The Fire of Rice Sheaves and its Connection to World Tsunami Awareness Day

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“World Tsunami Awareness Day,” designated on November 5th, is connected with the events that followed the Ansei Earthquake in 1854, when a great tsunami overtook Wakayama Prefecture’s Hiromura Village (present day Hirogawa Town). During the disaster, Goryo Hamaguchi lit fire to sheaves of rice in an effort to alert those who had not started running upland to safety, saving their lives in the process. On a proposal by Japan, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously designated November 5th as “World Tsunami Awareness Day.” At Inamura-no-Hi no Yakata, we will continue to spread the story of the “Fire of Rice Sheaves,” in an effort to ensure absolutely zero victims from tsunami disasters.

Examining how Tsunami-Based Disasters are Reported

On March 11, 2011, a huge tsunami hit the Tohoku region of Japan. Seeing such an event occur in our country shocked people throughout Japan. I remember sitting in front of the television as I kept watching the footage of the tsunami being broadcast.

Disasters occur every year, but tsunamis only occur once every few years, or once every few decades. The tsunami after the Great East Japan Earthquake is said to be of a class that only occurs once every thousand of years. While it is difficult to say how we should best go about ensuring that information about tsunamis is handed down between generations, the story about the “Fire of the Rice Sheaves” is one way we could help people learn about tsunami risk reduction.

The Fire of Rice Sheaves and the Inamura-no-Hi no Yakata

The main house of the wealthy Hamaguchi family was located in Hiromura, in Kii Province (modern day Hirogawa, Arida District, Wakayama Prefecture). The family had been producing soy sauce in the city of Choshi, located on the Boso Peninsula, since the mid-1600s. The main character of the Fire of Rice Sheaves, Goryo Hamaguchi, was the 7th generation head of the Yamasa Corporation. At the time he had been traveling to and from his hometown of Hiromura and Choshi. It was during one of his visits home in 1854, that one of the series of Great Ansei Earthquakes occurred, which was followed by a tsunami. He had heard that earthquakes were often followed by tsunamis, and so appealed to the villagers to move to the Hachiman Shrine, which was located on higher ground. This information had been handed down between generations based upon experiences from previous disasters.

In 1896, the writer Lafcadio Hearn received a report about the Sanriku earthquake. He combined this with information he had learned about the Ansei tsunami at the end of the Edo period, to write the book “A Living God.” An elementary school teacher who read the book translated it into Japanese, rewriting it as a tale for his students as “Inamura-no-Hi.” The book was adopted as part of the elementary school reading curriculum between 1937 and 1947. In 2007 the Inamura-no-Hi no Yakata (“Fire of Rice Sheaves Center”) was created as a facility that combines the Hamaguchi Goryo Archives and a Tsunami Educational Center. The Inamura-no-Hi no Yakata uses the story as a way to raise awareness of tsunamis, based largely around the main character of Goryo Hamaguchi. The center uses exhibits, videos, and other forms of equipment to help visitors understand what kinds of disasters tsunamis create, and help them incorporate disaster risk reduction into their daily lives. The earthquake in 2011 led to a large number of people visiting the center who had realized that they could not just ignore tsunamis in their daily lives. Textbooks with information about tsunamis were printed the same year, with elementary school students now learning about tsunami risk reduction at school.

Recovery and Revitalization after a Tsunami

The tale of the Fire of Rice Sheaves aims to create a story out of the idea that tsunamis occur after earthquakes and that people need to evacuate to higher ground. To prompt people to evacuate, Goryo Hamaguchi set fire to sheaves of rice located next to the village headman’s house. He did this knowing that the townpeople would quickly come to extinguish the fire, allowing them to be led to safety. His
quick thinking led to 97% of the town’s 1,323 residents being saved. However, this is only the start of his story.

He not only provided leadership and guidance to quickly solve issues such as acquiring food, housing, and restoring lifelines for the evacuated residents, but also paid most of the costs involved. Unfortunately, the townspeople were concerned about the risk of another tsunami, and began to leave the town due to concerns about their livelihoods. This process had been repeated again and again throughout Hiro-mura’s history. During the Muromachi period, Hiromura was a thriving castle town under the rule of the Hatakeyama clan, and had up to 1,700 households. The conquest of the Kii Peninsula by the Toyotomi clan and a tsunami that repeatedly hit the area led to the population being reduced to just 340 households in the Ansei era. Knowing this, Goryo felt a sense of impending crisis. He knew that if too many people left the village, Hiromura itself would cease to exist. This led him to consider the creation of seawalls. Hiromura already had seawalls in the form of the Hatakeyama seawall created in 1400, and the Wada seawall, located in the open water off the Kii Peninsula, which had been built based upon orders given by Yorinobu Tokugawa (the 10th son of Ieyasu Tokugawa), the first domain head of the area. However, neither of these had withstood the Ansei tsunami.

Goryo therefore planned to create an even larger seawall within the Hatakeyama seawall as a way of preparing for the next tsunami. Knowing that he could not rely on funding from the Kii Domain for its creation, he decided to pay for it himself. There was also support from another of the Hamaguchi households. Also knowing that he would need the permission of the Kii Domain to create it, he made his request by saying that “Creating the seawall would bring solace to a hundred generations of residents.” After receiving permission, he hired victims of the disaster as laborers and paid them daily, thereby contributing to relief efforts.

Goryo Hamaguchi’s Actions Lead to World Tsunami Awareness Day

After the Great East Japan Earthquake, the “Act on the Promotion of Tsunami Countermeasures” was enacted in June 2011, and November 5th became Tsunami Disaster Prevention Day. This led to awareness initiatives being implemented nationwide through evacuation drills, lectures, and other activities.

In March 2015 the 3rd United Nations World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction was held in Sendai. At the conference, the Japanese government proposed that November 5th be named World Tsunami Awareness Day. Thereafter, the government and volunteers from the National Diet worked energetically to ensure this was enacted in countries around the world. The actions of the Japanese government led to 142 countries making a joint proposal at the 70th UN General Assembly held in the same year. The end result was that all UN member states agreed to this proposal. This unanimous vote showed that countries around the world truly understand the necessity and importance of disaster risk reduction.

This is where the connection between the Fire of Rice Sheaves and World Tsunami Awareness Day can be seen. However, having this Day enacted in itself is not enough. We must continue to reach out to the world, and realize that we are still at the starting line when it comes to the promotion of tsunami risk reduction. The first World Tsunami Awareness Day held last year led to projects being held around the world designed to mitigate tsunami-based risks. There were joint drills held between Japan, Chile, and other Central and South American countries, an educational campaign based on the Fire of Rice Sheaves was held in Indonesia, and female leaders from Pacific Island Countries visited our center for training sessions.

Aiming for Zero Tsunami Victims

The story of the Fire of Rice Sheaves, with its main character Goryo Hamaguchi, attempts to communicate to the world that “Tsunamis occur after earthquakes in coastal areas. If a tsunami occurs, run away to higher ground. If there’s no higher ground in your country, try to get as far from the coast as possible.” Japan, along with the Inamura-no-Hi no Yakata, aims to ensure that we have a world in which there are no victims of tsunamis.

The Hiromura Seawall created by Goryo Hamaguchi (national historical relic site)