

Minamata, Mercury Bay

Saturday 19 August 2006, by [PONS Philippe](#) (Date first published: 28 March 2005).

To see the sea caress the rocks, algae cultures and tangerine trees growing up the hillsides behind them, it is difficult to imagine that these little islands of the Shiranui Sea have, for the last half-century, been the theater of an unending drama: the Minamata illness, a name which refers to the eponymous Japanese city. Even at the moment when a universal exposition entitled "Nature's Wisdom" is opening in Aichi, it is always difficult to evoke this affair in Japan.

This poisoning by organic mercury dumped into the sea by a chemical company is the archetype of industrial pollution. One man has contributed to making it known: the epidemiologist Masazumi Hamada. He was the one who diagnosed the symptoms of the illness and battled the authorities for forty years. "When a disaster of this magnitude is not arrested at the outset, it never will be," he regrets.

This drama, so revelatory of Japan's forced expansion in the 1950s and 1960s, was denied for a long time, then minimized. For years, its victims followed one another before the administration like so many pathetic witnesses for the tribute paid to blind growth. They constituted an army of human ghosts: children with disarticulated bodies, adults with limbs twisted like flowers of the apocalypse....

An exemplary case of collusion between a polluting company (the Chisso chemical factory), power, science, and the media, the Minamata affair also marked the beginning of the great citizen struggles in post-war Japan. Incriminated factory workers and victims ended up allying to the point of bringing a State anxious to reduce the tragedy to a simple "failure" of the "economic miracle" before the judges.

The contamination of fish by the mercury poured out by the Chisso factory - situated in Minamata, a middle-sized city on Kyushu - is the source of a nervous disease as serious as it is incurable. Children born mentally handicapped, adult victims who lose their sense of touch, have their visual field reduced, shake, or experience convulsions or paralysis: after a long and painful legal fight and then a political settlement in 1996, some 15,000 victims were acknowledged to have been affected to varying degrees.

For ten years, the illness seemed to have passed into the annals of history. Then, in October 2004, the Supreme Court finally decided on a complaint filed twenty-two years before. The judges ruled in favor of the plaintiffs and judged that neither the State nor the Prefecture in which Minamata is located had taken timely measures to reduce the spread of the illness.

This decision revived Minamata's pain. Sick persons who had lost hope began to demonstrate. "This illness does not belong to the past," asserts Doctor Makaba Matsumoto, who has cared for victims in a little local clinic for forty years. Following the Supreme Court judgment, more than 700 patients came to see him. "I would never have thought there were so many," he insists. In four months, a thousand people had registered requests to be recognized as victims. In its budgetary provisions, the Kumamoto Prefecture foresees 25,000 potential victims. And the illness has not only affected the inhabitants of the little town: beyond that, it threatens the 450,000 people counted in the census of the perimeter of the Shiranui Sea, half of whom, according to Doctor Hamada, unquestionably

constitute a "population at risk."

Along the coasts of this virtually closed sea and the nearby islands, cats began to die of convulsions during the 1950s. They were called "dancing cats" then, recalls an old fisherman from Izumi, south of Minamata. "That was also the 'white sea' time: banks of fish floated on the surface. We caught them by hand. They seemed to be fresh and we ate them," he continues. Like the cats, human beings, especially the most vulnerable - children, pregnant women, old people - began to present curious symptoms.

The first case was diagnosed in 1953. A mysterious "disease" was recognized three years later. At that time, people thought it was an epidemic. The victims were isolated. "They were buried at night out of fear of the rumors," remembers an old woman from Goshonoura Island. In 1959, a group of researchers established the correlation with the dumped organic mercury, but the factory and the prefectural authorities rejected those conclusions and the group of researchers was dissolved. In 1968, the health ministry in spite of all agreed that the cause of the illness was, in fact, mercury. Chisso had to stop dumping its waste in the sea. In the meantime, another poisoning of the same sort appeared in Niigata (northeast of Honshu).

Then the interminable procedures to identify and indemnify the victims began. "My father's case sat there for over ten years," relates the owner of a local inn. "After his death, the municipality told me that if the autopsy revealed he had in fact been contaminated, I would receive his reparations. I sent them packing!"

Doctor Matsumoto's father also died of the same causes: "My father was a doctor. He knew that no one would believe him if he described his symptoms. I felt it was my duty to do his autopsy myself to show that he had a fatal dose of mercury in his body. That was indeed the case. But it was horrible: an ogre's job. As far as the State was concerned, it was less important to care for people than to limit their numbers."

In 1973, Chisso was finally convicted and condemned to pay 16 to 18 million yen to the plaintiffs. In spite of very restrictive criteria, 2,665 sick people were recognized (only 719 of them still live), but 16,000 requests were rejected. In 1996, to put an end to the legal proceedings, the first Socialist Prime Minister of the day, Tomiichi Murayama, decided on a "great conciliation," under the terms of which reparations of 2.6 million yen were to be paid out to the victims on the condition that they give up further legal action. 12,371 victims accepted; however, about thirty hardliners would not lay down their arms. They are the ones the Supreme Court has just ruled in favor of.

Today, Minamata is a mournful little town. Everything is falling apart here: population, birth rate, income. In the main street, many steel shutters are drawn. A third of the inhabitants - 50,000 in the 1960s - have left. "Mercury Bay" has been filled in, and, on that central divider, a Memory Park, a Museum, and a Research Institute have been built. As soon as you walk out of the railway station, the snarl of Chisso Factory pipes stick up in front of you. It no longer pollutes, but continues to produce. When a chemical complex was established here at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the population thought it was entering modernity. A half-century later, it would discover the price to be paid....

"Everything has been destroyed: our bodies, our solidarities, our customs," mourns an old fisherman from the Island of Shishijima. At the confluence of Minamata's currents, the tiny island has been decimated - a third of its nine hundred residents believe they are ill. "Even after they told us that the fish was polluted, we continued to eat it three times a day: we were poor and there wasn't anything else," the old man continues. Communities everywhere have been spilt. The calumnies against the sick "beggars," accused of having "ruined the region" by attacking the factory that provided work,

have ceased, but a diffuse resentment remains. One shopkeeper testifies: "The true victims are the healthy: we haven't been aggressors or victims, but all around us, there's nothing left any more of what used to compose our lives."

Even today, many residents along the perimeter of the Shiranui Sea prefer to maintain anonymity when they talk about this subject, an obscure vestige of former ostracism. In fact there was a time when simply saying that the fish had been poisoned signed a death sentence for fishermen, who could no longer sell their catch. Moreover, in the beginning, many of them refused to accept the illness. "When did you understand?" we asked a fishing boat owner from Amakusa Island in 1978. Without a word, he led us into the next room. Two little mentally handicapped children were crawling on the tatami mats: "When they were born." The family has now entirely disappeared. At the end of many encounters, the collective drama of a massive amount of suffering crystallizes. Suffering, like that of this mother whose 43-year-old daughter, paralyzed and mute since birth, is tied into her bed to keep her from hunching herself over. "The only thing I ask is that she goes before I do. I'll die more peacefully," confides the mother. Many parents of the handicapped are confronted with such situations: structures for assuring care are missing.

About sixty of these handicapped - some with their mothers also mentally affected - have nonetheless been placed in a Rehabilitation Center run by the region. Most were contaminated in utero. "Apart from their love for their abnormal children, the mothers feel a debt to them: the fetus absorbed part of the mercury in the mothers' bodies and they feel they owe their children their own lives," explains Doctor Harada.

As she speaks, Reiko Kinoshita presses her palms against her temples: "I have had continuous migraines for thirty-four years and, when I cut my finger, the blood flows, but I feel nothing." A 73-year-old fisherman's wife, recognized among the first of the sick, she asks for nothing except that people "leave me alone."

"My body resists my will," says a 52-year-old fisherman. In his case, the first symptoms appeared when he was thirty years old, but he was not recognized as ill until eighteen years later. He has to hold his right hand with his left to contain the shaking enough to write. "Those recognized as sick are dead and those who presented symptoms often hid them," he continues. "For parents to say that they were sick compromised their children's future: they would have trouble getting married because the illness was thought to be hereditary for a long time.... You also had to know what to do to become recognized, and doctors were not always cooperative: they were afraid for their careers. Finally, you had to have money to begin the process."

Along the perimeter of the Shiranui Sea, two worlds collided: the world of simple people, convinced of the harmony between man and nature, and the world of predatory capitalism that, for a long time, played on the simple people's humility in the face of the power that capitalism represented. "Something in our hearts has been wounded forever," confides the old fisherman from Goshonoura port. "I often wonder what my life would have been without this sickness."

"The Shiranui Sea is a land of legends, and the inhabitants lived in symbiosis with the sea, the fish, the trees: so, when I was a child, I thought that the sun never set, but went to light up the kingdom of the sea," explains Michiko Ishimure. This 79-year-old woman has described the drama of the Shiranui Sea with great sensitivity in books considered among the most powerful in contemporary Japanese literature.

Mixing the novelistic, poetry, an intimate journal, and eyewitness testimony, she was the spokesperson for those without voices, drawing her creative power from the imaged richness of their dialect. "When sea life disappears, the whole social balance teeters, a whole system of reference

falls apart. First the sickness was experienced as an obscure punishment, then it mutated into a bitterness that must be overcome if one is not to remain alone with oneself.”

P.S.

* From “Le Monde”, Monday 28 March 2005. Publication in English and translation: t r u t h o u t French language correspondent Leslie Thatcher. [an error occurred while processing this directive]

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