NGO Activity as a Method for Public Anthropology : From a Case Study of Disaster-relief Activities in Miyagi Prefecture

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Abstract :

On March 11, 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake forced many people to relocate to temporary housing units. Human Security Forum (HSF), an NGO created by scholars and graduate students at the Human Security Program of the University of Tokyo, has been working since then to support disaster-hit people on the Sanriku coast of Miyagi prefecture.

In this connection, this paper is aimed at considering the methodological aspects of public anthropology. The first section provides the general picture of public anthropology and disaster as the framework of this paper. The second section presents the roles of NGOs in anthropological fieldwork to explain the author's approach in post-3.11 public anthropology in Japan. The third section introduces a case study of the author's engagement as a half-practitioner and half-anthropologist in the disaster recovery process. The last section discusses the possibility of a public anthropology better able to survive outside the academic institutional structure and mindset.

Keywords : Public Anthropology, Disaster, NGO, Human Security, the Great East Japan Earthquake

1. Introduction : On Public Anthropology and Disaster

The main purpose of this paper is to consider some methodological aspects of "public anthropology" using a case study of disaster-relief activities in Miyagi prefecture, seriously damaged by the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011.

Let us begin with a brief explanation of public anthropology. The relatively new genre of anthropology attaches weight to the public role of researchers, dialogue with civil society, and contact points outside academia[1]. The concern with public anthropology has been growing from the end of the 20th century. James Peacock who was president of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) emphasized the importance of social contribution by anthropology. At the AAA 1998 annual meeting in Chicago, he used the phrase "public or perish" in a parody of "publish or perish" (Yamashita 2008 : 171).

Since then, the central academic figures in American anthropological society have had their influence on the discussion up to the present. According to Robert Borofsky, public anthropology engages issues and audiences beyond today's self-imposed disciplinary boundaries (Borofsky 2000 : 9). The public interest anthropology (PIA) of Peggy Reeves Sanday adopts an approach that merges problem solving with theory development and analysis in the interest of

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[1] The term "public" is used in the various disciplines for similar purposes. For example, Michael Burawoy, former president of the American Sociological Association, promotes "public sociology" in order to cope with the growing gap between the sociologists' ethos and the world they study. In his presidential address in 2004, Burawoy classified public sociology into two types. One is traditional public sociology that becomes "the vehicle of public discussion." The other is organic public sociology in which "the sociologist works in close connection with a visible, thick, active, local and often counter public" (Burawoy 2005 : 7-8). Although the direction of public sociological studies seems to share the fundamentals of public anthropology, its differences can be seen by comparing their methodologies based on their distinct academic traditions. For example, "fieldwork," "participant observation," and "ethnography" have been widely used in anthropology, however, less so in sociology. The studies of public anthropology including my own are to develop these existing methods for both academic and social reasons.

change motivated by a commitment to social justice, racial harmony, equality, human rights and well-being (Sanday 2003 : 2). And in the writings of George Marcus, public anthropology is an anthropology whose primary "raison d' être" and prestige lies in the direct and tangible contribution that it is making to certain issues and events of the world (Marcus 2005 : 687). Other than these three, more anthropologists have participated in the debate on public anthropology mainly in the U. S. since the 2000 s (Purcell 2000, Lamphere 2004, Lassiter 2008).

Mirroring these developments, Japanese anthropologists also initiated concrete studies of public anthropology on topics such as multicultural co-existence and the impact of globalization in Japan (Shima et al. 2009, Yamashita 2011). And because of "the 3. 11 disaster," 2011 became a pivotal year for public anthropology in Japan.

Three months after the disaster, the Japanese Society for Cultural Anthropology published an article titled "Higashi nihon daishinsai ni yosete (On the Great East Japan Earthquake)." This article put forward a simple but sharp question : "What can anthropologists do?" (Ichinosawa et al. 2011). This has actually been the key question for anthropologists facing disasters for many years.

Even before the dawn of public anthropology, as Susanna Hoffman and Anthony Oliver-Smith indicate, considerable disaster research has actually been undertaken in the context of assistance. They foreground two matters in the anthropological study of disaster, " (1) what anthropology can do for disaster management as well as research, particularly regarding the moral issue of aid and (2) the ever-present specter to the more academic side of anthropology of the connection between theory and practice (Hoffman and Oliver-Smith 2001 : 14)." In more recent years, Ilan Kelman and JC Gaillard mention "disaster-related public anthropology" in their work. According to them, there are four cross-cutting themes which anthropologists can use when offering public service related to disasters : (1) The rights and responsibilities of anthropologists in their work and people affected by anthropologists and anthropology ; (2) The root causes of disaster that refer to the vulnerability conditions ; (3) Community-based approaches

that include applying the research results ; (4) Lifelong learning and exchange as an ongoing process with relevance to people's day-to-day lives (Kelman and Gaillard 2009 : 132-133).

Having considered the framework of this paper, we will now take a look at public anthropology after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the author's approach.

2. NGO activity as a research method of anthropological fieldwork

At 8 pm on April 20, 2014, a 45-minute lecture on public anthropology was televised as a program of the Open University of Japan. The lecturer was Shinji Yamashita, a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo. In the program, he introduced two major types of public anthropology used after 3. 11 in Japan. One is the officially-commissioned public anthropology (Kansei Kōkyō Jinruigaku, as Yamashita calls it[2]). The representative example is a research project on disaster-affected intangible folk cultural assets by the Center for Northeast Asian Studies at Tohoku University. The project was realized by a commission from Miyagi prefecture. The research team, whose leader was Hiroki Takakura, conducted qualitative research to check the damage done to traditional events along the coastal area of the prefecture from north to south. The results of this research have already been published (Takakura and Takizawa 2013).

In contrast to this kind of top-down officially-commissioned public anthropology, another type is the grass-roots public anthropology which is rather bottom-up. In this context, Yamashita introduced a disaster relief NGO called Human Security Forum (HSF) as an example and I participated in the same broadcast program as an interviewee from the NGO. I will analyze this case study in the next section.

The proponents of officially-commissioned public anthropology tend to be professional scholars or the specialized institutions employing those scholars because the social credibility that accompanies a trusted name, actual past achievements, and responsibility are prerequisites for public agencies to commission research. Thus, an unknown graduate student such

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[2] Additionally, Yamashita used the term in his writing on public anthropology (Yamashita 2014 : 13).

as myself at the time is unlikely to receive an official commission. As a substitute for this type of public anthropology, what I have attempted has been managing a new-born NGO and turning myself into an actor in the public space. Based on this, I would like to consider the possibility of the use of an NGO as a vehicle for public anthropology at a grass-roots level.

When we use NGOs as a method for anthropological fieldwork, the point is that civil activity and academic research are integrated to promote a social contribution. Therefore, it engenders the participation of more diverse stakeholders than a solo-observer style of fieldwork. Once an NGO project designed by an anthropologist is initiated, it involves recipients from the project, supporters of the recipient, sponsors of the supporters, and the anthropologist him/herself.

Before we delve into the case study, we should add a few words about the relationship between NGO activities and anthropological studies. NGOs have mainly provided a subject of study or an analytical perspective to view the surrounding society for anthropologists (Fisher 1991, Miura 2001). However, comparatively speaking, this kind of organization has not been positively evaluated as a tool for fieldwork.

To be sure, there have been anthropologists who engaged in establishing NGOs. For example, the research conducted by Jiro Kawakita, an early Japanese anthropologist, served in 1953 as a trigger to establish Himaraya Hozen Kyōkai (IHC : The Institute for Himalayan Conservation), and he himself became the founder (Kawakita 1974, IHC 2015). Paul Farmer co-founded Partners in Health (PIH) in order to provide health care to the most impoverished people in a mountainous area of Haiti in 1987 and now it has expanded its area of activity in the world (Farmer 2003, Kidder 2009). Nancy Scheper-Hughes launched Organs Watch with her co-workers in 1999 as a stopgap organization to monitor the global organ trafficking business (Scheper-Hughes 2008).

Although each preceding case represents a unique style of engagement and contribution by anthropologists, they remain independent from one another. Therefore, what seems to be lacking is an attempt to refine the debate on the modality of the relationship between NGO activity and anthropological fieldwork as a systematic methodology for the future of anthropology (at least public anthropology). This paper is aimed at stirring up further discussion through the example of the Great East Japan Earthquake.

3. A Case Study : Disaster-relief Activities by a University-based NGO

In 2011, widespread destruction of Tōhoku Pacific coastal areas by the March 11 th Great East Japan Earthquake resulted in 18,466 dead and missing as of July 10, 2015, forcing those who survived to relocate to temporary housing. In those temporary housing estates, communities of disaster-affected people have been formed and they have become places for support activities by NGOs and volunteers.

First of all, we will focus our attention on Human Security Forum (HSF), which is an NGO formed in 2011 and the fieldwork site for this study. HSF was created by scholars and graduate students at the Human Security Program of the University of Tokyo. At the time, I was a doctoral student and served as one of the founders.

The concept of "human security" which underpins the organization is characterized by an emphasis on the security of individuals and communities as it has moved beyond traditional national security. The concept has evolved since the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) first began to popularize the term in *the 1994 Human Development Report*, which described seven categories of security : economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political (UNDP 1994). Almost a decade later, the Commission on Human Security (CHS) went on to say that human security should focus on addressing "critical and pervasive threats" to the "vital core of all human lives" and added the freedom to live in dignity to the UNDP's dual freedoms from fear and want. CHS also defined the importance of five elements of human security : (1) it is people-centered ; (2) it is integrated with human development and human rights ; (3) it deals with a comprehensive set of threats ; (4) it engages actors beyond the government ; and (5) it proposes a twofold strategy of protection from above and empowerment from below (CHS 2003). A subsequent report to the UN Secretary General (A/66/763), "Follow-up to General Assembly resolution 64/291 on human security" clearly expressed the position that the issues of human security are not only limited to the situation of developing countries but also developed countries. The Great East Japan Earthquake is recognized as one of the promi-

nent examples of human security crises in developed countries (UN General Assembly 2012 : 5). Adopting the definition and usage of the concept in the international community, HSF strives to ensure the survival, livelihood and dignity of disaster-hit people.

Since the winter of 2011, HSF has embarked on the establishment of a Tōhoku branch in Tome city, which is located inland from the Sanriku coastal region of Miyagi prefecture with good access to devastated coastal regions such as Kesennuma city, Minami-Sanriku town and Ishinomaki city, where it has implemented long-term support activities for the disaster-affected people living in the area. I myself became involved in the disaster recovery process with HSF, which is legally separate from the university, in order to take on social contribution projects that are outside the mandate of universities as educational and research institutions. I was the first secretary general of the organization from its establishment until 2013.

In the HSF Tōhoku branch during my stay from December 2011 to May 2013, project money, staff members and local collaborators gathered together. A total of 9 members were hired to engage in the project operation. They were in their 20 s or 30 s and most of them were from outside the Tōhoku region and came to Miyagi to support the disaster-hit people. Half of them were students in undergraduate, master or doctoral courses. Around that time, staff members lived communally in a prefabricated accommodation facility that was provided by a local company. The branch office was a highly communicative environment and the staff kept work logs every day and shared their experiences of support activities.

I will now describe an empowerment project for disaster-hit children by HSF in detail. The project was called "House of the Future for Disaster-hit Children (Kodomo Mirai-kan Project)" and was co-sponsored by Toyota Foundation and Panasonic Education Foundation (a total of 18,750,000 yen for 3 years). The project was implemented in the assembly house of temporary housing estates from December 2011 until March 2015 and it reached a total number of more than 3,000 child users. There were usually two

or three paid staff and university student volunteers to assist children's studies. It aimed to provide a platform for rebuilding sustainable communities for children and families in the affected area.

The project can be categorized in the realm of community-based education that is outside of a standard school setting. Thus, as the basic activities of study support continued and as the findings of action research accumulated, I and other staff started paying attention to the children's capacity and encouraging them to actively participate in the temporary housing community[3].

From the perspective of community development, HSF staff and the children sometimes went on night patrol for fire prevention, calling out warnings such as "Hi no yōjin (Beware of fire)!" or "Macchi ippon kaji no moto (A match may cause a fire)!" and striking clappers around the temporary housing units. Most temporary housing consists of prefabricated houses made of light-gauge steel and plywood. Because of its structural features, the residents feel much colder in the winter without heaters. However, the buildings are vulnerable to fire. This activity aimed to contribute to the prevention of fire disaster in the daily lives of residents following the earthquake. And that was not all : members of the community appreciated the activity and felt that the children's lively voices contributed to the vitalization of the community.

To take another example, the staff and the children organized community events such as a cooking class to which they invited the adult members. The main role of children was dropping flyers for these events into the post boxes of all temporary housing units. They also visited their neighbors and told them about each event. Consequently, many elderly people, including those living alone, joined in the events. From the perspective of human security, it is important to set up opportunities for intergenerational communication among temporary housing residents. As the 1995 Great Hanshin Awaji Earthquake revealed, elderly people in temporary housing who lack strong human relations are very likely to die alone [Sasaki and Ueno 1999 : 129]. In light of the lessons learnt from the past, child participation in

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[3] As Rakesh Rajani stated in a UNICEF working paper, children and youths aged below twenty five years old comprise more than half of the world's population ; are the most dynamic of the world's human resources ; make tremendous contributions to societies at all levels, and their participation provides an important "window of opportunity" to promote well-being (Rajani 2001 : 134).

the process of post-disaster reconstruction should be recognized as a key concept in creating a community that is resilient to the effects of disasters.

The empowerment project for disaster-hit children achieved a clear result, backed by the large number of participants and many voices of support. It is easy to focus on their vulnerability and to claim the necessity of support. And yet, what is important in this practical study of a disaster-relief activity is to illustrate the diverse aspects of the support recipients. It is for this purpose that I described the children's potential to be active community members. And this is not all that I need to say about this case study.

Since anthropologists are trained to focus their analytic lens on the power relationship vis-a-vis people in the field, the reflexivity involved in the research process should be utilized for the support process as well. Otherwise, success stories written by those involved with NGOs will always contain more risks of representing themselves as "capable disaster-relief supporters" and objectifying the support recipients as "appreciative disaster-hit people." What is important here is to reconsider the dichotomy and to draw more realistic lessons. Therefore, I would like to point out several inconvenient truths for NGO workers that I faced during the project, from the critical perspective of an anthropological researcher, rather than as an NGO worker promoting human security.

The first inconvenient truth is related to the adverse effects of helping. HSF staff witnessed how some disaster-hit children were indulged by massive support from multiple actors. This sometimes instills in the children a lack of respect for their supporters from outside. In a related move, a school official in the disaster-hit area commented about disaster-relief activities as follows. "Thanks to the generosity of many donors, our school equipment has been renewed after the disaster. Although we do appreciate them, more assistance might be too much. It is not good for students' mental growth (April, 2012)." As a matter of fact, HSF staff scolded the children several times when they roughly used relief goods like stationery or toys.

Another inconvenient truth is related to the public relations dilemma faced by NGOs. From a management perspective, NGO outcome reports have to be widely publicized to represent their humanitarian efforts. The unique practices for the development of disaster-stricken areas can be important PR tools for funding. In the case of HSF, the site photographs of disaster-hit children were crucial for the advertisement of its activities. However, some of the children disliked having their pictures taken. The children seemed to vaguely notice the NGO's egoistic purpose and they were uncooperative even though the staff attempted to be privacy-conscious. One day in the early period of the project, when a HSF staff member held a camera during a support activity, an elementary school girl said to her friend, "Be careful of that camera!"

Furthermore, discourse about "vulnerable disaster-hit children" is not always down-to-earth. Some of them felt life in temporary housing was not bad. The children said it was even fun because they could live closer to their friends in the temporary housing estate. When HSF staff asked the question "Don't you have any problems because of the disaster?", the children answered "nothing special" many times. Therefore, the need for support and the meaning of the project often became controversial among the staff.

I have sought to reveal both the positives and the negatives of the empowerment project implemented by HSF in which I participated. What is necessary in this case study is not further debate over the rights and wrongs of the project, but a discussion about the research method of public anthropology based on NGO activities.

During my fieldwork, qualitative research on the livelihood of disaster-hit people was carried out in the context of support activities for temporary housing communities. Research findings were applied in planning more suitable assistance, and the enhanced support activities in turn necessitated further research. And meanwhile, I put my experiences and thoughts into words. Although my work to date considers disaster-relief activities as "gift-giving," a familiar notion in anthropology (Uchio 2013, 2014), I also had another important form of output. That is grant applications for NGO projects. Document preparation was one of my roles in HSF. Consequently, two other projects[4] (2,000,000 yen each) related to Kodomo Mirai-kan Project were funded by different foundations. Needless to say, both the real experience in disaster-relief activities and the problem finding skills amassed through academic training helped me a

great deal. I found that this work was actually similar to writing grant applications for research promotion, which graduate students in Japan usually challenge themselves to do over and over again. In fact, these funds enabled me to continue long-term research associated with the projects.

Retrospectively speaking, I used to be consumed by the feeling that I and my organization were stirring up problems for people in order to gain the financial wherewithal for solving them. It may be so. However, once the funding and the staff for the project were gathered and the disaster-relief activities started, the site could no longer be controlled by the planner and I had enough work on my hands to follow the changes in the field caused by the projects. In the process, I attempted to be constantly aware of my anthropological lens in order to understand disaster-hit people and to assess ourselves as NGO workers.

By these means, a field of public anthropology that brings trials and errors for the well-being[5] of the recipients (which often overlaps with the research subject) has been gradually taking shape.

4. Conclusion : Making Public Anthropology Work beyond Academia

In this paper, I have argued that the moral issue of aid and the methodological issue of tension between theory and practice are important factors for the anthropology of disaster. Furthermore, through an autobiographical account of my engagement as a half-practitioner and half-anthropologist in the disaster recovery process, I aimed at describing a method of grass-roots public anthropology that is possible even at graduate-student level[6].

For further discussion based on the case study, let us focus again on the phrase of James Peacock : "public or perish" that questions the very future of anthropology. After 3. 11, I have been motivated to participate in the controversy, initially at the national level. In order to give adequate consideration to the significance of the method this study has proposed, it is meaningful to examine the position of anthropology, formally referred to as cultural anthropology, in the context of Japanese academic society.

Here, I would like to pay attention to Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKENHI). It is a state undertaking by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), which is an extra-departmental body of the ministry. KAKENHI grants are awarded to promote creative and pioneering research widely ranging from the humanities and social sciences to the natural sciences (JSPS 2010).

As a measure of the presence of cultural anthropology, let us refer to the "FY 2013 Grants-in-Aid Distribution Chart (MEXT 2013)" for newly selected research projects. According to this report, the total number of projects funded was 24,439 and the total amount of funding was 55.6 billion yen. The sectorial allotment was as follows : 84.2% for the natural sciences (47.9% for Bioscience, 36.3% for Science & Engineering), 12.4% for the humanities and social sciences, and 3.4% for others. According to MEXT, the average allotment per project was 2,226,000 yen (as of April 2013).

The tendency to allocate the lion's share of funding to the natural sciences has continued for a long time. The humanities, comprising philosophy, linguistics, literature, history, human geography, cultural

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[4] One is "Creating Contemporary Folktales for Disaster-prevention (Bousai no Gendai Minwa Sousaku Project)" in order to preserve lessons of the disaster in narrative form. It has been financed by the Cabinet Office from the winter of 2012. The other is "Learning Space : Tsubaki (Manabi-ba Tsubaki Project)" as the next educational support of Kodomo mirai-kan project. It was accepted by Lush Japan Charity Bank at the end of 2014.

[5] There is also the necessity to discuss what the well-being of the recipient means, a task required of anthropologists who engaged in such activity.

[6] Concerning student participation in public anthropology, David Slater and Maja Veselič presented a paper on another disaster-relief project started from Sophia University. The project, called "Archive of Hope," has conducted interviews with disaster-hit people in accordance with university-based volunteer works. It has continued as a part of a regular class for which students signed up and receive credit. The scholars and students worked together cooperatively and they uploaded a wide array of video interviews in Iwate, Miyagi and Fukushima to a website (tohokukaranokoe. org). From the perspective of public anthropology, Slater and Veselič place importance on accessibility of the product to a non-academic audience including the interviewees in disaster-hit areas (Slater and Veselič 2014 : 120-125).

anthropology, psychology, education, art, and etc., received just 4.6% (2.6 billion yen) out of the 12.4% (6.9 billion yen) from the section of the social sciences. Within the humanities, that figure of 2.6 billion yen was shared among 1,732.5 projects. The average allotment in the section is only about 1.5 million yen per project. This amount of money is about two-thirds of the overall average that includes the natural sciences.

If the pattern of funding is not merely a reflection of the respective value and importance attached to the various academic disciplines in Japanese academic society, we can say that there is a strong premise that projects in the humanities are possible at low cost. As for cultural anthropology, the application of funds is supposed to be for fieldwork expenses such as traveling, accommodation, insurance, immunization, personal computer, books, printing, and maybe payments to research collaborators. Expensive laboratory instruments are not necessary for most studies of cultural anthropology, unlike the natural sciences. Although it is considered to be a merit of the humanities that brilliant research can be inexpensively produced, this premise can bring about rigidity of research methods within the constraints of actual budget allotments.

However, I do not intend to directly criticize the existing structure of Japanese academic society, nor to call for an increase in allocations to the humanities. What is important is rather to look beyond academia. Here, I would like to emphasize public anthropology with its strong affinity for NGO projects that have been supported by a different domain of funding from government research grants. HSF is an embodiment of my conception of public anthropology. To promote public anthropology at the grass-roots level, we should not only focus on research grants but also make use of NGO funds that serve as an important driving force in delivering their social contribution.

Let me summarize the points of this paper. Looking back on my experience in HSF, the following arguments can be made : (1) devising ways of eng-

agement different from those of traditionally prescribed anthropological fieldwork can be a key concept of public anthropology, (2) incorporating anthropological research into the framework of NGO activities is one way to enable linking between anthropological fieldwork and disaster-relief activities, 3) leveraging instruments and resources from civil society can contribute to developing fieldwork methods.

In the coming era of "public or perish" in Japan, I believe a certain kind of anthropology will survive better outside the academic structure and mindset[7].

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[7] It is worth mentioning that other HSF student staff members also conducted qualitative research sparked by their experience of disaster-relief activities. Although not all of them are students at the Human Security Program of the University of Tokyo, or majoring in cultural anthropology, they took a similar approach to mine. One undergraduate thesis and two master degree theses based on qualitative research through the interaction with disaster-affected communities have already been submitted to their respective universities. Some of them retired from their positions as HSF Tōhoku staff upon graduation.

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