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The Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake and Town-Making Towards Multiculturalism

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Five years have passed since the earthquake of unprecedented magnitude that occurred on January 17, 1995, killing over 6000 people in Kobe and vicinity on January 17, 1995. Now there is widespread recognition in Kobe that the disaster was a significant turning point in terms of the relationship between native Japanese and immigrants or ethnic minorities. One notable drastic change involves an emerging consciousness of *tabunka kyosei*, or multicultural coexistence, a term which describes the new concept of a society consisting of both “foreign” residents and Japanese as equal partners, not as guests and hosts.

The victims included nearly 300 foreign nationals in the whole region and 174 foreign nationals within the City of Kobe¹ alone. Kobe has a population of approximately 1.5 million, of which 3 percent are non-Japanese. The destructive impact of the earthquake focussed attention on the presence of ethnic minorities, in particular on “old-comers” such as Koreans and Chinese, and new immigrants such as the Vietnamese and Brazilians of Japanese ancestry. The media provided extensive coverage of these minorities and immigrants, often reporting stories concerning their long struggles and sudden losses or of their newly fashioned relationships with the Japanese.

In recent years, there has been a great deal of discussion regarding globalization and culture associated with space and place. Among others, Appadurai’s idea of “ethnoscapes” (1990) is one of the most quoted concepts in this field. Others (e.g. Hall 1992, Gilroy 1987, 1993) have also highlighted the importance of new approaches in looking at community and culture in today’s global context. Although these new approaches are of great importance, particularly in explaining deterritorialization of culture as more and more people

¹ About two-thirds of the victims of foreign nationality were Koreans and a quarter were Chinese, almost equivalent to the composition of non-Japanese in Kobe.

move about, more attention may be paid to “community” and “locality” as these terms can be attached to territory, not in a traditional closed, fixed sense, but using an open, flexible concept.

The wave of globalization that has swept other parts of Japan has also reached Kobe. In addition to old comers such as Westerners, Indians, and Chinese who have settled in this beautiful and livable town since late in the 19th century, newcomers include Vietnamese refugees and migrant workers of Japanese descent from Brazil and Peru, who provide low-skilled labor mostly to small or mid-sized businesses.

In this paper, I will explore how a new concept of local community and a consciousness of *tabunka kyosei* (multicultural coexistence) have emerged among Kobe residents since the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. In particular, I will focus on Nagata Ward, an inner-city neighborhood and plastic shoes manufacturing area where minorities form ten percent of the population, because it seems to be a space where a creolized and hybrid culture has emerged as local residents have built a new home together. In the process, I will examine how locality has been defined by the residents themselves, both native Japanese and non-Japanese, in their struggle to rebuild from ashes and ruins, and in their success in obtaining local government support. I will also discuss that for “foreigners,” the concept of home can be different at the local level and the national level².

I. Kobe and Internationalization

Since opening its port to world trade in 1868, Kobe has enjoyed a reputation as one of the most international and cosmopolitan cities in Japan. Currently nearly 43,000 people of foreign nationalities from about 100 countries reside in the City of Kobe. Two-thirds of them are Korean and another one-fifth are Chinese³. Since 1957, the city government has encouraged internationalization

² This paper is based on my field research that included frequent personal interviews with NGO leaders, local government staff, Nikkei counselors, and other service related people in Kobe and its vicinity between February 1997 through January 2000. It is a revised version of my earlier paper, “The Great Kobe Earthquake and Foreign Residents: Multicultural Coexistence in the New Concept of Local Community,” in Hiroshi Komai ed. *A Study on the Relation between Administrative Needs for New Comers and Internationalization Policies of Local Governments, A Study Report of a Research Grant-in-aid for Scientific Research by the Ministry of Education*. 1999.

³ Koreans (25,969) are the largest group, followed by Chinese (9,044), Americans (1,400), Indians (1,011), Brazilians (918), Vietnamese (872), and Filipinos (468).

activities such as entering into sister-city relationships, with Seattle being the first, providing assistance to countries in need, and welcoming foreign students. In a sense, the City of Kobe has utilized its image as an exotic town in its urban development. However, although major ethnic organizations among old-comers and city and prefectural governments have always worked together, most municipal attention has been directed outside, towards foreign countries, rather than inside, towards local foreigners.

Yet since the late 1980s, the presence of newcomers who, unlike old-comers, have limited understanding of the Japanese language and culture, has become readily visible throughout Japan. Since that time, each local government in Japan has started to confront the issue seriously by promoting the slogan “internal internationalization,” as well as dealing professionally with issues surrounding both old- and newcomers⁴.

2. The Earthquake and “Foreign” Residents

When the immensity of the earthquake disaster and its potential impact on citizens’ lives was realized, not a few Japanese were worried about Koreans and other minorities, recalling experiences during the Great Kanto Earthquake that hit Tokyo in 1923. Shortly after the Kanto Earthquake, thousands of Koreans were killed by Japanese under false accusations of arson and deliberate poisoning the water. Regarding the Kobe earthquake, both Korean and Japanese community activists say that they never even heard such rumors this time. Rather, they have described the deep sentiments they felt when they saw Japanese, Koreans, Vietnamese, and other foreigners smoothly assisting each other through the chaos despite serious shortages of food, water, and medicine in temporary earthquake shelters.

Immediately following the earthquake, among an estimated 1.2 million volunteers, many established local NGOs and individuals concerned about foreigners formed relief organizations and quickly initiated various kinds of services to all foreign nationals regardless to their status. To give just a few examples, the Foreigners’ Earthquake Information Center, which later changed its name to the Multicultural Coexistence Center, was organized five days after the

⁴ For example, the City of Kobe established a Division of International Relations within the Department of International Relations under the direction of the Mayor’s Office in 1991, and Hyogo Prefecture established The Section of Local Internationalization within the Department of International Exchange in 1995.

quake to provide hotline services and distribute short newsletters containing official government information regarding services, the condolence fund, financial assistance, and other programs, translated into 15 languages. The Kobe Students and Youth Center distributed 30,000 yen in cash to every foreign student whose residential building had been totally or partially destroyed⁵; in total, 767 students received it between February 1 and March 31, 1995 (Foreigners' Earthquake Information Center 1996: 147–157)⁶. The Relief Contact Meeting for Vietnamese set up its office in the Takatori Catholic Church in Nagata Ward, and the Center for Rebuilding Lives of Permanent Foreign Residents in Hyogo, was also born in Nagata soon after the quake. These two merged together two years later to organize the Center for Assisting Lives of Foreigners. Other organizations provided such services as confirming the safety of individuals, assisting with the official procedures required to receive condolence allowances, and establishing FM radio stations that broadcast information in ten languages and ethnic music to encourage the non-Japanese segment of the population. In February 1995, a couple of weeks after the earthquake, the organizations mentioned above and a few others joined together to form the Network for Relief of Foreigners.

One issue that became a debate between these NGOs and the local and the national governments was that of who is a “local resident”, the term included in the law regarding distribution of disaster condolence allowances to the bereaved. Although the local and national governments paid five million yen both legal immigrants and permanent residents for the death of breadwinners and two million yen for the death of dependents, the national government, specifically the Ministry of Welfare, rejected payments to three foreign families: an overstayer, a short-term sojourner, and a visitor. Another issue concerning medical costs began in February. For all of January after the earthquake, everyone, regardless of status, received totally free medical care at emergency medical care centers. While foreigners living in Japan less than one year and people who had overstayed their visas were not eligible to join government medical insurance and therefore had to cover all their medical expenses, all other foreigners were treated equally with Japanese and their expenses were fully covered. The Network for Relief of Foreigners found a solution to these problems, paying 1 million yen out of

⁵ There were other associations and NGOs which provided financial aid to foreign students. As a result, each foreign student whose residence building was totally or partially destroyed received approximately 500,000 yen.

⁶ SESCO, an international volunteer organization, sent 100,000 yen to 43 foreign students who at the same were attending non-university schools in Hyogo Prefecture but were intending to enroll in the university.

donations, to bereaved foreigners officially ineligible for the condolence fund⁷, and convinced the prefectural government to pay hospitals for unpaid medical costs of those foreigners.

The Hyogo branch of the Red Cross in Japan announced on February 6, 1995 that it would pay 100,000 yen from donations to every illegal immigrant as well as legally registered foreigner and Japanese person if she or he provided a certificate of having sustained damage in the disaster as well as proof of residence such as receipts for utility bills or mail⁸.

In this way, NGO leaders protested decisions of the local or national governments not to provide particular kinds of financial aid in certain cases. These protests were responses to the government's bureaucratic demarcation of the population in terms of citizenship and legal status of foreigners. These leaders claimed that the national government strictly maintains exclusive definitions of citizenship and permanent residentship, whereas the local governments responded more flexibly in adapting NGO proposals. NGOs achieved many, if not all, of their goals in pressuring local governments to consider more seriously the issues faced by foreigners.

It is also noteworthy that as these discussions continued between the NGOs and the city and the prefectural governments, an informal regular study group was formed called GONGO, an abbreviation for Government Organizations and Non-Government Organizations. GONGO managed to cover the unpaid medical, and promoted understanding of the idea of an Asia Town in Nagata Ward.

Compared to governments, local residents hardly drew any lines between themselves. According to a number of sources, including leaders of foreigner groups, the Japanese, whether young or old, victims or volunteers alike, made no distinction between minorities and Japanese in the distribution and sharing of goods and in extending assistance.

The media also covered stories of how Japanese neighbors of a Korean ethnic school in east Kobe and Koreans connected to the school broke down the walls

⁷ The government paid 5 million yen to the bereaved families of breadwinners and 2 million yen to those of dependents if the victims were Japanese nationals, permanent residents, or legal immigrants who had resided in the area more than one year.

⁸ However, perhaps a misunderstanding regarding this assistance program prevented illegal immigrants from going to City Hall to report their names and addresses in order to receive the certificate. Some NGO leaders had to go through a difficult negotiation process with government bureaucracies in order to obtain the condolence fund amount for these illegal immigrants; they later reported that they eventually received these moneys for all the cases they worked on.

between them to develop close relationships. When these Japanese, who had no previous contact with the school, found shelter there after the earthquake, the Korean teachers warmly welcomed their sharing the facilities, and later the Koreans offered rice balls and warm soup to everyone. In the process of living together in tents at the school over several months, almost every night they talked about each other's history, the prejudice each had against the other, and came to have a better understanding of each other. A 68-year-old Japanese man, who used to believe that this Korean school was affiliated with North Korea and was teaching terrorism to its students, said to me that it was the first time in history that the Japanese and the Koreans came to trust each other from the bottom of their hearts and started looking ahead instead of back. He even said, "The quake was indeed a hard and sad experience. But it was a challenge God gave us. We overcame the challenge to develop this relationship." It was a complete 180 degree change in their relationships. Now he is one of the strongest advocates speaking out for the rights of Koreans.

Even critical foreign resident activists have praised how the Japanese and minorities helped each other and increased their mutual understanding in the process.

Of course, there were some conflicts. For instance, some Vietnamese were asked, "Why are you Vietnamese here?" In another case, some working-class Japanese, standing behind a Vietnamese shelter, apparently complained that the Vietnamese had not cleaned the toilets for the week when they were on duty. Since many water and sewer lines were either cut or destroyed in the earthquake, the condition of or total lack of toilet facilities was a serious problem in many shelters.

Generally speaking, however, through the difficult life-or-death experience of an earthquake, an almost unanimous consciousness arose that communities in Kobe have reached the level where minorities and Japanese proved that they could co-exist together as partners. A 59-year-old Korean man believes that "since the tragedy and disaster was a common, shared experience, we have come to enjoy mutual safety and conversation when we meet on the street. Those people who used to adopt a certain posture [towards non-Japanese] have stopped assuming such" (Kobe Shimbun Nov. 1, 1995).

3. Nagata as a Testing Ground

Until the earthquake, most activities related to international exchange, international events, and various services for foreign nationals were initiated by

the city and prefectural governments and were offered in downtown Kobe. In this sense, Nagata Ward was totally peripheral within Kobe. However, since the earthquake, this long-neglected inner city has emerged as a testing ground for a number of new projects of multicultural coexistence in Kobe. This situation was unique because it was not initiated by local governments but by local residents themselves, both Japanese and non-Japanese, with the local governments later reacting to residents' initiatives.

In Nagata Ward, almost ten percent of the population or 10,000 people, were of foreign nationality when the earthquake occurred⁹. They represented 28 different countries, although most were Koreans and Vietnamese. Although there are geographical communities such as "Chinatown" and a European settlement area near downtown Kobe, communities such as "Korea town" or "Vietnam town" did not exist in Nagata.

It was only a few months after the quake, however, that the idea of an "Asia Town" in Nagata became publicly known. It derived from a plan among Korean permanent residents to build a Korea town in Nagata, but through the experience of the earthquake the leaders of the original idea and other residents became aware of how many Asians and other nationalities indeed live together in Nagata. Thus, the Council for Asia Town Promotion, established after the earthquake, is now engaged in various projects such as constructing multilingual public signage. The languages provided reflect the makeup of the residential population: English, Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Japanese. There is a strong conviction among council members that multilingual signage and information improves communications among different nationalities in terms of daily life and promotes mutual understanding among different cultures. Furthermore, such multilingual information enables smoother communication flows during disaster or emergency situations by assisting residents in fleeing the areas and by conducting them to safe shelters.

The idea of an Asia Town is a plan to have a "global village" that holds booths of various ethnic foods, ethnic grocery stores, small restaurants, and ethnic crafts, stores as well as a square for ethnic music and dancing. As a test model, the Marugo Ichiba, a public market in Nagata, conducted a three-day "Asia Market" in 1997 and 1998, utilizing stores in the market left vacant after the earthquake. Activities included celebrating ethnic dances, music, and cultures. Store guidelines in five languages (Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and English) were provided by the organizers. A 52-year-old Korean involved in the

⁹ Currently legal foreign residents number 8,700 in Nagata Ward.

Asia Town plan said, "It is not a matter of being Japanese or Korean. We are all the same local residents in this neighborhood" (Kobe Shimbun Nov. 1, 1995).

The Council for Issues Concerning Foreign Residents in Kobe, which consists of ethnic community leaders, intellectuals, and local government officers, proposed a plan to build an "International Volunteer Cultural Exchange Center" in Nagata as a model project. "The idea is based on the premise that it should utilize the new interaction which emerged since the earthquake out of mutual assistance between foreign residents and Kobe city residents". Responding to these various community-building activities undertaken by residents themselves, the city and prefectural governments obtained land near a railroad station and the plan is being carried forward.

Efforts toward a new community building also include a ten-language FM station, born after a Korean FM station and a multilingual FM station, both of which started broadcasting after the earthquake, merged into a single station. This local station provides ethnic music and news with DJs in each language. It too has contributed to generating and strengthening the atmosphere of multicultural coexistence in Nagata.

4. Membership in the Local Area vs. Nation-State

What we have observed in Nagata Ward is not necessarily an isolated case. For example, regarding the relationship in Nada Ward between the Korean school and its Japanese neighbors, the school has been actively supported by the neighborhood association, a women's group, and other groups and individuals since their new mutual understanding after the earthquake. They have succeeded in raising funds for the school, and in getting traffic lights set up in front of school, which the school had for a long time appealed for in vain to the police. Geographically, the school is located at the edge of Chuo Ward, in the middle of a factory area with almost no residents, whereas its Japanese neighbors belong to Nada Ward. Although the official demarcation line cuts between the two, they have formed their own new "local community". In Higashinada Ward too, where many universities with foreign students are concentrated, residents and university professors have started a project of town-making in their community. Among the various groups involved in relief activities, one young man declared that "a nationality is nothing more than a person's individuality."

Although Nagata is the most symbolic and most active area in terms of initiating various projects for multicultural coexistence, the society of Kobe is certainly changing significantly. This statement is supported by a keyword

search of newspaper articles in the Kobe Shimbun. In 1995, I found nearly 500 articles containing the term “foreigners”, and then came a steady increase: nearly 700 during 1996 and nearly 900 during 1997¹⁰. Furthermore, with regard to *tabunka kyosei* or multicultural coexistence, although I found no instances of use of the term in the titles of articles throughout 1994, there were two articles in 1995, 18 in 1996, and 14 in 1997.

Starting before the earthquake and continuing to the present, a large number of local governments throughout Japan have passed resolutions to support the local suffrage of permanent foreign residents, which is at present restricted by national law. The Supreme Court ruled in March 1995 that it is not against the Constitution to grant local suffrage to permanent foreign residents.

In March 1995, two months after the earthquake, the Hyogo Prefectural Assembly and the Kobe City Assembly unanimously passed the “Resolution on the Local Suffrage of Permanent Foreign Residents”. In making the resolution, the Prefectural Assembly stated that “the occurrence of the earthquake had a major impact on clarifying how Japanese residents could coexist with permanent foreign residents”.

An editorial in the Kobe Shimbun dated March 20, 1995 entitled “Foreign Residents’ Suffrage Needed for Rebuilding” discusses this issue. It is worth citing a portion in length.

“Indeed, it is not surprising that the landscape dotted with foreigners residences and foreign embassies has generated the common tourist catchphrase describing Kobe as an exotic town. However, a real international sense in Kobe and its vicinity, I believe, has been nurtured by the foundations of this metropolitan city and in the daily lives of city citizens. Why is it that among Kobe’s and Osaka’s citizens, there is a consciousness, a kind of affinity that they can engender towards Koreans, Chinese, and Filipinos? It is because people of any country are their neighbors in their daily lives. Without mixing with people from other cultures and experiencing their cultures, we cannot find uniqueness and strength in cities like Kobe and Osaka.

“If we think that way, the uniqueness of this international sense in Kobe and Osaka is a significant clue necessary to rebuild the areas. We can even go so far as to say that without the cooperation of foreign residents, it would be impossible to rebuild Kobe and Osaka. In order to reconstruct our cities, we need to build a new society of coexistence and together with our foreign residents, choose a path of reconstruction” (Kobe Shimbun March 20, 1995).

This concern is not one-sided. A 65-year-old Korean man stated that prior to the earthquake he had never been concerned about his suffrage rights; yet, after the earthquake, he found searching for employment difficult and felt that he would

¹⁰ Data prior to 1994 in this respect is not available.

have no luck in obtaining a temporary, city-subsidized apartment. He now thinks, "If I had the right to vote, I certainly would this time". A Korean community leader said, in his appeal for local suffrage and for full rights to be employed and promoted as a government employee, "Local communities share common destinies regardless of the nationalities or ages of their inhabitants. Community people not only live together but also could die together".

Many, if not all, Koreans seem to have strong attachments to locality and identify themselves as members of the local community, and yet many still show an unwillingness to naturalize, in order to maintain their Korean citizenship. Thus, when the president of an association for Korean residents in Hyogo Prefecture claimed at its 10th anniversary event that it should demand local suffrage in Japan and national suffrage in South or North Korea (Kobe Shimbun June 17, 1996), his statement was strongly symbolic.

On a different level, support of local suffrage by a large number of local governments throughout Japan while the national government maintains its position restricting suffrage to Japanese nationals, in a sense questions what social membership means at the local level and at the national level. It is obvious that the national government as the ruler of the nation-state is losing its control over maintaining citizenship (or nationality) as sacred and unique to Japan.

On the other hand, using Hannertz' definition of culture as a phenomenon of interactions (Hannertz 1997), at the local community level in Kobe, the Japanese, permanent residents, refugees, and other foreigners, through their interactions and efforts to rebuild the community, have been generating a creolized and hybrid culture.

5. Conclusion

Kobe is certainly significantly transforming towards becoming a society more sensitive to multiculturalism, as a result of the influx of foreign workers affected by the wave of globalization and the effects of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake. The presence of newcomer immigrants has had a great impact upon such changes in Kobe. Although Chinese and Koreans compose the largest segment of foreign nationalities in Kobe as well as throughout Japan, at least there are more resources and a firmer foundation for newcomers of those backgrounds that they can use to become familiar with the Japanese culture and system. This can be attributed to the establishment of old-comers, although needless to say, social and legal barriers against them still exist in various arenas. In that sense, immigrants from foreign countries have come to be a great force in pressuring

Japanese society. The formation of various NGOS, local government social services, multilingual FM stations, Japanese lessons, and such are all efforts by an increased number of native Japanese who deeply care about their “neighbors” and “partners” in a society that they want to make to be multicultural.

Here I would like to underscore the significant effects of the Great Hanshi-Awaji Earthquake in changing the native Japanese consciousness towards foreign residents. It is in the process of rebuilding after the earthquake that the basis of boundary making among some Japanese, if not all, in Kobe seems to be changing to a more community- or neighborhood-oriented stance than nationality- or “race”-oriented. As an old Japanese saying illustrates: “Neighbors are closer than distant relatives”.

Much of the literature on globalization and culture emphasizes fragmentation, disintegration, or deterritorialization of communities while paying close attention to transnational ties, imagined communities, or diaspora. There is no doubt that the Vietnamese, Japanese descendants from Brazil and Peru, the Koreans, and the Chinese maintain special attachments to their own “communities” that exist on the global level. The impact of globalization on locality, however, does not necessarily result in dislocation of communities. Such a theoretical model seems to be more suitable to explain “localities” that entail some degree of residential or economic segregation.

In the case of Kobe, although there are concentrations of ethnic populations in certain areas, their housing is integrated without forming ethnic enclaves. According to Komai (1998), since newcomers provide the labor force for small- or mid-sized businesses, what is called the double-split labor market did not come into existence in Japan. As a result, as far as new immigrants are concerned, their co-workers or employers and neighbors are Japanese with whom they have interactions in everyday life.

There are also other factors that should be taken into account. Many decades of struggles and achievements of old-comers, especially the Koreans and the Chinese, cannot be underestimated, as there would be no foundations on which to develop coexistent relationships with newcomers. Yet it is the sudden increase of newcomers who have little understanding of Japanese language and culture that has had an impact on Japanese society as a whole and local governments throughout Japan.

Furthermore, the age of globalization has affected the Japanese as much as it has immigrants and ethnic minorities. The NGO leaders mentioned earlier have various backgrounds associated with globalization, such as having worked for international organizations, having traveled around the world as back-packers,

marrying non-Japanese, and having close non-Japanese neighbors. For ordinary Japanese, too, “foreigners’” faces are not foreign any longer as they see “foreigners” almost everywhere in Japan, and the distance from foreign countries in time and space has been compressed, through the media and travelling.

Of course, Kobe is still far from reaching a type of society where different ethnic groups coexist as equal partners in a real sense, as there is overt or covert discrimination in employment, housing, and other domains of social structure. However, what we see in Kobe after the great earthquake is that local communities, especially in areas hard hit by the quake, are the central arenas of interactions, frictions, negotiations, and co-planning for local residents, both Japanese and foreign. Thus, using Hannertz definition of culture as a phenomenon of interactions (1997), local communities, after synthesizing and transforming themselves, have started producing a hybrid and creolized culture. They, in turn, have been putting pressure on local governments to change their definition of who is a member of society. Japanese society is changing from the bottom up.

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