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The Great Forest Wall:

A plan to protect Japan from future mega-tsunami

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Abstract

Disaster Anthropology is often prefaced on a phrase such as, 'First there was the eruption/earthquake etc., then came the disaster' meaning that much of what was experienced as disaster must be blamed on the lack of human preparedness and failures in the human response. The three-fold disaster that hit Japan in 2011 (mega-earthquake + mega-tsunami + plus nuclear disaster almost compatible to Chernobyl) was indeed such a mixture of natural disaster compounded by human failure. This paper focuses especially on the important role of religion and ritual in successfully responding to the disaster, and the difficulties that have arisen because government is constitutionally obliged to be tone-deaf to both. Government and many local people found they had seriously different assumptions and priorities. The welcome to foreign aid volunteers is used to highlight such differences. Enormous concern about the survivors and victims was coupled to the anxiety of survivors themselves and growing criticism of government, for not doing enough either before or after the disaster. Against the backdrop of so many complicated and conflicting sentiments and obligations, the paper introduces The Great Forest Wall project as not only a green solution that would protect against future tsunami for hundreds of years or more, but also as so far the only enterprise that hopes to enable the whole country to come together in a single testimony of all their powerful feelings about the victims, and collective concern for future generations. It seeks to enable a concept of Japan and being Japanese that avoids the awkward politics of nationalism. It links past, present and future by promoting traditional wisdom that 'It is the trees that protect us.' It offers a mixture of the latest science with traditional religion, and an understanding of how ritual and 'religious-like' concepts can bridge social divisions and express a great variety of contradictory sentiments at the same time.

Key words: 2011 Tohoku Disaster; Ecological Anthropology; Disaster Anthropology; Anthropology of Religion; Anthropology of Japan.

This paper links two newly popular areas of Social & Cultural Anthropology, namely Environmental and Disaster Anthropology, via the medium of one of the richest seams of Classic Anthropology: Religion and Ritual. It therefore marches to a very functionalist drum. I hope that the ethnographic content speaks for itself, so that others can interpret it in other ways and see other connections. The paper may also read like good PR for a project that seems to tick all the boxes for a 'development project': maximum appeal, maximum participation, maximally good for social reconstruction, maximally pro-environment, and remarkably inexpensive... Time of course will tell.

The Great Forest Wall is a project to plant a forest along the coastline of North-Eastern Japan (over 400 kilometres) and possibly other coastal areas at risk from the kind of devastating tsunami that struck on March 3, 2011. The project was devised by Akira Miyawaki, a leading conservationist, environmental architect and Professor at Yokohama University. He has achieved great international success with projects that use a barrier of trees, instead of concrete etc., to protect factories and communities from bad weather and similar dangers. He has also written and lectured extensively upon how ancient forests are important for our health. Much of his inspiration came from traditional knowledge in Japan and S.E. Asia, but he was able to incorporate the latest in engineering and biological knowledge. As the country began debating how best to prevent such horrible disasters in the future, a group began to grow around him, to use trees in a similar way but on a much grander scale. He found a powerful ally in Morihiro Hosokawa, former Prime Minister and Governor of Kumamoto Prefecture. They still head-up the project, as Vice-President and President respectively. From the very beginning, they did not see their project as simply using science to offer an alternative, and more environmentally friendly, solution to the massive concrete wall proposed by government. In addition, they wanted to design a solution that

also connected with spiritual, social and health needs. In simple terms, Professor Miyawaki's experience of 'working WITH Nature' combined with former PM Hosokawa's belief in 'true democracy'...The background: Frustration with Government.

Background: Frustrations with Government + frustrated religious needs

The Great North-Eastern Japan Disaster was essentially a sequence of 3 disasters. There was an enormous earthquake followed by numerous after-shocks, the dreadful tsunami cresting in places over 30 metres in height, and finally the damage to the Fukushima nuclear reactors, causing widespread radiation. Close to 22,000 people died, either during the disaster itself or subsequently from injuries sustained during it. The damage to property and industry was enormous. However it was images of the tsunami and its devastation in particular that shocked people not only in Japan but across the world. Japan was pretty used to earthquakes. The Fukushima nuclear disaster was new, and undoubtedly scary, but information was limited and officialdom minimised the problems, to stop any panic. Only the tsunami inspired general horror. Towns hit by the tsunami looked like a war-zone. Whole villages were simply swept away, with very little left behind. Survivors who witnessed it remain traumatised. YouTube is the closest most of us can be to the disaster, but does not show the dead bodies in the streets, or in cars, or washed into houses and apartments. Those who were not there cannot easily conceive the effect of such a sudden loss of so many friends, neighbours and loved ones, or the daily agonising over what might have been, but wasn't. It is the same with all great distress moments of trauma. How can you describe wartime experiences, to people who were never there, and have never experienced a war? If one single story might speak for thousands more, an elderly gentleman told me in very simple

words about how he and two friends were attending a local festival when the earthquake struck. The moment the tsunami alert sounded, they got on their bicycles and began peddling like mad for the nearby hill. Only the old gentleman made it in time. Along with his friends, hundreds died. I met him during his daily walk, a walk he had done for many years except this time there was no longer any town. A supermarket had stood where we were chatting. I thought it was just the beach...

In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, there were a lot of needs. The government responded very fast and within 24 hours all survivors had accommodation of some kind, and there was food. Basic needs were therefore met but the response remained pretty basic for several months. Moreover, there was no electricity or gas. For those people still near the coast, in towns like Ishinomaki, night-time especially was cold and scary, with aftershocks, frequently very powerful, coming every hour or half-hour, and the ever-present fear of another tsunami.

There were a range of what might simply be termed 'emotional' needs that could not be met so easily. In fact, inevitably, life in the evacuation centres frequently made such problems even worse, and added even more. Perhaps most troubling of all have been not infrequent reports of rape.

The many villages along the coast were famous for their very strong sense of 'community' – in a country already well-known for being community-focused. I helped bring much-appreciated supplies to one village, where survivors were sheltering up the mountain in what had been an old-people's home. The village of course, including the official evacuation centre, had been swept away. Almost everybody was over 60 years old – by now normal in 'village Japan'. In very simple conditions, they were supporting each other and there was a collective refusal to accept the offers from children to come and stay with them, eg. in Tokyo, instead. They knew that if they separated in this way, their community would die. I was surprised, and somewhat

shocked, that so many were keen to talk about the tragedy, and the loss of parents, siblings and spouses often in front of their eyes. No volunteer should ever initiate such conversations, since the consequences can be traumatic. But here, this eagerness to describe the event was coupled with enormous responsibility as survivors, bound together not only as neighbours and kin, but also by the ancestors. Being able to talk to me in this way was clearly understood as testimony to what it meant to be part of such a community. What in other circumstances might better be discouraged, was here part of local therapy and affirmation of historical knowledge that must be passed on.

Such stories reflect upon how 'therapy' has traditionally been handled locally, by the community and through Buddhist and Shinto priests acting as ritual experts. Psycho-therapy and Psychiatric-Counseling are not deeply rooted in the way they tend to be in Western countries. Part of the International Office of the WHO is based in Kobe, and strongly urged the Japanese government to recruit trained counsellors from elsewhere in Asia, to come and help survivors cope with trauma... The government rejected the proposal. Some of the reasons might seem obvious. The fact that foreign counsellors, albeit 'sharing an Asian perspective' (the WHO phrase), would have lacked knowledge of Japanese culture and above all would have needed translators. In any case, it was government policy to restrict entry by outsiders to the disaster zones for several months after the earthquake, because it was far from clear that there might not be another such disaster shortly, or indeed massive looting. Simply having to provide food and accommodation for outsiders, despite their obvious desire to help, seemed too big a challenge when it was difficult enough to meet the basic needs of survivors.

In fact the Japanese government has invested a lot in subsequently providing trained Japanese counsellors, especially for children, albeit not on the massive scale proposed by the

WHO. Such individual counselling is becoming available after most families have already been able to respond in the traditional way, using funerals and memorial rites to channel their personal & collective emotions into re-forming as a family.

It is quite common to hear criticisms of the government's response, for being late or inappropriate, or for diverting resources to Fukushima away from the tsunami-disaster zone. There is often truth in such accusations, as there would be for any government faced with a disaster on such a scale. But arguably what might to the foreign observer seem like simple slowness or ignorance on the part of the government, actually reflected subtle awkwardnesses within Japanese culture. The villages of the Tohoku region are famous for being suspicious of neighbouring villages, let alone Japanese from further afield. Japanese anthropologists I know, who had done fieldwork in the area, told me they felt it would be impossible for them to go back to those villages and help, because the survivors would feel ashamed. Shame was an issue that Haldor Stephanson also observed among survivors of the Kobe earthquake of 1995 (for example, within 24 hours of the earthquake, female survivors on TV news were wearing make-up). In a perhaps startling contrast, many foreign anthropologists in Japan signed up as volunteers, presumably in part no doubt because they felt their training would be useful. But this initial diffidence by Japanese anthropologists arguably reflects a set of social assumptions that can also explain at least part of the government response. Survivors might have lots of emergency needs, but they also needed 'space'. It was a space that insofar as it existed, could be bridged, ironically, by sympathetic foreigners. I frequently found survivors very happy to talk with me, or other foreigners but far less so if Japanese were present. Instead of talking, they would lower their heads and go silent. The Self-Defence Forces, which did magnificent work rescuing people and delivering aid, remained in 'military mode'. Expressionless sentries guarded

the trucks, in the midst of shattered communities. By summer, they were knocking on doors and chatting with the locals about the latest local news. In contrast with the governments refusal until the summer to allow in the many emergency volunteer associations that bloomed following the Kobe earthquake (2015) some foreign volunteer groups were given a free rein almost immediately. Often without knowing a word of Japanese, they were giving surviving grandmas hugs in the street and the tears would flow... It seemed these foreign volunteers could 'break the rules' in a way that truly met some important needs, at least during the immediate aftermath of the *tsunami*. By summer, the situation had changed. More conventional manners were back and the foreign volunteers had less to offer, apart of course from their labour. Yet those foreign volunteers who had shared in the immediate post-tsunami experience often found themselves bonded with survivors in a way that was impossible for the flood of volunteers (both Japanese and foreign) that arrived from the first summer onwards.

Many of these early foreign volunteers were linked with first-response Christian NGO's, such as Samaritan's Purse. They were trained not to exploit disaster situations for in-your-face evangelism. However, they did offer prayer, and this seemed much appreciated by survivors who were not Christian. Prayer was a need that non-Christian professionals also recognised. But local places of worship had been devastated just like everywhere else, and priests were dead, injured, traumatised, or just too busy caring for their own families. The Christian NGO's had received permission from the Japanese government on the basis that they could liaise with local priests and churches and might thus work without needing any other help. In fact, virtually no local priests or churches were in any shape to help them. As experienced first-responders, they found local survivors who worked with them to identify areas that needed help. As a result, they could fill in the gaps left by the government strategy, which was to set up

centres and ask survivors to come to them, rather than deliver aid into each local neighbourhood. Many survivors however preferred to stay close to their homes, however uninhabitable they might be, since this was the only way family members from elsewhere might easily find them. Thus a few blocks from a government depot, there might be communities that did not receive significant aid for weeks. There were of course no cars, no electricity. Mobile phone-connections remained a challenge. Communication was not easy.

Be-One, a group of foreign Christian missionaries in Osaka became embedded in several communities within or near Ishinomaki, by offering such locally focused help, initially in the form of food, clothing, 'blue sheets' and cooking items, and then with the re-construction of houses and lives. To the surprise of many, they have remained as 'house churches.' These districts of Ishinomaki will continue for many years as testimony to their lack of 'community' with each street featuring a succession of empty plots that look like 'pulled teeth' between reconstructed houses. The *tsunami* not only destroyed houses and families, but also the old local hierarchy. Many survivors see the Be-One houses, with their smiling foreign parents and noisy foreign kids, as part of the new community. After all, Christian evangelicals claim to know a lot about 'new beginnings'... Other individuals ostentatiously surround their houses with plant-pots and other garden features, just like in the old days, and try to live as if nothing had happened.

There were Buddhist and Shinto priests who also came to help survivors and restore community. The point is that neither national nor local government officials are at liberty to meet what are defined as spiritual or religious needs, at least in their public capacity. (No doubt many or most of them have a personal faith of some kind). The postwar Constitution forbids the use of public funds for any religious purpose. But it was the temples, shrines and occasional churches etc. that were essential to meet

not only key spiritual needs but also key social responsibilities, such as funerals. Much has been said about how many shrines or temples had been sited on coastal hills as places of refuge in times of past *tsunami*, and had kept markers (sadly forgotten) about where not to build, for fear of *tsunami*. In establishing postwar Japan as a secular state and denying authority to religion of any kind, perhaps too much had been thrown out with the bath-water.

In modern Japan, collective religious rituals and festivals continue to mark the seasons and the course of life in general. It's easy to see how they all promote the health and harmony of the local community. Perhaps more difficult to appreciate is how they require enormous effort and dedication from members of this community. They inspire qualities of leadership, craftsmanship and performing arts that might not be achievable any other way. The older generations teach the younger generations, who become the teachers of future generations. Since the Meiji Restoration in 1868, by and large, people go to Shinto shrines to pray for success and avoiding danger, and to Buddhist temples to deal with the heavier issues that surround death. Prior to 1868, however, it may not have been easy to distinguish Shinto from Buddhism at all. They would have seemed virtually fused, and all these functions were shared. No book about traditional or modern Japan would be complete without extensive coverage of religious ceremonies and festivals. Yet woe betide the local mayor who now visits a local shrine and makes a donation, however small, in his public, rather than private, capacity.

The destruction of funeral parlours (normally secular), temples and family tombs posed obvious problems for survivors, anxious to do the right thing for their lost loved ones. Government could do very little to help, except set up new funeral parlours that at least enabled funerals to take place. Anxieties rose as O-Bon (a 3-day festival in mid-August when the ancestors return for a short visit to their families) approached. Not all victims had

yet received a proper funeral, and of course many bodies were still missing, so there could be no proper funeral. Ancestors might be coming back before they had been properly buried, and more distant ancestors would be coming back to see their tombs in a mess or totally destroyed. Those who took such traditions seriously were not only ashamed, but also afraid. My Christian informants found themselves doing a lot more hugging.

As the time of the first anniversary of the disaster approached, national and local government did not wish to see a repeat of such frustration and anxiety. They decided to sponsor annual ceremonies to commemorate the departed. They encouraged survivors, government employees, the media etc. to take part. They were meant to mark a meeting of national and local concern. Arguably, it was important for government to do something, and within the limits of the Constitution this was perhaps the best that government could do.

It is a little too simple to say that the problems that ensued stem from trying too hard to invent non-religious ceremonies to satisfy religious needs. There was a clear precedent to learn from. Enormous controversy surrounds Yasukuni Shrine, where the souls of Japan's military dead have been enshrined. Insofar as the Yasakuni issues relate to government being too closely involved with religion, as well as war crimes, it was no surprise that to commemorate the victims of the N.E. Japan Disaster, government wanted a purely secular event. Yet there was still a lot of controversy. Even now, over six years since the *tsunami*, there remain enormous local disagreements over the memorials that the government has funded for victims. By contrast, what government has tried to keep out, i.e. religion, seems very welcome. A group such as Tohoku Aid, centred in Sendai, has helped establish mixed faith teams of Buddhist, Christian and Shinto priests who come to these memorials or other places and simply offer to pray with individuals, and their actual religion doesn't seem to matter much.

This seems to belie much of the justification for *secular* rituals such as the commemoration ceremonies and memorials, namely that a purely religious ritual would be impossible for the simple reason that every religion, and often every sect within that religion, has a different teaching about the after-life. Insofar as a funeral marks the sending-off of the soul, then each religion would be sending the soul to a different place, with very different teachings about what happens next. Surely, it would be so much simpler to have a one-size-fits-all secular ceremony that commemorates the dead and says 'sayonara.' Simpler maybe, but also seriously problematic.

The relationship of any individual and his/her family with loved ones who have died, especially so suddenly and tragically, is always going to be complex. Three issues at least need special attention to understand the situation in Japan, especially in traditional areas such as the North-East. Firstly, religious experts, i.e. priests, are necessary for prayers and rituals not because they are experts in theology or any particularly difficult branch of knowledge, including counseling, but because they have *authority*. They have authority and confidence in those moments when ordinary individuals and families falter. For vulnerable young children, they offer blessings and charms. For bereaved and grieving families, they offer the next step... This is an authority that government simply doesn't have and has never really had either. (The elevation of Shinto to a state ministry in the late 19th. century was coupled with banning Shinto priests from performing funerals.) So there has been considerable unease, or worse, about the State getting involved in complicated after-life issues yet again.

Secondly, the decision to build these memorials came before local agreement was secured. In fact there was considerable local disagreement. A list of all the disputed points would be a very long list indeed, and much more than disputing the right to use a particular location, or design. They would include complaints of

government spending lots of money on celebrating the dead, but doing very little to celebrate the living... Very simply, feelings remain very raw and the hurry to meet a deadline was a hurry of the government's own making, and did not allow for the slow and painstaking sensitivity to local opinion that local people wanted. The government was deciding how to properly memorialise the disaster in the eyes of the rest of the country, and the outside world. Unfortunately, the locals felt left out.

Thirdly, a funeral in Japan turns the dear-and-departed into ancestors who continue to have a living presence, not only in the form of photographs on the wall but also within family ancestral altars and ancestral graves. Those that die as babies or children are nonetheless ancestors too. Thus a government-sponsored memorial ceremony that simply registers 'goodbye' to the dead, is at best irrelevant and potentially seriously shocking. No, the dead come back. If it was simply a matter of saying 'goodbye' then mourners would just have to get on with their lives and any personal problems of grief and hardship might well best be conceived in terms of 'counseling needs.' Instead, the traditional response to bereavement and the closest thing to therapy, was not to say 'goodbye' but to help the departed to achieve life in a new form and come back in a new role, as an ancestor, who ought to be properly venerated and remembered and may help in times of need. A serious family disaster or upset might be explained in terms of a failure to clean the ancestral tombs, or pray for a particular ancestor. A young wife (*'yome'*) might be delegated with conducting the brief ancestral ceremonies each morning, work that might seem like drudgery but could potentially become the most important work of all.

To argue that a society uses the problems of individuals to fuel society itself is to argue not only why we have societies at all, but also how anthropologists might explain religion, insofar as such a process is frequently managed via non-scientific but socially useful concepts and rituals.

What might therefore have seemed like government doing its benign best, in fact not only undermined what had been key resources and responses within traditional communities, but also seemed to empower government in a way that many thought totally inappropriate. The push to send in psychotherapists and counsellors, as cited above, was misguided not because there wasn't a need for them, but because it reflected the notion that the survivors had nothing of the kind to help them. Far from working *with* the resources of local culture, they would have been working *against* them. What local people had, tho perhaps difficult to prove scientifically, was belief that that they had the power to control the situation. The survivors in the story cited above, huddling on the mountain, still believed they were in control, if they could stay together. They had duties not only to each other, but also to the ancestors. Take away the ancestors, and send in counsellors instead, would see the community collapsing overnight as members were told to focus on themselves as individuals rather than part of a shared, living history. (It is sad and perhaps ironic that what *is* killing such communities is the growing awareness that there will be no new generation to take over from the survivors. The younger generation has found work in the towns and although there may have been promises to come back, take care of the parents and maintain the ancestral household, this is now even less likely to happen.)

However community festivals, funerals or concepts of the ancestors enabled local communities to survive and thrive in the face of life's challenges, it should be clear that this was rooted in trust in local tradition and local priests having the necessary authority. Having these rituals and concepts empowered the community, whereas that the governments clumsy attempts to provide better, secular rituals only served to undermine and disempower them. Whether or not this might reflect how central authority can so easily feel challenged by local independence, the

government found itself often working against local expectations and conversely local people felt government, in some serious ways at least, was working against them. This is not to say that government and local communities managed to achieve a great deal together. But instead of a win/win the partnership turned into something more like a three-legged race.

If government had forgotten one BIG thing, it was that Japan had been through similar and even worse disasters before. Japanese society and culture had survived and thrived. What was new about this *tsunami* was the scale of economic destruction. In the past there had just been coastal or inland villages that relied solely on local resources. The Japanese government did a great job speedily re-constructing the airports, the roads & railways, the fishing fleets and all the infrastructure that was vital to get a modern economy running again. Social reconstruction was going to be more difficult. The above discussion tries to illustrate the dangers, not only when a government forgets that mega-*tsunami* happen, but also how its own society works.

To focus on religious and spiritual needs may seem unfair, since the government by law should have nothing to do with religion, especially if this involves government money. However, government policy undermined much that was crucial to how local people responded collectively to such disasters. To say that religion is 'private' and should have nothing to do with the State left a big void. Trying to fill this with ceremonies officiated by politicians, rather than religious leaders, implied that politicians have a similar kind of authority to religious leaders, and the right to similar respect. This would always beg a few questions, but especially so in the case of ceremonies designed to reflect the needs of bereaving survivors...

A situation was developing in which survivors were beginning to feel that government was seeing them more and more as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. They must adapt to what was decided by central planning, if

they were going to be helped at all.

The government certainly felt under enormous pressure to get things done. Pressure from the Opposition Democratic party, pressure from International Opinion & Investment, and pressure from sitting on vast donations from so many people, inside Japan and overseas, who responded to news of the tragedy by sending money. A year or so after the tragedy, when I told friends both in Japan and overseas that I was still going up to Tohoku to help, I was regularly met with surprise that things hadn't already returned to normal. This was the front that the government felt obliged to show, but it covered a great deal of local frustration.

Two major issues needed to be tackled: re-building the coastal towns and villages and protecting the coast from future *mega*-tsunami. The clock was ticking, for although such megatsunami, and their associated earthquakes, might be once-in-a-thousand-year events, the experts were beginning to suggest that such events might 'cluster' due to the behaviour of the tectonic plates beneath Japan. Action however was impeded because government attention and finances were being distracted by the problems of the Fukushima nuclear power plant.

To re-build communities in their old locations meant exposing them, and their descendants, to the same dangers in the future. Moreover, it presupposed that the region's economic and social needs would remain the same. In the case of villages populated by septuagenarians, such a future was highly questionable. At the very least, safety meant moving the communities to higher ground, but in this area the mountains often come close to the sea and flat ground higher up is hard to find. In each situation, some individuals were in favour of moving higher up, and others were in favour of staying in the same place. Others were in two minds to leave the area completely. Without a general resolution, it was difficult to decide whether or not to rebuild the house even when government grants or insurance pay-outs were available. In parts of Ishinomaki, government

help enabled what might seem the best of both worlds. Massive amounts of earth were trucked in to raise the level where the old houses had been, and the new houses are being built on top. But this was a massive undertaking, and doing something similar everywhere else would require not only enormous sums of money, but vast quantities of earth and cement and of course manpower. That would inevitably translate into a long time before every town or village could be re-constructed.

Government has been rather more optimistic with regard to protecting the shoreline. Re-building the sea-wall seemed a lot more do-able. Prior to the tsunami, most coastal communities had already been protected by a sea-wall of some kind. Such barriers included the biggest ones in the world. Unfortunately, these had not been big or strong enough. The government has opted for the mother-of-all-sea-walls, a great concrete barrier that would stretch 500 km. along the coast of N.E. Japan and in some places 30m. high. Great gates would allow the fishing boats to come in or out. The cost is estimated in billions of dollars and Japan's annual supply of construction materials such as earth or sand for several years to come. Major opposition has come from the fishing community, not only because they will no longer to 'read' the sea from their homes, but also because the massive wall will disrupt fishing massively. The fish are nourished by the run-off from the mountains that bring valuable nutrients into the sea. In fact this is an 'ancient knowledge' that the Japanese government and others have been celebrating as part of a 'Satoyama' tradition of sustainable farming and fishing that created a super eco-system and gives Japan a very special place at the Environment table. But the great concrete wall will block the valuable run-off from the mountains and thus ruin what has been one of the two mainstays of the local economy. The other has been tourism, since the views out-to-sea were made famous in the poems of Bassho. Now, all you will be able to see will be the biggest concrete barrier in the world. Some would argue

this in itself will make the wall a tourist attraction. The locals fear otherwise, and don't fancy living in the shadow of such a monstrosity either.

Once again, there seems to be another dysfunction between what a 'nanny' government insists is the right medicine, but locals understand otherwise. They seem happy to wait for a better solution that won't kill the local economy, which was why they came to be living there in the first place. And yet it is the locals that government seeks to protect. The population at large is thunderstruck by the projected cost to the public purse, in a country already mired in 20 years of depression. Agreement is only possible because government claims there is no alternative.

In sum, It has been really difficult, in the aftermath of the Tohoku Disaster, to achieve a long term plan that everybody can support. There has been the common complaint of those who want to help not being appreciated, and those who seek help not being listened to. The Government has felt obliged to do something. After all, who knows when the next great tsunami may come? However, the concrete wall will not protect Japan for ever. It's lifetime is expected to be about 50 years. What then?

The Great Forest Wall

The Great Forest Wall by comparison is so many different things. It will be a defence against *tsunami* but also a place for recreation, where children can play and families can picnic. It will not be an eyesore. It will be a great ecological resource. At the same time, water from the mountains will still find its way to the sea, and bring the nutrients that sustain Japan's traditional fishing industry. It will be a memorial not only to remember those who died and how much people suffered, but also to celebrate how much people cared for future generations. It promotes the value of community, and how much we can do if we work together.

It celebrates traditional wisdom, whereby people should work with, rather than against, Nature and the trees themselves can protect the people.... These are all things that a concrete dyke, for example, cannot achieve and they cannot be measured in money, not least because almost no money is involved.... Last but not least, it doesn't have to be built quickly. It can bend or wait in accordance with local opinion. After all, the concrete barrier will protect the region for 50 years. Within that time, the forest wall can grow, and it can last for thousands of years.

This at least is the PR. In practice, since the project began in 2013, only a handful of small stretches have been built. However, the organisers are not dismayed. They see the project as building community and national sentiment and not just building a forest.

The Great Forest Wall certainly represents an innovation in sustainable construction, and disaster prevention. Mangrove swamps protected the coasts of Thailand and other countries against the terrible tsunami of 2004. They didn't stop the tsunami, but weakened its force and also prevented survivors and houses etc. from being swept out to sea. The Great Forest Wall will have a similar effect, but it is inland, close to the sea rather than in the sea, and it needs to be constructed first. It will generally be about only 5 metres high, but there will be higher points at regular stages where people can be sure of sanctuary. In all it will stretch about 500 kilometres. Construction utilises the non-toxic rubble left behind by the tsunami, which is an eyesore and a disposal headache for government. Trees are planted on top. The method has been tried and tested in many other areas around the globe, by Professor Miyawaki.

The Great Forest Wall Project seeks to build on Japanese cultural traditions and on all the hopes and anxieties generated throughout the nation by the Tohoku Disaster. Very simply, the organisers feel they have found a way for everybody who cares 'to do something'. It seeks to build on 'values', without assuming

that everybody must share the same values or motivations. People suffered and were affected in different ways, but they all come together to help build the Great Forest Wall. It remains the only project related to the *tsunami* that has not generated great controversy. This is not the same as attracting all the necessary approval, but already the project is achieving much simply as an inspiration for many.

Recently, a lot of world attention has focused on ‘Satoyama’, the traditional landscape surrounding Japanese villages that has become celebrated as a model for intensive but highly sustainable farming and forestry. Sensitive and close knowledge of the local environment enabled the villagers to get Mother Nature to do most of the work and develop a very rich ecosystem that included the nearby sea. Unfortunately during the past 100 years of modernisation, most of this local knowledge and practice has come close to disappearing.

A typical Japanese village was sited with wooded hillside above and fields for rice and other crops below. What modern scholars have decided to term ‘Satoyama’ wisdom included the careful management of woodland on the slopes above, not only to yield useful resources but also to prevent landslides, an ever-present risk since Japanese hillsides can be very steep, reflecting Japan’s volcanic past. The Great Forest Wall project uses the same wisdom.

The Tohoku Disaster, and before that the Kobe Earthquake of 1995, highlighted other elements of ancient wisdom that had been forgotten. Much of the destruction in Kobe was caused by the fires generated after the earthquake. Whole streets were destroyed, but the fires were frequently stopped by lines of trees. Along the Tohoku coast, so famous for its gorgeous scenery of white sands and trees, the tsunami swept everything away, except –once again– here and there some trees stood firm.

Tohoku may be more famous for the trees that were destroyed than the ones that survived. The famous pine forests

along the coast were established hundreds of years ago as a windbreak as well for their beauty. However pine trees are not indigenous to Japan, and certainly not to its coastline. They burned like torches in Kobe, and splintered like match-wood before the *tsunami*. The trees that withstood both were particular broad-leaf species indigenous to Japan.

The Tohoku Disaster led to serious distrust in government planning. The risk of *tsunamis* was well known. There had been enormous investment in great embankments to protect villages along the coast. The experts said they did not need to be more than 10 metres high. The nuclear power station at Fukushima was built according to similar mistaken estimates. Even when evidence was produced to question these assumptions, it was overruled. Of course, the consequences were tragic. The government experts still promoted the same science, and just advised 'build bigger.' But the trees surviving in Kobe and along the Tohoku coastline seemed to teach that it's simply a mistake to aim at controlling or fighting nature. Instead, they testified to an older wisdom, of 'working With nature rather than AGAINST nature'.

Interestingly, as former PM Hosokawa and Professor Miyazaki canvassed for support in 2013, the Forestry Ministry set up a project called 'Green Connections,' strongly supported by former prime-minister Noda of the Democratic party. This also seeks to run parallel to the coast but features a much lower embankment (3 metres). It is therefore not designed to compete with the concrete sea-wall that the government is building. For the same reason, although it utilises a construction model similar to the Great Forest Wall and can offer a similar recreation, ecological and aesthetic function, it is not designed to protect future generations from another mega-tsunami. Both projects are trying to avoid direct competition. Green Connections, like the Great Forest Wall, requires local agreement and is proceeding very slowly. Of course two major differences

are that Green Connections has government funding whereas the Great Forest Wall relies on donations and volunteers, and that, as a government project, Green Connections cannot appeal to religious sentiment or support. Instead, it relies enormously on the appeal of its scientific, eco-friendly model. The following discussion focuses only on the Great Forest Wall. However, it must be noted that despite the eco-friendly claims of both Green Connections and the Great Forest Wall, significant academic opposition is being mounted on ecological/conservation grounds because both projects are likely to literally crush the fragile life-forms that in fact survived the great tsunami. Building a large or small forest embankment along the coast will dramatically change the present system. Of course, the great concrete barrier will do even more damage. This debate continues, but whereas Green Connections is limited to battling with the same scientific facts and conservation doctrine as this opposition, the Great Forest Wall team can also appeal to other sentiments, although it certainly doesn't wish to lose the eco-argument. Fortunately, neither Green Connections nor the Great Forest Wall are in any great hurry, in contrast with the government's concrete barrier. So there seems to be time for proper discussion and flexibility. For example, it is unlikely that any forest wall can cover estuaries and inlets, and therefore disrupt their present ecology. Such areas would remain holes in the forest armour and perhaps can only be fully protected by a sea-wall.

Like Green Connections, the Great Forest Wall is a *secular* Project. In part this is to guarantee maximum public support, but also not to discourage government support. However, the project was recently re-named, in Japanese, as 'The *Chinju-no-mori* Project'. This is because the indigenous trees that protected villages from fire and tsunami survive most conspicuously in the sacred groves called '*chinju-no-mori*' that are a feature of every Shinto shrine. '*Chinju-no-mori*' can be translated as 'Forest of Protection'. In Shinto theology they were spaces left in the wild

forest that once covered Japan, where the local deities or *kami* could rest undisturbed by villagers chopping down trees and generally making lots of noise elsewhere. Traditional wisdom was that health and safety meant not disturbing the *kami*... It has certainly preserved virtually the last remnants of ancient forest, as it would have been 2,000 years ago. But the project highlights not how shrines have protected the trees, but rather how it is the trees that can protect us....

'*Shaso gakkai*' is an association of academics, interested members of the public and shrines, to study *chinju-no-mori*. It was established not only because of academic interest in the ancient groves attached to shrines, but also because the groves have been coming under threat as local governments see them as potential parking lots, or barriers to road-widening schemes. As a result they have become a hot potato issue, at least in local politics. Shaso Gakkai has become a forum through which Scientific, Conservation and Religious interests can partner together. In other words a fascination with *chinju-no-mori* does not require Shinto faith, but it can readily lead to respect for whatever ancient wisdom led to the creation of *chinju-no-mori* in the first place. Neither Professor Miyawaki nor former prime minister are aiming to promote modern Shinto but this change in the project's name not only associates it more specifically with religious tradition, but also reflects how they feel the supporters of the project are comfortable with this association. For the less religious, it is the idea of 'the trees protect us' ; Shinto devotees would see *kami* instead of the trees.

It can be no coincidence that the day-to-day administrator of the project is a Shinto priest, or that the daughter of former PM Hosokawa, is also a Shinto priest and has been very closely associated with the project. Nor is it irrelevant that for several years, Jinja Honcho, the national association that represents about 80% of all shrines in Japan, has been partnering closely with conservation NGO's such as ARC and WWF, to promote 'the

Shinto View of Nature', in a way that embraces not only *chinju no mori* but also the Satoyama traditions described above. But what might loosely called the 'mainstream' of Shinto, and certainly Jinja Honcho, is widely identified with right-wing nationalism, and the opinions of *Nippon Kaigi*, a controversial nationalist think-tank closely associated with politicians in the ruling LDP, and Prime Minister Abe in particular. It is legitimate to see this linking of Shinto with modern environmentalism as an attempt to steer the common image of Shinto away from associations with the war and imperialism, towards something arguably more ancient and useful. However it would be a mistake to assume that more than a minority of Shinto priests share such aspirations.

In a narrow sense therefore, use of the term '*chinju-no-mori*' refers to the scientifically proved value of indigenous trees that offer protection against fire and tsunami. The link with ancient wisdom associates the groves with Shinto in a way that is more than a little subversive to right-wing nationalism which celebrates imperial nationalism instead.

This subtle use of 'ancient wisdom' to contrast with modern politics is even more marked in the other feature that most distinguishes the *chinju-no-mori* project: people power and smiling faces.

So far less than 300,000 trees have been planted with the help of about 30,000 volunteers. There is still of course a long way to go! The project aims to make building the forest wall a means to building a new sense of community and environmental responsibility in Japan. At a rate of one volunteer per tree, completion of the forest wall will take a long time if it depends, as it does, on creating more volunteers. Government, maybe with the help of some big corporations, could order the construction of the Great Forest Wall. It would look the same and might be finished very quickly, not least because government might override any local opposition. But it would not *be* the same.

The planting events are arranged to last no more than one

day, and finish with music and a party. The core of rubble has already been laid out and covered with earth. This work, plus growing the seedlings, comprises the main expense for the project and is not difficult to cover especially once local support has been achieved. All that remains is to plant the seedlings. The area is carefully marked out into plots and the seedlings are set aside for each plot. Each plot is assigned to a particular group, and the members of each group are free to plant the seedlings as they wish. Volunteers come from all over Japan. It's a great day out. Some, especially if they are local, want to plant trees to remember lost loved ones or to express remorse that they 'could have done more' to save people. Others come because of an overpowering urge simply 'to do something'. Colleges, schools and companies send teams because they all benefit from participation. The emotions and motives are always varied and intense, but building the forest wall is an opportunity for everybody to come together as a community, with a common concern for the future. Families of 3 or even 4 generations come to plant trees together. I often heard volunteers talking about how they hope to protect future generations 'for a thousand years.' They are investing themselves in the project, in a way that will be a legacy that future generations cannot forget. Generations in the future would see the forest wall not only as protection or a place of recreation and beauty, but also as testimony of the love and concern of their ancestors.

To start talking about events that enable individuals to link with their ancestors and recently deceased loved ones, or touch base with future generations, to express difficult and pent-up emotions in hands-on activities, to relate with the powers of nature, and above all to assemble large numbers of people and enable them to do all this with a great sense of community, certainly starts to look like what anthropologists would identify in terms of religion and ritual, except there is no easily identifiable 'religion'.... The stretches of forest wall so far completed, for

example near Sendai, feature a small Shinto shrine. Illustrations that advertise the project also feature a small shrine. But they are dwarfed by the trees. I was told that the shrines had been included as part of the attempt to link the project with Japanese tradition and the ancient Japanese landscape. Maybe an opportunity for bit of soft Shinto PR but scarcely in-your-face evangelism. Amongst the volunteer groups I met eminent Buddhist priests and people of many other religious vocations or none at all. Any association with traditional Shinto was no problem. It was likewise an occasion for people from all kinds of political and social backgrounds to come together. I am sure these included right-wing nationalists, but there were also lefties and new-agers. What brought them together was the desire to help build the forest wall, and do this together.

If the great forest wall project avoids association with any particular religion, the organisers nevertheless very freely talk about it as '*shukyo-teki*', or 'like a religion', meaning 'religious in style.' There is a facility with using religious modes and working with groups of all kinds, that contrasts markedly with the difficulty government faces, not only because of the constitutional block on being closely associated with religion at all, but also in generating the right kind of ritual to genuinely reflect community values and concerns.

Former Prime Minister Hosokawa sees this coming-together of volunteers as signs of the kind of true democracy he has looked forward to for so long. He became PM through the kind of rise in popular sentiment that will be necessary to build the great forest wall. However his credentials as the first prime-minister in 50 years to topple LDP control of government might not, on the face of things, endear him to the current government. Nor, since he was an independent, is he automatically embraced by the only potential alternative, the Social Democrats. He does however head up one of the most eminent dynasties in Japan, the Hosokawa clan which is centred upon Kumamoto in central

Kyushu, which experienced its own disastrous earthquake in 2016. The family has its own Shinto shrine, with its own *chinju-no-mori*. He therefore has a very special perspective and set of qualifications that give him influence and authority across Japanese society without having to embrace any particular political party or avoid religion.

No doubt much of the project's success is due to his abilities as a politician and also to the dedication of staff, who make sure all volunteers feel welcome and keep the project on track. The core science of the project, as developed by Professor Miyawaki, remains rock solid. However, although much more research might be done to elucidate the growth of the project in terms of particular connections or personalities, this paper has a much simpler aim, namely to highlight how the project has rooted its events in ritual and comfortably incorporating religion in a manner that seems impossible for government.

Let us return to the survivors of the *tsunami*, trying to mourn their lost loved ones and rebuild their lives, but feeling strangely misunderstood or neglected by government and reconstruction policies. In addition, there are people all across Japan who want to help but feel powerless to do anything tangible, except perhaps send money to the government (the government set itself up as banker to safeguard donations). It is often said that Japanese society has evolved a special ability to come together in a crisis. If so, then government dropped the ball. It might be said that government had all the money, and the power to make decisions but lacked the vision or ability to use the methods of earlier times that featured neither, and instead the medium of political power was ritual and the success of village communities depended on being able to overcome their differences so that they might come together and participate in festivals... Although nowadays these might feature primarily as quaint photo-ops for tourists, once upon a time they functioned as mighty resources that helped villagers preserve social harmony and face up to major disasters,

when government itself was weak or inadequate.

Still in its infancy, it remains far from certain that the great forest wall will ever be completed. The leadership and organisers nonetheless remain confident they can achieve the kind of success in both protecting Japan against tsunami and promoting a sense of national community that has evaded the government, despite or perhaps because the project does not require money or central planning, and because it can utilise methods associated with religion that have become alien to government. Their success so far certainly highlights how and why the government may have been failing. I certainly hope that the project comes off, and becomes a landmark all over the world for projects that work WITH nature rather against it, and generate bonds of community that transcend politics and religion, whilst harnessing the powers of both. It would be a story such as myths are made of. Arguably, the project itself is already developing in parallel as myth, and may indeed achieve enormous international influence, whether or not the forest wall fully materialises.

In talking up the great forest wall project, this paper has been talking down the government's own efforts and in particular its methods and vision. It is argued that the contrasts point to a role for religion and ritual in Japanese culture and politics that may have been normal in times past but has become more difficult now. In part this may be because a word such as religion ('*shukyo*' in Japanese) has come to connote divisiveness, not least because there are now so many religions in competition with each other. In the past, things were easier because religious activity essentially meant 'fusion' of all religious traditions. In this sense, the way the project organisers describe it as *shukyo teki* ('like religion') define religion not so much as a set of doctrines but rather as a mode of authority and representation that works through rituals and festivals, and appeals to all manner of sentiments and social needs in a way that modern politicians in

Japan simply can't, even when they try. As outlined in the very beginning of this paper, the project certainly seems to tick all the boxes for investors looking for a great NGO project, except that it doesn't really need money. The point of this paper has been to try to explain the failures of government to meet some key social needs both among survivors and also nationally, in terms of its inability to incorporate religion and religious skills, and to explain the success of the Great Forest Wall Project in terms of the precise opposite, i.e. its facility with ritual and its ability to incorporate religion as ancient knowledge and avoid the kind of associations that caused the Constitution to virtually ban any association between government and religion. Religion, or at least religious modes such as rituals and festivals, remain therefore as vehicles of power whatever the Constitution says.