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# The roles of monuments for the dead during the aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the roles of disaster memorials during the five years that followed the Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE). After the collective experience of catastrophe, societies develop various modes of grieving and remembering the tragedies and their victims. One of these strategies consists of the erection of monuments where mourners, survivors, politicians, religious leaders and other visitors may process their sorrows, pay their respects to the dead, express their solidarity with the affected community, and remember the catastrophe. Despite the fact that the grieving process starts immediately after the event, memorials for the dead are paradoxically built years, if not decades, after the events. The reason might be that memorials are often conceived solely as 'mnemonic devices.' However, to limit their role as material testimonies of catastrophes is to ignore the functions they hold for communities during the immediate aftermath. In response, this study reports on the practical roles played by memorial monuments for the survivors of the Great East Japan Earthquake. It reflects on the significance of both their tangible (the monument and its surroundings) and intangible dimensions (grief, social bonds, memories). The paper concludes a few of general recommendations based on the idea that memorials compose a matrix of complementary practices of remembrance that together contribute to reducing the impact of the losses suffered by post-disaster communities.

## 1. Introduction

Industrial societies respond to threats of earthquakes and tsunamis by drawing primarily from the lessons learned by engineering and natural sciences. These fields most commonly study the physical evidence left these natural hazards on human habitations, the environment and human bodies themselves. The rapid advancement of hard sciences and technology has encouraged industrial societies – in their efforts to reduce disaster risk and impact – to increase their reliance on the resistance of buildings, infrastructures and information technologies. However, the rising complexity and costs of natural hazards have recently called for a more holistic approach, thus directing more attention to collective behaviours and cultures in the context of disasters [1–3]. The last few decades have witnessed an exponential increase in the number of scholars from the social sciences and humanities studying the influence of the collective experience, indigenous knowledge, and cultures of disasters on society's preparation, adaptation, response and recovery [4–7]. Cultural anthropologists, historians, and other specialists have been concentrating their efforts on understanding how communities that regularly experience disasters might create, develop or adopt particular perceptions of, knowledge of and responses to disasters [8–10]. Their approach has brought more attention to the 'soft' responses that may contribute to disaster risk reduction.

One of the emergency responses examined by social scientists is the way groups of people memorialise disasters. Addressing the collective experience of catastrophes, societies develop various modes of grieving and remembering disasters and their victims [11–13]. These modes are both tangible (monuments, gardens, museums, and archives) and intangible (ceremonies, rituals, storytelling, oral histories). A common strategy consists of the erection of cenotaphs and memorial monuments where mourners, survivors, politicians, religious leaders and other visitors may process their sorrows, pay their respects to the dead, express their solidarity with the affected community, and remember the tragedy. In industrial societies, the most common type of memorials is probably that of wars. Such monuments constitute an official means of honouring fallen soldiers and reminding new generations of the atrocities and dangers of wars [14,15]. Some of the world's most notorious edifications include the memorials of the Holocaust in Berlin, the Vietnam War in Washington and the Hiroshima A-bomb in Japan. Other memorials of 'human-made' tragedies include those commemorating terror attacks, such as the 9/11 memorial for the assault on the World Trade Centre in New York City [16]. Less well known but increasing in

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number are commemorative stones for disasters related to natural hazards. Examples include memorials for the Sumatra Indian Tsunami (2004), Hurricane Katrina (2005) and the Sichuan Earthquake (2008). All these memorials often constitute 'les lieux de mémoire' or sites of collective memory [11]. More recently, some studies have demonstrated their capacity to improve the social recovery of affected communities for whom the memorialization of a catastrophe may serve as a means of resolving conflicts and a source of empowerment [17,18].

Despite their significant roles during the aftermath, monuments often seem to be considered the third wheel of disaster response and recovery. Monuments are built years, if not decades, after the events they memorialise. The memorials for Hiroshima and 9/11 were accomplished in 1954 and 2011, respectively, or approximately ten years later. We make the same observation when it comes memorials for those catastrophes that relate to a natural hazard. The memorials for Hurricane Katrina and Sichuan were built, respectively, three and five years following the tragedies. A possible reason for these delays might be that those responsible for their constructions conceive memorials as objects of closure that confine disastrous events to the past or 'mnemonic devices' [19]. This view suggests that monuments stand immobile as a timeless representation of the past rather than active elements of social recovery disaster risk reduction (DRR). The inclusion of memorial monuments as contributing elements depends on our understanding of what constitutes DRR. According to the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR), DRR "aims to reduce the damage caused by natural hazards like earthquakes, floods, droughts and cyclones, through an ethic of prevention…The scale of the impact, in turn, depends on the choices we make for our lives and for our environment." [20] If disaster risk reduction is about reducing the consequences of the disasters that follow natural hazards, then why are memorial monuments not considered part of this process? Considering this question, we hope to show how the presence of memorial monuments decrease the impact of the loss of lives and the loss of place suffered during a disaster. By drawing our attention to their roles during the immediate aftermath, this paper at contributing to the idea that memorials are memory itself, dynamic and adaptive to the needs of post-disaster society.

Inscribing itself within studies of memorials and the anthropology of absence [21,22], this paper investigates the multiple roles played by monuments during the immediate aftermath of the Great East Japan Earthquake (GEJE). The first section of this paper reports on the activities observed at three monuments in a community affected by the tsunami. The second section draws from this case study to highlight the distinctive and complementary roles played by the memorial stones of disaster victims. The third section concludes with recommendations about future approach to monuments that we believe is necessary to allow their active contributions to processes grief and well-being, social solidarity and place making, the preservation of memories and disaster education during the immediate aftermath of disaster.

## 2. Memorial monuments of the GEJE

On the afternoon of March 11, 2011, the northeast region of Japan was hit by a magnitude 9.0 earthquake. The quake triggered tidal waves that reached up to forty meters high and several kilometres inland. The tsunami washed away entire coastal settlements. Among those caught by the waves, 15,083 lost their lives, and 3971 went missing. The waves also ignited the crisis of the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Disaster, the second worst nuclear accident in history. The GEJE is reportedly the costliest catastrophe ever recorded, representing an economic deficit of over 210 billion US dollars [23]. To these overwhelming figures, we must add the devastating impact that the events have had on the livelihoods, social relationships and cultural assets of the affected communities and their survivors.

The intense degree of the commemoration of the GEJE matched the level of destruction. Every year, the whole country has marked the anniversary of the disaster and observes a minute of silence to remember the loss incurred on March 11. The Emperor, the central and local governments, Buddhist temples, NGOs/NPOs, and local associations all perform ceremonies and other rituals, with attendance reaching several thousand individuals for the largest events. The barren landscapes of the disaster areas have become the sites of informal and formal acts of remembrance including flower, incense and water offerings, scribbled messages and other mementoes left by the wondering survivors in the ruins of some building or some makeshift shrines. These wilful behaviours preceded by the establishment of more orderly memorial sites including a stone monument(s). These stones are built in memory of the disaster and the souls of its victims. Many cities decided to build memorial parks and small museums, sometimes near the beaches where their communities once lived. As will be discussed below, the struggle over the planning of the reconstruction and the debate surrounding the location, the nature and the timing of memorials often delayed their construction.

The monuments of the GEJE find their roots in Japan's deep culture of memorial stones. The depth of this culture is reflected in the fact that Japanese people classify memorial monuments into several categories, each of which assumes a particular function. All of these share the Chinese character "碑", which is pronounced *hi* and means "stone monument bearing an inscription" [24]. The first and most common category is *kinenhi* that means stone in memory of something. *Kinenhi* commonly marks a place, an event or an institution. For example, they are often found on school grounds, new train stations and other public buildings. They may also be erected to commemorate an event such as a war, an earthquake or a tsunami. The stones that memorialise tsunamis are also referred to as *tsunamihi* [25]. The second category is *ireihi*, or stones to comfort the spirits of the dead. *Ireihi* comprises those monuments dedicated to victims of an unnatural death; another related category is *kuyôhi* or stones for the memorial services of the deceased [26]. *Ireihi* is a collective grave. Like cenotaphs, they do not contain the remains of the dead. They are most often the responsibility of religious institutions who commonly honour the 'souls' of the dead in Japanese society. Buddhist temples erect them as places to pray for the souls of their parish members who have become victims of 'natural' disasters. Shrines of Japan's native religion (i.e., Shinto) contain and maintain *ireihi* honouring the souls of fallen soldiers. As a result, *ireihi* are objects of ritual focus where bereaved families, survivors, religious leaders, government officials and visitors may pray or show their respects for the dead as well as their solidarity with the wider disaster community. Following these traditional patterns, the *kinenhi* and the *ireihi* of the GEJE have two defined functions.

In continuity with Japanese tradition, the GEJE stones constitute one of the most common modes of remembering the disaster and its victims. One of the first *ireihi* was erected within a year of the tsunami. Its location is the devastated land of the Ogawa Primary School in Ishinomaki City, where 74 pupils and ten staff members lost their lives in the tsunami. Before the erection of several grand stones, the first *ireihi* of the school resembles a regular family grave. The central element is a rectangular column of black granite engraved with the dates, the name of the monument, and other information. The engraving reads, "The Unnatural death of the Great East Japan Earthquake" and "The memorial tablet of ten teaching staff, 74 souls of the primary school children, three souls of the junior high school, and the young men and women residents of the area." The other elements of the memorial are an incense burner and two blocks for flower offerings, as well as Buddhist statues, several stupas, and other objects of remembrance. This structure materialises the tragedy that took place on the site of the school and the need to care for the souls of the 74 young lives drowned by the tsunami. Among the *kinenhi*, the most striking example can be found in Kamaishi City under the name "Telling and connecting with the giant tsunami of March 11" [27]. The monument is composed of five columns built of black granite, each of which measures 2.6 m in height. Each column comports the messages of primary school children,