

Spirited Ecology at the End of the World

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Across the globe, extreme weather events such as prolonged drought, intense typhoons/hurricanes, atmospheric rivers, and rising sea level are disrupting lives, prompting a massive reengineering of strategically critical terrains. Disturbances precipitated by these events do not simply impact the daily lives of coastal peoples, but transform their patterns of ritual and sense of belonging to the land and the sea. My book project considers these pressing issues through a series of essays that not only foreground the insights, struggles, humor, and trauma of the residents on the northeastern coast of Japan, but also analyze community-led projects that explore innovative and experimental ways of understanding and inhabiting a post-disaster landscape.

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami (henceforth 3.11) produced a wealth of publications from experts in the natural and social sciences. They addressed a broad range of topics, including post-disaster ecological assessments, historical analyses of Tsunamigenic earthquakes in the region, future disaster mitigation strategies and landscape designs, and folklore and cultural heritage of the tsunami-battered communities now on the cusp of disappearance. During the first few years following 3.11, northeast coastal community members and municipalities explored competing visions for the future. Demonstrators were also gathering in front of the Prime Minister's residence in Tokyo every Friday to protest the reopening of nuclear power plants across the Japanese archipelago, demand transparency and accountability for the ongoing debacle at Fukushima Daiichi power plants, and imagine a better future for Japan. Yet, when the central government began reconstructing key infrastructures on an unprecedented colossal scale, it became clear that a new post-3.11 'normal' was being dictated by the civil engineering projects, which ultimately foreclosed all alternative possibilities. At the center of the plan was coastal hardening, known as the "fortress-ification," realized through the construction of concrete seawalls and accompanying disaster mitigation measures. Whereas the civil engineering feat of reconstruction (*fukkō*) is an undeniable reality, the success of community recovery (*kaifuku*) remains contentious considering the plight of those who cannot return home due to the post-disaster state designation of "difficult-to-return zones" in Fukushima and "disaster-danger-zones" in Iwate and Miyagi. Despite a decade having passed since, the sociocultural, politico-economical, and environmental ramifications of 3.11 cast a long shadow in the region to this day.

Traditional ways of life within the northeast coastal communities prior to 3.11 were informed by close-knit familial and communal ties, a sense of belonging to the land and the sea, and a distinct religiosity that places socioeconomic and spiritual lives in a symbiotic relationship with the surrounding ecological milieu. Against the backdrop of the post-3.11 'fortress-ification,' which has severed the physical and spiritual connections residents had with the sea, I explore the premise of ecology as the genesis of forms. Specifically, I investigate residents' effort to reinterpret ancestral values embedded in the rituals and festivals that have dictated their ways of life, and to redefine their relationship to the sea and surrounding ecological milieu that has been altered by the construction of concrete seawalls. My manuscript critically responds to the questions of global environmental crisis and ethical living through a socioculturally nuanced and historically grounded lens. Drawing inspiration from my informants, who are former and current coastal residents, amateur oral historians, local nonprofit organizers, ecologists, landscape architects, biologists, and state/municipal officials, my manuscript attends to the various forces that are actively rehabilitating 'Indigenous' lives, both human and nonhuman, within the disturbed ecological milieu of the post-3.11 era.