Radiation in Japanese Culture During and After Fukushima: a Research Proposal

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**Abstract:** The 2011 Tohoku earthquake and tsunami **###**

In March 2011, the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors released large amounts of radioactive isotopes into the environment of eastern Japan, as a consequence of the devastating Tohoku earthquake and tsunami; the amount of radioactive isotopes released was approximately one-tenth of that released by the Chernobyl event in 1986, and the contaminated area is also approximately one-tenth as large (von Hippel 2011). This environmental contamination has caused a cultural climate of fear and anxiety, as well as mistrust and anger directed at the state and the owners of the nuclear reactors, who seem to be viewed as mismanaging the disaster and failing to keep the public informed (###CITE?). In search of information, many people turned to social media websites, such as Twitter and Facebook; in some cases, this provided timely and useful information on the disaster, but in other cases, false rumors were quickly spread and then only later overtaken by truthful and accurate information (Kaigo 2012:32).

One of the economic consequences of the nuclear accident was contamination of produce and livestock in areas downwind of the radioactive isotope release. The state prevented their sale to protect the public, however the farmers were not compensated for their losses until several months later. In April 2011, farmers protested in Tokyo with their cattle present to increase visibility of the protest, demanding compensation from TEPCO, the electric utility company that owned and operated the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors (###CITE).

Stratification plays a significant role in the cultural effects of the Fukushima accident. For example, radiation cannot be detected with human senses; instead, a Geiger counter is needed to detect radioactive contamination oneself or one's food or water—this is a significant expense for a working class person, such as a farmer. Geiger counters were found to be necessary, and so they were obtained despite the costs (Ikegami 2012:155). Ikegami also notes that bureaucrats in the central and local governments discouraged lay persons from taking measurements with Geiger counters, ostensibly because of the unreliability; he draws comparison between this discouragement and the Soviet ban on personal usage of dosimeters around the Chernobyl accident, speculating that the true reason for this discouragement is to maintain the balance of power between the state and the public by controlling knowledge of contamination (Ikegami 2012:155).

**Research Proposal**

Statement of Purpose

I propose to perform anthropological research into the various negative effects on Japanese culture of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster, with the ultimate goal of counteracting these negative effects as much as possible. There are several questions I hope to answer by this research: how did cultural factors influence the public reaction to the threat of radioactive contamination, and how did this threat in turn influence culture; what are the commonly held beliefs about the hazards of radiation, and how do these beliefs differ from the scientific understanding of radiation's effects on organisms; to what extent is knowledge of radioactive contamination controlled by those with power in Japanese society, and to what extent is this knowledge withheld from the general public; and how effectively did Japanese authorities handle the disaster in terms of preventing injury, death, and loss of livelihood. My research will necessarily be interdisciplinary, requiring collaboration with specialists in health physics and environmental science.

Methods and Data

I will collect data over a six-month period using participant-observation fieldwork with farmers whose crops or livestock have been contaminated by radioactive isotopes from the Fukushima accident, and with involuntary evacuees from the 20 kilometer radius around the Fukushima nuclear reactors. The six-month period is shorter than the one year period traditionally used for anthropological fieldwork in order to strike a balance between accuracy of results and the length of time before the fieldwork results can be used to form a plan of action for helping the affected persons.

During the fieldwork, I will live in the communities in which affected farmers and evacuees currently reside, and attempt to establish a rapport with as many of them as possible. I will buy food at the same places that they buy food, and (as much as possible), I will ask them how they choose what they buy and do not buy, and how the possibility of radioactive contamination informs their choices. I will also conduct interviews in the Japanese language with persons who seem to have been particularly affected by the Fukushima disaster.

Significance

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Works Cited

von Hippel 2011 ###

Ikegami 2012 ###

Kaigo 2012 ###