

Lashed by Sharks, Pelted by Demons, Drowned for Apostasy: the Value of Myths that Explain Geohazards in the Asia-Pacific region

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Memories of geohazards which have impacted the activities of humans in the Asia-Pacific region extend back several thousand years and represent an important complement to conventional scientific knowledge. While some records have long been captured in written form, those on which this presentation focuses are the oral traditions of non/pre-literate cultures that sometimes today remain an important (potential) source of information for contemporary disaster risk reduction and climate-change adaptation. Three groups of geohazards are used to illustrate this.

Earthquakes and tsunami have sometimes been represented in the Asia-Pacific region as the results of divine anger: in coastal areas and islands, often as a result of a monster fish able to shake land and generate large waves by lashing its underwater foundations. Volcanoes are typically represented as the abodes of divinities, their periodic activity explained in a variety of ways that teach people the range of possible effects. In addition to providing rational explanations of these phenomena and ways of recognising their precursors, both these groups of geohazard myths have also been incorporated into traditional explanations for the creation of lands, particularly smaller islands in the Asia-Pacific region, and sometimes the origins of the first people to inhabit them. The third group of geohazards is broader and refers to coastal change. It includes land movements and sea-level changes that cause coastal land to either emerge or be submerged. Since many such movements have tended to be gradual rather than abrupt, their encoding in myth is diverse. For example, the impact of short-term extremes (like storm waves) is often given as the cause of land disappearance, which is more plausibly a consequence of slow longer-term sea-level rise. Godlessness and apostasy are among the mythical causes of land loss (including island disappearance) in the Asia-Pacific region.

Many recent initiatives designed to enhance geohazard understanding and preparedness among vulnerable communities in the Asia-Pacific region have been less successful than hoped. In those communities where bodies of appropriate oral tradition are extant (or have been until recently), it is helpful to encourage preservation of those elements germane to disaster risk reduction (such as associated with earthquakes, tsunami and volcanoes) because they will often be regarded more favourably by communities than those developed externally that may be viewed as alien. In addition, many oral traditions incorporate advice about sustaining livelihoods in the face of coastal change, advice that may be relevant to challenges arising from climate change in the Asia-Pacific region.

Many of the myths in the Asia-Pacific region developed over long periods of time to inform community responses to natural disasters and coastal change, both areas of concern for the future. It is argued that the intrinsic value of such myths should be acknowledged by those concerned with community preparedness for disasters as well as those mandated to embed strategies for effective and sustainable climate-change adaptation in the Asia-Pacific region.