

# REMEMBERING DISASTERS: THE ROLE OF ICH IN DISASTER MEMORY

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Good morning everyone. I am going to present some case studies that I have gathered as part of other research work on intangible cultural heritage (ICH) and disasters in the Philippines.

## **Why the Need to Remember Disasters**

Why is there the need to remember disasters? First of all, remembering and commemorating can be cathartic, especially for those who have gone through a very traumatic experience with disasters. Memories of disasters may contain valuable lessons which can be lifesaving. Memories become a shared past that can fortify group identity and can lead to the development of strong social capital that may spur collective action in a positive sense in the future. Memory has the potential for increasing risk awareness and it builds on resilience towards future encounters with disasters.

I would like to explain further the individual memory and collective memory nexus. Memories are framed within the owner's personality and life experiences, and they contribute to collective memory. An individual also acts within a group, thus is able to evoke and maintain memories that are of interest to the group. Memories of other people evoke an individual's own memories as well; and collective remembrances are hinged on individual memories. Otherwise, it would be difficult for one to find content or meaning in his or her own memories. They are also attached to feelings or emotions. That is why it is important to remember not only events but associated feelings and emotions as well.

It is important to move from remembering to commemoration, because commemoration entails shared meaning and affect. It incorporates rituals enacted as a group, and the recognition of material objects as remembrances of their shared experiences. Commemoration entails shared experiences, thus shared memories and collective action. Moreover, commemoration is formalized and characterized by memorialization and recurrence. That is why there are calendrical events associated with commemoration and these are repeatedly done usually on a yearly basis or even more often.

## **Cultural Memory**

I would like to introduce you to the concept of cultural memory, which of course draws from my own discipline in anthropology. I will be going into discussions of material culture and ICH in disaster context as framed by cultural memory, highlighting culture as shared and adoptive and transmitted.

It has been argued that memories formed in the mind can be transferred to tangible objects, particularly through material culture which precipitate in remembrances. Objects serve as indexes or reminders of the past. They help instigate the act of remembrance. They act as mnemonic devices, and are promoted by social practice; hence, the need for collective commemorative practices. Meaning is created through social discourse, as represented in material culture, and it is critical for the remembrance, performance and maintenance of the tradition.

Let me go into some of the examples of material culture that have been formed, developed, or constructed, in relation to some of the disasters that occurred – natural hazards that have resulted in disasters in the Philippines.

One of the examples of disaster memorials is the crosses in Albay that commemorate Typhoon Reming which devastated the province in the latter months of 2006. Several memorials were likewise constructed in Typhoon Yolanda (2013) hit areas, such as the marker in the Astrodome and the beached ship which was made into a marker. Both can be found in Tacloban City. There is an article that lists several other ways in which Typhoon Yolanda is being commemorated. Both material culture and ICH are vital in remembering and commemorating disasters.

## **The Role of Intangible Cultural Heritage in Remembering and Disaster Resilience**

Now I will go to some of the examples in ICH and disaster memory. What I have here are by no means complete. There are many more examples that can be drawn from the literature and from studies that have been done in the Philippines. But I would like to focus on some that I have worked on in my research in the past.

### ***Religious rites and rituals***

The first example is the festival of the Nuestra Senora de Salvacion (the Lady of Salvation) in Albay, a province in the Philippines. Every third Saturday in August in one of the towns in Tiwi Albay, the image of the Nuestra Senora de Salvacion is paraded around the town. It crosses a river and the path that the image passes through is considered to be sacred during the procession. It crosses a body of water, a river, and the water in the river is also considered as sacred at that time. It is a very popular festival. It can last for a week or more, depending on the different activities that have been lined up by the local government and other private groups during the festival. It also draws pilgrims not only from within the province but also from other parts of the Philippines and even from abroad. So, there was even a time when because there were several hazards that passed through the province and the festival was held twice

in that year.

Another example is the *Pagluluwa*, or prayer, for the Lady of Caysasay in Batangas Province. Unlike the Neustra Senora de Salvacion, the festival for our Lady of Caysasay is limited to a smaller group of devotees. But what is interesting about the festival is that it involves artisans of prayer called the *nagluluwa* – I consider them as ‘weavers of words’ because they are considered as experts in prayer-making, specifically for the Lady of Caysasay. People pray to her, to save them against natural hazards and other disasters. So, the devotion to the Lady of Caysasay encompasses both natural hazards and personal problems.

### ***Local knowledge***

And also, there is local knowledge; and the sharing of memories of experiences with local knowledge, especially when successful, can reinforce belief in the local knowledge.

Local knowledge can encompass animal behavior, signs from the constellations, and signs from the physical environment. I am sure you can contribute a lot more. There are many examples in the literature on local knowledge and how they could stem the occurrence of disasters.

### ***New narratives in old legends***

There are also evidences of the incorporation of new narratives in old legends. We have the story, for instance, of Sam Ryan on Homonhon Island, and in Guiuan, Eastern Samar.

Sam Ryan is an old legend that has been transferred from generation to generation, but after typhoon Yolanda, new stories or narratives emerged.

There are lessons imparted through the legends. At that time there was a pouring of aid from many different sources not only from within the country but also from outside, and there was a need to organize the delivery of this aid that is coming from everywhere. The story of Sam Ryan cautions people from accepting aid from just any donor or entity.

### ***Community commemorative events***

Here I am introducing two of several commemorative events listed for Typhoon Yolanda. For instance, the candle-lighting ritual which was done every year after the typhoon; and the commemorative walk in the areas that have been affected by the typhoon.

## **Issues in Remembering and Commemoration for DRR**

I would like to point out some of the issues in remembering and commemoration for disaster risk reduction (DRR). First of all, there is great variance in memory and meaning among individuals. Disasters will have different meanings for different individuals depending on how you have been affected by the disaster. Meanings and

memories may vary within a person's lifetime as well; they may transform and fade away. And of course, there is also the politics of remembering and commemoration, because memories have been used for political ends like elections, for instance, and the commercialization of memory for personal gain. There is also the pain of remembering. Some individuals take time to get over the pain of remembering. That is why the DRR programme have to be holistic. There is value in remembering but also there has to be other programmes like, for instance, psycho-social intervention.

So, what needs to be done? These are just some of the recommendations:

- The need to find out ways through which ICH can sustain memories of disaster for DRR and to document this in various cultural contexts
- The need to document how memories of disaster contribute to sustaining ICH in various cultural contexts