

THE ROLE OF MUSEUMS IN RECOVERY FROM DISASTER: THE GREAT EAST JAPAN EARTHQUAKE AND TSUNAMI

Sudo Ken'ichi

National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka, Japan

Keywords: Grand Kagura, sacred music and dance, memories of disaster

Today's theme is the role as cultural guardians played by museums, institutions that preserve and protect cultural resources and cultural heritage, in the aftermath of an unprecedented earthquake and tsunami. Minpaku, National Museum of Ethnology, Japan responded immediately to the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami that struck on March 11, 2011 by forming a Disaster Relief Committee composed of eight researchers.

A budget was provided, and both material and financial assistance were sent to the affected areas. Information on the impact of the disaster was gathered via a network of universities, museums and archives located in the region. In March 2011 two specialists in preservation studies began on-site salvage operations of ethnological and cultural assets, and in April a team of six began research on how best to provide both cultural asset salvage operations and social and cultural assistance to the areas affected by the disaster.

This report describes (1) cultural asset salvage, (2) damaged cultural heritage restoration, and (3) the revival of traditional performing arts. These activities are treated here as brief case studies of how Minpaku responded to the Great East Japan Earthquake.

1. Cultural Asset Salvage

Responding to an appeal by the Agency for Cultural Affairs, in April 2011 many organizations joined together to form a Committee for Salvaging Cultural Properties. They began salvage activities requested by the disaster-affected prefectures in mid-April. Two Minpaku conservation scientists participated in this effort, providing support for salvaging ethnological materials from local museums and archives, primarily in Iwate and Miyagi prefectures, both of which were particularly hard hit by the disaster, arranging temporary storage, setting-up emergency facilities, and organizing and recording the materials salvaged.

Funding for these activities, which were conducted for eight months, was provided through the Agency of Cultural Affairs and Minpaku itself. Most of the salvaged materials were stored temporarily in the empty classrooms of local schools, but when desalination or salt-removal or other treatment was required they were sent to Minpaku, where the necessary procedures were carried out.

Because Japan is particularly prone to natural hazards, Minpaku is now developing facilities for the salvage, emergency handling and storage of damaged materials, in preparation for anticipated future disasters.

2. Damaged Cultural Heritage Restoration

In the fall of 2011, a mudstone lion's head from Kamaishi City, in Iwate Prefecture, which had been damaged during the earthquake and tsunami, was brought to Minpaku for restoration. This lion's head is revered locally for protecting the community and its members from evil spirits, and helping to ensure peace and prosperity for community households.

The restored head was displayed at Minpaku during a thematic exhibition that began in September 2012. To thank Minpaku for the restoration, a troupe from Kamaishi City presented at Minpaku in November 2012 an elegant performance of the highly regarded Grand *Kagura*, sacred music and dance. This annual traditional performance exorcises demons from households and purifies the place where it is performed. Expressing Kamaishi City's gratitude for the restoration, the director of the troupe said "that so many people gathered together to restore a lost tradition brings unity to our community; we take pride in the *kagura*, which keeps our hometown alive in our hearts."

The lion's head that protects people's lives and the *kagura* sacred dance have become touchstones in reviving the region and its inhabitants' livelihoods.

3. Revival of Traditional Performing Arts

There were 5,349 homes in Ofunato-city, Iwate Prefecture, before the earthquake and tsunami, but as of September 2013 there remained 3,558. The other 1,791 either had been swept away or left uninhabitable, with their surviving former inhabitants living in temporary shelters. The dead or missing numbered 155.

In the Sasazaki District of Ofunato-cho, the 220 households in the fishing and agrarian village along the shore had performed the *Shishi odori* (Deer Dance) at the Kamo Shrine, as part of a festival held in April every five years. Although 2011 should have been such a year, the festival could not be carried out. Not only had many homes in the district been damaged by the disaster, but all the costumes, drums and other equipment required for the traditional performance had been swept away.

When Minpaku research team visited this area in May 2011, a representative of the Deer Dance Preservation Society told them, "we want to continue the festival and performance, but we have lost everything." Minpaku was requested to secure deer antlers required for the headdresses used during the dance, so we launched the "Love Deer Project" to provide them.

With the assistance of various social groups in the Kinki Region of Central Japan, Minpaku struggled to find pairs of antlers, each with four branches and of sufficient length for the headdresses. By October, however, forty-six pairs had been secured. With financial support from foundations and other organizations for reviving their traditional folk performance, in November members of the Sasazaki Deer Dance Preservation Society started making the new headdresses. The women began making the costumes. By May 2012, ten sets of headdresses and costumes were complete.

It was decided that the first performance of the revived dance would be held in June at Minpaku, as an expression of gratitude for providing the antlers. On June 9 the Deer Dance was performed in Minpaku Hall, in front of 450 guests. Then on the following day this soul-stirring dance was performed before an audience of 2,300 in Nagata Ward, Kobe, to raise the spirits of the victims of the 1995 Kobe-Awaji Earthquake and comfort the souls of those

who had died in it. The dancers said “we never expected to be able to dance again so soon,” tearfully expressing their heartfelt thanks for the opportunity to perform in Osaka and Kobe.

A month later, on July 8, the Deer Dance was performed in Sasazaki, its hometown. It was performed at a gymnasium, before an audience of 200 villagers, some still living in their homes, others dwelling in temporary housing, and others who had evacuated elsewhere. Representatives of the city, a folk performing arts association and the media were also present. Before Buddhist mortuary tablets brought by members of the community, nine dancers first prayed to comfort the souls of the dead. Then they mounted the stage for a majestic forty-minute dance performance.

The local people were crying tears of joy as they said, “there is no way to thank you enough for bringing back this dance that was swept away.” Later, on August 13, during the Obon Festival, an event was organized in the Ofunato City gymnasium to showcase the revival of traditional performances. Former residents of the city who had been scattered to different places enjoyed the opportunity for a happy reunion. One of the newly made deer costumes was exhibited at Minpaku.

The Ofunato Sasazaki Deer Dance is an example of a folk performance to exorcise evil spirits, pray for the repose of the souls of the dead and comfort the souls of the ancestors. Traditionally, the dance is performed once every five years in April, as part of the Kamo Shrine festival. However, since that festival was still three years in the future, on this occasion the dance was performed on August 13, during Obon, the annual holiday to honor the spirits of the ancestors. One community elder said, “holding a festival was our last chance to reconnect a lost region; we had to perform the Deer Dance, no matter what.” A performer who had danced on July 8 said “as we danced we wept; this was the first step to revival.”

The dance would neither build new homes nor restore the region’s economy. But it spoke eloquently to the need for a new opportunity for residents of the affected area to express their hope and determination to restore their community. It was clear that for victims of this massive disaster traditional performing arts revived their sense of agency and had great significance for them as they went about rebuilding their lives.

As described above, Minpaku’s efforts to assist areas affected by the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami involved the salvage of ethnological materials, the restoration of damaged materials, and, in particular, the revival of traditional performing arts. In 2012 we invited another troupe from the affected area to present a traditional performance. This month we will invite a *kagura* sacred dance troupe from Miyagi Prefecture to perform.

We are confident that by organizing events that feature the traditional performing arts of the disaster-hit regions we offer local people, who have become scattered and so far have seen little progress in rebuilding their homes and communities, opportunities to renew their solidarity, while at the same time spreading among people who live in the Kansai Region of Western Japan knowledge of the extraordinary quality of these performances.

Looking to the future, each year we will continue to organize temporary exhibition titled “Memories of Disaster” and symposia, and to invite troupes from the affected areas to perform at Minpaku. While encouraging those who live in the affected areas to take pride in their traditional performing arts, at the same time we will instil and sustain awareness of the importance of recovery from disaster among the audiences watching their performances.

Concluding Remarks

Festivals and performing arts are usually thought of as something that should be restarted after livelihoods and communities have recovered. However, it is important to understand that only when these performances are carried out can we say that local society really exists.

In other words, festivals and performing arts are indispensable elements in the recovery of local society, helping to weave people together through new strands of tradition and culture, and vital for restoring local pride. Thus it is the role of museums not only to function as managers of material culture, but also to provide support for creative individuals in the affected areas, on whom falls the burden of restoring un-tangible culture.

Summary

The National Museum of Ethnology (Minpaku) was founded in 1974 as an Inter-University Research Institute housing a museum and graduate school. A museum is more than a place to store intangible and tangible heritage. Along with its responsibility for conserving and passing on cultural materials, it also creates new culture. On March 11, 2011, Japan was struck by an earthquake and tsunami of unprecedented proportions. From one month after the disaster, conservation experts from Minpaku participated in the rescue of tangible cultural resources for the period of eight months. At the same time, our disaster response team worked with village residents in damaged localities, assisting their efforts to replace costumes and ornaments for traditional performing arts that had been washed out to sea, or to repair damaged lion heads, to aid in reviving traditional performing arts. We had thought that, in the process of revival and recovery, the re-launch of festivals and traditional performing arts would come later than the construction of the homes and livelihoods of the local people. In one case, Minpaku, based on its research, was able to provide deer antlers for the headdresses needed to revive the deer dance, an intangible cultural heritage of a village in Iwate Prefecture. Village elders worked the antlers we donated, restored the costumes, and within a year were able to produce ten full sets of costumes. Subsequently, the deer dance was performed in village after village to calm the spirits of the dead, ward off evil spirits, and restore the confidence of people afflicted by the disaster. In this way, a traditional performing art contributed to the revival and rebuilding of the affected communities. In another village the repair and restoration of stone lions' heads and providing aid for refugees from the disaster were further other examples of organized activity carried out in connection with the traditional performing arts. In sum, our experience in the wake of the Great East Japan Earthquake demonstrates that a museum's efforts to revive and restore traditional performing arts can do more than sustain folk arts. It can also play a vital role in rebuilding the spirits of communities and localities affected by disasters.