

Japan/Social Fallout: Marginalization After the Fukushima Nuclear Meltdown

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On March 1, 1954 a Japanese tuna trawler was at sea in the Marshall Islands. Quite unexpectedly grey ash began to fall like snow and covered the boat and crew. It was not snow; it was radioactive fallout from a nuclear test that had been conducted by the United States hours earlier 90 miles from the exclusion zone proclaimed by the US. This nuclear explosion, known as the Bravo Test, was the first detonation of a deliverable hydrogen bomb. The 15 megaton bomb, approximately 1,000 times greater than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima, was the largest explosion in human history at the time. It would render several of the atolls that make up the Marshall Islands uninhabitable. March 1st is now called Nuclear Victims and Survivors Remembrance Day in the Marshall Islands. However, for the crew members of the trawler it was a mystery.

Two weeks later the trawler pulled into port in Yaizu in Northeast Japan. The crew members were all sick with radiation poisoning, whose symptoms included pain, nausea, dizziness, burns and diarrhea and one, radio operator Kuboyama Aikichi, died six months later. News of the incident spread around the world and the word “fallout” entered the public vocabulary. The boat was named the Daigo Fukuryū maru: the Lucky Dragon #5. The Japanese kanji character “fuku” means fortunate or lucky.¹

The Japanese word fuku has recently returned to the newspapers of the world. This time it is in the name of the nuclear power plants that have melted down as a result of the earthquake and tsunami of March 11. Fukushima, the prefecture in which the meltdown occurred, means “fortunate island.” In both of these instances it has come to carry a much darker connotation.

As the world now knows, three nuclear power plants in Japan’s Northeast fully melted down and radiation then passed through their primary containment. Enormous amounts of radiation have entered into the environment—into the air, the sea, and the groundwater. This radiation is already having a devastating effect on the local ecosystem [[1](#)] and perhaps far beyond [[2](#)], and it will continue to impact all who dwell therein for decades to come. But there is a secondary impact, just as invisible as the radiation that the communities of Northern Japan will have to contend with: the social and cultural fallout of radiation exposure. Having studied the history of communities exposed to radiation in the wake of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima, Nagasaki and Micronesia for many years with Australian scholar Mick Broderick, it is easy to see some of the difficulties that lie ahead for survivors and evacuees from Fukushima.²

Many of the residents displaced from around the plant will never return to their homes.³ This has not been made clear to them, and while the news is painful, the truth is easier to plan from than false hopes. For many this will be a profound disruption of traditional ways of life.⁴ Tohoku is among Japan’s poorest areas, one that has industrialized and urbanized less quickly than has much of Western Japan. It is a region notable for the existence of farms and fishing communities, some already marginal and depopulated before the earthquake and tsunami.⁵ Many of the displaced people come from families that have been farming the same land or living in the same community for generations.⁶ When people from such long lines of traditional living find themselves in temporary shelters, and then in apartments on the fringes of Tokyo or elsewhere, they have lost more than just

their homes. They have lost a piece of their identities.⁷ The rhythms of life are different, the diet is different—even the accents are different. Many people who were displaced from their home atolls in the Marshall Islands after being contaminated with radiation from the Bravo Test have never fully adjusted to the new atolls to which they were removed, and to the disconnection from familiar lands and diets. Living now as refugees in others' home atolls, their lives have been transformed from one of mastery and ability to one of dependency.⁸ People can be moved to new homes, but the bonds that connect us to who we are and where we come from cannot be replaced.

We have all seen the photographs of the evacuees being checked for radioactive contamination. Terrified children and adults with their arms held out as someone in a haz/mat suit and a gas mask scans them. This is the beginning of their new identities as radiation-affected people. Consider the scene: the person who is scanning you is wearing a suit to protect himself—from you—as a photographer records the moment because it is unnatural and people around the world will want to gawk. Even if no radiation is detected, the sense that others find you dangerous or need to avoid you penetrates deep into the psyche, into one's fears.⁹ There have been reports of cars with Fukushima prefecture license plates being denied service at gas stations in other prefectures, and stories are rife of evacuated children (no doubt some of them having endured radiation scanning and no longer living in their homes) being bullied by other children in their new schools and ostracized for being "contaminated". As the experience of the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggest, this will not end anytime soon. These children, as well as adults, can anticipate a life in which employers are reluctant to hire them ("they may get sick more often than other employees") and potential partners are reluctant to marry them ("they may give birth to mutated children!").¹⁰ Those who have endured radiation exposure in other places can tell them what to expect. A survivor of Chernobyl commented that those near the Fukushima plants will forevermore define their lives as "before Fukushima and after Fukushima."¹¹

Left in place while high levels of radioactivity from the three melted nuclear cores exposed them to ever larger doses, are the residents who lived near the plants supposed to comfort themselves that their exposures were done in order "not to panic" people? Imagine if, in the many public relations efforts in the nearby communities, TEPCO officials had said this: "We promise to make public safety a priority. We are committed to the safety of our neighbors at Fukushima Daiichi. And our pledge to you today is that if there is a serious accident and releases of radioactivity that may affect you, we pledge that we will not inform you of this event since our highest commitment is to insure that you don't panic. You can count on this."¹² Scores of thousands of people have since been forced to evacuate from a 20 km radius from the plant, and then additionally from hot spots out to 30 km there have been voluntary evacuations. However, high levels of radiation have been detected as far away as Fukushima City, that is, levels above those which required mandatory evacuations from Chernobyl.¹³

Already tests have shown the presence of radionuclides in the breast milk of some nursing mothers who were not evacuated from areas near the plant quickly enough.¹⁴ Children as far away as Fukushima City have been confirmed to have radioactive cesium-134 in their urine.¹⁵ How will a nursing mother look at her baby now? Will she fear that she may be a source of contamination to her child? How will she look at herself?¹⁶ There are press reports of mothers choosing not to breast feed because they don't want to contaminate their babies.¹⁷ What long-term damage is being done to these formative relationships?¹⁸ How will parents treat an accident in which their toddler accidentally wets his or her pants? Will they regard this not only as a nuisance, but as contamination to and from their child, or to their home?¹⁹ Stories of depression among the evacuees, and among those not evacuated but near enough to the plants to be anxious about radiation, abound in the press. Japanese suicide rates, chronically among the world's highest, have increased even higher.²⁰

Every July or August (depending on the location) the Japanese celebrate the Buddhist holiday of Bon

(formally called Obon). This is an ancient holiday in which the hard work and sacrifices of the ancestors are honored. Traditionally Japanese families gather in their home village to celebrate, to clean and maintain the grave sites of departed family members, and to welcome the spirits of their dead ancestors who briefly visit this earthly realm. At the beginning of Obon, families light a fire in the home, and then visit the graves of the ancestors and call to them so as to guide them to the family. The ancestral spirits visit the family home and are reunited with their descendants. At the end of the festival lanterns are lit at grave sites and set afloat in rivers and on lakes to guide the ancestors back to the spirit world. For the families of those whose ancestral homes are inside the evacuation zone, this holiday can no longer be observed in the traditional manner.

Now, many grave sites are in areas that people will not be allowed to visit because of the radiation danger. These graves will not be cleaned. When the spirits of the ancestors arrive, no one will be there to greet them, or to guide them to the ancestral home. Ancestors and descendants will be unable to reunite. What will be the impact of such a disruption?²¹ After years of leaving ancestral graves untended, and ancestral spirits un-honored, people may begin to feel dislocated. When important cultural rituals are left uncompleted, a tear in the psyche leaves us more vulnerable. Our thoughts, perhaps conscious, perhaps not, might be: What must the ancestors think of us, their descendants? And who will honor our spirits when we are dead, since we did not meet our own familial obligations? Even though people are aware of the compelling structural reasons that they cannot honor this obligation, the disconnection from family and tradition is often experienced as a personal failing to their family and to those who sacrificed in the past so that the family might thrive. To feel that one's generation has broken a bond and tradition stretching back over centuries can deeply affect one's sense of well being.

Or think of those who had family members that died in the tsunami, and whose bodies were recovered near the nuclear plants. In many cases the bodies of loved ones were found to be highly radioactive.²² The families were not allowed to claim those bodies and to conduct a traditional cremation and funeral since the bodies were declared to be "toxic waste." How does one live with the knowledge that parents, grandparents, children, loved ones, must suffer the indignity of "waste disposal" rather than the honor of a traditional funeral? It is often said that a funeral is for the benefit of those left behind. Additionally, it is customary in Japan for family members to be buried together. How does one compensate for being unable to give honor and final rest to one's loved ones? To excluding them from the family's collective remains?

These disruptions of familial integrity can have unforeseen and often devastating consequences that may not surface for years. In radiation-exposed communities it is often towards the end of one's own life when the toll of having been denied the ability to honor ancestors takes its psychic toll. Who will be there for these people in 20-30 years when many of them will be dealing with this sorrow and depression? What steps will be taken this year, this summer, to help these families to find ways to observe the Obon holiday and to honor their ancestors in a manner that helps them to heal rather than tears open deeper psychological and emotional wounds? What steps will be taken next year?

Those impacted by the disaster of the Fukushima nuclear meltdowns, including both Fukushima citizens and workers at TEPCO's Fukushima Daiichi plants, are the newest hibakusha. They are at the beginning of what is likely to be a long and painful journey. Hibakusha from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and from nuclear test sites at Bikini and around the world, can tell the people of Northeastern Japan what lies ahead. However, the rest of us have an opportunity here as well. We can take steps at the beginning of this journey to help those exposed to radiation, and those who have lost their homes to contamination, to have a different path than those who have come before them. We can intervene to anticipate and help to ease the social, emotional and familial fallout of this tragedy before it contributes to the devastating trauma these people have suffered. Perhaps teams could move graves from inside to outside of the evacuation zone, or alternative sites can be

established for families to honor ancestors. Similar sensitivity should be paid to burying the victims of the 3.11 earthquake tsunami and meltdown disasters, both those whose bodies have been recovered and those who are missing. We can learn from the past, and work together for healing the victims of atomic meltdown.

Robert Jacob

Notes

1 See Ōishi Matashichi, *The Day the Sun Rose in the West. Bikini, the Lucky Dragon, and I* translated by Richard H. Minear, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2011). See also "A dialogue about nuclear-related issues" between Ōishi Matashichi and Oe Kenzaburo.

2 Mick Broderick, "Topographies of Trauma: Dark Tourism, World Heritage and Hiroshima," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* Issue 24, June 2010.

3 Nick Allen, "Japan: the 'Nuclear Refugees' Who May Never Go Home," *The Telegraph* (March 23, 2011).

4 "Itate Holdouts Find Nuclear Refugee Option Hard Choice," *Japan Times* (June 15, 2011).

5 "Evacuees Lose Welfare Benefits / Cash from TEPCO, Donations puts 150 Households Over Income Limit," *Yomiuri Shimbun* (June 17, 2011).

6 Martin Fackler and Matthew L. Wald, "Life in Limbo for Japanese Near Nuclear Plant," *New York Times* (May 1, 2011).

7 Henry Ridgwell, "Ordeal Continues for Japan's Nuclear Evacuees," *Voice of America* (April 2, 2011).

8 Nakagawa Masami, Honda Masakazu, Hirako Yoshinori and Sadamatsu Shinjiro, "Bikini: 50 Years of Nuclear Exposure," translated by Kyoko Selden, *The Asia-Pacific Journal*.

9 "Radiation Fears Fuel Abuse of Fukushima Fuzoku Gals," *The Tokyo Reporter* (June 22, 2011).

10 Rick Wallace, "Discrimination Increases Torment of Fukushima," *The Australian* (June 11, 2011). The writer Hayashi Kyoko has vividly captured the emotional and physical torment of Nagasaki hibakusha. See, for example, "Masks of Whatchamacallit," in Kyoko Selden and Noriko Mizuta, eds., *More Stories by Japanese Women Writers. An Anthology*. Armonk. M.E. Sharpe, 2011, pp. 52-75.

11 Dana Kennedy, "Chernobyl Cleanup Survivor's Message for Japan: 'Run Away as Quickly as Possible'" *AOL News* (March 22, 2011).

12 "Nuclear Accident Disclosure," *The Japan Times* (July 8, 2011).

13 Hisae Sate and Fumikazu Asai, "Radiation-contaminated area spans 800 square km, new map shows," *Asahi Shimbun* (May 12, 2011).

14 Danielle Demetriou, "Radioactive Iodine Found in Breast Milk of Japanese Mothers," *The Telegraph* (April 21, 2011).

15 Say-Peace, "Protecting Children Against Radiation: Japanese Citizens Take Radiation Protection into Their Own Hands," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Volume 9, Issue 25, No. 1, June 20, 2011.

16 "Japan's Radiation Dilemma: Leave or Live in Fear," *CBS News* (June 28, 2011).

- 17 Deborah Dupre, "Japanese Parents: 'Test Everyone!' Children 60km from Fukushima Irradiated Urine," The Examiner (June 30, 2011).
- 18 "Survey Shows Disappointment, Anger Among Fukushima Evacuees," Asahi Shimbun (June 25, 2011).
- 19 "Radiation in Japan: Nosebleed, Diarrhea, Lack of Energy in Children in Koriyama City, Fukushima," EX-SKF (June 15, 2011).
- 20 Ted Thornhill, "Japan's suicide rates soar by up to 39 per cent in areas hit by the earthquake," The Daily Mail (June 24, 2011); John Glionna, "Japan fears post-quake rise in suicides," Los Angeles Times (April 24, 2011); Kyung Lah, "Farmer's Suicide Note Shows Japan's Disaster Impact," CNN (June 14, 2011). See also "Elderly Fukushima woman kills self 'to evacuate to grave'", Mainichi Shimbun July 11, 2011.
- 21 Chisa Fujioka, "Japan Priest Speaks Out on Spiritual Toll of Nuclear Crisis," Reuters (June 9, 2011). On priests cleaning up non-contaminated graves in Miyagi prefecture see "As reconstruction progresses at a crawl, priests help rebuild graveyards," Mainichi Shimbun July 10, 2011.
- 22 Karl Huus, "Japan faces another dilemma: Radiation-contaminated bodies," MSNBC.com (April 6, 2011).

P.S.

* Pictures are not reproduced here. Recommended citation: Robert Jacobs, Social Fallout: Marginalization After the Fukushima Nuclear Meltdown, The Asia-Pacific Journal Vol 9, Issue 28 No 4, July 11, 2011.

<http://japanfocus.org/-Robert-Jacobs/3562>

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Footnotes

[1] http://japanfocus.org/-Say_Peace-Project/3549

[2] <http://japanfocus.org/-Lori-Dengler/3542>