

Minamata's *Moyainaoshi* Movement and Sustainable Development: Recovery from Division

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The methyl mercury that the Chisso Corporation released along with industrial pollution destroyed Minamata's abundant natural environment and the bodies and minds of its people. Scenes of sludge accumulating in Minamata Bay and of patients writhing in pain have been communicated through photographs and film. Now, as we mark the 50th anniversary of the official discovery of Minamata Disease,¹ the tragedy is fresh in our memory. Besides the direct damage to nature and people's bodies, the damage brought to Minamata by pollution is incalculable. What does it mean to have nature destroyed by pollution? What kind of influence does this kind of environmental destruction have on our lives? I would like to look back at Minamata Disease using "division" as a key word.

What Pollution Brought to Minamata—Division of Nature and Human Beings

First, we can say that the pollution in Minamata divided "nature" and "human beings." The earliest and most extensive damage was experienced by the fishing people who lived by the sea. Eiko Sugimoto, a narrator at the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, described life in Minamata before the disease outbreak in this way: "How can I say...the land and sea were interconnected. We were living so close to the sea that we could run to it in a minute. At ebb tide, snails, cockles, and sea cucumbers were in the tide pools. There were plenty of them for villagers to catch."² The sea and human beings were so close that it was truly the case, as it was said, that you could drop a fishing line out the window and catch a fish.³ It was a landscape where the houses were that close to the sea. Also, many people went down to the sea to gather fish and shellfish to eat as part of their daily lives, even if they were not directly involved in the fishing industry.⁴ It was not just a matter of people being physically close to the sea. A harmonious relationship was maintained in which nature was present in the midst of people's daily lives and people led their daily lives in the midst of nature.

The people who first noticed the strange changes in the sea were those who lived in concert with nature. Fish that had lost their sense of direction swam towards the shoals, dead fish carcasses washed up in the harbor, kites and crows that had pecked at fish and shellfish fell dead out of the sky, and along the seaside, cats died frantic deaths. In a short time, people began to say they did not feel well, and they started to leave the fishing industry and become more distant from the sea, which was a significant part of their lives. Prior to the outbreak of Minamata Disease, the number of people engaged in farming and fishing had been decreasing in Minamata. However, as a result of the outbreak of Minamata Disease, this trend became definitive.⁵

¹ Minamata Disease was reported by the Chisso Corporation Hospital as a strange disease of unknown cause, and was officially discovered in May, 1956. 2006 marks the 50th anniversary of this discovery.

² Kumamoto Nichinichi Shimbun. (May 1, 2006).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Comments of Sumiko Kaneko of the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum. (July 7, 2007).

⁵ According to a survey conducted by Tsurumi (1998), in the districts with high prevalence rates of Minamata Disease (Tsukinoura, Detsuki, Yudo, and Modo), the number of households involved in the fishing industry decreased from 315 in 1958 to 143 in 1976. Tsurumi concludes that the dispersion and differentiation of jobs that began with Japan's period of high economic growth became definitive as a result of the outbreak of Minamata Disease (Tsurumi, 1998. pp.181-182).

Division of People from One Another

Minamata Disease not only changed the relationship between people and nature, it destroyed the full range of human relationships in the society, giving birth to relationships opposed in conflict. At the point when Minamata Disease arose, it was treated as a strange disease of unknown cause or as a contagious disease, and patients and their families faced intense discrimination and prejudice. Unfair dismissal from employment, discrimination against children in employment and marriage, harassing letters, looks from people when walking around town... the pain and isolation felt by patients and their families cannot be known. In addition, this kind of discrimination and prejudice was directed at all residents of Minamata. People avoided saying that they were born in Minamata and lost their pride in being residents.

Following the official discovery of Minamata Disease in 1956, conflicts regarding compensation arose not only between patients and the Chisso Corporation and patients and the government, but there was jealousy and harassment of the officially recognized patients and their families, in addition to splits and struggles among patients with different interests. The spirit of community mutual assistance that had existed in the past was lost.

This kind of division of human beings from one another was even seen within families. For example, if someone in a family was working for the Chisso Corporation or the government, victims would hesitate to apply for official recognition as patients. Families that had not received official recognition experienced financial deprivation and conflicts occurred with families who received this recognition. Families broke up due to social discrimination and economic reasons. In the area where Minamata Disease was prevalent, the number of single-person households grew rapidly following the outbreak of Minamata Disease.⁶

We probably do not understand the true meaning of environmental destruction. The example of Minamata shows that pollution not only destroys nature and people's bodies, but person-to-person relations which--like air, water, and food--are the foundation for human existence.

Strategy for Recovery—Repairing Divisions

In 2005 and 2006 Minamata was awarded first place in Japan's "Top Eco-City" Contest. This is because Minamata accepted the inheritance of its pollution experience as a "treasure coming out of loss," and has used "environment" as the key word in its development. Policies being implemented by the city of Minamata are based on the goal "Creating a Lifestyle in Harmony with the Environment," and are divided into the themes "Creating a Lifestyle Gentle to the Environment," "Creating Communities Good for the Environment," "Creating Products Good for the Environment," and "From Minamata to the World." Concretely, "Creating a Lifestyle" covers sorting garbage and recycling; "Creating Communities" covers ISO14001 certification and the city's "Eco-Town Plan"; "Creating Products" includes introducing a "Minamata" brand of agricultural products and an "Environmental Meister System"; and "From Minamata to the World" includes disseminating information via the Internet and organizing environment-related conferences.⁷

The starting point and foundation for this revival in Minamata is *Moyainaoshi*. The original meaning of *moyai* is "tying boats together" and "doing something cooperatively." *Moyainaoshi* means rebuilding the bonds between people that were lost as a result of the

⁶ Tsurumi (1998) points out that although it is difficult to conclude from charts of family composition that "families were destroyed by Minamata Disease," the rate of single-person households was extremely high, especially among middle-aged women (Ibid. pp.171-174).

⁷ Detailed information about Minamata's urban planning can be referenced on the Minamata City Website.

outbreak of Minamata Disease--in other words, bonds between patients and government and patients and other citizens, and between patients and one another and citizens and one another.

The revitalization of Minamata's environment began in 1977 with efforts to dispose of the sludge in Minamata Bay. In the 1980s, a number of revitalization plans were developed by various agencies of the national government, Kumamoto Prefecture, and the city of Minamata. However, the acceptance by the government of the reality of Minamata Disease and the effort to think together with citizens about "ways to live without destroying the environment" began in 1990 with the implementation of the "Minamata Environmental Creation and Development Project" by the Kumamoto Prefectural Government. The project included organizing events where individual citizens could confront the issues of Minamata Disease. For example, they included "The Citizens' Gathering to Think about the Welfare of Minamata," "The Citizens' Course about Minamata Disease," and the "Citizens' Gathering to Think About the Revitalization of Minamata—Let's Start *Moyainaoshi*," a "Fire Festival," and "Singing for the Sea in Minamata." As a result of this development, a *moyainaoshi* movement flourished. On May 1, 1994 at the third Minamata Victims Memorial Service, Minamata Mayor Masazumi Yoshii apologized for Minamata Disease on behalf of the government and declared the day "*Moyainaoshi* Day."

How does each individual citizen actually interpret the concept of *moyainaoshi*? Has *moyainaoshi* helped to overcome conflicts or antagonisms? Has *Moyainaoshi* occurred gradually during the numerous efforts? None of this is known for sure. However, it is clear that the meetings and events, study sessions, workshops, collaboration, and other activities of the *moyainaoshi* movement have increased chances for patients, citizens, and government to meet face-to-face and exchange opinions.

The planning process to establish the municipal welfare facility Minamata *Moyainoashi* Center is one case where residents came together under the common goal of community revitalization and reconstruction and transcended the framework of polluters and victims of Minamata Disease. *Moyainaoshi* has become a driving force for transforming conflict to conversation and changing citizens' consciousness towards Minamata Disease and the environment. Former Minamata Mayor Yoshii emphasizes, "There is compensation to aid patients, but the community is needed to provide psychological stability."⁸

Efforts at community revitalization in which Minamata Disease remained a taboo were not successful. Minamata has started to move towards true revitalization by accepting the reality of Minamata Disease and rebuilding relationships where divisions were long-standing and by transcending the framework of two opposing sides in conflict.

Message from Minamata

Under the Minamata Bay Pollution Protection Project, the polluted sludge from Minamata Bay was dredged and a large, 58-hectare area of reclaimed land was completed in 1990. If you stand in the expansive park called Eco Park Minamata that is situated on this land, your heart relaxes seeing the beautiful and gentle sea spread out in front of you. However, if you imagine the large amount of methyl mercury sealed underfoot, you are

⁸ With the cooperation of Soshisha (nonprofit corporation), the writer was able to interview former Minamata Mayor Masazumi Yoshii and hear him talk about the destruction of the community by Minamata Disease and the process of revitalization based on *moyainaoshi* from his personal experience (July 6, 2007). Soshisha is an organization established at the time of the outbreak of Minamata Disease to provide assistance to patients. At present, in addition to the original goal of patient assistance, the organization is involved in revitalizing the affected communities and is putting effort into passing on the experience of Minamata and disseminating information within Japan and internationally.

overcome with unease. The problem of Minamata Disease has not been solved. While Minamata seems to have been reborn and changed, the conditions of the damage remain in nature and within human beings, and one cannot help but feel uncertainty about nature and life.

Now, as we aim to create a sustainable society and need to question development, our values and our lifestyles, there are many things we should learn from the experience of Minamata.

Minamata Disease has been communicated within Japan and internationally as a fundamental example of pollution due to the scale and seriousness of the damage. Pollution is defined as “environmental damage caused to community residents by industrial activities.”⁹ Based on this definition, struggles unfold within a framework that places industry and residents and polluters and victims in opposition. However, there is a trend towards viewing Minamata Disease outside the framework of the two opposing sides that were involved in struggles for patient certification, compensation and assistance. Rather than focusing from beginning to end on the pursuit of one company’s responsibility, we see a movement towards reflection on our own values and lifestyles of abundance and convenience that are benefits of development. As patient Tsuginori Hamamoto says, “Chisso is us.” Dr. Masazumi Harada who conducted a longitudinal study of Embryonic Minamata Disease said, “If you investigate Minamata Disease thoroughly, you end up with a problem of the ways of living and values of each individual.”¹⁰ If you look at Minamata Disease anew from this viewpoint, it is no longer a problem confined to the limited community of Minamata, but one for people across Japan and the world.

As a result of their natural environment being destroyed by pollution, the people of Minamata experienced a hopeless situation of unsustainability in which human beings and social relations were destroyed. By rebuilding the relations between people, a revitalization process in Minamata began. Minamata’s approach to “sustainable development” started from rebuilding these divisions between people. Environmental destruction and depletion of energy resources are important issues of “sustainable development.” However, by looking from the perspective of “division” at our societies and lives, we notice the existence of unsustainability in places closer to us. While learning from the revitalization process of Minamata, we can revalue the relationship between nature and human beings, and the person-to-person relations amid families, neighborhoods, schools and companies. I would like to suggest that we connect those things which have been divided like this and take the first step toward “sustainable development.”

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⁹ *Koujien*, 5th Edition. Iwanami Shoten.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

URLs

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<http://www.minamatacity.jp/eng/index.htm>

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Minamata Disease Municipal Museum: <http://www7.ocn.ne.jp/~mimuseum>

Nonprofit Corporation Soshisha: <http://www.soshisha.org> (Japanese)

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