean it satisfies human needs.

There are some who say, "I would have been better off washed away by the tsunami." Others mourn. They mourn for years of working the fields, sharing tea on the porch with a neighbor, coming and going without locking doors, knowing where everything was in friends’ houses. Now they live in isolation, separated by iron doors, always watchful…

Interviewed May 2019

KATARIBE

Minamisanriku-cho 2011.3.11-Future

Story teller

Web-Sites

Kataribe: A Keyword to Recovery
https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#kataribe

Beyond2020_nx
https://topics.japan-insights.jp/#beyond2020

KATARIBE

Story teller

Storyteller: Kazuma Goto

“What I want to convey”

Storyteller: Hiroshi Onodera

“That's why, I want people to know”

Special Editing: Gareth Pughe

Published February 2020 Interviewed May 2019

www.toshibafoundation.com/jp/ *www.japan-insights.jp*

Toshiba International Foundation

1-1-1 Shibaura, Minato-ku, Tokyo105-8001, Japan