

Kizuna:

The dynamics of social ties in post-disaster Japan
Impacts of the 2011 earthquake, tsunami and radiation

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The triple disaster that hit the north-eastern coast of Japan in 2011 displaced several ten-thousand people. In 2017, many communities are still living dispersed across the country. This raises questions about how people try to strengthen communal ties, despite the disruption of their communities caused by forced migration. Cultural institutions - such as festivals and events, concepts which explicitly relate to communal ties, and food culture - can provide a frame of stability and a basis for forming a common identity in a time when the physical frame of a community is literally washed away. The role of these cultural institutions has often been emphasized as a means to strengthen social ties among international migrant communities. Although there are clear similarities in the way domestic migrants, and in this case the survivors of the disasters, rely on cultural aspects, the case of domestic migration is still understudied.

By comparing communities which have been mainly affected by the Tsunami (with Natori in Miyagi prefecture as an example) with communities which have been mainly affected by the nuclear disaster (with Namie in Fukushima prefecture as an example), I hope to show how the type of disaster affects community building and the employment of local cultural aspects. I argue that in regions that have been mainly affected by the Tsunami, the employment of the named cultural institutions is helping the survivors to (re)build their communal bonds. Yet, they had to be changed and adapted partially to work in the new situation. Thus, they are not as stable as often expected. In Namie, however, even the institutionalized aspects of everyday culture become subjects of discussion after the nuclear accident. While some people consider celebrating festivals a way to rescue their local culture, others see it as a threat to their children's health. This study will hopefully contribute to a better understanding of the role of cultural institutions for community building and recovery, as well as the different impacts of natural disasters and nuclear disasters on communities and social ties.

Julia Gerster is a Ph.D. Candidate at the Graduate School of East Asian Studies (GEAS), Free University Berlin. She received her Bachelor's and Master's degree at FU Berlin in Japanese Studies. Exchange stay include Chuo University and Sophia University, in Tokyo. In 2013, she joined a research group from Sophia University under the supervision of Prof. David Slater for the project "Voices from Tohoku". Since December 2016, she is doing her field research at Tohoku University, Sendai.