

Comparative Study of Disaster Memory Transmission between Japan and the Philippines: Cases of Kobe City and Tacloban City

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1. Introduction

The Philippines is a country frequently affected by typhoons, but Super Typhoon Haiyan (locally known as Yolanda) in 2013 caused unprecedented devastation, claiming 6,300 lives and leaving 1,062 missing, with most damage concentrated in Eastern Visayas, particularly Tacloban City. A key factor behind the widespread destruction was the insufficient public understanding of the term "storm surge," despite evacuation warnings being issued. Although the region had experienced storm surges in the past, those lessons had not been adequately passed down. Due to rising disaster risks from climate change, passing on the lessons of Super Typhoon Haiyan has become increasingly important. Disaster memory transmission aims to preserve experiences and share knowledge for future disaster risk reduction.

Japan offers a notable example in Kobe City, where the experiences of the 1995 Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake have been transmitted through multiple methods. These include distributing supplementary disaster education materials to all schools, establishing the Disaster Reduction and Human Renovation Institution, holding community events, and younger generations have also engaged in storytelling activities, promoting intergenerational transmission.

Thus, disaster memory transmission in Kobe has been implemented in a multilayered and institutionalized manner, with strong leadership by local authorities, ensuring that memories transcend individual experiences and become "collective memory" within a society. However, transmission practices are influenced by cultural and institutional contexts and may vary across regions. Therefore, this study aims to examine how disaster memories rooted in local culture are currently being transmitted in Tacloban City, using Kobe as a reference point.

2. Methodology

Field research was conducted in Tacloban City, Philippines, from March 11 to 17, 2025. The study included site visits and interviews with key institutions to understand disaster memory practices after Super Typhoon Haiyan.

Two workshops were also held: one with Eastern Visayas State University (EVSU) students and another with Barangay officers. Participants discussed current disaster memory practices, perceptions, and ideas for effective transmission, following examples from Kobe City.

3. Results & Discussion

Through results from surveys and interviews, this study compared disaster memory transmission practices in Tacloban City and Kobe City. Focusing on the role of institutional development and cultural background, the analysis identified four key characteristics of disaster memory transmission in Tacloban City.

First, there is a fragility in the physical foundations for memory preservation. While Kobe City has systematically institutionalized disaster memory through museums and public facilities, Tacloban City has only a single prominent physical memorial related to Super Typhoon Haiyan which was preserved through citizen donation rather than formal government efforts. Access to the site remains limited, and the facility does not adequately function as a collective memory platform for the broader community. Moreover, survey responses from EVSU students indicated low recognition of museums as an effective means of disaster memory transmission, suggesting that public interest in museum-based memory initiatives is limited.

Second, disaster memory transmission through school education in Tacloban largely remains informal. While Kobe City has incorporated earthquake experiences systematically into school disaster education programs, Tacloban City has no formal educational curriculum dedicated to Super Typhoon Haiyan. Although schools are closed on the official day of remembrance, the transmission of disaster memory relies mainly on individual teachers' personal accounts. In the survey, 20 out of 23 EVSU students reported learning about Haiyan through conversations with teachers, indicating that disaster memories are transmitted in an informal, teacher-dependent manner rather than through a structured educational framework.

Third, cultural differences in commemoration and memory sharing were observed. Kobe emphasizes civic memorial events led by local government, fostering a public and secular approach to collective memory. In contrast, over 90% of Tacloban's population is Catholic, and disaster remembrance predominantly takes place through spontaneous, church-led religious ceremonies. While religious practices play a significant role in memory transmission, they differ in structure and purpose from the public-centered memorial activities seen in Kobe.

Fourth, workshops suggested that an "oral telling" approach—directly sharing personal disaster experiences—may have strong cultural resonance in Tacloban. Focus group interviews indicated that storytelling is a familiar practice within Filipino culture. Although some participants expressed reluctance to recount deeply personal stories, many were willing to share generalized versions of their experiences. This finding implies that developing culturally adapted oral storytelling methods, rather than simply transplanting Kobe's structured approaches, could form an effective model for disaster memory transmission in Tacloban.

Overall, disaster memory transmission in Tacloban stands in contrast to Kobe's multilayered, government-led model. Institutional foundations in Tacloban remain underdeveloped, and individual or religious community initiatives largely drive activities. Finally, it must be noted that this study is based on a single fieldwork investigation and reflects the situation at a specific point in time. Future research should involve continuous fieldwork and longitudinal studies to capture the evolving process by which individual memories transform into socially shared collective memories.