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LECTIO PRAECURSORIA

Aspired Communities: The Communities of Long-term Recovery After the 3.11 Disaster in the Town of Yamamoto

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ABSTRACT

A lectio præcursoria is a short presentation read out loud by a doctoral candidate at the start of a public thesis examination in Finland. It introduces the key points or central argument of the thesis in a way that should make the ensuing discussion between the examinee and the examiner apprehensible to the audience, many of whom may be unfamiliar with the candidate's research or even anthropological research in general.

Learned Custos, my esteemed opponent, honourable members of the audience:

My dissertation that I defend today explores the concept of community and long-term disaster recovery in the context of the 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami. My research is based on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in the small, disaster-stricken town of Yamamoto in the Tohoku region in the Miyagi prefecture.

I left for Japan on a sunny autumn afternoon at the end of September in 2014. Everything was ready and my already-packed bags waited by the door to be transferred to the car. However, just before leaving for the airport, I rushed to plant some tulips in our garden. It was comforting to know that something beautiful would be waiting for me upon my return and exciting to learn later how the blooms would turn out.

Tulips became a promise of a return home for me. However, unlike me, not everybody in

Yamamoto was able or even willing to return to their pre-disaster homes. Others, then again, opted to return to their pre-disaster homes in totally altered neighbourhoods. This does not mean that the wish, hope, and longing for home, a secure future, or community disappeared. The situation was actually quite the contrary. The need for a shared future extended from the material reconstruction to redefining community. This manifested as incredibly versatile and partly conflicting references to community and as various kinds of community activities.

The locals in the Tohoku region, however, faced a difficult task: they needed to re-envision their personal and collective future in relation to the disaster experience, the reinterpretation of pre-disaster life, and the continuous social and material changes brought about by the reconstruction. In the magnitude 9.0 earthquake and the following tsunami, the waves of which reached as high as 39 metres, over 20 000 people lost their lives, 6 200 were injured,

and 2500 remained missing. Approximately 1150000 buildings were destroyed or damaged. The earthquake, tsunami, and the following Fukushima nuclear accident caused the temporary or permanent evacuation and relocation of over 470000 residents.

In Yamamoto, 635 people lost their lives and nearly 5000 buildings were destroyed or damaged. The tsunami inundated approximately 37 per cent of the town and destroyed the coastal neighborhoods, shrines and temples, fields and greenhouses, the coastal forest zone, the railway, and the known living environment altogether. During reconstruction, the disaster hazard zone policy prohibited building along the coast and the large-scale building projects continue to change the town's landscape. In addition, population decline and aging in the politically and economically peripheralised Japanese countryside shaped the future prospects of the town even before the 2011 disaster.

The future is also a central theme in my thesis, in which I explore community as a future-oriented process. Planning, dreaming, and striving for the future can be easily considered a highly self-evident part of the human experience. This, however, is what makes the future and particularly its role in the construction of social reality interesting to explore. Regardless of this, the future has often remained in the shadow of the past, shared memories, and collective memorialisation in the analysis of both community and disaster recovery. Recent studies have started to emphasise a future-focused dimension, but that focus has remained on anticipation and avoidance of risks and threats. In addition, community, social structures, and shared identities are argued as formed through this kind of risk construction or the avoidance of threats forming strong juxtapositions or clear boundaries.

In my research, however, I emphasise that

risks, threats, uncertainties, avoidance, and anticipation alone are not sufficient in capturing the significance of the future in the formation of the experience of community. I invite the reader to explore with me instead what collective aspiring of the desired future can tell us about community in its varying forms. Of course, nothing certain can be said about the future, but the experience and the meaning of it can be studied in the present. Thus, with a future orientation I refer to temporal dimensions of present activities, or, in other words, to the ways we continuously orient towards the future and interpret the past based on future orientations.

This makes *community* an analytical framework of the process of meaning-making about the social reality instead of a definition or a categorical identity of a particular group. In my research I suggest that a future orientation of *collective aspiring* can serve as an analytical, conceptual tool that helps to understand how various forms of socialisation are interpreted and experienced as a community in diverse social practices attached to their material environments. That is, a community, which is dynamic, versatile, and even conflicting, but also very real, unified, stable, and even compelling as an experienced social reality.

The critical examination of community and the understanding of its temporal and spatial multifaceted nature are particularly important in the context of disaster recovery. The dynamic, processual nature of community is often neglected and, in some cases, politically motivated since reconstruction policies are based on rigid, place-bound pre-disaster community conceptualisations that may hinder recovery. Communities are experiencing disasters, yet they are valorised as the fountain of recovery resources and resilience. This kind of overemphasis on community capacity and spirit may delegate the responsibility of recovery

to the affected localities and divert attention away from the need for support and social and political problems.

After the disaster, many actors seek to define what kind of future the social, material, and political development should be directed towards. This can easily lead to conflicts. In Yamamoto, the reconstruction plan based on national guidelines aimed to respond to the challenges posed by disaster and decline, and to create a safe, viable, and attractive town by prioritising three new compact urban-styled reconstruction areas and relocating the railway away from the coast. These developmental visions based on tsunami risk estimations did not, however, resonate with the experiences and future wishes and aspirations of many of the residents. These residents felt that it was not their future for which the new town was built. Many coastal residents criticised the reconstruction plan and considered the massive, prolonged construction projects risking rather than securing the town's future.

One critical resident who had returned to the coast was Kaneko-san, a retired, yet active man in his neighbourhood. When I met Kaneko-san for the first time, he proudly introduced the communal field, library, and meeting place he established. However, according to his wife, he had not been such an active community organiser before the disaster. When asking Kaneko-san why he did all of this, this always cheery man suddenly became silent. With tears in his eyes even four years after the disaster, he said that he never again wanted to witness the sorrow that he saw on the faces of the residents returning from the coast the day after the disaster. He thinks that the togetherness that was felt in the disaster aftermath could serve as a basis for a secure future, not only in disasters, but also in the everyday life of aging residents.

Kaneko-san's case illustrates how community as intertwined social connections can form through what is collectively wanted and how: that is, past experiences and the interpretation of reconstruction laid a foundation for Kaneko-san's activities, but only the futural aspiring animates the community. By organising events, establishing meeting places, and participating in critical resident groups, Kaneko-san not only seeks to realise the future goal of a safe coastal community, but this constantly redefined action oriented pursuing towards and yearning for a sense of togetherness actualise this community.

For instance, working together in the field that Kaneko-san established, greeting neighbours passing by, choosing and planning which vegetables to plant, and waiting for the harvest connected people to perform an activity and shaped their experience of a shared future: The activity of farming in itself offered something to do, wait on, accomplish, and communicate together. This is not, however, a guarantee of an idealised sense of community, but collective aspiring may lead to contradictions, conflicts, and indifference. Some may want to plant carrots instead of potatoes and some consider sweating in the field entirely pointless.

Gardening and farming were regarded as important for social connections, but were impossible in the new urban residential areas depicted as safe, as Murata-san, a new resident remarked. She felt that her new home was nevertheless an important start for recovery, which granted many a temporal and spatial reference point after the prolonged liminal state in the barracks-like temporary housing. However, the change created anxieties and insecurities. The mixing of residents from different coastal districts and their divergent community rules and practices complicated

community building in the new areas. In addition, unknown neighbours and the threat to privacy caused by the dense building caused concerns. In particular, this emphasises the social dimensions of security.

Murata-san and the other new active residents sought to navigate together these social and material changes and to form new practices to create the community for which everybody yearned. According to Murata-san, meetings at trash collection points and when walking dogs became new opportunities to create social connections that would also serve as a safety net for the lone elderly at risk of marginalisation. However, while seeking to secure their community and its future, these residents also formed normative expectations of the proper enactment of community, such as by expecting everybody to introduce themselves to their neighbours regardless of their individual interests in socializing.

These are just snapshots of the diversity of futures and communities in post-disaster Yamamoto. This illustrates, however, how disaster recovery is not simply reconstructing social and material reality as it was. Instead, it can be seen as a process in which the capability of envisioning and enacting a future in and of place is recovered both individually and collectively. Furthermore, agency and power both between the residents and officials and within a community are accentuated in the exploration of the future and community in the post-disaster setting.

Honourable audience, I return for a moment to discuss tulips, even if they are not really such social entities. Indeed, a beautifully blooming flowerbed awaited me when I returned home in May 2015. This was not, however, a permanent accomplishment; a garden requires constant work and care for the new spring. In the end, a week before this defence, I completely

remoulded that flowerbed and planted some peonies, which I hope will flourish. In addition to the expectation of future blooms, the activity of gardening in itself was meaningful for me during this process.

Likewise, the community is moulded in the continuous future-oriented dynamics of envisioning and enactment. Hence, I suggest in my thesis that community can be analysed in its various forms through and as a process of collective aspiring in itself. Sometimes, a community needs only a little maintenance; but, sometimes the world turns upside down, and sometimes it is necessary to plant roots in a new place. The great East Japan disaster was a massive and dramatic experience for everybody involved. It suddenly moulded locals' lives and their understanding of community, yet it alone did not fully define them. Disaster continues its existence as an experience that is a part of the life histories and the future trajectories of locals. It is important to pay closer attention to the processual nature and the role of aspiring in it, during the course of reconstruction and beyond.

Different crises, such as disasters, wars, and pandemics, may accentuate the uncertainty of the future. However, particularly in the midst of these kinds of disruptions, the significance of a shared future becomes highlighted both in individual and social lives. Thus, I hope that my research directs attention to this and provides tools to further examine how important shared futures are indeed to social life in both disaster recovery and everyday life.

This *Lectio Praecursoria* was originally delivered in Finnish and subsequently translated for this publication.

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