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Tohoku's Futures: Predicting Outcomes or Imagining Possibilities?

William W. Kelly

The natural disasters and human failures of 3.11 and the ensuing nuclear plant and radiation crises have dealt incalculable damage to Japan's Tohoku region—to its natural landscape, to its societal infrastructure, and to the lifeways of its people. The massive loss of life, the ravaging of communities, aquacultures, and arable land, and the destruction of schools, businesses, and housing may have been concentrated along Tohoku's Pacific coastal towns, but like the tsunami itself, its damage, dislocations, and repercussions have swept across the entire region, powerfully although unequally.

We are among many other scholars who have been drawn to these tragedies and their aftermath from our deep personal and professional involvements with the people and places of Tohoku, and the challenge and the context raise a basic question: what can we as anthropologists and other social scientists offer at this moment? What is distinctive about our perspective? I have two remarks about this as a contribution to this discussion. One is about prediction and imagination. The other is about local leadership and political amalgamation.



Scene from Kesennuma

Tohoku was already challenged by a fragile economy of farming, fishing, and subcontractor factories, and by a population declining in numbers and aging in composition. In the aftermath of 3.11, the urgent question of Tohoku's future is being framed by extreme scenarios. Should it reconstruct itself by rebuilding the economic patterns, material foundations, and social structures of the immediate past? Can it seize this moment to reinvent regional livelihoods and lifeways in entirely new directions? Or are the blows likely to prove fatal to both vitality and vision?

The central dilemma is this: to rebuild regional lifeways and life worlds in forms resembling pre-3.11 seems impossible in the wake of devastating earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear power plant meltdown, but to reinvent the region through reimagining new forms of community and economy also appears beyond the capacities and resources of the region.

The horrifying videos showing massive numbers of vehicles, farm equipment, and fishing boats, of homes, work sheds, stores, and municipal buildings being swept through the towns and across fields and back into the sea are tragically indelible ¹. They also vividly testify to a moment of reckoning for the Faustian bargain of a regional economy built on a heavily-subsidized infrastructure as Japanese politics over many decades showered rural areas with seawalls, roads, ports and public facilities—and promoted and funded inefficiencies and distortions in local livelihoods. In one afternoon, the savage sea reclaimed the excesses of this developmental infrastructure and destroyed the hubris of planners and politicians.

As many ethnographers of Tohoku have shown, resilience, resistance, resolve and resourcefulness have characterized the Northeast from the deep past to the contemporary present. They are qualities that I myself have experienced and appreciated in over 35 years of close attachment to the Shōnai area of Yamagata Prefecture.

The dignity and determination of the region's residents are not in question, but are these qualities sufficient for the magnitude of the current challenges?

Within the economy it was surely fishing and aquaculture that was hardest hit. Is it really possible for recovery after the loss of life, the devastation of sea beds so vital to shell fish and sea weed cultivation, and the destruction of most of the fleets and docks and processing plants?

Farming too suffered, both directly and indirectly, with the pall of suspicion that now hangs over large areas of Tohoku production, including rice, vegetables, dairy products, and meat. Even if this cloud lifts, can farming meaningfully recover if the average age of Iwate farmers now approaches 65?



Scene from Kesenuma

And what about the hundreds of subcontractor factories and assembly plants that dot the Tohoku prefectures, often far from the coast? We quickly learned how vitally and intricately connected they were to global supply chains for the automotive, electronics, and other industries. But many of their delicately calibrated machines were destroyed by the earthquake tremors and their supply lines disrupted for weeks. We then learned how quickly the parent corporations could shift their sourcing and their production nodes to other parts of Japan and abroad. Will they come back? Why should they come back?

And even if a modicum of jobs return and infrastructure is rebuilt, who among the younger workers, with families of young children, will choose to return to a region of contaminated soils, despoiled seascape, the low dread of radiation, and the tortuous path towards community reconstruction?



Prediction and imagination

So these are some of the factors why I have been so pessimistic since 3.11 when I calculate the prospects and predict the chances for a Tohoku recovery and renewal. But as the months of watching and listening and caring stretch on, I have become more and more uncomfortable with such a judgment. Who am I and who are we, we must ask as anthropologists, to predict Tohoku's future? On what basis can and should we be making such projections for the devastated region?

A jumble of freight containers

The roles and responsibilities of social science—especially our own discipline of anthropology—are weighty matters about which much has been written and debated. Here I can only assert my own view, which is that we anthropologists have neither the analytical disposition nor the moral right to prognosticate on the futures of those among whom we work and whose lives we seek to understand. To foresee is a claim “to see for” as well as “to see forward.” We should do neither.

But if it is not our place to predict, it is our role to imagine. Prediction deals in likelihoods; imagining deals in possibilities. We should not be asking “WHAT WILL?” but rather “HOW MIGHT?” We must avoid the smugness of prediction and embrace the harder work of imagining.

And how might we ask “how might” instead of “what will”? What is to be the source of our contributions to imagining the possibilities for Tohoku?

The anthropology of Japan has deep roots in Tohoku. One small measure is that over 10% of the 340 or so English-language anthropology dissertations done on Japan over the last seven decades have been sited in

Tohoku, to which one must add the even larger corpus of extended field studies done by our Japanese colleagues in sociology. Together, these books and articles add up to an exceedingly rich ethnographic archive. The topics have ranged across the gamut of the field's agenda—kinship, language, politics, gender, work, health, tourism, schooling, and much more—and it is this ethnographic archive, an accumulation of understandings, that we must draw upon. In what ways can the ethnographic past speak towards the ethnographic future?

Local leadership

Other papers in this group are themselves demonstrations of this, and here I only suggest two further brief examples. We know from our archive that local leadership and regional development in Tohoku have characteristically brought forward two kinds of local leaders, whom one might tag the pipeline operators and the judo masters.

Pipeline operators are conduits of central resources to localities, who use their connections and influence to activate the flows of subsidies that pour from the center - the money to spend but also the directives on how to spend it and the plans and the planners for just how it is to be spent. They have opened the floodgates to top-down subsidy-development, which often chokes out bottom-up sustainable development like an invasive pond weed.

But we know that there have been conditions for and examples of the latter. There are the judo masters, who have the poise and balance to flip the heavy-handed center, to deploy the resources from the outside for more local needs. People like Hayano Senpei, at the center of Jackson Bailey's invaluable historical ethnography of Tanohata: the combative and irascible mayor of Tanohata from the mid-1960s to the 1990s, who skillfully leveraged central institutions to enact a home-grown vision and a local agenda for identity and livelihood³. And there are others. They are in Shōnai and Akita and elsewhere in the ethnographic archive.

Imagine the disparate outcomes if one or the other type of local leadership should prevail and let us imagine the circumstances that can produce one or the other.

This is something we can and should contribute to.

“Gappei”

Another line of inquiry that we Tohoku ethnographers might usefully pursue in imagining possible futures is the effects of a half-century of local administrative amalgamation on the post 3.11 region. There were 33 administrative cities, towns, and villages directly affected by the tsunami and earthquakes along the Tohoku coast on March 11, from Iwaki in the south up to Hachinohe in the north. Their total area is 3000 square kilometers, of which the inundated acreage has been photo-mapped to be about 440 square miles (some 7% of the total area of these administrative units).

What does it mean that every harbor, every coastal village and town, directly destroyed by the tsunami is administratively embedded in a larger local political unit? How is this mitigating or exacerbating the difficulties of recovery and the lines of renewal? Political amalgamation, we know from the ethnographic archive, has economic and social consequences, and it has produced, depending on the circumstances, new solidarities and new frictions. What is happening in these 33 *shichōson* and what are the lessons from the



Mayor Katsunobu Sakurai of Minamisoma made a plea to the world via YouTube, “I beg you...to help us.”

Tohoku archive that may be brought to bear? Ethnographers can and should help to answer these questions in ways that could help to envisage the future of local communities.

And to conclude with a final provocation. It would certainly seem from Japan's modern regional histories that *gappei* (merger) is inexorable and, to local testimony and scholarly conclusion, often deleterious. But might we imagine the possibilities of pushing it to its logical limits?

Tohoku, like New England in the US or the Maritimes in Canada, is a socio-geographic construct, a unit in the popular regional mapping of the country, a precipitate of cultural history, a grouping of convenience of its six prefectures. Regions have no formal economic or political standing.

But what if the continuous calls for an “age of locality,” for decentralization, for breaking Tokyo's stranglehold on the concentration of political, financial, and media power—what if these calls took at its literal word the state's own agenda of ever-larger administrative amalgamation? Could we imagine a Tohoku region of official standing and formal governance, a redrawing of the political, the constitutional map of Japan towards a less centralized and more federated union of regions that could offer the possibility and the rights and resources for region-first and region-led designs for living?

Fanciful, I admit. From pipeline to pipedream, some might say. Tohoku is not Quebec although it may be Scotland⁴. But my contribution here is not that particular imagined form, but the larger disposition behind it.

We can't speak about Tohoku, to Tohoku, with wisdom but we can speak from understanding, a collective understanding that is broad and deep.

We must clear a space between an appalled anthropology—with dire “Akira“-like predictions of a Tohoku dystopia—and an applied anthropology, with its stipulative tone about what must be done.

What I am suggesting is not *kibōgaku*—I have no hope for hope-ology, which seeks to take the pulse of optimism without an instrument or scale—but rather *sōzōgaku*, a deliberate and informed effort to imagine both the what and the how.

Our question is not what are the odds of a Tohoku *Ishin* (restoration), but what might be the forms of a Tohoku *Ishin*? Let us try to bring 50 years of concern for this region and its people to bear on that question.

Notes

1. For a timeline of videos produced by NHK of different aspects of post 3.11 see [here](#).
2. Winifred A. Bird and Elizabeth Grossman, “Chemical Contamination, Cleanup and Longterm Consequences of Japan's Earthquake and Tsunami,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 9, Issue 33, No 1, August 15, 2011.
3. Jackson H. *Bailey (1991) Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives: A Study of Political and Economic Change in a Tohoku Village*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.
4. An analogy pursued by the important volume recently published by the Shrinking Regions Research Group. Peter Matanle, Anthony S. Rausch and Shrinking Regions Research Group (2011) *Japan's Shrinking Regions in the 21st Century: Contemporary Responses to Depopulation and Socioeconomic Decline*. London and Amherst, NY: Cambria Press.

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