

ARTICLE

# Can art convey a victim's voice to future generations? A case of Minamata disease in Japan

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## Abstract

*This study explores how communities pass on traumatic memories to future generations in the aftermath of tragic disasters. In the aftermath of conflict, people attempt to forget or record and share memories of the tragedy to rebuild the community. In restorative justice, hearing victims' voices is important. This core idea can be extended to future generations by including them in the passing on of the voices. To understand inheritance of memory as a form of restorative justice, I conducted a case study on Minamata disease, a major human, social, and environmental tragedy in Japan. I focused on the work of a local reading group that does not directly advocate for the voices of victims but expresses them by artistically presenting texts related to Minamata disease. The victims perceived that not only humans but also non-human beings had been harmed by environmental destruction. The focus of the analysis was on how the world described by the victims' sensitivity to non-human beings is passed on to the future generations. The study highlighted that the process of an artistic approach of restorative justice creates a space for dialogue between different generations. The positive impact of an artistic approach to restorative justice can be used as a tool of resistance by communities facing tragedy.*

**Keywords:** restorative justice, community, environmental harm, art, Japan.

## 1 Introduction

After a tragic event such as war or crime, people have two options. First, they can pass on the memory of the tragedy to future generations and inscribe it in the community's history. Second, they can forget the past and start afresh as a new community. Some victims would prefer that community members take the first

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option, dismissing the second. The following testimony conveys one such victim's perspective:

If nothing is done, the deaths of the Minamata disease patients will be in vain. The sacrifices we have made and continue to make will be forgotten when all the patients die. How can we leave living proof? (Hongan-no-kai, 1998: 6)<sup>1</sup>

The preceding quotation belongs to a victim of Minamata disease (MD), Yoshiharu Tanoue, who died in 2002. MD is a serious neurological disease caused by consuming methyl mercury-contaminated seafood. In 1956, the first case of MD was officially reported in the Minamata area, and the factory effluent from Chisso Co. Ltd was suspected to be the cause. Founded in 1906,<sup>2</sup> Chisso was a chemical factory that started using inorganic mercury in its production cycle from 1932. This mercury was being discharged into the sea before the outbreak of MD occurred. The suspicion was confirmed when results of experiments conducted on animals by Doctor Hajime Hosokawa at Chisso's internal hospital were obtained. However, owing to economic considerations, Chisso did not stop releasing its effluent into the sea until 1968.

Resultantly, MD continued to spread in Minamata and surrounding areas, and by 2020, as many as 2,283 people were officially recognised as MD patients. Tanoue was diagnosed with MD in 1956. He joined the first group of MD victims who filed court cases in 1969 and was compensated by the company in 1973. Although, legally, amends have been made for this harm, his life with the disease continues after the trial. The pollution not only damaged his health but also poisoned the surrounding sea and destroyed the livelihoods of the community. Although there is no cure for MD, he sought to restore the connection to nature that existed before the pollution. He explored nature-inspired rehabilitation methods like bee-keeping, cattle-breeding and kiwi cultivation. His desire to 'leave living proof' can be interpreted as a wish for retelling his individual life story instead of a record of his clinical case or trial as an MD victim. His demand for 'hearing the victims' voices fits within the scope of restorative justice.

While in traditional criminal justice, offenders are punished by the coercive power of the state, restorative justice involves victims and offenders voluntarily participating in dialogue and seeking solutions themselves. Under restorative justice, victims' needs are considered opportunities for speaking to the community about their experiences. Victims need to have their experiences heard and be fully acknowledged by others in the community (Zehr, 1990). The European Forum for Restorative Justice (EFRJ), which promotes research on and practice of restorative justice in Europe, submitted recommendations for the revision of the EU's 2008 Environmental Crime Directive. The EFRJ recommendations clearly refer to realising justice in environmental harm: a central need for victims is to be heard and to tell their stories (EFRJ, 2021). In environmental harm cases, human and

1 The author refers to a number of Japanese sources. All quotations from the Japanese literature have been translated by the author.

2 Shitagau Noguchi founded the company as Sogi Denki, the predecessor of Chisso co., Ltd.

non-human beings (e.g. animals, plants, seas and rivers) suffer injury and negative impact of the harm. While it is difficult to identify non-human beings as 'victims' in conventional legal proceedings, restorative justice responds more flexibly to environmental harm. The EFRJ recommendations offer the following as one of its conclusions:

Community involvement is key, as a criminal justice system alone will never be able to deal with the complexity of environmental harm. Likewise, environmental crime, because of its intrusive character at a societal level, offers unique opportunities to capacitate civil society to become more familiar with justice mechanisms and acquire more civic competencies in this respect. (EFRJ, 2021)

Environmental restorative justice practice expands the concept of community by widening the scope to hear the voices of non-human beings, whereas traditional restorative justice assumes a human-only community. This means that the traditional vision of dialogue to realise justice needs to be changed. As an example of exploring the possibilities of dialogue, including with non-human beings, I refer to artist Maria Lucia Cruz Correia's art performance *Voice of nature: The trial*. In this work, Cruz Correia offered the vision of restorative trial and a new form of courtroom to respond to ecocide. She brought fish and plants into the courtroom, reminding the audience of the victims of environmental harm, stimulating not only language but also the senses of sight, sound, smell and touch. During this performative trial, the participants do not discuss offenders' sentences but rather re-examine the relationship between human beings and nature, physically touching plants and animals harmed by human beings and learning that human beings must take care of nature (Cruz Correia, 2021). In other words, through art, people's sensibilities are stimulated, and environmental awareness is raised, thereby encouraging them to prevent and repair environmental harm. The artistic approach to environmental restorative justice is an innovative way of stimulating people's sensibilities in a non-verbal way.

Restorative justice studies on the Minamata region, focusing on the *Moyainaoshi* movement in the 1990s, were conducted. Within the *Moyainaoshi* movement, various types of activities aiming to hear the voices of MD victims were activated. The movement was promoted through the cooperation of local authorities, victim groups, supporters of victims and unaffected citizens. The essence of restorative justice is clearly present in the *Moyainaoshi* movement (Ishihara, 2013). The process of dialogue between victims and various stakeholders, seeking to rebuild the Minamata community, is regarded as a prototype of restorative justice. In particular, in 1994, at a memorial service for MD victims, the mayor of Minamata City sincerely apologised for the mistakes made by the Minamata administration in dealing with the victims at the time of the outbreak of the pollution. Furthermore, MD victims organised the event *hi no matsuri* along with volunteer citizens as part of the *Moyainaoshi* movement. There, MD victim Eiko Sugimoto called on the citizens of Minamata to mourn for non-human beings, recognising that pollution victims included not only humans but also fish. Sugimoto imagined a community

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that included non-human beings (Komatsubara, 2021b). Thus, the people in Minamata who heard the voices of MD victims evoked memories of the pollution and shared them as a part of community history. The *Moyainaoshi* movement shares the essence of restorative justice, which aims to rebuild a community after environmental harm (Komatsubara, 2021b). However, previous studies have analysed the *Moyainaoshi* movement mainly in terms of the functioning of local government policies and as lacking an artistic approach. Furthermore, more than 30 years have passed since the *Moyainaoshi* movement was launched, and the MD victims are ageing. I considered it necessary to develop a model of restorative justice, different from the *Moyainaoshi* movement that would be suitable for the Minamata area today. I assumed that the form of restorative justice in the Minamata area today, to resist forgetting and to hear the victims' voices, would be different from that of the 1990s.

My aim in this article is to explore restorative justice practices that resist the forgetting of the memory of environmental harm in the community and transmit victims' voices to future generations, highlighting an artistic approach. To this end, I analyse a case study in two stages. First, I identify directions of memory remembrance and forgetting in the current Minamata community, using the example of 'the MD renaming campaign' for Minamata today. A memoir by a supporter of MD victims (Endo, 2021; Koizumi, 2020; Nagano, 2018) has been published, documenting their activities to resist the forgetting of the memory of environmental harm. Research has also shown that resistance to the forgetting of pollution memories can lead to the reconstruction of the Minamata area (Yokemoto, 2020). Furthermore, with the development of the internet, individual residents of the Minamata region have discussed memory forgetting and its resistance in weblogs (Takakura, 2019). The first stage of the analysis is based on these data.

Second, as an activity of resistance to memory forgetting through an artistic approach, I will examine the case of the reading activity of *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai*, whose literal translation is 'The group telling the MD stories'. *Kataritsugu* means transmitting MD memories as a legacy for future generations. The group's activities involve 'training courses for exhibition guides at the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, editing and publishing a collection of interviews with MD patients, and raising MD awareness among teachers and guardians in Kumamoto Prefecture' (Kawajiri, 2021: 40). In the reading activity, members practise reading texts related to MD, victims' memoirs, novels and court documents. Once a year, they express the texts' contents to an audience of Minamata citizens in a recital. The expression focuses not only on the literal contents but also on the tone of voice, pauses, breathing and gestures. Therefore, the reading activity is indeed a practice that takes an artistic approach. Since 2015, I have conducted repeated cycles of fieldwork in Minamata two to three times a year, lasting from a week up to a month. I also attended the recitals of the reading activity in 2018. I organised semi-structured interviews with four people in Minamata, on 24 and 25 February 2021. Interviews ranged from 90 to 150 minutes in length.

Finally, by comparing traditional restorative justice and an artistic approach to restorative justice, I identify the unique value of the latter. In particular, I will

clarify that in the case of environmental harm, the artistic approach to restorative justice can help victims' voices to be heard intergenerationally.

## 2 Forgetting and remembering tragic memories in Minamata

For decades, there has been a struggle in Minamata between people pushing for either remembering or forgetting the memories of the disaster caused by environmental harm. The conflict is symbolised by 'the MD renaming campaign'. MD was called a '*kibyō* (strange disease)' of unknown cause when patients with the disease first became visible in Minamata; from around 1958, the city council and health service started calling it 'Minamata disease' (Minamata Disease Centre Soshisha, n.d.). Consequently, the word 'Minamata' became associated with images of polluted seas, dead fish and birds and suffering patients. People of Minamata were suspected of having MD if they moved to other areas and suffered marriage discrimination (ibid.). For them, their hometown was associated with negative images of MD, and they lost pride and confidence owing to being born in Minamata ('*Watashi ni totteno Minamatabyō*' Henshu Iinkai, 2000). In 1972, some citizens started the MD renaming campaign, making the following claims: 'the name "Minamata disease" is an insult to citizens', 'MD is not endemic', '[The vision of] positive Minamata is what citizens want', 'Rename Minamata disease' (Minamata Disease Centre Soshisha, n.d.). When the MD victims won their court case in 1973, the mayor of Minamata at that time stated: 'I believe that today's verdict marks a closure for Minamata disease', and 'I would like to restore the city's positive image and remove the stigma of [that Minamata is] pollution starting point (ibid.)'. Therefore, 'the MD renaming campaign' began as an attempt to disconnect the city and people of Minamata from the history of pollution and to rebuild a community.

Meanwhile, MD victims opposed 'the MD renaming campaign'. More than 15 years before the campaign began, the name 'Minamata disease' had already been circulating in Japanese society. Specifically, for the MD victims, the name 'Minamata disease' had become a part of their identity (Endo, 2021). Even within the local community in Minamata, accurate knowledge of MD was not passed on, and prejudices were widespread. These included beliefs that the disease was caused by fishers who ate rotten fish, that it was an epidemic or that it was a fake disease. MD victim Eiko Sugimoto was disowned by relatives and not allowed to buy rice because her condition was regarded as an infection, and she was even pushed off a cliff (Fujisaki, 2013). Another MD victim, Eiko Ueno, who lost her 3-year-old daughter to MD, was told by a neighbour that 'she had behaved badly and that her child was sick' because of the punishment and that she was 'dirty' and 'horrible' ('*Watashi ni totteno Minamatabyō*' Henshu Iinkai, 2000: 99). She said that she hated the human heart the most and that 'she would never forget what her neighbours said [when they discriminated against her], rather than the Chisso [pollution] itself' (ibid.: 100). For MD victims, neighbours inside the community were enemies, and supporters of victims shared this perspective (Endo, 2021). 'The MD renaming campaign' was a legitimate demand from the contemporary medical perspective, and MD deserved a value-neutral name, such as 'methylmercury

poisoning'. Nevertheless, in Minamata, the historical context was such that 'the MD renaming campaign' was seen by MD victims as an action that aimed to erase their existence from the community's history.

In the 1990s, the *Moyainaoshi movement*, a project to rebuild the community in Minamata, began. The *Moyainaoshi* movement involves the entire community. In a survey conducted in Minamata in 1999, 87.3 per cent of respondents said they recognised the project (Mukai, 2004). However, in anonymous interviews with people in Minamata after the project, MD victims who received compensation were viewed as having a bad attitude and no morals; respondents said that some people pretended to be sick to get compensation and called themselves MD victims for money. One respondent had decided not to express her opinion on MD in an official meeting but was encouraged by a local government official to speak for the Minamata community. The respondent stated that *yosomono* (strangers) could leave the community after saying whatever they wanted. The respondent stayed in Minamata and was silent out of consideration for their neighbours ('Watashi ni totteno Minamatabyo' Henshu linkai, 2000). In addition, a survey conducted in Minamata in 2016-2017 indicated that only 38 per cent of the respondents were familiar or fairly familiar with the *Moyainaoshi* movement (Keio Gijuku Daigaku SFC Kenkyusho, 2018). Thus, the *Moyainaoshi* movement has become less functional in its role of rebuilding the community. One MD victim supporter noted that although the *Moyainaoshi* movement was a good idea initially, there are people who use it to lead people to think that MD is over (Nagano, 2018). Thus, the project, which aimed to recall memories of pollution, is in danger of being used as a tool for promoting forgetting over time.

Even now, 'the MD renaming campaign' continues, with a roadside sign in Minamata stating 'Call for the revision of the name [of MD] to methylmercury poisoning!' (Nishinippon Shinbun, 2019). A woman named Tsudumiko Takakura, who lives in Minamata, blogged about her experience of having a dialogue with a man who runs 'the MD renaming campaign'. She realised that he had no interaction with MD victims. She was born and raised in Minamata and was subjected to prejudicial remarks outside of her community. She was unable to talk about MD for a while and could understand why people wanted to change the name of the disease, because she had the same emotional conflict in her mind. However, learning about MD made her feel lucky to have been born in Minamata. She believes that education about MD is needed to ease the suffering of the future generations in Minamata (Takakura, 2019). In Minamata, the two sides of memory, remembrance and forgetting, remain in conflict to the present day.

From a restorative justice perspective, if we consider that the work of listening to victims' voices should continue in Minamata, the most urgent issue is the ageing of MD victims. For example, MD victim Eiko Sugimoto, who played a central role in the *Moyainaoshi* movement in the 1990s, died in 2008. How and who will inherit the task of listening to the victims' voices? Kunio Endo (2021), who started working with MD victims in 1989, described the impact of hearing their stories face to face. Even though he has heard MD victim Eiko Ueno's story many times in person, he still cries each time. Meanwhile, texts and video recordings of Ueno's narrative do not evoke the same emotion. In other words, directly listening to the victim's voice

conveys the whole person's existence to the other person beyond the literal content. Hatsue Koizumi, who works at the Minamata Disease Centre Soshiha, said that as an activist of a younger generation, when she tries to present the victims' voices to the audience as an advocate, it does not seem to flesh out the truth (Komatsubara, 2020). Therefore, new ways of conveying the victims' voices in Minamata are needed. I will examine *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* in the following section as an example of an attempt to transmit victims' voices to the future generation.

### 3 Reading activity in Minamata

*Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* (the group telling the MD stories) was founded in 2012 and officially established in 2013. In 2015, the group started a reading activity. In the reading activity, conducted by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai*, members organise an annual recital during the month of February. They select a text about MD to read at the recital and meet once a month to practise. In Japan, reading activities were introduced into educational policy during the Meiji period (1868-1912) as a part of the state-led modernisation process. During World War II, a campaign to read national and patriotic poetry was introduced in Japanese language education. It aimed at uplifting people's nationalism through physical training by reading aloud the 'correct' texts that fuelled nationalism (Kobayashi, 2012). However, a reading activity is not just a repetition of words but a bodily expression that allows for a non-verbal representation of the human-nature relationship. In an experiment conducted at the University in Hokkaido in Japan, students read stories about the nature and history of the region, depicting the interaction between plants, animals and the Ainu people (Kato, Yoshioka, Kasami & Suzuki, 2021). The Ainu people are indigenous to Japan and have passed on their ideas about nature in oral rather than written form. Reading activities are considered to be an attempt for young people today to learn about the traditions of the Ainu people, not as knowledge but as experience. Therefore, the reading activity conducted by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* has the potential to go beyond the literal text and convey the victims' voices. In what follows, I analyse the reading activity conducted by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* from three key perspectives: a social movement, a community including non-human beings and art as a collaborative process.

#### 3.1 A social movement's perspective

From the first perspective, the reading activity by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* did not emerge suddenly but gradually during the history of social movements aiming to preserve and present victims' voices in Minamata. Rimiko Yoshinaga, the founder of *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai*, is the daughter of an MD victim. Her father died of MD in 1956. Her grandfather was also bedridden for nine years and died in 1965. When she was a young girl, she remained silent owing to her fear of discrimination against MD. While she received the wrong explanation about MD, namely that the fishermen were so poor that they must have eaten rotten fish, no one shared accurate information about MD with her. She was ashamed of her

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father and grandfather. Around 1994, she read the book *Minamata no keiji* (1983) and found that the discharge of the effluent had not been stopped, despite the widespread damage caused and realised that MD is not only a disease of the individual but also related to the history and culture of the Minamata community. She became aware that she had discriminated against MD victims because she did not want to know the truth. She decided to share her knowledge with other people. In 1997, she began working as a *kataribe* (MD storyteller) at the Minamata Disease Municipal Museum, sharing her family's memories with visitors. Her testimony is also available online in video format (NHK, 2013). Thus, she was a part of the movement to preserve victims' voices in Minamata.

Meanwhile, Rimiko Yoshinaga, and her husband, Toshio Yoshinaga, officially founded *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* in 2012. She focused on bringing out the unspoken voices of the MD victims and their families. She aimed to tell the stories of people like her mother, who had already died and could not talk about their MD, in a way that was different from her own sharing of experiences as a *kataribe* (MD storyteller). Simultaneously, she had noticed that some people in Minamata avoided listening to *kataribe* talks because the stories of MD victims and their families had such a strong impact. For her, the reading activity was an alternative means of giving voice to MD victims, conveying their non-verbalised experiences. She thought that the reading activity might make the audience more receptive, since the text was already written, which may act as a 'protective cushion' (interview 24 January 2021, Minamata) for the audience. One of her strategies was to use texts written about the Minamata landscape as material for reading activity. The pollution of the sea has radically changed the coastal landscape. The loss of landscape does not directly recall the antagonistic relationship between the offending company, Chisso, MD victims and the rest of the citizens in Minamata. Thus, her idea can be interpreted to envision an approach for the reading activity in which she recalls and shares memories of a landscape commonly lost to the people of Minamata, rather than based on the victim-offender relationship.

Toshio Yoshinaga, who founded *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* with Rimiko Yoshinaga, is a supporter of MD victims. He is from Shizuoka Prefecture in Japan and has no roots in Minamata, but he moved to Minamata and joined the MD victims' movement in 1972. In 1981, he began working for the Minamata Disease Center Soshisha. In 1983, he contributed towards establishing the *Minamatabyo rekishi koshokan* (Minamata Disease Historical Investigation Centre), which is affiliated with the Minamata Disease Centre Soshisha. His aim was to preserve the testimonies and memoirs of MD victims, not as MD data but as a record of their individual, vivid lives (Hirai, 2021). He did not simply address the tragedy of the pollution but tried to make visible the existence of MD victims' lives afterwards. Indeed, *Minamatabyo rekishi koshokan* attracted many visitors. Subsequently, it functioned as a space for supporters to express and communicate to the visitors what they experienced, learnt, thought and felt during their interactions with MD victims (Hirai, 2021). In this way, Toshio Yoshinaga has long been involved in social movements that centre on listening to victims' voices.

For Toshio Yoshinaga, the reading activity is a more flexible approach to the MD movement. He stated in an interview (24 January 2021, Minamata) that fans



of the offending company, Chisso, would be welcome in the reading activity if they wanted. For example, if a participant wanted to sing the Chisso song, he would be accepted. He said that, ideally, the reading activity would bring together people from different walks of life to see the real lives of MD victims' families and the surprisingly positive side of Chisso supporters, which would soften their prejudices towards each other and 'melt the ice'. He also said:

It is not possible to have a sticky relationship, anyway. But I think ... how can we have a relationship where the ice is broken a little bit? Well, it just so happens that, for her [Rimiko Yoshinaga], reading is the way to challenge that. (interview 24 January 2021, Minamata)

Aligning with his words, the reading activity is regarded as an attempt to go beyond the victim-offender relationship and share memories of MD. Specifically, it is directed at community rebuilding in Minamata.

One of the members, Kaori Okuba, is more explicit in her assertion of the contrast between reading activities and traditional social movements. A migrant from outside Minamata, she has worked for Kan-Shiranui-planning, an MD awareness-raising organisation, before joining *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai*. There, she has been telling the MD story as an advocate. She is the study tour coordinator for teachers and children willing to learn about MD; however, she felt that raising awareness was a hard task. She said in an interview:

Umm ... When I tell audiences about MD, I ask them to make a big change. 'Are you sure you want to live like this?' and 'Can you live like this when there are so many problems?' and so on. I tried to grab [their minds and bodies] and shake them. Well ... unconsciously ... I asked them [to change so much], even though I did not want to do so. (interview 25 January 2021, Minamata)

Kaori Okuba was on the verge of burnout, faced with the reality that despite her passionate commitment to social movements, society and people were not changing easily. In contrast to this approach, the reading activity focuses on the representation of the text, and participants do not have to argue for an opinion or try to change others. Kaori Okuba feels more comfortable with the reading activity. In promoting people's remembrance of MD in Minamata, they recognised the limitations of traditional ways of conveying victims' voices and selected the reading activity as an alternative method. Therefore, the artistic approach emerged as a complement to the traditional social movements.

### **3.2 A community that includes non-human beings**

The second lens through which *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* can be viewed is as a community that includes non-human beings. The earliest to realise that MD victims had a vision of a community that included non-human beings was the literary artist Michiko Ishimure (Komatsubara, 2021c). Through her writings she expressed her conviction that it was not only the material environment of the sea and marine products that were destroyed by the pollution but also the mystical

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world of the inhabitants connected to nature (Komatsubara, 2021a). The *yokai* (ghosts) called *kappa* and *gago*, ghost foxes and gods living in the sea and mountains of Minamata were also lost owing to environmental harm. Ishimure's work is often selected as a text in the reading activity. In particular, the picture book *Minamata: Umi no koe* (Minamata: The voice of the sea), which Ishimure illustrated for children, was performed at the 2018 recital. The work begins with a mysterious incantation, 'Shuuriri en', and the ghost fox Ogin tells the story of the pollution in Minamata. The text is unique in its poetic repetitive rhythms and sound, which are only vividly expressed when read aloud. As the readers' voices echoed in the hall during the recital, a buzzing world of small, silent creatures and *yokai* emerged (Komatsubara, 2021a). Thus, a vision of community that includes non-human beings, which was lost owing to MD, is expressed in the RA.

Kaori Okuba, who read *Minamata: Umi no koe* in 2018, is fascinated by Ishimure's literature. She was born and raised in a fisherman's family in Tokunoshima, where she lived until she was eighteen. Tokunoshima is an island in southern Japan with a unique natural environment and culture. Since her childhood, she had been surrounded by the *yokai* (ghosts) and gods of the island. She feels that the gods of the island always protect her. She read Michiko Ishimure's works and compared the richness of Minamata's marine world and the discrimination against fishermen with her own life in Tokunoshima. Meanwhile, she faces challenges in verbalising while sharing with others her sense of a 'community including non-human beings'. She lives in a mountainous area in Minamata, an environment different from Tokunoshima. She is learning about Minamata, where gods and *yokai* live, from Michiko Ishimure's books. As she lives near a river, she often hears elders' stories about *kappa* (*yokai* in the river). Sentences such as 'I know the man who wrestled with a *kappa*', 'That was probably a *kappa*' and 'the path of *kappa*' are frequently used. However, she repeatedly discussed the difficulty of explaining about the *yokai* and gods through language. For example, when she asked an old man in Minamata about a *yokai* called *gago*, he said, 'It [*gago*] is there', 'No, it acts like that, behaves like this and comes out at such a time'. Kaori Okuba described this miscommunication with the man in an interview as follows:

Well ... [yokai and gods] are vague, round, clumsy, and sometimes angry... But it is very difficult when you try to catch them with words. But [for the local people], they are there as a natural matter. Even if they do not [consciously] put it into words, [the local people understand that], they are there. So ... they do not intentionally record them in words ... maybe ... (interview 25 January 2021, Minamata)

For Kaori Okuba, the feeling of being surrounded by something great comes first. Therefore, it is difficult and inexpressible for her to only talk about the *yokai* and gods because separating them from the world around her is challenging. They are beings that cannot be understood by verbal explanations alone. She believes that even songs and dances can be passed on to future generations if performances have a soul. However, she says that language is a 'quicker' way of communicating.

Through the reading activity experience, she is aware that each word has a distinct meaning, and she considers that if she understands the feelings behind it, she can capture them in words. She always selects Ishimure's works for her reading activity. For her, Ishimure is very good at verbalising about the *yokai* and gods, and she finds her writings helpful. She is amazed by Ishimure's works and feels that what was supposedly inexpressible through words was beautifully articulated. Through Ishimure's work, she learns how to translate *yokai* and gods into language. Thus, she is learning how to share and express an image of a community that includes non-human beings in the reading activity.

Meanwhile, Rimiko Yoshinaga also has a vision of a community that includes non-human beings. She was born and raised in a house close to the sea in Minamata, and beaches and tidal flats have been her playground since childhood. Her unique sensitivity to non-human beings is well illustrated in her conversations with her husband, Toshio Yoshinaga, especially in the episode 'Shells are born from the soil'. In the episode, Rimiko goes down to the beach, looks at the stones and rocks and thinks that these might have also absorbed methylmercury when the sea was polluted. She then tells us that small shells are born out of the earth. Toshio says, 'That is weird' but then confirms, 'You mean shells come out of the soil?' The conversation proceeds as follows:

Rimiko Yoshinaga: So ... I think we have overlooked it. Yeah. There were creatures in those places [in the soil]. However, when you go down to the beach, you only see the sea at first. We see only the sea. But if you look under your feet, you will find many more beings.

Toshio Yoshinaga: You know, it is a poetic expression that a shell is born out of the soil. But maybe that is part of what she [says], but she is saying exactly, that [shells] come from the soil. It does not matter to her if I say that scientifically, it is not right. (interview 24 January 2021, Minamata)

Rimiko Yoshinaga's words show that when the reading activity tries to describe the landscape of Minamata that has been lost to pollution, it not only refers to the natural physical landscape, but includes a mythical world where invisible creatures roam. Specifically, the landscape implies a community that includes non-human beings. Of interest is the response of Toshio Yoshinaga believes that money is needed to preserve MD victims' voices and change their communities. Despite his materialism and pragmatism, he strives to understand his wife's words:

So, how can I compromise? How can I live with her? If I do not [compromise], it is ridiculous. It would be impossible [to understand], according to our common sense. But somehow, when she keeps telling me that shells are born out of the rock ... no, the soil on moonlit nights, I start to think that ... yeah, it might be possible. That is what I mean. (interview 24 January 2021, Minamata)

Furthermore, he talked about his spiritual episode: he sometimes feels the sigh of Rimiko Yoshinaga's mother, who had passed away. As the interview progressed, he

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recalled hearing his mother's voice when he left his hometown to find a job and muttered, 'Yeah ... I ... maybe ... have [a certain sense]'. Therefore, it is possible to say that he is trying to walk into and share the world that Rimiko Yoshinaga sees. Kaori Okuba, Rimiko Yoshinaga and Toshio Yoshinaga share the recognition that MD has destroyed the local vision of the community, including non-human beings. These common understandings have enabled them to express the mystical world of the MD victims in their reading activity recitals.

### 3.3 *Art as a collaborative process*

The third perspective from which *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai's* reading activity can be viewed is that it treats art as a collaborative process. Even though the goal is to perform at the annual recital, it is notable that the creation process is collaborative. Kaori Okuba, the core member of the reading activity, does not perform a solo act but one that includes interactions with others. She reads the text carefully and states the following about her process:

I need to be convinced and have my understanding of the meaning of the words, why these words are here ... um ... otherwise, it will just be a monotonous voice, reading aloud ... well ... the background of the words and the place where they are depicted [is important], so I actually go to the place and [get the meaning] from there by intuition. (interview 25 January 2021, Minamata)

In the case of a mountain, for example, she believes that

[I must] read deeply and put into myself whether [the characters] are at the foot or at the top of the mountain, where they are and what they are doing before I can express myself. (interview 25 January 25, Minamata)

She has been working with the members in her group to imagine the words and feelings in the text. She explains that even when group members have different textual interpretations, they can decide the appropriate one through reading practice. For Kaori Okuba, the reading activity is a form of self-expression that can only be achieved by working together in a group.

In addition, through the process, communication between members may deepen. This aspect of the reading activity is highlighted in Yukiko Nagasaki's experience with the reading activity. Her grandfather was a Chisso worker. Although she heard negative comments about MD victims from her grandfather as a child, she did not want to pass them on to the future generations. However, for her, being aware of the history was also a burden. She felt that Ishimure's extremely vivid descriptions were about her family and that Ishimure denounced the Chisso workers, including her grandfather. She borrowed Ishimure's book from Rimiko Yoshinaga and discovered a story about a *kaisha undokai* (a sports event at the company attended by the employees and their families). The story reminded her of a conversation with her grandfather about Chisso's *kaisha undokai*. While she intends to read the book, it will not be easy.

Kaori Okuba noticed Yukiko Nagasako's emotional conflict and had a conversation with her. Kaori Okuba was impressed that several Chisso workers' families also faced the burden of MD history and that they also struggled to open Ishimure's book. After the conversation, Kaori Okuba and Yukiko Nagasako became emotionally closer and eventually became friends. Kaori Okuba felt that the approach and pace of the reading activity should be respected as everyone has a different standpoint. She believes that these dialogue opportunities are significant in the reading activity.

The reading activity as a tool [to tell MD stories], there are many approaching [to tell MD stories] ... umm ... so it is easy for people who want to struggle MD to participate [in the reading activity] ... well ... but it is also possible for people who want to read about the seasonal scenery of Minamata [to participate in the reading activity] ... uh, disconnection [between people in Minamata] can be avoided ... So, we can do something [with people having different perspectives]. (interview 25 January 2021, Minamata)

Kaori Okuba's experiences of interacting with the reading activity members suggest that the value of reading lies in the creation process, not in the achievement of the recital. In the reading activities, collaborative relationships are built through the medium of art.

#### 4 The value of an artistic restorative justice

Through the case studies, the reading activity carried out by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* seems to be an attempt towards intergenerational transmission of victims' voices. In this section, I will discuss three key points about the act of hearing victims' voices in the reading activity from the perspective of restorative justice. I compare typical restorative justice with artistic restorative justice and identify the unique value of the latter.

The first point is the 'status of an advocate'. In typical restorative justice, victims principally talk about what they have directly experienced, whereas in the reading activity, non-experiencers become the victims' voices. The main reason is the ageing of the victims, so if the aim is the intergenerational transmission of memories of environmental harm, advocacy on behalf of those who experienced the harm by those who did not is inevitable. The unique nature of the reading activity's artistic approach in Minamata becomes apparent when compared with the attempts to pass on the memory of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima.

Hiroshima city has launched a project to train people to provide testimonies of the atomic bombing. The project is an attempt by non-experiencers to provide the testimonies of the ageing survivors of the atomic bombings. In this project, non-experiencers are trained for over three years to work with survivors to pass on their memories (Dohi, 2017). Thus, non-experiencers serve as memory devices that, as far as possible, transmit the words spoken by the survivors to the future generations accurately and without distorting their content.

In the reading activity, in contrast, the members do not learn how to tell stories from MD victims; instead, they interact within the group to find out how to express the victims' voices in the reading of the text. Kaori Okuba compared the practice in Hiroshima with the reading activity in Minamata, stating that she wanted to express the victims' voices in a new format, as she could not acquire the MD victims' experiences herself (interview 25 January 2021, Minamata).

For Kaori Okuba, the reading activity is an attempt to reconstruct and recreate what happened in Minamata in the past through the voices of the MD victims. The need for a creative process in the transmission of memory is considered necessary because it involves a vision of the community, including non-human beings destroyed by MD, as will be discussed later.

The second point is the expression of spiritual harm. The damage caused by MD not only impacted human health, but also caused the destruction of Minamata's landscape and the world inhabited by gods and *yokai* (ghosts). The latter type of damage is difficult to verbalise and hard to convey to people outside the Minamata area through words. However, literary artist Michiko Ishimure expressed this mystical world in her novels (Komatsubara, 2021c). In the reading activity, members include not only factual and historical MD material, but also artwork as their texts, including Ishimure's work. The artistic approach allows reading activity members to shed light on the inner spiritual harms of the invisible psyche.

While in typical restorative justice the facts of the victim's experience are shared by community members through language, an artistic approach to restorative justice such as a reading activity aims to share the spiritual world of the victim in a non-verbal way. The format used differs from democratic debate and opinion exchange and stimulates the sensibilities of community members and awakens their imagination. An artistic approach to restorative justice encourages people to approach the spiritual world harmed by environmental destruction by hearing the victims' voices and mourning their loss together.

The third point is the communication that emerges during the art creation process. Typical restorative justice assumes that victims, offenders and community members face the facts of the crime or violence. However, in places like Minamata, where communities have long been fragmented, facing the facts is sometimes a burden for community members. Activists who try to encourage dialogue around the facts among the members of the community burn out, as in Kaori Okuba's case. In contrast, in the artistic approach, members concentrate on expressing the text rather than expressing their own opinions. This means that direct conflicts between members are avoided, and even those with different opinions can work together. As Toshio Yoshinaga pointed out, an artistic approach such as a reading activity has the potential to ease conflicts among community members and provide opportunities for mutual understanding.

In the reading activity, texts that record the voices of MD victims function as a medium for people to interact with each other in the process of creation of art. It is noteworthy that reading activity members did not initiate the artistic approach for their own enjoyment but as an extension of their work to preserve and present the victims' voices. If they used victims' voices as material to satisfy their own need for self-expression, it would be an insult to their dignity. It is important to note that in

Minamata, artistic attempts at restorative justice, such as a reading activity, have emerged as an alternative after several years of activities based on hearing the voice of MD victims, as in the case of typical restorative justice. Artistic restorative justice can function as a complement to direct victim-offender dialogue.

## 5 Conclusion

Through the Minamata case study, the reading activity conducted by *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* was portrayed as a prototype of artistic restorative justice. The reading activity in *Minamatabyo-o-kataritsugukai* is one attempt to stop the forgetting of the memory of pollution in Minamata. By allowing contemporary activists to express the voices of MD victims using texts, the project has the potential to pass on to future generations not only the voices of the humans but also the spiritual world that has been harmed by environmental destruction. The reading activity is an extension of their local work that preserves victims' voices in Minamata.

Meanwhile, until now, great works based on Minamata's pollution have been produced by professional artists. Highly acclaimed Japanese artists, such as documentary filmmaker Noriaki Tsuchimoto and documentary photographers Shisei Kuwabara and Takeshi Shiota, have also created works about Minamata. In addition, the film *Minamata* (2020), in which Johnny Depp plays photographer Eugene Smith, has been broadcast worldwide. While these spectacular artists shone brightly, the small-scale activities of the reading activity have been overshadowed. However, the analysis highlights that grass-roots artistic work by community insiders, such as reading activities, contains the essence of restorative justice. The process of art creation through reading activity is analogous to turning an old monochrome photograph into a colour video. These activities do not need to teach the historical records but create new images of MD that they have discovered. The creative process of art has the power to give life to the records of past events. This approach follows the restorative justice perspective that focuses on the process, not the outcome.

While I proposed the possibility of artistic restorative justice in Minamata, it is significant that it has been more than 60 years since the first victims of pollution were recognised. Historian Aleida Assmann, who studies the transmission of Holocaust memory, points out that people's attitudes towards traumatic memories shift over time. Assmann says that in the context of the history of the controversy surrounding the Holocaust in Germany since World War II, what was impossible for the first generation and ignored by the second would be a subject for the third to talk about and accept with empathy (Assmann, 2019: 217). In Minamata, the activities of hearing the victims' voices have changed over time and gained new sustainable formats. Artistic restorative justice has the potential to become a tool of resistance against the forgetting of tragic disasters when viewed from a long-term perspective. Extending the scope of traditional restorative justice, which assumed a temporal victim-offender relationship, to intergenerational relationships in the history of a community would open up the possibility of dealing with harms such

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as war and environmental damage, where collective rather than individual harms are central.

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