

A Personal View of Volunteering in Iwate After 3. 11: In Whose Service? 3.11以降の岩手での奉仕活動についての個人的見解

Margaret Mehl

Prologue by David H. Slater

Margaret Mehl poses some penetrating questions about the changing role of relief work over time as she introduces her experience of volunteering in a relatively remote section of Iwate sixteen months after the 3.11 disasters. She provides an unusual glimpse of the on-going relief effort and the challenges that both volunteers and relief groups face in the redefinition of their priorities and practices as local needs on the ground move away from immediate survival relief and beyond the digging out of mud and debris. Through reflexive questioning of her own volunteer activities, she forces us to rethink the role and motivations of NPOs and of volunteers where the line between relief work and “disaster tourism” begins to blur. Mehl asks if some sort of volunteering, including some of what she herself was doing, are in fact little more than “just amateuring in another guise,” a part of a “lifestyle feature” focused more on the self-fulfillment of volunteers than on making a difference to the local areas. If indeed that is the case, what are we to make of it, both positive and negative, in terms of efficacy and ethics? For many people who have spent days, months and even years volunteering in Tohoku and other places, some of these questions may be unsettling—perhaps one reason that they have rarely been asked in the 3.11 aftermath. But we believe that they are important questions and their exploration through first hand accounts of actual volunteers may be the best way to address them. The Asia-Pacific Journal has published

numerous accounts of volunteer efforts in the wake of 3.11, and these are referenced at the end of the article.

If others would like to share their experiences in volunteering, we encourage you to comment at the end of this article. DHS

Introduction

The Sanriku coast and Iwate prefecture were unknown territory to me before last year’s triple disaster, although I have been coming to Japan for study and research since 1984 and have travelled widely. In November/December, 2011 I spent two weeks in Miyako as a volunteer affiliated with the OMF Iwate Relief Project, affiliated with the 3.11 Iwate Church Network.² Accompanying the OMF team comprised of Mike McGinty, Rowena McGinty, Homma Hidetaka and Homma Sanae,



Fig. 1: Jōdogahama beach, complete with tourist amenities including a restaurant offering “Jōdogahama Curry,” is open to visitors again.

I visited several temporary housing complexes in Miyako and Yamada and held “Christmas cafes” in order to bring some festive cheer and to provide an occasion for the inhabitants to get together socially; we also distributed goods bought with donations from Japan and abroad.^{va}

(A brief explanation of the regional characteristics of the Sanriku coast and the damage caused by the tsunami, including maps, can be found [here](#).)

By the end of November, eight months after the devastation of the earthquake-tsunami, progress towards recovery was impressive. In Miyako, Yamada and Tarō the debris had largely been cleared from the ground, leaving the bare foundations looking like archaeological diggings; particularly in Miyako rebuilding seemed well on its way. The main shopping street looked to me as if it never had been hit by a tsunami, although a sign marking the water level at the Riasu-tei assembly rooms revealed that the water there had been almost as high as my waist, enough to devastate any shop floor. When I left after two weeks - the longest time I had ever spent in a provincial town in Japan - I was determined to visit again.

So, this summer I took a break from my book manuscript about the social history of the violin in Japan and headed for Iwate once more. Having read the “Reports From the Field”, especially those by Christopher S. Thompson and Dawn Grimes-MacLellan,³ I felt even more strongly the importance of returning to the same area, one whose people have perceived themselves to be at the back of the queue where attention and support in the wake of the disaster is concerned.

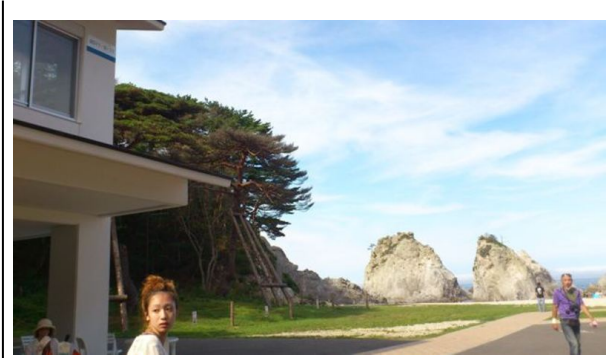


Fig. 2: A plaque at the Jōdogahama Rest House indicates the height of the tsunami.

This was also my own impression when I looked for ways to help as a lone volunteer with no specific practical skills (OMF was receiving a constant stream of teams over the summer). A disproportionate number of the more visible organizations seem to be concentrating their efforts on Ishinomaki and on Miyagi prefecture in general. My choice eventually fell on Kawai Camp in the mountainous area of Kawai, administratively part of Miyako city, and on Tōno

Magokoronet (Tono City Disaster Relief Work Network).⁴ Both were open to short-term as well as long-term volunteers and to individuals as well as groups. Like most organizations they require registration in advance and the Disaster Volunteer Insurance that seems to be standard and can represent a headache for people coming from abroad.⁵ A trip to the volunteer office in the Fureairando Iwate complex in Morioka took care of the insurance, and I was even given a box of protective masks, one of several items both organizations (like others) include on their list of things to bring. I was also directed to the nearest Homac (Home Amenity Centre) to buy items I had not brought with me from Denmark, including such (for me) esoteric items as metal-reinforced safety insoles. These lists of equipment I came to regard as problematic, because they seemed to encourage a perception of volunteer work that

no longer matched the realities I encountered.

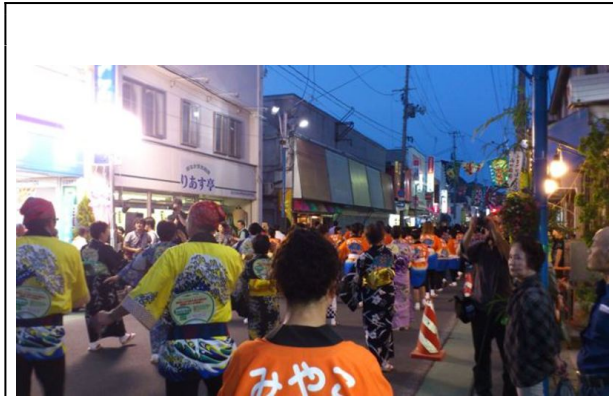


Fig. 3: “Shimin odori” in the main shopping street of Miyako at the Summer festival, 28 July 2012.

Before making my way to Kawai, which is reached by the bus connecting Morioka and Miyako, I spent the weekend in Miyako to renew my acquaintance with that city, before going wherever Kawai Camp would send me. It was a special time for Miyako. Jōdogahama beach, known for its natural beauty, had been officially reopened for bathing just a couple of weeks before, for the first time since the tsunami. The Jōdogahama Rest House offered changing facilities, ice cream, drinks, souvenirs and a restaurant, as if it had never been inundated by the tsunami, although a plaque to mark the water level was close to the roof (Fig 1-2).

Meanwhile, in town on 28 and 29 July, the 45th Miyako Summer Festival with a display of folk performing arts (*dentō geinō*) was in full swing. Ten years older than the famous Sansa odori in Morioka, as the compère on the stage in front of Miyako Station proudly announced, the Miyako festival was clearly celebrated as a marker of a city on the way to normalcy and an affirmation of local identity in the face of ongoing challenges.⁶ Saturday evening featured “*shimin odori*” (a dance by the townspeople, in which bystanders join) in the high street (Fig.3), a custom resumed after years of

neglect; the dancing was similar to the bon dances I knew from Tokyo, but new lyrics had been composed for the occasion, including references to the recovery efforts.

One does not have to look far in Miyako to see that recovery still has a long way to go. But that weekend a happy, festive atmosphere pervaded the town.

Kawai Camp (Fig.4-6)



Fig. 4: Kawai Camp, Kawai, Miyako city.

The following morning I boarded the bus for Morioka, arriving at Kawai Camp just in time for morning assembly at 8 a.m. Some volunteers had come by bus from Morioka just for the day. Those who stay longer come from all parts of Japan; during the five days of my stay this included people from Fukuoka, Kanazawa, Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Tokyo as well as two from America. Between 25 and 31 volunteers (4-10 women, 17-25 men) stayed overnight at the camp, which has a capacity of 120 volunteers and at peak times accommodated around 90. At morning assembly, newly arrived volunteers were introduced by name and where they came from while departing volunteers were named and thanked for their contribution.



Fig. 5 Employees Kanehira Isao (l.) and Nakatsuka Eiji (r.) in front of the office, Kawai Camp.

Kawai Camp is run by Morioka City in the building of the former Kawai branch of Miyako High School. It serves as a place for volunteers to stay from which they can organize the dispatch of volunteers to different locations in response to the needs communicated to the camp by the volunteer centres of Miyako, Yamada and other municipalities. A daily list of “needs” would be posted at around 6 p.m. and volunteers could sign up for the next day. On the day I arrived, most of the volunteers who had no special assignment were driven in minibuses to the welfare centre in Miyako, where another morning assembly awaited us and other volunteers, who had come directly to the centre. In the blazing heat (already at 10 a.m.!) we were taken through the radio gymnastics routine, before being driven, in groups of three, to the *kasetsu jyutaku* (temporary housing complexes, commonly simply referred to as “kasetsu” in local parlance) for activities described as a “salon.” This meant serving tea and cold drinks and socializing with whoever turned up in the common room (*danwashitsu* in the smaller housing complexes, *shūkaishitsu* in the larger ones).



Fig. 6 Kawai Camp badges.

My group included a high school student from Shikoku and a company employee from the Kyoto area, and we visited Takahama *kasetsu*.⁷ We were not the only volunteers as it turned out. Two women, apparently from a different network, turned up and served drinks and individually wrapped shop-bought cakes. They had arranged for a lawyer to visit and talk about solutions to the financial difficulties resulting from last year's disaster, including the possibility of reducing or even annulling loans on property destroyed by the tsunami. He deserved a bigger audience, I thought, as I listened to him explaining the different schemes, using large cardboards with diagrams, *kamishibai*-style, as he himself called it. Only four old ladies had turned up and a man who arrived late and left early, as well as a mother with a primary school boy. They all left at lunchtime, and we volunteers ate our *bentō* or *onigiri*, bought at a convenience store en route to Miyako. Only the boy returned in the afternoon, and the high-school volunteer did his best to keep him entertained. About half an hour before we were due to be collected at 3 p.m., we remaining two sat on a bench outside, and my fellow-volunteer struck up a conversation with an elderly man on a bench and a lady passing by with her shopping bags. Perhaps sitting outside in the sun was a better way of meeting the residents (the aim of “salon” activities), I reflected. After all, entering the common room requires a

commitment to a bout of socializing which many of them might not wish to make, while passers-by seemed to enjoy a more casual encounter outside.

“Salon”, exchange (*kōryū*) or whatever preferred expression is used, seems to be generally perceived by organizers (the local welfare authorities as well as several relief organizations) as a positive thing to do for residents in the *kasetsu*. The Miyako volunteer centre and Kawai Camp had the “salon” routine well-organized, with a complex system of reporting; there was a file on each *kasetsu* for the welfare centre and a copy for the camp as well as a notebook for each *kasetsu* for communication among the visiting volunteers (*renrakuchō*). During the morning assemblies on the “salon” days, we were given a few simple guidelines about how to behave (such as not talking about last year’s disaster unless people brought up the subject of their own accord). Last year, however, I had heard criticism about the salon approach. Some of the same criticism was voiced by one of the veteran volunteers, Toda Hiroshi*, at the camp one evening: ‘What about the people who do not come to the common room?’ Even in good times, parties are not to everybody’s liking. In hard times, the people most in need of human contact might be the ones least inclined to leave their apartment or unit. Many elderly are housebound and cannot go out, even if they wanted to. Toda suggested that knocking on doors might be a better way of reaching out to people, but he had been told that it was not allowed. This too is understandable. Kawai Camp does not screen the people registering to volunteer, and allowing or even encouraging all sorts of volunteers to knock on doors could be invasive. People who value their privacy might not appreciate strangers appearing at their doors unbidden. So, although “salon” exchanges do not always seem to be the most effective way of reaching out to the residents in the *kasetsu* (much less disaster victims living in other kinds of temporary accommodation),

finding alternatives is not easy.⁸

On the second day we went to another *kasetsu*, Kanan.⁹ This time nine women came in the morning and ten to twelve in the afternoon (including those who had come in the morning). They were a lively lot; as we watched the Olympics and chatted, I wondered whether they really needed us at the *kasetsu*. Kanan houses many people from the same community and they knew each other before the disaster threw them together in prefab housing. (It is more common for the residents in a single temporary housing unit to come from different communities, which makes it much more difficult for them to get along, organize activities in the temporary housing or plan for the future.) In the afternoon one of the residents brought material for making paper dolls (Fig.7). We were shown little carrier bags made for newspapers and given some as presents. They appeared to have a regular craft group going; one of my bags has a label saying that it was made by *Kanan Niji no Kai* in Miyako city Kanan *kasetsu jutaku*. Making, and possibly selling handicrafts, seems to be another occupation that is generally perceived as laudable; the two volunteers the previous day had passed around samples of craft items, presumably to encourage imitation.



Fig. 7: Paper dolls folded by members of Kanan Niji no Kai, Kanan *kasetsu jutaku*, Miyako city.

In the afternoon a man came round in a van selling sweets and vegetables and assorted groceries. He was eagerly awaited by the women. He told us he started off as a volunteer and still regarded himself as a volunteer, and he was certainly generous with free gifts. He drives around the *kasetsu* with his wares and even calls at Kawai camp once a week. The spot where he laid out his wares proved to be an assembly point for the residents, and again I could not help thinking that such casual encounters suited many people more than “salons” in the common room.

By day three, I felt ready for a more “hands-on” task. There are times, when even a scholar might feel an urge to engage in physical labour in order to feel she is “doing something to help”. And I was not the only one; other volunteers at Kawai Camp expressed similar hopes. Rumours about cleanup work in Yamada had several volunteers hovering by the notice board waiting for the “needs” list to be posted. From my stay the previous year I knew that much of the major clearance work was already accomplished. The mountains of debris, the infamous *gareki*, most of it neatly sorted into concrete, metal scraps, car tires and so on, provided visible proof of how much has been done. However, much more rubble had been carted into the woods, out of sight, yet waiting to be cleared in sustainable ways. I was well aware that more than a year after the disaster needs would have changed. But like my Japanese fellow-volunteers I found it hard to separate the idea of “volunteering” from images of disposing effectively of *gareki*. Perhaps we still had the media images from the early days following the disaster in our mind’s eye. And after all, why else would we be told to come equipped with masks, goggles, boots, safety steel insoles and three types of protective gloves? To be sure, the list on the Kawai Camp homepage only said that these things might be needed, but it nevertheless reinforced the idea of volunteer work as hard physical labour in a dangerous environment.

It was an expectant group that climbed into the bus to Yamada, where most of us would work at cleaning up Aragami beach for the next three days (Fig.8). We reported at the local welfare office’s volunteer centre, housed in a prefab in the middle of the ruined town. Since last November the number of temporary buildings set up on the cleared foundations has increased. One such building, close to the prefab volunteer centre, is the meeting house “Ippo Ippo” (Step by Step) set up by the OMF Iwate relief team in order to provide a drop-in centre for a community whose members otherwise have few places to go apart from the local pachinko hall. From the centre of Yamada we drove past the ruins of what was once the *Kujira to umi no kagakukan* (Whale and Sea Research Centre) in the Funakoshi area of Yamada, and an immense *gareki* processing facility, along a narrow coastal road to Aragami beach, once a designated swimming area with changing and shower facilities and a shop. We divided into two groups, one to dig up the sand to the depth of about a metre, the others to sieve the piles of sand. The top layer of sand, we learned, often concealed large amounts of debris washed onto the beach by the tsunami. Explanations were minimal, but we all went to work with alacrity, although I could not help suspecting that there were more and less effective ways of doing the job, and if we thought it out a bit, we might produce better results. Perhaps it did not matter much. It seemed to me that the beach near my home in Copenhagen is much more in need of the cleanup than this one was. While we were working in our boots, complete with metal-reinforced insoles (those who did not have their own had borrowed some from the Yamada volunteer centre), a group of boys was playing on the beach and in the water with beach shoes or barefoot.



Fig. 8: Aragami beach, Yamada town.

That is not to say that the beach and the Aragami shrine had not visibly suffered. The shrine's *torii* looked as if it had been recently replaced and a small prefab meeting house looked intact, but the steps leading to the shrine path were badly damaged. We had been told that should a tsunami warning be broadcast (a transistor radio was switched on while we were working) we were to flee to the shrine precincts, since the water had not reached the shrine. But the very rusty box for offerings in front of the main hall made me wonder whether, like the heap of very rusty cars we had passed in the bus, the box had been immersed in sea water and the tsunami had in fact come close to the shrine building. As at Jōdogahama, a closer look at the area around the beach did reveal signs of destruction. But the sand looked clean, and even when we dug down into it and encountered tell-tale black markings that might have been caused by charred wood and other debris washed ashore, we did not in fact find any major debris. As a Kawai Camp veteran told me, however, this was in contrast to another beach where he had worked

The following day we arrived at the Yamada volunteer centre to be told that a busload of elementary school children would be joining us for a short while;

we should let the children take a turn in doing the work. We started digging and sieving while

a couple of camera men, possibly from local tv moved around us. The bus duly arrived a little later. We took an early break and watched the children get into the ditches we had dug and busy themselves with shovels and crates, while the camera men filmed away. The children did not seem to be at it very long, before half of them were playing by the sea. I do not believe they were there for longer than about half an hour. The whole thing seemed to me like a fearful waste of time, but then I reflected that the exercise should not be judged in terms of volunteer work but regarded as an expression of solidarity and as an educational activity. The children will grow up and the damage wrought by the tsunami will be repaired. But their physical experience at Aragami beach will remind them of the disaster, providing a better lesson than a chapter in a textbook or even a video. Seen in that light, the exercise made sense.

On day three, I was appointed "leader" of our group; the "leaders" and "sub-leaders" changed every day. I was invited to pick one of two different Kawai Camp badges, and was given both when I did not make up my mind immediately. The instructions I received did not exactly amount to a clear job description, and the last two days "leaders" had mostly kept a low profile while we worked. Rather than working really hard myself, I was told, I should look out for the rest of the group and make sure everyone was alright. Had they appointed me to save me from overdoing it, I speculated, or to prevent me from sneaking a second lunchtime swim (along with another volunteer). Fortunately, there were plenty of former leaders and camp veterans to tell me what to do. My first task in the morning was to go through a checklist of items to be loaded into the bus; an AED kit, a first-aid kit, two water canisters, a blue groundsheet, and four cooler bags filled with water bottles. The next task was to call the register once we had boarded the bus. I had received some quick help from two of the veterans so I could pronounce some

of the less straightforward names. Next, I was reminded that I should address the group and to do this sooner rather than later, as people might use the ride to catch up on sleep. So I introduced myself and the schedule for the day (known to most by now) and, of course, repeated the advice about drinking plenty of water and taking enough salt, for example in the form of salt candy, Kawai Camp having provided a bag full in case people had not brought their own. We had been told about taking enough fluid and salt innumerable times, at morning assemblies at Kawai and in Miyako, as well as by the drivers and leaders. But since working hours were from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., the hottest hours of the day, the danger of dehydration and heatstroke were very real. Just the week before I arrived at the camp, during some of the hottest days that summer, two members of the camp had been taken to hospital, one in an ambulance. That same week (23 to 29 July) 8,686 people nationwide were reportedly hospitalized for heatstroke 16 of whom died.¹⁰

At the Yamada centre I had to get out and report us ready for work. Our bus driver helped me with this. In fact he was the real leader of our group, providing continuity from day to day and liaising with the Yamada officials, who tended not to take the “leaders” seriously. He also acted as a timekeeper while we worked, blowing his whistle after 20 minutes and then again after 10 minutes when I would tell people to resume work. At first this had seemed excessively cautious, but as time went on I thought, that given the conditions and the fact that many of us were unused to physical labour, it was probably appropriate if volunteers were to conserve their strength over several days. We were joined by a busload of volunteers from Mie prefecture. There were not enough tools to go round and someone phoned for more. I was told that the leader of this other group wished to speak to me and we greeted each other, but otherwise we minded our business and they minded theirs. Again, instructions about how to

do the task to best effect seemed to me vague at best. My suspicions about the effectiveness of our work were confirmed that morning when we discovered that the high tide had washed the sand we had dug up the previous two days and not finished cleaning back into the ditches. There was a local who worked with us, whom I assumed to have some kind of advisory role, although he wore no identification (the volunteers all wore cloth badges with their name, the place and the date of work). I later learned that he was in fact just a local volunteer who liked working with the members of Kawai Camp rather than an official local representative acting as advisor and that the ultimate decision about how to proceed lay with the representatives of Kawai Camp rather than with him.

Because of the high tide we finished early that day. At the volunteer centre our driver dictated a report and the official filled in a form. I was invited to comment, so I said that I thought the lines of communication could be a bit clearer. I repeated my concern at greater length back at the camp, where the “leaders” filled in another form and reported back. Perhaps, as I said apologetically, this was merely the concern of a *gaijin*, who had not grasped what was going on and how things were done. Some of my fellow volunteers agreed, however, that the situation had been particularly confusing that day. Indeed, one of the sub-leaders added his comments to my oral report, mentioning the other group arriving and the insufficient number of tools.

I left the next day, after a final “kitchen party.” One of the best things about the former school building was that it had a cookery classroom with individual gas rings and sinks. As everyone knows who has ever experienced communal living, there is nothing like a spacious kitchen to encourage social interaction among a heterogeneous group of people thrown together by chance. Volunteers prepared (or merely unwrapped) and ate meals

individually or in groups. Supplies were bought during the buses' daily stops at a supermarket on the way back to camp. I had thought there might be an alcohol ban, but that was not the case at either camp (although at Tōno there were areas where alcohol was prohibited), despite the presence of high school students during the summer holiday. Not that the early nights (lights out at 10:00) or the early mornings were conducive to serious drinking anyway. Volunteers slept on tatami mats in the former classrooms, the men on the third floor, the women on the second in what must have been a music room, with lines for staff notations on the blackboard and a keyboard in the corner. Inevitably there were people who got up and rustled around before 6 a.m., the official wake up time, at which hour loudspeakers in Kawai would blare out some melody, which might have been Schubert's "Heidenröslein." (Last winter in Miyako City it had been the opening line of "The Bluebells of Scotland at the more congenial hour of 7:30 a.m.) The dormitories were in former classrooms, where tatami mats had been laid on the floor, women on the second, men on the third floor. The following week I would look back wistfully at the space and comforts offered at Kawai camp (which even included a donated flatscreen TV in the kitchen), which made volunteering seem like a holiday.

Nevertheless, the work was taken seriously; perhaps socializing in the kitchen even played a part promoting a serious attitude to the work. Toda told me that volunteer groups from Kawai had a good reputation for their work. I asked whether the presence of the long-term volunteers had something to do with it, and he confirmed this. I would suggest that appointing two to three members of each group as "leaders" and "sub-leaders" for the day was a good way of strengthening the cohesion of the teams, giving as many volunteers as possible the chance to take personal responsibility for a team and thus have a higher stake in seeing the work well done. The elaborate reporting system

may have seemed overly bureaucratic, but collecting regular feedback from the volunteers is another way of increasing the sense of responsibility and will ideally help the organizers to make adjustments to volunteer activities and how they are done.

I left after the morning ceremony and the departure of the volunteer teams for their day's work, amidst friendly farewells from staff members and fellow-volunteers taking the day off to rest. At present the plan is that Kawai Camp will stay open until the end of March 2013, but Toda Hiroshi who walked with me to the bus stop said he thought they might extend the period, as there was still plenty of work for volunteers to do. Indeed, as I was proofreading this article for a final time, I received an e-mail from Kawai Camp to former participants (dated 8 November 2012), explaining the victims' continuing, if less obvious, need for help and telling addressees that the camp is still recruiting volunteers even as the work is changing and including a flier with information for applicants. The main tasks listed on the flier are: clearing up the sites of former houses, re-planting farmland, moving house, clearing out gutters, as well as weeding, soil preparation and sowing seeds as part of the "Rape Blossom Project".¹¹

Tōno Magokoronet: It's not just *gareki*

After another weekend in Miyako, a day on the road with a visit to Ippo Ippo in Yamada, and a day of sightseeing in Tōno, I reported at Tōno Magokoronet's base in Tōno on 7 August in the afternoon, just in time for the daily orientation meeting at 5:10 p.m. which was followed by an introduction for new volunteers (Fig.9).



Fig. 9: Entrance to Tōno Magokoronet's headquarters and camp.

Tōno, a small town reached by a local train wending its way through the mountains, gained fame through Yanagita Kunio's (1875-1962) works on the rich folklore of the region, including *Tōno monogatari* (Tales of Tōno). Apart from the folklore museum, which was to host a symposium to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Yanagita's death a few weeks later, most of the tourist sites are on the town's outskirts and conveniently explored by bicycle (rented from the tourist office). Tōno Magokoronet is organised by the local welfare authorities together with volunteers. It is financed by public money and donations. Like Kawai Camp it provides free accommodation and organises task forces in response to local needs. But the organization seemed to take more initiatives of its own (though presumably in consultation with local people), and volunteers from outside Iwate took long-term charge of projects.

The accommodation for individuals and small groups were in a makeshift structure of plastic and wood; larger groups stay elsewhere. In the female dormitory we had one tatami each. In theory there were 34 sleeping places with a few tatami left free for passage (the male dormitory is larger). But in the night preceding the festival at Kamaishi I counted 37 sleepers. Luggage was piled on the floor or on tables around the room; again the space for each person was restricted. The sleeping spaces

would be re-allocated each morning although there was an unspoken agreement that people staying for several nights would keep their space.

The format of the orientation meeting, which took place after a flurry of cleaning from 5:00 to 5:10 p.m., varied a little each day; essentially, team leaders would report on the day's activities or on forthcoming activities and people from the floor - sitting on the tatami in the male dormitory - were invited to comment. Then some of the next day's projects would be introduced, typically those for which more volunteers were needed. There were admonitions about sorting the rubbish correctly in accordance with the elaborate rules set down by Tōno municipality, keeping quiet at night, and so on.

As at Kawai, people would sign up for activities the night before, and there was a larger choice at Tōno. Some activities, however, advertised on a separate notice board, seemed to be open only to a chosen group and I never quite worked out how you joined that group. Apparently these activities included some of the more popular ones such as clearing up debris. In the morning all volunteers, including larger groups who came for the day or had stayed the night elsewhere, lined up under signposts giving the names of the places where the activities would take place; Ōfunato, Ōtsuchi, Rikuzen Takata, Kamaishi and so forth. Morning assembly was similar to the one at Kawai Camp, except that it included radio gymnastics to a tape with an instructor speaking in the local dialect - much to everyone's amusement. Here too people seemed to come from all over the country and sometimes from abroad.

On my first day I had not signed up for anything and joined those who stood together at morning assembly waiting to be allocated to the groups most in need of extra hands. I found myself in a group bound for Akahama, part of

Ōtsuchi-*chō*, the place that attained dubious fame when a picture showing a sightseeing boat stranded atop a building went around the world in the wake of the tsunami (Fig.10, 11). Tōno Magokoronet and other volunteer groups had planted flowers among the foundations and our job was to weed these flowerbeds. Caring for flowerbeds in such a wasteland of destruction seemed a bit of a luxury. However as our guide, a volunteer from Kyoto, told us, contrary to popular image, volunteering is no longer about clearing up the debris. He pointed to the cemetery on the mountainside.¹² The Bon season was approaching, when people would visit the graves and while they attended to them the ruins of Akahama would be in full view. The flowerbeds among the ruins would signal hope amid the destruction.



Fig. 10: Akahama, Ōtsuchi-*chō*; a photograph reminds of the boat stranded on a building, now it has been removed. There is talk of constructing a replica.



Fig. 11: Akahama, Ōtsuchi-*chō*: Flowerbeds planted by Tōno Magokoronet (the building on the right is the one where the boat was stranded).

The facilities at Tōno were less conducive to extensive socialising over meals than those at Kawai, there being no dedicated cooking and dining area. But some volunteers did sit around the few tables and share food and drink. One night a young man talked about volunteering in Fukushima prefecture. Most people called at local municipal welfare centres in the affected areas, as individuals rather than as groups as they did in other places, including Tōno. The work there, he told us, was still about clearing up debris. Apparently our guide in Akahama was right; even more than one year after the tsunami, dealing with *gareki* is widely perceived as “real” volunteering. But on another occasion, a young man and long-term volunteer gave a different perspective, telling us the most heartrending story I heard about clearing up debris. He had helped dismantle a ruined piano in order to remove it from a home with the other debris. The girl who had played the piano stood watching; when he was done she thanked him, tears running down her cheeks. That was when he decided that rather than removing the last traces of people's lives, he wanted to be part of rebuilding them. At Tōno he was in charge of the volunteers helping to build a kindergarten.

For the next three days, most of the volunteers were driven to Kamaishi, to help prepare for the Sanriku *umi no bon*. This Bon festival by the Sanriku coast was to be the second of its kind, held in honour of those who died last year. The first was held last year, in Ōtsuchi-*chō*, and the idea is to hold one every year, moving down the coast to the different towns hit by the tsunami.¹³ Our first day in Kamaishi we spent weeding a parking lot in the centre of town where the stage was to be set up. Another group cleaned the river banks, where the

lanterns were to be floated (*tōrō nagashi*). The parking lot was part of a public space (*Suzuko-hiroba*) which now housed a temporary shopping and eating mall in the now familiar pre-fabricated units. We were encouraged to buy at the shops and eat in the restaurant, although there was also a large supermarket across the road.

The next day I was with a group that was supposed to finish cleaning up one of the fields near the harbour that were to serve as a temporary car park for visitors to the festival. Another group had completed a major cleanup the previous day, and there was very little for us to do. We found numerous small fragments of glass, bits of wiring, coins from slot machines and assorted, mostly small, pieces of debris, but hardly anything that was likely to damage the tires of a car. At some point in the afternoon, looking for a spot that really needed attention, I found myself chatting with a man from Tokyo who had given up the pretence of working kept up so admirably by the majority of the group. “There is nothing to do here,” he said, and I had to agree. He told me he had come as a volunteer the previous year, when the need was obvious. Now he didn't think he would be coming again.

Finally the day of the festival, by now eagerly anticipated by all, had arrived. Morning assembly was held earlier than usual to give us an early start, and then virtually everyone, including several larger parties, climbed into the buses for Kamaishi. The festival began in the morning with performances of *dentō geinō*, similar to the festival I had witnessed in Miyako; indeed some of the performances were the same, such as the Kuromori *kagura* from Miyako, a designated intangible folk-cultural property.¹⁴ Many volunteers stayed in the centre of town to man stalls and help with preparation on-site. The rest of us were bussed down to the harbour where our task was to direct cars to the temporary car park or simply sit next to a signboard directing the traffic to

the car parks. One person per board would be enough, we were told, but because there were so many of us we should go in pairs to keep each other company. I was assigned to a group of six, two for each of three boards. We would take turns with two other groups, so one hour by the board would give us two hours to take the shuttle bus back into town and enjoy the festival. Few cars seemed bound for the festival though; even by our early afternoon shift, I saw less than 20 cars in the car park.

Back in town, the festival was a lively affair. There were the usual eating stalls, selling *kakikōri*, *yakisoba* and other festival fare, a stall with badges and T-shirts sold by Tōno Magokoronet to raise money for its activities (Fig.12), as well as a stall selling products made by craft groups in the temporary housing. Buyers were invited to write a message of encouragement to the craft groups. As I did so I imagined ladies like the ones I had watched folding paper dolls at Kanan *kasetsu* the week before. The floats and the lanterns stood ready and visitors were urged to write messages on these, too. Most of the people milling around and enjoying the scene appeared to be other volunteers rather than locals. My partner at one of the signboards believed that the festival had not been widely advertised; only the fireworks display in the evening, being a regular event, was likely to attract a crowd. I believe he was right. Certainly, the tourist office in Tōno had no idea when I inquired there the morning after arriving in town, and their phone call to the office in Kamaishi only yielded information about the fireworks display, a recurring event.



Fig.12: Badges sold to aid Tōno Magokoronet’s relief projects.

The stage performances ended with a Buddhist rite to honour the dead conducted by local priests. Then everyone went down to the river to float the lanterns (Fig. 13). The way was lit by small lanterns created from PET bottles and Japanese paper. The bottles and paper had been lying in the corridor in the camp in Tōno over the last few days, with the invitation to make as many lanterns as possible by writing messages on the paper and folding it around the bottles. After the *tōrō nagashi*, we were asked to help with clearing up. Despite elaborate efforts to sort the large group of volunteers according to what time they hoped to take a bus back, there was confusion about the return journey. Eventually I joined the group boarding a bus at around 8 p.m. We took with us several plastic bags of garbage, carefully sorted in compliance with the rules of Tōno city, thanks to those volunteers whose job it had been to oversee garbage disposal, telling visitors exactly what to put in which sack or even doing it for them.



Fig. 13: Floating the lanterns, Kamaichi umi no bon, 11 August 2012.

I left early next morning. There were no formal farewells, so I said good-bye and thanks to a couple of people who seemed to have some official capacity. The fact is that during the four days of my stay I acquired only the vaguest idea of how the network is run. Most of the people I came into contact with appeared to be long-term volunteers either entrusted with various tasks in the office or in charge of the work at different locations, such as the flowerbeds in Akahama, the building work for a kindergarten in Kirikiri, or activities in the different *kasetsu*. Most of them seemed to have come from outside Iwate prefecture, but the

best of them have built up good relations with local people, enabling them to work out what is needed most. One of these, responsible for work in Ōfunato, spoke to us at a meeting about *minashi kasetsu*, a word that was new to me, and saying that he himself had only learnt after coming to the region. The expression, meaning “accommodation considered as *kasetsu*,” refers to housing other than the prefab housing complexes provided by the public authorities, often privately rented accommodation. Besides the question of who pays the rent, another problem is that the people living in *minashi kasetsu* are less visible and therefore less likely to receive the kind of support available to people living in *kasetsu* proper. The number of *minashi kasetsu* is greatest in Fukushima and Miyagi prefectures.¹⁵ But as I learned at Tōno, there are significant numbers in Ōfunato and Kamaishi, where only part of the town was destroyed. Tōno Magokoronet is now trying to establish the needs of people living in these *minashi kasetsu*.¹⁶

Indeed, the issue of changing needs is one that all relief organisations have to address and are addressing in different ways. This includes the need for volunteers. At Tōno we were told that although the camp might seem crowded to us, the number of volunteers had in fact decreased drastically. I did wonder nevertheless whether they did not have more volunteers than they could use effectively. But as our guide in Akahama said, the problem with saying “*fukkō shimashita*” (recovery accomplished) and, “we don't need any more volunteers”, is that people will take this at face value and stop coming altogether. So how long does Tōno Magokoronet plan to continue working in the area, I asked. There was no clear answer. It seems largely to depend on how long the money and the volunteers keep coming as well as local needs. Tōno Magokoronet is financed partly from public money (*joseikin*) and partly from charitable donations.

Volunteering as “Disaster Tourism?” Final Days at the Sanriku Coast

On Sunday 12 August I made my way by bus to Ichinoseki with a detour via Rikuzen Takata. Walking across the wasteland; the sheer expanse surpassed anything I had seen so far, as I came across a tour coach parked beside the coastal road. A stream of people, many with cameras, crossed the road and walked towards the sea, disregarding a notice prohibiting access to the area (Fig. 14). I soon realized that this was the site of the famous lone pine tree, the only one of an entire forest that remained standing after the tsunami; only later did I notice the signboard on the road pointing towards the “*kiseki no ipponmatsu*.”¹⁷ “Are they all tourists?” I asked a couple who had addressed me. They seemed faintly embarrassed at my question. “Most of them are probably volunteers,” I was told. This may well be true (although I had my doubts about the tour coach); after all I too was a volunteer of sorts, although not in Rikuzen Takata. What reason had I to be there, apart from wishing to see for myself the town I had heard so much about? “Disaster tourism” is an ugly expression, suggesting inconsiderate sightseers satisfying their curiosity and in the worst case hindering rescue work or exploiting the victims.¹⁸ But, as so often, reality is complex.



Fig.14: Access prohibited: Visiting the famous pine tree at Rikuzen Takata.

At both the camps I visited this summer, there appeared to be a tacit understanding that one of the motives for volunteering in Tōhoku was the volunteers' desire to see the scene of the great disaster for themselves. A fellow-volunteer at Kawai Camp told me when he was leaving, that he intended to rent a car and drive down the coast. He was not in the least apologetic about it, and I suspect that other volunteers combine volunteer work and travelling in the disaster area to observe the destruction and beginning recovery, as indeed I did myself. To some extent a "summer camp" approach to volunteering was even encouraged both at Kawai and Tōno. Kawai Camp organized a trip to Morioka in the evening of 4 August to give volunteers the chance to see the final day of the four-day *Sansa odori*, one of the most famous festivals of Tōhoku.¹⁹ It would be a special occasion we were told, with unprecedented numbers of performers and spectators from all over the country. Volunteers wishing to join the trip were told to take the day off from volunteering to enable an early departure for Morioka. In a similar vein, at Tōno, volunteers were driven to Kamaishi in greater numbers than the work demanded and urged to enjoy the performances of *dentō geinō*, associated with the locals and generally savour the festival.

Even on our day at Akahama, the leader of our group acted as much as a tour guide as a coordinator of the work. In the afternoon he gave a lengthy speech about the tsunami damage in that particular location and the rationale behind planting flower beds and encouraged us to spend money at local shops, including the nearby prefab sake shop. "What you see here, you can only see now," he told us and urged us to come again in a few years time to see the area when it had recovered. On the way back to Tōno we stopped at a prefab shopping mall, mainly, it seemed, for the opportunity to spend money (we were told where we would find "omiage" to take home) and to listen to the half-hour performance by a

visiting school wind band from Kanagawa. Looking around the audience, I saw mostly other volunteers, recognizable by their "bibs" with the Tōno Magokoronet logo. What I took to be local shopkeepers turned out to be a couple of members of the network, though possibly they were local shopkeepers as well. The performance ended with communal singing of "*Ue o muite arukō*" and Misora Hibari's final hit, "*Kawa no nagare no yōni*."²⁰

The acceptance of a "tourism" element in volunteer work seemed to me to be most tellingly reflected in attitudes to taking photographs I encountered at both camps. Of course, all volunteers knew and accepted that we were there to work rather than to take photographs. But in an age when nearly everyone carries a mobile phone-cum-camera with them, taking photographs has perhaps more than ever become a fact of life and as such difficult to challenge. As our bus from Kawai Camp approached Yamada-*machi* for our first day of work at Aragami beach, we were informed that the town had an official policy of prohibiting photography. However, our driver added, there was nothing to stop us taking pictures through the bus windows. Immediately, several cameras and mobile phones came out to record the beauties of the bay with the landmark Oranda (Holland) Island, as well as the mountains of carefully sorted debris. At Akahama, we were told that it was acceptable to take photographs seawards, but not inland towards people's dwellings, and that we should avoid taking pictures when locals were present.²¹



Fig.15: Photography OK: View of the ruined Ishinomori Mangattan Museum, Ishinomaki.

In any case, over a year after the disaster, when some of the worst evidence of devastation has been cleaned up and signs of reconstruction are apparent, it is not clear that the locals necessarily mind; at least not in the case of public sites. This was brought home to me during a brief visit to Ishinomaki, where I had lunch at a restaurant in the prefab Machinaka Fukkō Marushe mall opposite the island on which stand the ruins of what was once the Ishinomori Mangattan Museum.²² In the spot where the view was best, there stood one of those figures with holes for visitors to put their face through to be photographed, popular at tourist attractions.

In Lieu of a Conclusion: The Importance of Being There

To date, I have spent a mere four weeks in total in the coastal areas of Iwate, and no more than nine days at volunteer camps. My training and work as a historian, moreover, hardly qualifies me to draw expert conclusions from my experience. I went to Iwate hoping to be of use and seeking to better understand the nature of the disaster and to contribute in a small way to societal responses to it. I returned to Denmark unsure whether volunteering as I had experienced it is in fact much use to locals and with many more questions than answers.

Had it not been for various circumstances that included the London Olympics, I might well have spent part of my summer in the south of England playing chamber music with other amateur enthusiasts rather than volunteering in the north of Japan. Was my volunteering just “amateurism” in another guise, with providing an audience for a school band and a festival of folk performing arts as the equivalent of attending the professional coaches’ concert at a chamber music summer course?²³ There could be worse analogies. At the very least, amateur musicians make a supremely appreciative audience for the professionals, listening in a way which only someone who has physically engaged in the music can.²⁴ Did we volunteers represent the amateur audience not just of stage performances but of the great performance that is the recovery effort, spurring the performers (those doing the real work in contrast to our feeble efforts to help) on to greater heights? Perhaps. Already during my time with the OMF team the previous year I had become convinced that “being there” has value in itself, demonstrating to the people on the Sanriku coast that their fate matters to us and making an effort to support and encourage them in their hopes for the future. My second stay in Iwate confirmed my belief that “being” may well be as important as “doing”. Wherever I went, whether purely as a tourist, or as a volunteer, I was warmed by the pleasure and gratitude local people expressed, just because I and others were there. At both volunteer camps, tables of freebies, from food and toiletries to items of clothing, represented tangible tokens of the appreciation shown by local individuals and businesses. Locals often thanked us profusely and sometimes offered gifts and services to groups of volunteers. Even during casual encounters in the street, people would express gratitude with a “*gokurōsama*”, as soon as they recognized a volunteer. The very presence of the volunteers seemed sufficient reason for thanks. Perhaps this was merely an expression of good manners; on the other hand, perhaps it was another indication

of the value of “being there.”

Nevertheless, I do not believe that “being there” is enough, given the enormity of the devastation and the task of recovery. If volunteering on the Sanriku coast is to continue to be justified it must contribute to the well-being of the people it professes to serve. But what exactly is the role of volunteers to be, now that the most urgent relief work is largely accomplished and the long haul towards recovery continues? There is a fundamental difference between the kind of relief work needed in the immediate aftermath of a disaster and the long-term work towards recovery. How much of the latter might be meaningfully done by volunteers, especially volunteers who are inexperienced, without obviously useful skills, and only there for a few days? Sophisticated structures for welcoming and organizing volunteers are all very well, but is there not a danger that they might take on a life of their own and their providers lose sight of their purpose? Is disaster volunteering in some cases becoming an activity for the sake of itself, pure amateuring with no goal beyond self-fulfilment, or even a sort of lifestyle feature? Or, conversely, will a growing number of volunteers become disaffected if they find themselves engaged in activities they do not perceive as “useful” and having more contact with fellow-volunteers than with the local population they are supposed to be helping? Could such disillusionment make it more difficult to mobilize volunteers when the next natural disaster strikes, as it undoubtedly will?²⁵ To work out the answers to these and other questions is the difficult task of municipalities and relief organizations working in the areas and will most likely mean determining by trial and error which projects give most benefit to local people in the long term.

The paradox here is that, although the greatest value of volunteering in the disaster zone may well lie in being there and providing as it were

an audience that listens with the whole body, being there must never become an end itself, if volunteering is to maintain its credibility. Of course, travelling to Tōhoku in order to demonstrate support (I noticed JR advertising for a special “Ōen” [“support”] railpass in November 2011), is a legitimate exercise, but volunteering, I believe, demands a more active commitment.

Meanwhile, the words of one of the workers at Tōno Magokoronet during one of the orientation meetings remain in my mind: “What the people [who have suffered] fear most is that they will be forgotten.” If volunteers can show them that they are remembered, then their efforts may not be entirely in vain.

Margaret Mehl is Associate Professor of Japanese Studies at the University of Copenhagen. Her books include History and the State in Nineteenth-Century Japan and Private Academies of Chinese Learning in Meiji Japan. She has just completed a manuscript on the social history of violin playing in Japan.

Recommended Citation: Margaret Mehl, "A Personal View of Volunteering in Iwate After 3. 11: In Whose Service?" The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10 Issue 47, No. 2, November 18, 2012.

Notes

¹ My warmest thanks to Rowena and Mike McGinty and Homma Sanae and Hidetaka of the OMF Iwate Relief Project, to the staff and volunteers at Kawai Camp and Tōno Magokoronet, and to all the local people of Iwate I met during my stay.

Japanese names are cited with the family name first, * indicates a name changed to protect anonymity.

² [Iwate Relief Project](#) (accessed 18 September 2012) [OMF](#) or [OMF International](#) (formerly the China Inland Mission and Overseas Missionary

Fellowship, founded by James Hudson Taylor in 1865), has as its vision “to see an indigenous, biblical church movement in each people group of East Asia, evangelizing their own people and reaching out in mission to other peoples.” (accessed 2 November 2012). The Iwate Relief Project was established primarily with the aim of providing relief and recovery assistance in cooperation with local [churches](#). (accessed 24 September 2012)

³ Christopher S. Thompson, '[Local Perspectives On the Tsunami Disaster: Untold Stories From the Sanriku Coast](#),' The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol 10, issue 10, No 5, March 5, 2012 ; Christopher S. Thompson, '[The Great East Japan Earthquake One Year on: Reports From The Field](#),' The Asia Pacific Journal, Vol 10, Issue 10, No 1, March 5, 2012;

Dawn Grimes-MacLellan, '[Students in the field at the site of the Great East Japan Earthquake](#),' The Asia Pacific Journal, Vol 10, Issue 10, No 4, March 5, 2012.

⁴ [Kawai Camp](#); [Tōno Magokoronet](#); for Tōno, see also the article by Dawn Grimes-MacLellan cited above.

⁵ All organizations I investigated require Disaster Relieve Insurance provided by the national social welfare council; www.fukushihoken.co.jp

⁶ The [Morioka Sansa odori](#) was first held in 1978 (accessed 18 September 2012); on the importance of local festivals, cf. Thompson, Local Perspectives.

⁷ 44 households, according to [figures](#) by Iwate prefecture (accessed 18 September 2012)

⁸ An alternative to the “salon” model, may be local drop-in centres like the one that has been created in Yamada by the OMF Iwate Relief team, mentioned below. For a report on the centre (opened in June 2012) in a local newspaper, see [here](#) (*Sanriku keizai shinbun*,

18 June 2012, accessed 5 November 2012).

⁹ Formerly Sokei, 90 households according to the table cited above (but I believe there were around 100).

¹⁰ *Japan-Magazin* (Verlag Dieter Born) 180 (10 August 2012), p.9.

¹¹ The e-mail includes a [link to a blog](#) detailing recent activities.

¹² The graves were not necessarily those of tsunami victims. Already the previous year I had noticed several cemeteries on higher ground than the devastated towns and reflected on the irony that the dead seemed to have been better protected than the living.

¹³ See [here](#). (accessed 24 September 2012)

¹⁴ [Kokushitei mukei minzoku bunkazai](#) (accessed 24 September 2012). [Kurumori Kagura](#) even performed in Russia in October 2011 (accessed 28 September 2012).

¹⁵ Figures relating to *minashi kasetsu*: “[Minashi kasetsu ni todokanu shien: kojīn jōhō hogo ga kabe ni](#),” *Yomiuri shinbun*, 28 December 2011 (accessed 24 September 2012). See also “[Minashi kasetsu de kōdokushi boshi](#),” *Yomiuri shinbun*, 3 May 2012 (accessed 24 September 2012)

¹⁶ The situation of people who have lost their homes but are not living in regular *kasetsu* has received very limited media attention. In some areas, including Miyako they can receive certification as victims and could, for example, receive donated goods. In 2011 the local authorities held “bazaars” for this purpose, and these were announced in the local paper, according to what I heard. I was interested in the subject, having met an old lady from Tarō in the street, who was living in a corner of the open plan office of her son’s business. Adjacent to the corner was a tiny room she used as a bedroom and as far as I could tell she was well

looked after. But she had lost her husband and their home and business, and her son had another business address in Tarō which was also in the devastated area. In late 2011 the woman was clearly traumatized and I wondered how much official help was available for people in her situation. In summer 2012 she told me that she would soon be moving into new housing.

¹⁷ Also known as the “kibō no ipponmatsu”, the tall pine tree was the only one of a protective forest, planted along the coast. The tree has since died, but seeds have been recovered in order to plant new trees. The lone pine tree has become the subject of a picture book: Nakada Eri, *Kiseki no ipponmatsu: ōtsunami o norikoete*, Tokyo: Choubunsha, 2011.

¹⁸ Timing is obviously a significant issue; Amanda Kendle, “[Disaster Tourism: How Soon Is Too Soon After a Natural Disaster?](#)” (accessed 14 September 2012). In fact a British website devoted to disaster tourism, includes “volunteering” among its offerings and describes “Tsunami Volunteering” in the wake of the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami as a trip nominated in 2006 by National Geographic Traveller magazine as one of their “[Top 50 Trips](#)”; (accessed 14 September 2012). In the wake of the Sanriku tsunami, an Australian company likewise offered a tour that combined volunteering and sightseeing. See Jennifer Robertson, “[From Uniqlo to NGOs: The Problematic “Culture of Giving” in Inter-Disaster Japan.](#)” *The Asia-Pacific Journal* 10, no. 18.2 (2012), note 39.

¹⁹ See note 5.

²⁰ “Ue o muite arukō” (“I will look up when I

walk”; also translated as “Let’s walk with our heads up”), Sakamoto Kyū’s hit of 1963 and one of the few Japanese popular songs to become a hit abroad (where it is better known as “Sukiyaki Song”), has become one of the songs widely sung in the wake of the Tōhoku disaster. Misora Hibari’s final hit, “Kawa no nagare no yō ni” (Like the Flow of the River; 1989) has become something of a signature tune, which is also performed by foreign artists wanting to pay tribute to her or even to Japan in general.

²¹ The [Ishinomori Mangattan Museum](#) was opened in 2001 to commemorate the work of the prolific manga artist Ishinomori Shōtarō (1938-1998). It is scheduled to reopen from 17 November to 1 December 2011, then to reopen with completely restored indoor exhibitions on 23 March 2013. (includes link to bilingual brochure; accessed 5 November 2012). There is another museum dedicated to Ishinomori; the Shotaro Ishinomori Memorial Museum in Tome City, Miyagi Prefecture.

²² See Wayne Booth. *For the Love of It: Amateuring and Its Rivals*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999. Booth uses “amateuring” for engaging in activities as an amateur, for the pleasure of doing so.

²³ Booth. *For the Love of It*; see especially his reflections on amateuring versus volunteering to help others, pp. 63-65 and “Hearing with Your Body: How Playing Transforms Listening”, pp.149-157.

²⁴ Interestingly, one of my fellow volunteers, a man from Kanagawa prefecture, mentioned the possible usefulness of his experience in Tōhoku when disaster strikes in the Kantō region as one of the potential benefits of volunteering.