

Learning Resilience from Japan

By

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EVERY child who learns poetry in Japan would surely have been introduced to Kenji Miyazawa (1896-1933). 'Strong in the rain, strong in the wind, strong against the summer heat and snow... That is the kind of person I want to be,' one of his famous lyrical poems went.

Miyazawa wrote and lived in Iwate, one of the areas worst hit by the earthquake on March 11 last year. Eight months after the devastating disaster, I visited his hometown. I had expected mourning and sorrow. Instead, I was struck by the almost stoic spirit of the people of Iwate.

Resilience seems to be a strong feature of this north-eastern community in Japan. Unlike cosmopolitan Tokyo, Iwate still maintains much of its traditional heritage. Folklore, customs and rituals - things often dismissed as relics of premodern society - are still alive and integral to the community. Amazingly, it is this tradition that serves as a bulwark against hopelessness and despair for the people of Iwate.

In a village on the highlands of Miyako city, I observed the powerful effect of tradition through a performance of the *kuromori kagura*. The *kagura* is a traditional dance that conveys ancient folk beliefs, often imparting values such as strength, chivalry and valour. In this annual affair, villagers gather to reaffirm their community life.

Such social rituals serve an important function in renewing the ties of villagers. The performance of the *kagura* itself reminds them that all will be well and goodness shall prevail. It seems that tradition is a source of hope and meaning for the people of Iwate - a remarkable lesson that the modern world can learn from.

In the face of disaster, tradition ensures that a community does not simply disintegrate and perish. Instead, it calls for an altruistic spirit via the telling of stories from the ancient past. In Japanese folk religion, for example, disasters are not seen as the wrath of heaven, but as nature's way of recalibrating human lives towards a more peaceful balance between humans, nature and the gods. This 'way of the *kami* (deities)' provides solace and comfort in times of hardship. It is this 'organic solidarity' that rituals, customs and religion provide, as sociologist Emile Durkheim has argued.

Today, much of tradition has been eroded in the process of modernisation. The modern world may have created technologies and systems that can minimise casualties in the face of disaster. Notably, in Kamaishi city, an effective warning system, an evacuation plan and disaster-management procedures for schools had saved thousands of children who were in school when the disaster struck last year. Yet, it requires inner strength to confront the brutal fact that their parents had perished and their homes were washed away. That inner strength, for the people of Iwate, comes from the living tradition of the region.

The famous mystic poet Khalil Gibran once said: 'Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars.' Perhaps there is something Singapore can learn from the resilience of the Japanese: that modernisation need not mean sacrificing our heritage.

In Singapore, we pride ourselves as a multicultural society. But an essential ingredient of multiculturalism is the heritage of the various ethnic and religious communities. The richness of diversity lies in the vast variety of culture, customs and traditions. Be it the performance of the Chinese *wayang*, the parade of *kavadis*, or the rituals of the *kuda kepang* (horse dance) - these are practices from our cultural heritage that give life to an otherwise impersonal urban existence. More importantly, people gathered to watch or partake in these social rituals. Such rituals give joy to our collective existence, as author Barbara Ehrenreich wrote in her book, *Dancing In The Streets: A History Of Collective Joy*.

Had the people of Iwate destroyed their tradition, they would have been destroyed by much more than the pounding waves of the tsunami. Keeping to their rituals helped to preserve their soul as a community. Despite the insurmountable task of reconstruction for towns and villages razed to the ground, the people of Iwate came together as a community, as seen in the worst-hit city of Ofunato. Assistance from the central government had been slow, due to the immediate attention given to the nuclear meltdown down south in Fukushima. But the people of Iwate had tradition to teach them to be strong and to assist one another.

Has Singapore developed the same soul and spirit? Does our society have rituals to express solidarity, to provide solace in times of hardship? One thing is certain: economic progress need not come at the expense of our rich, multicultural heritage and traditions. Perhaps we should truly look east and learn from the people of Japan. []

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