

Beware of Earthquake Buzzwords

Shuichi Kawashima

Senior Researcher, International Research Institute of Disaster Science (IRIDeS), Tohoku University

Field of expertise: Folklore

Translated by Catherine Sachi Kikuchi

As the 10th anniversary of the Great East Japan Earthquake approaches, there are a series of words that are used more frequently and have started to take on a life of their own, mainly by governments, researchers, and the media.

The word *kataribe* (storyteller, narrator) has been used since the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake to mean "someone who passes on stories of the disaster", but the word *denshō* (transmission/passing on) has grown significantly in the past decade. Although *saigai no kioku* (memories of the disaster) are not the only thing worth passing on, they seem to have taken on a whole new role.

Another word is *community*, a word borrowed into Japanese from American sociology. It's used in Japanese as if it were understood, but there is a big difference between Japanese communities, especially those in the Tohoku region, where the relationship between the *honke* (head family) and the *bunke* (branch family)¹ is strong, and those based on the contract community system². Without understanding this, it is difficult to understand the reconstruction situation in the affected areas simply by using the abstract term, community. It's also possible that, in part because it was easier to get involved with the culture in the affected areas, it is also necessary to reflect on the trend of focusing on rescuing folk entertainment, as if it were the only type of folk art.

It is essential for future disaster research to reconsider these words and behaviors through substantive discussion.

One aspiring storyteller who attended a briefing session on the prefectural government's project to train *kataribe* for post-disaster reconstruction, said that the consultant commissioned by the prefecture advised him not to touch on the issues of radioactive contamination and tritiated water discharged into the ocean due to the TEPCO's nuclear power plant accident.

This incident revealed how vague the term *kataribe* is, and that any project or research that is sponsored by the federal government, prefectural government, or corporations will not yield good results.

This is not necessarily limited to disaster research, but unless researchers themselves maintain a sense of independence in their work, it is unlikely that any creative studies will be produced by Japanese universities in the future.

¹ The *honke* is the main household of a Japanese family, where the head of a household and his successor (often the first born son) lives. *Bunke* are the branch households, often established by second and third sons.

² A type of village organization mainly distributed in the Tohoku region, in which mutual aid in situations such as illness, construction, and funerals, is involved, along with meetings and codes of behavior for members. Significant regional differences exist in the organizations.