

# Analysing the Role of Cultural Events in Post-Disaster Recovery Through Placemaking

The case of  
The Reborn-Art Festival in Ishinomaki, Miyagi Prefecture, Japan

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## Abstract

Using cultural events as a way to reconstruct places hit by disasters is not uncommon. Apart from the economic benefits that they can deliver, cultural events can be used as an essential tool for placemaking, offering possibilities for local communities to reimagine their city and generate a sense of place through connections created between people, whether locals or non-locals. Ishinomaki in Miyagi prefecture is one of the places hardest hit by the disaster that affected the North-eastern part of Japan in 2011. This study focuses on the Reborn-Art Festival (RAF), a biennale festival that was inaugurated for the first time in 2017. How and in what ways do stakeholders involved in the RAF negotiate their engagement and placemaking processes, and how does this relate to the socio-cultural role of cultural events in post-disaster recovery processes of Tōhoku after 2011? In the case of Japan, academic research on the topic of cultural events in post-disaster areas by looking at community bonds and placemaking is still limited, and, while previous research about the RAF exists, it has not focused on its social relevance and interplay with tourism development. In an attempt to unravel stakeholders engagement and placemaking processes developed through the RAF, semi-structured interviews were conducted with locals, volunteers, artists, visitors and event organisers. The findings reveal that the RAF has a socio-cultural role benefiting all stakeholders involved, including locals and non-locals. While the RAF can be considered as a successful event that brought movement to Ishinomaki, local's engagement is ambivalent, resulting in placemaking processes and imaginaries that are unequally enacted.

**Keywords:** Cultural events, post-disaster recovery, placemaking, sense of place, furusato

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# Glossary

## Japanese terms and phrases

<i>Furusato:</i>	Native village or hometown
<i>Machizukuri:</i>	'Town-making', refers to residents' practice of building their own environment
<i>Tsunagari:</i>	Connection
<i>Bon-odori:</i>	A dance for the traditional festivity of O-Bon (or Bon, without the honorific prefix) in Japan
<i>Rebon-Odori:</i>	The <i>Bon-odori</i> dance of the Reborn-Art Festival
<i>O-matsuri:</i>	Japanese traditional festival
<i>Inaka:</i>	'Countryside', a place that invokes traditions and familiarity
<i>Fukkou:</i>	Revival / recovery
<i>Pachinko:</i>	Japanese arcade game
<i>Kikkake:</i>	An occasion or opportunity
Tōhoku:	The North-eastern region of Japan (includes Iwate, Miyagi, Fukushima, Yamagata, Akita prefectures)
<i>Bousai:</i>	Disaster prevention
<i>Hoya:</i>	Sea Pineapple
<i>"Nanika Yatteru":</i>	"They are doing something"

## Acronyms

- RAF

# 1.Introduction

Although Japan is only 0.28% of the Earth's land area and 1.9% of the world's population, the country is the site of 18.5% of the earthquakes of magnitude 6 or greater in the world (Grands séismes Japon, 2019). This year will be the 10 years commemoration of the triple disaster that hit the Tōhoku region in North-eastern Japan. This event shook the whole country in an unprecedented way. The seism, the largest earthquake ever recorded in Japan, was followed by a tsunami and the meltdown of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, causing the evacuation of 409,146 residents from the Fukushima, Miyagi and Iwate prefectures and 19,630 casualties (Cho, 2014; Tagore-Erwin, 2018). Ishinomaki, the second-largest city in Miyagi prefecture with a population just over 139,000 inhabitants (Ishinomaki-shi menseki, 2021), is one of the places hit the hardest by the catastrophe. Just in this city, the lives of 3,553 people were lost, 423 are still missing, 33,091 buildings were destroyed and 50,758 people were evacuated (Tagore-Erwin, 2018).

The affected cities and towns are still today in the process of recovery, and grassroots initiatives, as well as cultural events, are flourishing to aid not only the physical reconstruction, but also the process of re-imagining the cities' identity. One of those initiatives, which started in 2017, is the Reborn-Art Festival (henceforth RAF), organised in different parts of Ishinomaki. It involves artists from other parts of the world and showcases contemporary art installations, events focused around food made with local ingredients as well as music events, encompassing various aspects of the local culture and contributing to the development of tourism in the area. As the website for the festival reports:

“Traces of the unprecedented disaster caused by nature's wrath are still visible all around the Tōhoku region of North-east Japan. But we should not describe what happened in the region only in negative ways ... transforming the negative into the positive is what has shaped this art festival, organised around the concept of 'reborn' art as a means of living” (Reborn Art Festival 2019, 2019).

In the past, cultural events have been used as a means to aid the reconstruction of places impacted by disasters in many parts of the world. Recently, for example, the town of L'Aquila in Italy, that faced an earthquake in 2009, saw the proliferation of cultural events as an instrument for 'placemaking' (Pasquinelli et al, 2018), and similarly, after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that hit Kobe in 1995, the Kobe Luminare festival contributed to the development of regional tourism (Recovery of Japan Tourism, 2012). Cultural events can be an

essential tool not only for the economic and physical recovery of the communities hit by disasters, but also for their contribution to the recovery from mental and emotional trauma (Itoh & Konno, 2019). Moreover, some countries are experiencing a steady decrease in population due to the low fertility rate as well as emigration. Japan is no exception, facing dramatic population shrinkage and demographic transition: By 2065, Japan's population is expected to be 88 million compared to 127 million in 2015 (Hori et al, 2020). Such issues further complicate the revitalisation of rural areas, especially when hit by a disaster, as financial, physical and human resources are impacted, making the resilience of regions even more difficult (Sanders et al., 2015).

Considering this, my thesis asks the following question; How and in what ways do stakeholders involved in the RAF negotiate their engagement and placemaking processes, and how does this relate to the socio-cultural role of cultural events in post-disaster recovery processes of Tōhoku after 2011? Moreover, it considers the following sub questions: While the event seems to promote itself as community-based, to what extent is it engaging local individuals, their values, opinions and supporting their activities? How do locals, volunteers and tourists negotiate their placemaking process before and after the RAF, and how do they imagine the future for themselves and others through the Reborn-Art Festival? Finally, what are the new initiatives that are flourishing after the disaster, and what is envisioned through these activities? Indeed, I expect that the RAF has a certain social role in bringing movement to Ishinomaki, connecting people through increased interactions and developing tourism. On the other hand, I also expect to find areas of improvement, negative opinions and concerns that the locals have towards this new event being organised in their city.

This study aims to contribute to the theoretical discussion of the effect that cultural events such as the RAF could potentially have in the recovery process of disaster-affected places and communities. In the case of Japan, academic research on the topic of cultural events in post-disaster areas is still limited and do not look at community bonds and placemaking following different sets of stakeholders. This study is not only relevant for the case of Japan but also has the potential to be applied in other contexts and post-disaster cases outside of Japan. While some research about the RAF exists, it has been focusing on the artworks and not on its social relevance and interplay with tourism development. In addition, since the biennale festival has been inaugurated for the first time in 2017, I studied the event across two iterations to see how this evolved through time.

In an attempt to unravel the engagement and various placemaking processes developed through the RAF, a theoretical framework has been developed (chapter 2). It discusses the main theoretical concepts underpinning



my research, such as placemaking, the relationship between festivals and revitalisation, sense of place as well as the diverse types of tourism that have been proposed in Tōhoku after 2011. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with locals, volunteers, artists, visitors and event organisers and these were analysed using thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). Hence, chapter 3 will demonstrate the methodology used for conducting this study, including clarification about the data collection and the ensuing analysis processes. Following this, chapter 4 will provide an analysis of the results that emerged from the collected data. The RAF has a socio-cultural role for various stakeholders, whether local or non-local (4.1), while an ambivalent feeling among locals was also found (4.2). The festival enacted placemaking processes and imaginaries (4.3), and finally, the event was analysed from a tourism perspective (4.4).

These findings enabled me to gain further insights into the potential role of cultural events in post-disaster contexts, such as in Tōhoku after 2011. Indeed, the RAF has a socio-cultural role that benefited all stakeholders, however, the event enacted placemaking processes and developed new imaginaries about Ishinomaki, mostly amongst non-locals. The RAF generated new networks, offering opportunities for non-locals to re-imagine Ishinomaki for themselves. From a tourism perspective, the event incentivised an alternative form of tourism, attracting temporal and long-term residents in Ishinomaki. Ultimately, chapter 5 discusses these findings and considers the limitations and future directions of the research.

## 1.1 Context

### 1.1.1 About Ishinomaki

In this study, 'Ishinomaki' will be used when talking about the broader municipal area that since 2005 incorporates different neighbouring villages, which are mostly rural areas. 'Ishinomaki city' will be used when referring to the core area in the municipality, which can be described as an urban area having the characteristics of a city. Ishinomaki city in Miyagi prefecture is located on the coast of Tōhoku, in the Oshika Peninsula, less than 100km from the epicentre of the earthquake. Like many other towns, the reconstruction process is still ongoing even after a decade, the whole coastal part of Tōhoku has been deeply scarred and the aftermath of the disaster can still be felt economically, politically, and socially (Tagore-Erwin, 2018). As discussed by Vainio (2020a), while the recovery process is advertised by the government as being 'community-focused', in reality, the locals often feel left out 'voiceless' and 'unheard'(p. 7).

Indeed, the recovery plan advanced by the government has been developed without taking into account the desires of the community, and thus, governmental plans are often detached from the realities that the communities are facing. The clashing imaginaries concerning the future envisioned by the government focuses on reconstruction plans, reports and policies, which are not always well-received by the local communities and are becoming a major source of tension (Vainio, 2020a). Hence in such a situation, community-led initiatives have the potential to play a significant role in maintaining social relations, communication, opening possibilities for community resilience in contrast to top-down recovery plans that do not consider the social aspect and realities that the local communities are facing. Undoubtedly, one of the most significant challenges is that imaginaries are complex social constructs, conceived in different ways depending on individuals and communities, and are bound to be controlled by the most powerful interests (Pasquinelli et al., 2018; Vainio, 2020a; Vainio, 2020b).

"The landscape of the city is progressively being restored and although there are some improvements, the reality is that terrains and views that we want to keep are being scraped." (Yuri Miyamoto, 39 Ishinomaki)

While the government and local authorities had mainly focused on physical reconstruction, according to Akane Suzuki, new locals coming from outside the prefecture have been a tremendous support for some of the local communities. Akane Suzuki, 36, is originally from Ishinomaki. She moved to Kanagawa prefecture after graduating university in Sendai, and is regularly coming back to

Ishinomaki to see her family. She also worked for 2 years for the RAF as a volunteer manager. As she personally had the opportunity to listen to the stories of the locals when organising the RAF, she explained how some of the local communities had developed a significant relationship with new locals who moved to Ishinomaki to volunteer after the disaster. Indeed, many used their physical strength to help the removal of mud and debris. Not only actively invested in rebuilding the city that was completely destroyed, they also provided support for the locals' emotional and psychological trauma. For example, people were searching for places to accept children that could not go to school anymore, while others listened to the stories of elderly who lost their relatives. They were confronting the realities that local communities were facing, leaving a stronger impression than governmental authorities, which mostly focused on providing temporary housing:

“Each of them did what they could to give energy to the locals to survive, fight together and encourage them to reconstruct the city (...) Locals are forever grateful about it and want to keep this relationship on the long term” (Akane Suzuki, 36, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)

These initiatives were, of course, also developed by local communities, but Akane Suzuki believes that the fact that people from outside also joined the recovery movement probably contributed to switching their mindset and moving forward. “It might not have come this far without everyone’s power”, she adds.

The disaster had a devastating economic and social impact on Ishinomaki. It is, however, important to note that the harbour city was already facing post-growth challenges before 2011, mainly due to depopulation (*kasō*). Indeed, lack of employment opportunities for young generations, which happens in many other smaller regional cities in Japan (Klien, 2016), causes them to migrate to bigger cities. In 2012, one of my interviewees, Duccio Gasparri, spent two months doing volunteer work in Ishinomaki. He then decided in 2017 to conduct his PhD research and live there for 12 months. As a food anthropologist, and following his interest in disaster studies, he decided to look into how food and in particular seafood, including oysters (*kaki*), abalone, scallop (*hotate*) and sea pineapple (*hoya*) was being produced, marketed and imagined after the disaster. Ishinomaki is an area particularly rich in seafood, because of a favourable environment, as the warm and cold currents of the Oyashio and Kuroshio collide in the area (Gota Matsumura, 47, Ishinomaki). As Duccio Gasparri explained, In the 60’s, Ishinomaki used to be a very affluent town. Situated on the coast, it was a good departure point for commerce, since a lot of deep-sea fishing was docking in the ports of Ishinomaki. It was also a city known for being an industrial base, with fish

processing, shipbuilding, and paper factories. But slowly, from the 80's, people started to move out to bigger cities such as Sendai or Tokyo, and the population of Ishinomaki and its economy started declining (Klein, 2016). Gasparri (2019), consider this rural decline as the 'real' disaster:

"Then the disaster came (...) I mean, the disaster was a big change. But in terms of macroscopic aspects, it did not change anything and it accelerated all this process of decay, the population and the economic decline" (Duccio Gasparri, 35, Silea).

According to him, while Ishinomaki is still a place that is experiencing a decline, it still manages to gather immigrants coming from the coast as a result of the disaster. For example, Watanoha in Ishinomaki is a place which could be described as expanding, with big supermarkets and even a huge *pachinko* (japanese arcade game) place that has been rebuilt right after the disaster. On the other hand, coastal areas are bound to living restrictions since the catastrophe. According to Takahiro Hino, the displacement of communities that used to live on the coast has long been an issue.

"A new city has been created and especially elderly people have been separated from their friends (...) It's been 10 years since, and they are still in the process of creating new communities - for some it works, for others not so well." (Takahiro Hino, 46, Sendai)

As mentioned previously, Ishinomaki is a broad municipal area that used to comprise several smaller municipalities that have been joined in 2005, with one independent municipality, Onagawa, in the middle. Thanks to its unique topography, Ishinomaki can be considered as a fragmented city geographically. This fragmentation has also been accentuated demographically, as many communities were displaced after the disaster. For instance, the city itself has been reconstructed far from the coast in the inner area. Ishinomaki is divided into six areas and within these areas, the following districts hosted the RAF as a venue: Ishinomaki city, which is the central area, Oginohama, Kozumi, Momonoura, Ayukawa and finally, Ajishima island (Reborn Art Festival 2019, 2019). While Ishinomaki is famous for its fishing industry, it also has areas that are dedicated to farming, such as rice. According to Yuri Miyamoto who is a local, seafood is very famous, but Ishinomaki is also renowned for being a slate stone production area. These stones are mostly used for roof tiles (*okatsu ishi*) and for pavings or stone monuments (*inai ishi*). However, the RAF mostly collaborated with the coastal area

of Oshika peninsula, hence mostly focusing on fishing and aquaculture (Akane Suzuki, 36, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)



Figure 1: Ogi-no-hama, Oshika Peninsula, Ishinomaki. Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

### 1.1.2 Tourism in the Tōhoku region

In the past, the Tōhoku region was identified as a distant and foreign region. Described by historians as “Japan’s internal colony”, the region was serving Tokyo during the Meiji era as the main provider of rice, cheap labour and industrial products (Hopson, 2013, p. 5). The “backwardness” of the region was then further accentuated by the famine that struck the region in 1913. In the post-war period, the image of Tōhoku as the Japanese “other”, associated with the image of the “cold, barbarian and inhospitable territory” saw a shift (Akasaka et al. 2011; Gasparri, 2019, p. 22). From the 1980s, as a response to the depopulation of rural areas and to reimagine the values of post-war Japan, the government played with the notion of nostalgia to alter the representation of Tōhoku as the roots of Japanese identity “where the heart, the rice and grandmother’s house is” (Hopson, 2017, p. 8). The Tōhoku region in general has never been a tourist destination, but is developing a revitalisation strategy around tourism. In the prefecture of Miyagi, tourism policies have been mostly focusing on domestic tourism but also on attracting international visitors, as mentioned by one local prefectural employee.

Takahiro Hino, 46, who used to work for the International Affairs Division in Miyagi Prefecture to promote inbound tourism explained:

“It is an area where you can imagine the ‘old Japan’ with many old-fashioned Japanese characteristics from 50 years ago that are remaining, so we are targeting (foreign) visitors who want to see such things’ (Takahiro Hino, 46, Sendai)

Roger Smith, an environmental advocate currently living in Kamakura was also greatly involved in the development of inbound tourism in Tōhoku since 2014. As the coordinator of international relations in the town of Matsushima, he was the first foreign employee working in the tourism section. He was responsible for promoting Matsushima but also the broader area of Miyagi prefecture to help the recovery of the region after the disaster.

“There is this rising tide nationally (...) it’s the biggest number of foreign tourists in Japan’s post-war history and that is happening after the tsunami (...) Tōhoku is not really benefiting from that, that’s the real issue.” (Roger Smith, 41, Kamakura)

However, unlike other cities and towns in the region that developed their recovery strategy around tourism, Ishinomaki does not seem to be part of that trend yet. While the neighbouring town of Onagawa for example, has completely redesigned the entire town with fancy shops, Roger Smith explains that Ishinomaki, which is the last stop of the local northbound trains departing from Sendai, has a completely different image, depicting it as “something from the 90s” (Roger Smith, 41, 2021):

“Before that [when living in Sendai] I just didn’t really feel like I had a reason to take the train to the end of the line. So the RAF gave me an opportunity to explore a bit” (Roger Smith, 41, Kamakura)

In Japan indeed, the rural decline is becoming a major preoccupation for politicians, and creating sustainable revitalisation of rural communities is a new challenge (Qu & Cheer 2020). Since the early 2000s a number of cultural events have been held in different areas of Japan, mostly contemporary art festivals, with the aim of revitalising rural cities hit by the economic and demographic decline. In the case of the Echigo Tsumari Art festival in Japan, organised in rural areas of

Niigata in the Tōhoku region since 2000, its principle lies on increasing the attractiveness of the region based on grassroots initiatives (Klien, 2010).

In the aftermath of the disaster in Tōhoku, several festivals like the RAF aimed at regional revitalisation also saw the light. For instance, the Project Fukushima!, aimed at creating new opportunities to attract people in Fukushima, as the region was either avoided or, in some cases, the target of voyeuristic tourism using the catastrophe for tourism entertainment (Zernik, 2017).

### **1.1.3 The Reborn-Art Festival (RAF)**

On the contrary, the purpose of the RAF is to reconstruct a new narrative and image of the city of Ishinomaki while commemorating the catastrophe. The RAF takes place during 51 days over the summer (between July and September). It differs from other festivals organised in Japan as these are mostly projects carried out by local authorities. On the other hand, the RAF is an initiative started by the well-known musician Takeshi Kobayashi. Also an art enthusiast, he is especially known as the producer of the music group 'Mr. Children', a famous pop-rock group formed in Tokyo in the 90's. He is the executive committee chairman of AP Bank, a non-profit private organisation (NPO) that is known for their active engagement in supporting the reconstruction of the Tōhoku region (Itoh & Konno, 2019) but also for their commitment to environmental advocacy.

Initially, AP Bank started a three-day pre-event in Ishinomaki in 2016, called the AP Bank Festival. It mainly focused on music events inviting famous groups such as Mr. Children. This was also a way to attract people from all over Japan and have an idea of what it could be to set up a festival in Ishinomaki. This initial event was apparently a success, and the AP Bank was giving a preview of the RAF edition that was planned for the year after. According to Haruko Hayakawa, her appreciation of the pre-event was a major motivator for participating as a volunteer in 2017 with two of her children and her husband. Mother of four, but also working as a freelance radio personality and as a marriage-educator coach, she explained with enthusiasm her experience during the three-day event. These included fishing with local fishermen and preparing a barbecue with locals in an old elementary school, attending live talk shows from the organisers and participating in small music events. She stated how these activities enabled her to understand the commitment of AP Bank for the RAF.

While the RAF is an initiative from a private organisation that does not involve anything from the government, it has collaborated with local authorities (from the municipalities of Ishinomaki and Matsushima as well as the prefectural authority of Miyagi) and other local organisations throughout its festival editions. As Ishinomaki is the main stage for the RAF, the festival delegated the secretariat to

Gota Matsumura, 47, the representative of the organisation Ishinomaki 2.0. Concerning the Ishinomaki local authority, the cooperation mainly served for the use of public spaces for art installations and other events. Akira Oomori is working in the Industrial promotion division of Ishinomaki, and as an employee from the municipality was responsible for the city's collaboration with the event. As he explained, various procedures are necessary when it comes to using public plots of land in the city, so he was mainly supporting these procedures to facilitate the organisation of the RAF. Besides, the production committee is mainly composed of people from Tokyo including Takeshi Kobayashi, but also for instance, the curators from the Watarium Museum in Tokyo.

“How will that place recover after the disaster?” In an interview, Kobayashi Takeshi explained that this was the question that triggered him to organise the event in Ishinomaki (What is the Reborn-Art, 2017). As stated on the festival's website, their aspiration is a “reconstruction from the inside [of the region] and create a new cycle” (Reborn Art Festival 2021-22, 2021). The festival aims at developing a bottom-up approach for the organisation of the event. In fact, if such events are properly developed by making sure they respond to local needs, they can indeed be a powerful tool to stimulate endogenous development processes (Dimmer, 2016). However, according to Gasparri, (2019) who conducted interviews with Ishinomaki locals, the event does not engage them enough.

As I will show next, the development of such festivals can have a deep influence in reconnecting communities, making bottom-up imaginaries more visible and ultimately allowing the community to have a say in broader economic and political projects. The following chapter will discuss concepts of placemaking and *machizukuri* which is specific to the context of Japan. Moreover, it will examine the potential of using festivals for revitalisation and consider the limits of such an approach and further, will discuss how festivals can generate a sense of place through place attachment. Finally, relevant types of tourism existing in the Tōhoku region will be debated.



## 2. Theory and previous research

### 2.1 Reconnecting communities

People usually think about the notion of community as a fixed, static entity. However, a community is a “social construct, one that is created and enacted by people” (Liepins, 2000, p. 29). Indeed, communities can be formed based on common practices and processes (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015). Especially after a disaster like the one in Japan in 2011, in which people are displaced and neighbourhoods are destroyed, the notion of community and people’s sense of community can be radically changed.

In Japan, ‘*machizukuri*’ which translates into ‘town-making’, is the term used to denote grassroot initiatives which aim to bring change through the engagement of local citizens to build their own environment that reflects their values (Kusakabe, 2013). Hence, *machizukuri* is closely related to the notion of placemaking, but differs from the latter as it is specific to the context of Japan, particularly denoting initiatives from the 1960’s to 1970’s to face the Japanese post-growth challenges (Tagore-Erwin, 2018). While *machizukuri* concerns local resident’s management and planning processes of their living environments, it also has a role in generating a sense of community and place. This is perceived as crucial in a post-disaster context for building community resilience. The process of *machizukuri*, wherein locals engage in activities for their environment in cooperation with other local residents, is as important as the result itself (Watanabe, 2007). *Machizukuri* planning is often described as an alternative to the conventional top-down urban planning approach led by the government (Tagore-Erwin, 2018; Hein 2002; Kusakabe, 2013; Posio, 2019). However, as experienced by some localities in their post-disaster reconstruction planning, such as in Kobe in 1995, there has been criticism around the fact that *machizukuri* did not embrace local residents’ perspectives enough. Similarly in Tōhoku, despite efforts from authorities in taking into account past criticism, current reconstruction plans seem to be following the same pattern, with excessive control of government authorities in the reconstruction process (Edgington, 2011).

In academia, ‘placemaking’ has often referred to the fields of tourism marketing and tourism planning (Lew, 2017). One of the many definitions of this term is the top-down approach used to control or shape the perception of a certain place and the associated efforts to influence people’s identities, behaviours and experiences (Lew, 2012 & Smith, 2002). Another definition, which designates the opposite, is defined as the organic, bottom-up approach and process shaped by individuals in their daily social practices (Dyck, 2005 & Lems, 2016). In this thesis,

my interest concerns the tension between the institutional side and the local communities who are trying to have their voices heard (Vainio, 2020). Hence, when the notion of placemaking is used, it will refer to the definition most closely associated with sense of place, which is “how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space” (Lew, 2017, p. 449).

What makes *machizukuri* or placemaking processes complex lies in the fact that multiple actors are at stake, from local communities with heterogeneous opinions to authorities, each of them with different political agendas and ideas about the imaginaries of the town (Kusakabe, 2013). Indeed, places can be defined as ‘complex identities’ that comprises the interplay between tangible objects and individuals with multiple connections, representing diverse cultures, systems, values and meanings (Hudson, p.627, 2006). Using cultural events as one of the many ways to help the reconstruction and foster a sense of community in places hit by disasters is not uncommon. As previously mentioned, the town of L’Aquila in Italy that faced an earthquake in 2009 saw the proliferation of cultural events as an instrument for placemaking (Pasquinelli et al., 2018). Similarly, in the wake of The Black Saturday fires that affected the same year the rural areas surrounding Melbourne, community events including festivals enabled locals to boost their morale in addition to building social cohesion and networks (Sanders, 2015).

Indeed, cultural events can be considered as transient but essential placemaking tools, a place where displaced communities can meet, and through active or passive participation, form a new imaginary of the town (Vainio 2020). This new imaginary can greatly help interaction between people in the community, thus creating networks, allowing recovery from mental and emotional damages and also supporting economic activities (Pasquinelli et al., 2018; Itoh & Konno, 2019).

## 2.2 Revitalisation and placemaking using festivals

Festivals can revitalise rural places, as it offers tools for the community to reimagine their city, and attract not only external individuals such as tourists, but also volunteers, often connected with Non-Profit-Organisations. Some of them eventually become future permanent settlers as they are fascinated by the situation and decide to stay. The fact that there are new migrants, in turn, can increase the attractiveness and liveability of those places due to the new influx of people in a place where other displaced citizens do not necessarily want to come back (Sander et al., 2015; Tagore-Erwin, 2018; Qu & Cheer, 2020). For some people, post-disaster recovery is considered as returning to normalcy by reaching the

same social, economic and emotional situation as before. For others, recovery is defined as searching for a new normalcy, seeing the disaster as a new opportunity for radical change by reconstructing a better city (Klien, 2016). In a post-disaster context, Solnit (2010, p. 22) describes such a phenomenon as the 'extraordinarily generative character of disasters' in which affected places have the power to bring different people together, forming new networks and innovative ideas while imagining and aspiring to new values and quality of life.

However, using festivals as an instrument for revitalisation can be a problem, as these events are often aimed at economic revitalisation (Zaiontz, 2018 & McLeod, 2019). Festivals, when facing pressure for their economic viability, usually intensify their commercialisation, leaving out community resilience and environmental sustainability. This trend in using festivals as an instrument for creative placemaking is growing, but does not come without criticism as it can lead to potential risks such as gentrification and serial-reproduction (Richards, 2020). This is problematic as those festivals usually rely on community volunteers, while paradoxically, leaving them out from the decision-making process (Qu & Cheer, 2020). Hence, it is important that festivals aiming for placemaking build upon endogenous capabilities rather than banally importing ideas that have no profound meaning or relationship with the local communities and their identities (Turok, 2009; Qu & Cheer, 2020). Festivals involve multiple complex actors ranging from governments to tourists, artists, volunteers and local communities with different opinions and imaginaries of their town (Kusakabe, 2013; Vainio, 2020). According to Qu and Cheer (2020), the challenge of making a successful festival focused on community engagement is to successfully balance on the one hand, tourism attractiveness and on the other, respect and support locals and communities' culture. However, the situation is way more complex than it seems, and the difficulty lies in the fact that even within the local communities, opinions are not consistent, creating tensions within the same group of stakeholders.

## 2.3 Imagining a new sense of place

In the aftermath of a disaster, the restoration of the physical infrastructures should not be the sole focus. Most importantly, the recovery should entail the re-establishment of social networks that rely on pre-existing resources so that it can form 'adaptive capacities' such as social capital, communication and information capabilities of the locals (Pasquinelli et al., 2018). The importance of maintaining strong bonds between people as well as grassroots organisations and their initiatives should not be neglected when planning the recovery process (Pasquinelli et al., 2018), and cultural events such as festivals can be a catalyst for making those connections (Marks et al., 2014; Pasquinelli et al., 2018; Sander et al., 2015).

Beyond the revitalising benefits that they can deliver, festivals can also generate a 'sense of place' among people, whether tourists or locals (Marks et al., 2014). Some suggest that a sense of place is created when there is a shared 'sense' in a certain community that a particular place has a 'spirit', a special atmosphere which is influenced by community ties, the social context and place attachment (Campelo et al., 2014). Others such as Low and Altman (1992), Stokowski (2002) and Relph (1976), discuss the sense of place as a social construct, something created through people's relationships, negotiated by conversations with others in a certain setting where varieties of experiences take place. An important notion linked to the sense of place is place attachment, defined as the positive connection created between individuals and a certain place (Low & Altman, 1992; Marks et al., 2014). It is steered not only by the physical environment but also by the social circumstances in which such interactions take place. As festivals usually connect locals and visitors, it can be the ground where place attachment can be created as it engages local communities to reflect on and appreciate their identities in the presence of external visitors. Hence, socially-engaged artworks and other activities within festivals can enact these processes of reflection, interactions and discourse, enabling people to pay attention and return focus to the place itself and increasing a sense of place (Marks et al., 2014).

Further, this sense of place and interactions in such a context involving multiple actors from inside and outside the community can build up the imaginaries that locals have about their future. Imaginaries as social constructs are enacted by people that engage in shaping the collective social life (Vainio, 2020b; Appadurai, 2000). They are however bounded by socio-economic and political realms with specific values and norms. This influences imaginative possibilities, as some of them are more conceivable than others within the boundaries set by authorities. Spaces where these imaginaries are expressed exist, but paradoxically, dialogue

and ideas voiced often cannot be translated into concrete practices, and thus, the imaginaries can be distorted to fit the different expectations and political agendas (Vainio, 2020b). Hence, community-focused events could be creating a space where priority is given to the community's desire, or giving them the possibility to participate in realising their imaginaries with other stakeholders, through networks created within the context of the festival.

## 2.4 Development of an alternative form of tourism

Much of the research around tourism in post-disaster contexts treat disaster and post-disaster tourism as inevitably linked to dark tourism. Dark tourism is a recent tourism concept that is usually associated with places affected by death, disasters, dark histories and memories, but many of them have been focusing particularly on negative narratives and emotions, neglecting the fact that certain sites can also evoke positive feelings (Prayag, 2016). These uncritical assumptions that tourism development in a place hit by a catastrophe is necessarily something 'dark' has also raised criticism among scholars (Tucker et al., 2016). Indeed, not many studies have been looking at disaster tourism as generative of positive narratives. "What one might imagine as 'dark' can also contain the seeds of hope and radical social and political change" (Bowman & Pezzullo, p. 191, 2010). Post-disaster tourism in itself has the ability to link tourism with issues of recovery, whether in an economic or social sense (Hall et al., 2016).

Many visitors to the post disaster area of Tōhoku are motivated by what is defined as 'volunteer tourism', which is also a relevant type of tourism, especially in the context of Tōhoku. It arose from a movement of solidarity shortly after the disaster, but those activities were mostly controlled, selected and managed by the government (McMorran, 2017). Indeed, in 2011 at least 450,000 volunteers travelled to the Tōhoku region in a short time frame from March 11 to mid-June of the same year (Forgash, 2011). While not all the volunteer tourism activities should be considered as such, McMorran (2017) discusses how these 'voluntours' organised by governmental bodies hinder the spontaneity of volunteering by "commodifying participation in civil society" (p.576). Other questions could be raised such as how post-disaster voluntourism could potentially contribute in perpetuating the idea that affected places are considered permanently in terms of post-disaster, solely having connection with the rest of Japan because of its vulnerability (McMorran, 2017).

Tourism in the Tōhoku region is complex and full of contradictions. The negative economic effects of the disaster made no exception for the tourism industry, which was partly hindered by the belief spread by the media that the area

was radioactive, despite the fact that not all parts of Tōhoku were concerned with the consequences of the meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant. But soon after the catastrophe, the government started promoting the region as a means to recover the economy, using the notion of '*furusato*' for economic recovery. In fact, rural tourism in Japan concerns the so-called *furusato* tourism. In Japanese, the term *furusato* translates to 'home-town', or 'native village'. However, its meaning goes beyond this interpretation. It is a culturally-loaded notion imbued with the idea of feelings of nostalgia for a traditional, abstract hometown that is home to all Japanese people; it summons an imaginary of rural Japan, simple daily life and activities, and natural landscapes (McMorran, 2005; Polleri, 2020).

*Furusato* is a theme also found in popular songs and films, there are innumerable advertisements made by tourism offices, selling this native village that all Japanese have a cultural attachment to (Polleri, 2020).

Since the early 1970s, to counteract the phenomenon of depopulating villages, the national authorities have developed a project that incentivised tourism in rural areas, especially targeting urban tourists. This type of tourism was facilitated by improvements such as new roads and government support for projects that would promote this nostalgic feeling, such as recreation of the old village ambiance that sought to change the image of the countryside into a romanticised place (McMorran, 2005; Kawamori, 2001). Indeed, as discussed by one interviewee, the Tōhoku region bases its revitalisation strategy mostly on *furusato* tourism (Takahiro Hino, 41, Sendai). However, scholars are more critical towards this strategy, explaining how "aspects of daily life" are increasingly being commodified and marketed as products while promoting it as a way to experience Japanese rural life (Vainio, 2020a, p. 148): "The specialness of each town was promoted through a similar pattern, where various elements of everyday rural life were picked and elevated into a consumable status" (Vainio, 2020a, p.148). Nonetheless, this type of tourism also has the potential to share past histories and traditions of locals to tourists that may otherwise be extinct (McMorran, 2005).

In various places affected by natural disasters such as the North-eastern region of Japan, there are opportunities for the affected communities to initiate alternative forms of tourism. Also known as community-based tourism, this type of tourism is centred around social and environmental sustainability and enables communities to maintain their ties with places, develop meaningful interactions, inform and educate their visitors by raising awareness, empathy and understanding (Kato, 2018). However, too often, community-based tourism assumes that communities are homogeneous, neglecting the internal power structures and clashing values (Hoggett, 1997; Blackstock 2005). While we should keep in mind this conflicting aspect of community-based tourism, in this thesis,

community-based tourism will be defined as a type of tourism that transfers the control of tourism development to the locals, establishes decision-making processes based on consensus and makes equitable distribution of benefits to all stakeholders (Pearce, 1992). For instance, the towns of Ishinomaki and Rikuzentakata, which were not touristy destinations in the past, are starting to implement tourism projects related to the disaster for educational purposes (Martini & Buda, 2019). Moreover, a neighbouring town called Minamisanriku is also a good example where such tourism developed, building on “place-based traditional practices” and “local community knowledge” (Lin et al., 2018, p. 15). Indeed, it not only built a path for community resilience but also raised awareness to visitors towards disaster learning and environmental sustainability (Lin et al., 2018), by giving the control of the tourism activity to the locals (Pearce, 1992).

There are a lot of different ways in which tourism has been proposed and enacted in Tōhoku after 2011. Ishinomaki used to rely mostly on *furusato* tourism until now, but since the disaster, it has seen the development of volunteer tourism hence creating a unique and hybrid form of tourism.



Figure 2: View of Ishinomaki. Picture taken by Roger Smith (2014, September)

## 3. Methods and data

### 3.1 Data collection method

Given the exploratory nature of the study, semi-structured interviews were used to gather qualitative data (Kvalle & Brinkmann, 2009). This enabled the collection of rich insights, as the study mainly focuses on observing and understanding not only local communities' feelings and opinions, but also other stakeholders that engaged with the RAF such as visitors, artists and volunteers. Interviews are particularly meaningful for this type of research since it enables the reconstruction of past events and to think about how a certain event unfolded (Bryman, 2012). Moreover, one focus group was conducted with three volunteers (two non-locals and one local). Focus groups encourage multiple viewpoints with the interviewer acting as a moderator, which makes it suitable for exploratory studies. While the primary downfall concerns moderator's loss of control of the discussion, in the case of my study, the fact that the group was composed of three people enabled to overcome this constraint (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Given the context of the pandemic, interviews were conducted mainly using online platforms such as Zoom, replacing face-to-face interactions as best as possible. These interviews lasted in general over an hour, which allowed for in-depth conversation with interlocutors and detailed description of their experiences during the festival. During the interviews conducted with locals that engaged with the festival as volunteers, topics such as their motivation to volunteer, their volunteer activities, perception of the festival as well as their concerns were discussed. For local interlocutors that engaged with the festival as organisers, questions concerning challenges faced during the implementation process were asked. Interviews conducted with other stakeholders such as artists and tourists and other non-local volunteers covered topics such as their experiences during the festival, their encounters with the locals and other people, and their perception of Ishinomaki before and after participating in the festival. However, one of the limitation of this methodology was indeed the fact that the last festival editions were taking place in 2017 and 2019. It is thus important to consider that some of the interviewees also might have forgotten some elements that they had experienced during the festival. However, most of the interlocutors had pictures, social media posts, and memorable moments of the festivals that seemed to be etched in their memories. Hence, I believe there were not any significant obstacles on the interlocutor's side in remembering past experiences and encounters during the festival. Interviews also have shortcomings, as even if they are a rich method to



get insights into people's opinion, they do not allow for a full immersion unlike participant observation (Bryman, 2012).

Finally, to overcome the time constraints of one interviewee, one interview was conducted by email (Opdenakker, 2006), hence not using the usual Zoom platform. For that specific interview I could not rely on the non-verbal aspect such as the face expression as I did for the other interviewees. This could have led to a different meaning-making process, as usually interviewees have the time to organise their thoughts and reframe their answers (Maynard, 2002).

### **3.2 Unit of analysis and sample**

The study concerns the social impact of the RAF on local communities in a post-disaster context but also the social impact that the RAF has on other participating stakeholders. By taking the case of this recently inaugurated grassroots initiative, the research aims at unveiling how the locals of Ishinomaki negotiate their participation with this cultural event, and if the RAF provides a role in the recovery process of the local community. Furthermore, it also integrates other perspectives from non-local stakeholders that have an affinity with the festival. This allowed me to understand how different stakeholders negotiate their engagement and placemaking processes.

In order to answer these questions, from February until April, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted online through platforms such as Zoom as well as one email interview. The types of interlocutors are multiple: tourists (domestic and international), local and non-local volunteers, new locals and finally, local institutions that were engaged with the RAF and its organisational process. Indeed, it is quite difficult to categorise all those interlocutors as they can be simultaneously associated with two categories at the same time. For instance, some locals I interviewed were also volunteers, and people working at the municipality of Ishinomaki were also locals. Finally, locals could also be divided into sub-categories in the sense that there are 'historical' locals that used to live in Ishinomaki for a long time, while there are other locals who moved to Ishinomaki after the disaster, and thus, are considered as 'new locals'. Concerning the strategy of sampling, the snowball sampling strategy was used mainly due to its convenience. While this same convenience could result in unrepresentativeness of the population as it might select similar respondents from the same networks (Bryman, 2012), I believe that this study was able to counteract this potential drawback as half of the respondents were reached independently either through personal contact or through social media (mainly Instagram and Facebook).

A minimum of diversity was ensured within the sample concerning age, gender and background of each individual (Appendix B). However, my sample consisted of more male than female (10 and 6 respectively). Age of the interviewee ranged from 27 to 47. Most of them were living in Japan, comprising individuals from Miyagi prefecture (Ishinomaki and Sendai), Kanagawa prefecture (Yokohama and Kawasaki), Kagawa prefecture, and Osaka prefecture. Their nationalities were mostly Japanese but included one Franco-Japanese, one Italian and one American. In terms of nationalities, my sample is quite representative of the event as stakeholders mostly involve Japanese individuals. However, one drawback that should be considered is that most of the people that engaged with the festival were more easily reachable than others as they had a positive attitude and higher engagement toward the RAF.

Besides, an interview guide was used to maintain a certain structure while conducting interviews but without leading the conversation forcefully into a certain direction. The guide only served as a blueprint to make sure the important aspects of the research was covered (Appendix A), but spontaneous questions were also asked based on the answers of each respondent. Finally, interviews were conducted mainly in Japanese, two of them were in English, and one in French.

### **3.3 Data Analysis**

All of the interviews were recorded with the consent of participants. Interviews were then transcribed in the original language. When needed, further information was asked to the respondents. All the transcriptions not in the English language have a small summary of approximately 200 words. Quotes and passages used in my research were translated from Japanese and French into English as precisely as possible, and when needed, adapted. Data were coded using thematic analysis to generate meaningful themes (Bryman, 2012) with the use of the software Atlas.ti. Before starting the coding process, the transcriptions were read and rechecked several times.

To identify relevant themes, an inductive approach was chosen. This means that themes are strongly related to the collected data themselves rather than trying to fit existing theoretical themes mentioned in the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The coding process was mainly divided into two parts. The first part consisted of generating relevant codes by isolating keywords, sentences and paragraphs to identify interesting patterns that could develop into potential themes. These included descriptive and interpretive codes. After this process, a second round of coding took place. It consisted of focusing on aggregating previous codes into more interpretive, generalisable code groups. This was helpful in

preparing the next step of the analysis as it further clarified the thematic division before interpretation. For instance, identifying repetitions, similarities and differences can be helpful when looking for themes (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Themes are similar to categories and were identified based on the developed codes from the collected interviews. Ultimately, these themes were then used to clearly divide my findings based on the relevancy of my collected data, and further, served as a basis for making links between the collected data with relevant literature, enabling further contribution to existing literature on the topic.

## 4. Results

This chapter offers an overview of the main themes emerging from the interviews collected with diverse interlocutors. This includes locals, volunteers, artists, visitors, organisers and people working at the municipality of Ishinomaki. The findings show that the RAF influenced differently and to varying intensities diverse set of stakeholders, whether locals or non-locals. In order to unravel these dynamics, the findings were divided into four main parts. The first part will discuss the role of the festival in socio-cultural terms from various point of views, and the subsequent part will analyse the ambivalence of the locals toward the event. Further, the placemaking processes and imaginaries enacted through their engagement will be analysed and finally, the RAF will be discussed from a tourism perspective.

### 4.1 The socio-cultural role of the RAF

#### 4.1.1 *Tsunagari*: Connections

One of my initial interests concerning this festival was to understand how this event was received by the locals but also what kind of dynamics it created between all the stakeholders engaged, including local and non-local visitors, volunteers, and artists. Hence a recurring question that I asked during the interviews concerned my interlocutors' interactions and encounters that took place during the festival in Ishinomaki, how and with whom these were taking place but also how they perceived local people and businesses' engagement.

The term that refers to the connection between volunteers and survivors of the catastrophe is '*kizuna*' (which means tie or bond), commonly used in academic literature. However, I decided to use '*tsunagari*' for two reasons. Not only because that was the word used by several of my interlocutors, but also because '*kizuna*' is a politically-loaded term that has been criticised by locals themselves, considered as a term employed within national and public discourses to divert attention from other societal issues in disaster-affected areas (Gilhooly 2021).

#### A "*Kikkake*" for connecting locals and non-locals

One important finding that came out is the ambiguity of local engagement with the festival. Tomomi Kanda, 45, is originally from Ishinomaki. She works as a civil servant and kindergarten teacher in Ishinomaki and volunteered for the RAF 2017 edition.

“When the festival was recruiting volunteers [in 2017], there were not enough of them, and so as public employees we were asked if we wanted to participate. So in terms of how much cooperation was obtained from the locals or how interested they were, I don’t think there were many.” (Tomomi Kanda, 45, Ishinomaki)

Indeed, the volunteer group ‘Kojika-tai’ (little deer corps) in 2017 counted 2,405 people in total, among which 1,124 were staff from Ishinomaki’s city. On the other hand, it would be untrue to say that no locals were involved in the festival. Yuri Miyamoto, 39 and an Ishinomaki local, explained her engagement with the RAF. Being an artist herself and a fan of one of the artists exhibiting in 2017 and 2019, she personally offered her support as an assistant to help for his artworks and services such as driving. However, the impression that I had as I conducted my research was that this was not the case for a significant part of the locals.

Kana Abe, 27, originally from Kanagawa prefecture, is currently working in Hyogo prefecture as a nurse in a library. As part of the *machizukuri* project of the city of Toyooka, the library focuses on social-oriented activities and Kana Abe is a “life-nurse” that can be consulted in the library space. For her, the RAF was more of a trigger (*kikkake*) that allowed her to go to Ishinomaki. She participated as a volunteer in 2017, and from there, she developed her own network and is now visiting Ishinomaki regularly to meet her friends. She discussed how the event in itself was not necessarily the context in which she met locals. As previously mentioned, most of the volunteers were from ‘*kengai*’ (outside the prefecture) and even her encounters at local shops and restaurants mostly involved non-locals or new-locals.

“Strange story, but it’s really after the festival that I personally made friends by walking around the city and meeting people that were living in Ishinomaki for a long time, who eventually became my friends (...) If you ask people if they met locals from Ishinomaki during the festival, I do not think they would answer that they have made a lot of these connections. And certainly, that is a good point to make.” (Kana Abe, 26, Hyogo prefecture)

But this didn’t refrain people from making meaningful encounters with locals from Ishinomaki:

“Without the RAF I would not have met and gotten to know, communicated and spent such a good time with the locals of Ishinomaki, so it’s very big for

me (...) at the end, all of that was possible thanks to the RAF.” (Haruko Hayakawa, 46, Yokohama)

Kinoko, 43, is an IT system engineer living in Tokyo. He had always been concerned about Tōhoku since the earthquake and when he heard there was a recruitment campaign for the ‘Kojika-tai’ of the RAF volunteer group he saw it as an opportunity to go to Ishinomaki. As a result, he participated in the festival as a volunteer in 2017 and 2019. “I always had this feeling that I had to go”, he says. He added that the fact that it was an art festival did not matter that much to him.

When I asked him what he enjoyed the most during his involvement with the RAF, he replied:

“I think it’s the encounters. If you were expecting that I would talk about the art festival in itself, I would be a little off topic. So for me, I had the opportunity to go [to Ishinomaki] because of the RAF, and I was able to meet many people because I joined ‘Kojika-tai’. And that’s how I could meet people from Ishinomaki. So it’s the encounters.” (Kinoko, 43, Tokyo)

Even if the last two editions of the festival themselves did not allow for much interaction with locals, the festival was a trigger for non-locals to actually come to the disaster-affected place and directly and personally engage with the locals. The fact that the RAF created this opportunity for visitors to come to Ishinomaki was something that was shared among many of my interlocutors.

### **A sense of belonging to a community**

After talking to interviewees that engaged in various ways with the event, it is clear that the RAF has created something unique that goes beyond simply attracting visitors. That is, the creation of meaningful connections on the long-term between the various stakeholders that were involved with the festival whether that is between locals and non-locals or between non-locals themselves. Among the people that were involved as volunteers, most of them stayed in Ishinomaki between one day to two weeks during the two-months’ time frame of the festival. Volunteers’ activities mainly involved tasks such as introducing artworks in different areas, supporting visitors with information, selling goods, and managing spaces for the parking lot. However, one particular aspect that contributed significantly to their experience as volunteers was the fact that they were all hosted at the Reborn-Art House. Indeed, the RAF offered a huge guest-house as a place to stay, an old

hospital repurposed for this specific occasion, where anyone involved, from artists, to volunteers, to organisers, could stay during the event.

Tsutomu Goto, 44, works at the Kagawa prefectural office and participated as a volunteer for the 2017 and 2019 editions of the RAF. As a devotee of contemporary festivals organised all over Japan, he emphasised the importance of this meeting point where everyone could talk, eat, drink and spend time together after a day of work. Being particularly interested in the ways festivals are designed to create these connections between people, he added that the most significant experience for him during the RAF was his encounters at the Reborn-Art House.

“Without evaluating the festival itself, and at that time [in 2017] there was probably the effect of Mr. Children with a lot of fans all coming at once, but everyone was getting along, and there was this atmosphere with a strong will of working together as one. It was something that impressed me, something that could not be found in other festivals (...)” (Tsutomu Goto, 44, Kagawa prefecture)

Many of my interlocutors described their stay at the Reborn-Art House in a similar vein. In 2017, according to Kana Abe, there was even a chef preparing breakfast and dinner for the whole house. During our discussion, Kinoko mentioned that in 2017, “*korekara no jibun ni deau tabi*” (A journey to meet your future self) was the title for the festival communicated by the RAF. When I asked him if he was able to meet his future self, he replied:

“I wonder... but in the end, people are not alone, right? We are a person in relation to other people. We cannot live by ourselves, so you meet people and connect with them, and within that environment you kind of find a new self, I think. So you have the self at work, the self at school, the self in family, you know, people are different in all these relationships. In that sense, in Ishinomaki and in the ‘Kojika-tai’ it’s also a new self. I think it’s something close to a community. So in that new community [Kojika-tai], I feel like I also found myself.” (Kinoko, 43, Tokyo)

Here, Kinoko discusses how a sense of community arose from being part of the ‘Kojika-tai’, something that was also shared by my other interlocutors. In addition to that, the Reborn-Art House was designed as a space for people to spend time together during the festival, through which strong connections between volunteers, artists, and other people involved could be fostered further. This shared sense of belonging to a community, arising from working together as one group of

volunteers positively affected the relationships between them and developed a sense of place among the stakeholders staying at the Reborn-Art House (Campelo et al., 2014; Relph, 1976). Based on my interlocutors' description, it seems that most of the volunteers chose to be accommodated at the Reborn-Art House. For them, it was certainly an easy solution for meeting other people. But at the same time, it disincentivised volunteers to find alternative ways of accommodation such as staying in local hotels or guest houses, and thus, physically distancing non-locals from the local environment and offering less opportunities for casual interactions with locals.

Christophe Riva, who was involved in the festival as an artist, also described the Reborn-Art House as a place where "everyone was invited". He is a Franco-Japanese living in Osaka. He draws graffiti, street art and caricature portraits. He participated in the RAF twice, the first time as a simple visitor for 10 days helping his artist friends and the second time as an artist. According to him, after spending one month there, "everyone knew each other". Apart from staying at the Reborn-Art House, Christophe and his artist friends also stayed in a guest-house, hosted by a local electrician that turned his shop's second floor into a small accommodation place.

"There was this one person, the electrician of the city that was hosting us on the second floor at one point. With this electrician we shared many good times because he was a big fan of music, and also drank quite a lot of alcohol so he would invite us for a drink, watch TV together and chat about anything and everything. It was great fun." (Christophe Riva, 27, Osaka)

As the encounter of Christophe with the electrician shows, staying at a local guest house gave visitors the opportunity to spend time and get to know locals, something that was less likely to happen when staying at the Reborn-Art House, which mostly regrouped non-locals. After discussing the two editions of the festival with my interlocutors, it is clear that volunteers, artists, and other stakeholders involved in the festival were mostly non-locals, while the largest portion of locals involved were working for the municipality. In particular, the perceived atmosphere and positive energy described in the narratives of the people staying at the Reborn-Art House seems to have contributed significantly to their whole experience at the RAF, especially because no other significant point of meeting and exchange such as the Reborn-Art House existed within the festival. However, this in turn, can be said to have exacerbated the division between stakeholders within the 'Kojika-tai' staying at the Reborn-Art House with other stakeholders that did not stay there, such as local volunteers. On the one hand, the Reborn-Art



House created a sense of community among people staying there while on the other, it unintentionally created a certain gap between non-locals and locals participants.

The groups of volunteers not only kept contact through social media but also organised meetings and attend events together that are not related to the RAF, such as spending the new year's eve together in Ishinomaki or participating together at the Marathon in Ishinomaki (from the interviews of Hara Miki and Kana Abe). In that sense, it is interesting to see how through the RAF, people made connections that would manifest beyond the festival ground. As remarked by a few of my interviewees, not many spaces for interactions were available at the festival site. Tsutomu Goto mentioned the "Poet's house" (*shijin no ie*) situated in the Ayukawa area of Ishinomaki as a potential space for those interactions. Gozo Yoshimasu is the resident artist there, and uses the house as his working place. Visitors can come for a cup of coffee or can reserve rooms for their accommodation. But these kinds of meeting points seemed to be scarce, or if available, would not be a place where many locals would go. Indeed, Tomomi Kanda mentioned that as a local, she did not necessarily want to buy tickets to access the festival's artworks which could explain why these meeting points were not visited by locals. She further explained that apart from the music concerts, she did not visit the festival as a client, and only went to see the 'white deer', a symbolic installation of the RAF situated on Ogi-no-hama's beach (Tagore-Erwin, 2018).

All in all, the RAF volunteer group 'Kojika-tai' was an important aspect of the festival for many, especially non-local volunteers as it enabled them to connect with locals that were involved as volunteers. Moreover, a sense of community emerged from the strong willingness of volunteers to participate, with the Reborn-Art House further emphasising that aspect. This, however, could be said to have heightened a certain division between locals and non-locals.



Figure 3 : 'White Deer' (Oshika) by Kohei Nawa. Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

#### 4.1.2 More than an event: Steering understanding and reflection

“In fact, there was no event as such in Tōhoku until now (...) in reality, it is not an event but something that gradually deepens people’s understanding”.  
(Hino Takahiro, 46, Sendai)

These were powerful words expressed by Takahiro Hino. While not being a local from Ishinomaki, Takahiro Hino had also experienced the earthquake and tsunami. These words imply that the festival has much more at stake than “Art”, “Music”, and “Food”. In fact, just like other cultural events organised in Tōhoku after 2011, the RAF also wants to create a moment of reflection and understanding regarding the physical, social, and economic consequences of the disaster. This is also something that could be felt by talking to my non-local interlocutors. Tsutomu Goto also mentioned how the RAF, without directly treating the subject of the disaster, created an opportunity for visitors to come and see by themselves the situation there.

“Festivals have the power to attract people to the locality, which gives them a chance that is much more than just hearing about the disaster, but

actually going there, listen to the locals and seeing it with their own eyes”  
(Tsutomu Goto, 44, Kagawa prefecture)

Miki Hara, another volunteer that participated in the RAF, added that coming to the disaster-affected place had much more power than just being given an explanation about the situation there. She continues:

“How can I say... after all, I wasn’t affected by the disaster, so it’s absolutely impossible to understand. But after bringing back home what I have felt while being there, I started to think about it on a daily basis, things like what are natural disasters. At least from the perspective of someone who has not been affected by the disaster, I think it was an effective event, in the sense that we [as visitors] had to reflect about that.” (Miki Hara, 30, Tokyo)

The event incited visitors to reflect upon various aspects of their daily lives. Similarly, Haruko Hayakawa, shared some thoughts explaining how her visit affected her. She participated as a volunteer with her two children and husband at the 2017 edition of the RAF. Her active and energetic personality could be felt even through our zoom call.

“The most significant thing was that I was able to hear real stories from locals that I have met through the festival. In one word, it made me realise about the preciousness of life... that there is not necessarily a tomorrow, and that we should cherish every single day of it”. (Haruko Hayakawa, 46, Yokohama)

Similarly, Kinoko recalls how listening to stories about the disaster from locals that were part of the Kojika-tai was a big change for him:

“It really changed my way of thinking (...) There was one person that was still living in temporary housing and was explaining how it was easier to just stay there. I didn’t have many opportunities to hear the different opinions among people that experienced the disaster. I didn’t have any occasion to hear it (...) There was also another person that couldn’t look at the sea anymore (...) It had been already a few years at that time, but trauma remains. If you don’t go, you would just watch it on TV or on the internet, which is different from talking with locals and seeing the city.” (Kinoko, 43, Tokyo).

Be it about the natural disaster, disaster prevention (*bousai*) or life in general, the event was a trigger that pushed visitors to be in this environment where they could have the space and context to make these reflections. The RAF's themes for each edition of the festival also functions as a subtle reminder of the disaster, its aftermath, and some of the values and keywords that have become paramount in disaster prevention and recovery narratives. It included themes such as 'texture of life' (2019 edition) and 'altruism and fluidity' (2021 edition).

As Japan is a country that is constantly under the threat of such disasters, many visitors could reflect through their encounters with locals about how the disaster was managed in Ishinomaki, and what would have happened if something like this happened in their city. These encounters between locals and non-locals were, for visitors, an opportunity for moments of deep reflection and of understanding of the circumstances around disasters and after a disaster. Moreover, it was an embodied experience, in which visitors could experience the of the post-disaster reality and see how that differs from seeing the impact of disaster on the media.

#### **4.1.3 A way to commemorate the catastrophe**

The general impression that was shared among my interlocutors shows that, in general, locals did not seem to be much interested in the event.

"The excitement of the outsiders compared to the people from Ishinomaki was a little different. It seemed that people living there did not have much interest in it [the festival]" (Kinoko, 43, Tokyo)

Similarly, Kana Abe shared her feeling about local's engagement with the event:

"I think that it's a very good festival as a concept. But in the end, it's people from outside that are organising it (...) It's the people from Tokyo that invite artists, you know because it's easier to bring them from there and they probably use local things or listen to the stories of the locals and make something out of it. But locals being actively involved in the festival itself, well I had the impression that it was difficult, or that they [the locals] wouldn't be willing" (Kana Abe, 26, Hyogo Prefecture)

Kanda Tomomi, an Ishinomaki local, shared her perception about the cultural festival being organised in Ishinomaki.

“(…) I think it was a good way to attract people after all. Personally, I like Mr. Children so I was like oh, there’s Mr. Sakurai coming, oh it’s Takeshi Kobayashi, you know, that kind of Groupie flow (nori). But we were really hit hard by this disaster and I used to work at the kindergarten in Ogi-no-hama, and I really had this feeling of happiness, to see how a place can change so much, to see that a place that I know is now able to attract clients. But that’s how I feel, and to be honest, there is a part of me that cannot read how the [other] locals feel.” (Tomomi Kanda, 45, Ishinomaki)

According to Tomomi Kanda the ability and willingness of locals to participate in the art festival requires a certain stability. Living relatively inland within the disaster area, her home was safe and, as being a civil servant she did not lose her job. However, her husband lost his father and his parents’ house during the disaster and she saw her kindergarten school being washed away in front of her eyes. Although she faced these difficult realities, she explains that she has been considering herself as doing okay, while from the perspective of someone desperate to survive, they probably cannot afford to be involved in such events. While it is difficult to fully grasp local’s opinion concerning the RAF being organised in their city, (and perhaps because it is still in its early stage), locals nonetheless seem to have a clear sentiment towards the event as being a way to commemorate the catastrophe.

“Japan is a country that experiences a lot of earthquakes, so new disasters occur one after another. So everyone forgets. In a sense, it can be a good thing to forget, but it is nice that there is something to commemorate it and to have an event to move forward.” (Hino Takahiro, 46, Sendai)

Tomomi Kanda also had shared similar thoughts:

“(…) I don’t think the locals see it as something bad. On the contrary, it’s been 10 years now, so it’s even more meaningful at this time to see that it hasn’t been forgotten. If it had been organised only after one or two years, there might have been people feeling gouged, but considering the timing, I think people are grateful that such event is happening at the disaster-affected place (…).” (Tomomi Kanda, 45, Ishinomaki)

Haruko Hayakawa had also shared a similar story while conversing with local ladies she encountered on the local bus. The women came to her and asked if she was there for “the Reborn thingy fes” (*reb-on nanchara fesu*), explaining how,

while they did not feel connected to or interested in that event, they feared the most that the disaster would be forgotten. In this regard, using art or music to remember the catastrophe and having people actually coming to the place is something that is very meaningful for the locals.

As we will see next, while the engagement and interest of the locals towards the RAF is ambivalent, one thing that could be clearly captured is the locals' positive feelings about the fact that an event was designed to commemorate the catastrophe and make sure that it is not forgotten. While other aspects of the festival seem to be received differently, the fundamental meaning behind the organisation of the festival had been understood and well interpreted by the locals.

## 4.2 An ambivalent feeling among locals

As mentioned previously, something that I had found hard to capture was the local's feelings and opinion towards this festival. In fact, during my interviews I realised there were mixed opinions towards the festival, that the locals involved with the RAF could not clearly describe or understand. And there seems to be a multitude of reasons attached to this inequality in opinions.

In this thesis I used the term 'locals' without problematizing it. However, Ishinomaki locals themselves are not a homogeneous entity. There are locals that have been living in Ishinomaki for a long time, some that grew up there but moved somewhere else and thus, did not experience the disaster. Some had experienced it but not in the exact same conditions as other locals might have. Then, there are also new locals, who are mostly individuals that moved to Ishinomaki after volunteering post-disaster, and decided to stay as they found an opportunity to start anew in the city. In this regard, this section problematizes the term, and takes into account these differences when analysing the impact and opinion that they have towards this festival.

### 4.2.1 "*Nanika Yatteru*": A dichotomy of the urban-rural or a miscommunication?

During my interviews "*nani ka yatteru*" (they are doing something) was a persistent phrase used by my interlocutors to describe how the event was perceived by some of the locals. Haruko Hayakawa also shared some spontaneous interactions she had during her visit. Based on the small talks she had with the taxi driver, local ladies she met on the bus and a local shop employee, they all seemed to be sharing the same feeling of "*nani ka yatteru mitai*" (looks like they are doing something). These words subtend a sense of detachment that locals seem to feel, as if "they" are doing something but "we" do not know what, or "we" are not interested.

While this dichotomy was clearly formulated by the non-participant locals, I could also identify a similar separation made by my interlocutors whether locals, non-locals or new locals. "*Yoso mono*" (someone from outside), was the term used by non-locals to explain the fact that the initiative of the RAF started from people from Tokyo. Furthermore, locals themselves were using "*inaka* [countryside]" to talk about Ishinomaki clearly defining this gap between the urban and rural. *Inaka*, similarly to *furusato*, not only denotes the rural as physical place, but is also a culturally-loaded term that encapsulates the lifestyle of the countryside. Symbolised as the antithesis of the urban, it invokes tradition, warmth and familiarity (Robertson, 1988).

“I think that there is an underlying Japanese character. It is a small island country, and if you look at the history and culture of Japan, there are many mountains and every time you cross one, there is a village. So they had to protect their villages, and were kind of reluctant towards immigration. I personally also had difficulties when I arrived [as a new local] and it took time for them to accept me. Provinces can be complex sometimes, you have to steadily open your heart. And this event is seen as something that people from outside the prefecture are doing on their own” (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)

In Japan, immigration can take different forms and does not only designate someone that emigrates from abroad. There are specific terms that denote domestic immigration, such as U-turns and I-turns. I-turns designate the phenomenon of people moving from big cities to non-metropolitan cities. U turns on the other hand, is when people leave their hometown to live in bigger cities, but then later move back to non-metropolitan areas (Chandran, 2019). Nowadays, these domestic immigration movements are incentivised by the government through various means, including festivals organised by local authorities to revitalise rural areas. Masateru Imamura is thus an I-turner, as he left Chiba to move to Ishinomaki, and in that sense he could be considered as a domestic immigrant. As he explains, the disaster and the associated flow of people that came to volunteer in the Tōhoku region was, according to him, much more ‘efficient’ in generating flows of I-turn, which are mostly people that decided to stay in the region after volunteering. As already mentioned, in the past and especially since the Meiji era, the Tōhoku region and its ‘*inaka*’ had been associated with ‘backwardness’ (Hopson, 2013), which had seemingly affected his experience when arriving as an ‘outsider’. Similarly in a personal interview, Gota Matsumura, RAF’s local representative and founder of Ishinomaki 2.0 shared his thoughts about his city and Tōhoku using words like “conservative” “insular” and that people are “not good at accepting people from outside and having fun interacting with each other” (Orizzontinternazionali, 2016).

Moreover, the reluctance of some of the local communities from the event was further accentuated by the miscommunication from the organisers’ side. The miscommunication concerns not only the planning of the festival itself, but also the content of the artworks, and was clearly acknowledged by a few of my interviewees, including volunteers, locals, and organisers themselves, such as Masateru Imamura:

“Until now, I think that they haven’t made an effort to get people to understand [the festival]. I am planning to suggest restaurants to participate



in a tour of the festival before the opening. It's very sad if a customer enters a restaurant while visiting the RAF and asks something about the event and the shop staff doesn't know anything about it (...)" (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)

This noticeable dichotomy stems from a combination of the way that the festival has been communicated to the local communities, and the strong contemporary element of the festival, especially the art installations, which can be characterised as a product instilled from the urban areas. In regards to this complex negotiation, academics such as Susanne Klien (2010) ask themselves: "How can such urban-centred artwork become a catalyst for local revitalization?" (Klien, 2010, p.539)

This concern is shared by some of my interviewees. Miki Hara, a volunteer from Tokyo, shares that:

" (...) I don't want the event to be something that tramples down the feelings of people living there, so I am a little worried about what kind of stance and purpose they will have in the future. After all, art events are very stylish, and I wonder if doing it stylishly will profit the locals." (Miki Hara, 30, Tokyo)

It is not only about profiting from it, as Hara implies, but also the fact that the locals might have felt like the organizers did not include them in the process of meaning-making, and thus felt even more detached and alienated from the festival:

"So, the first reason why some people weren't interested was that the event organizer should have put more effort into explaining it carefully, right? You know, delivering the message properly (...) convey that they aim for a win-win situation (...)" (Haruko Hayakawa, 46, Yokohama)

### **Do artworks heal or hurt?**

The inadequate communication can also be illustrated by the abandonment of some of the art projects following the complaint of local communities during the 2017 edition of the RAF. "Inside out", a project of a French artist consisted of printing photographs of visitors in black and white on a big poster. Local communities showed their discomfort towards the cultural insensitiveness of the project, as black and white photos are usually printed for funerals in Japan. Similarly, another project required the use of public loudspeakers, common in towns and cities all over Japan. Loudspeakers are part of the everyday

soundscape of Japanese people, and have very specific and unchanging functions. During normal times, they would be used to sound emergency alarms, for local communications, or to remind the time or the weather conditions. An artist used the equipment and transmitted a chime with her singing voice within the venue of the festival, which made some locals feel uneasy. Both of these art installations were removed within one week due to a number of complaints according to Mr. Takahashi, who is working with Akira Oomori at the municipality.

Yuri Miyamoto also shared her thoughts about this:

“No matter how much they try to stand close to us, it’s a place where many people died with the disaster and only those people know where their home used to be. Even if people say ‘I used the debris to make art!’ it was once part of someone’s house or life. ‘A famous photographer takes pictures of everyone’s smiles and decorates the embankment with black and white photos!’ This was also removed because everyone perceived it as portraits of deceased persons and disliked it (...) It’s not the artist’s fault, but I think that with the context behind the place, it makes it difficult.” (Yuri Miyamoto, 39, Ishinomaki)

According to Mr. Takahashi, despite the fact that these artworks were announced and described to district’s representative or through newspapers, they were either not properly transmitted or when these projects would start, the impression would be different. When I asked Yuri Miyamoto if she ever thought about participating in the festival herself as an artist, she explained that although she had thought about it, as someone who has lived in Ishinomaki for a long time and having friends that got hurt, she did not want to stand in between and have this ‘pressure’ on her. As she did for the last two editions, she would still participate as the personal assistant of an artist she admires. While this only concerned a few art installations from the 2017 edition, it reinforced the gap between the artists and the locals, which could have been minimised if the art projects were developed in closer collaboration with local communities.

#### 4.2.2 The Rebon-odori as an element of connection

On the other hand, there was one particular aspect of the RAF that appealed to a larger number of locals. On the last day of the festival, at the end of summer, the RAF organises a “*Bon-odori*”, called *Rebon-odori* (*Bon-odori* from the RAF) a traditional dance celebration for the ancestors that usually happens mid-august.

These small festivities usually take place in the neighbourhood village, and they each have their own song and dance. The *Rebon-odori* was open to anyone that wanted to participate and attracted not only children but also the elderly, local faces that would not be seen during the other days of the festival. My interlocutors that participated in the *Bon-odori*, depict the event as something warm and fun, a place where everyone danced and spent a good time together. As we talked, they would remember that night and their joy could be felt across the screen.

“[singing the song for the *bon-odori*] Rebon, bon, aato bon! isn’t it? (laughs) (...) Don’t you think they should have been more people? It was really fun. Of course there were probably a lot of volunteers, but that’s where I met locals for the first time at the Reborn at least, there were quite a few of them.”  
(Tomomi Kanda, 45, Ishinomaki)

Tomomi Kanda continues explaining how their involvement was not due to the fact that it was organised by the RAF but because they simply wanted to participate in the o-matsuri (festival). Akane Suzuki, who is also an Ishinomaki local, mentioned how people from the local chamber of commerce played a central role during the *Bon-odori* by helping with the decoration of the event. She adds that, in her opinion, Tōhoku is a region that likes o-matsuri, and that it made her very happy to see everyone dancing as one for the occasion.

This also echoes the point of view of Akira Oomori, from the municipality of Ishinomaki. When I asked his point of view concerning what could be improved for the future editions of the festival, he replied:

“This is a little personal, and it would be selfish maybe, but there is one thing that would be interesting (...) In Ishinomaki, there has been this festival called the Kawabiraki matsuri for about 100 years. It’s a special event for the citizens, it has a long history and people from in and outside the city come to see it. And that is not only because it has a long history, but because we all contributed to the event in some way since primary school by affiliating to a dance team for example. So through active participation, citizens built their history and have a close connection to that o-matsuri (...) Like the Kawabiraki Matsuri, the RAF could become more familiar to residents by getting them more involved and participating as organisers.” (Akira Oomori, 46, Ishinomaki)

Unlike international contemporary art, which is apparently difficult to understand for some locals, o-matsuri (festival) such as the *bon-odori* are deeply

rooted in the Japanese culture. *O-bon* (or Bon) is a Japanese ritual originating in Buddhism and is celebrated for a few days during mid-summer to honour the spirits of the dead. In various districts in Japan, the O-bon is celebrated with the community, a festivity where people dance the *Bon-odori* (bon-dance) which consists of simple steps with songs and instruments such as *taiko* (Japanese tambour) (Ashikaga, 1950). The fact that the *Rebon-odori* attracted local residents that would otherwise not even come to the festival space is something quite significant. The previously mentioned dichotomy seems to be non-existent during the *Rebon-odori*, showing how a traditional festivity like this one had the power to bring people together and celebrate, whether old or young, local or non-local. While this *Rebon-odori* has an innovative twist as it invites nationally renowned singers, it is at its core a festivity grounded in traditional local culture that has a profound meaning and ties with the local communities, an essential principle for sustainable placemaking processes (Turok, 2009).

This in turn shows how certain aspects of the RAF are more appealing to some locals. But the Reborn-Art Festival, as is implied in the name, mainly focuses on art and more specifically on contemporary art, which for most of the locals is something that they themselves perceive as unrelated to their interests. Indeed, according to Gota Matsumura, roughly 80% of the energy and financial resources are invested for the art aspect of the festival. The organisers strongly believe in the power of art as being something that “stimulates and tickles people’s hearts” and potentially triggers interesting actions from a region where people are “exhausted” (Gota Matsumura, 47, Ishinomaki).

There is hence a clear contradiction between the expressed desire of the organisers and their concrete actions. While the event is supposed to revitalise Ishinomaki from the inside, which would imply that it builds upon endogenous capabilities and community engagement, it seems to be failing in appealing to a large part of the local community (Turok, 2009). The larger effort and resources invested by the organisers are focusing on artworks and artists, while the other aspects of the festival such as “Food”, “Music”, and symbolic events like the “*Rebon-Odori*” have had so far a smaller allocation of resources.

## 4.3 Placemaking and imaginaries

“Ishinomaki 2.0 is an initiative of *machizukuri* that we started with the idea that, instead of going back to how the city was before, we should create a new model of the city. I was involved in many projects and met a lot of people, and one of these encounters was with Takeshi Kobayashi (...) Rather than gathering people for a short-period of time, the main goal of the RAF is to think about how we could make the pre-disaster depopulated Tōhoku region and the countryside of Ishinomaki a place where various exchanges and circulation take place, where urban and rural, old and young, nature and civilisation can converge. It might seem abstract but I think that creating a reason for people to stay here on a daily basis is placemaking.” (Matsumura Gota, 47, Ishinomaki)

### 4.3.1 New networks and ideas

It is evident that new networks were established through the festival. Miki Hara explained how the connections she had made while volunteering at the RAF was something unusual:

“People with different values, different ages. When you become an adult you have much less opportunity to meet people from different generations and who are not related to your work. Of course, the event itself was fun, but in that sense, the fact that I met people with different values was something very enriching for me even after the event.” (Miki Hara, 30, Tokyo)

Christophe Riva, who was exhibiting at the Museum of Wall Art (MOWA), similarly talked about his experience as an artist, revealing how the RAF was a special project for him compared to the ones he had undertaken until now. Not only because he was exhibiting in the middle of nature, but also because he had never created something that considerable from scratch and surrounded by people from different backgrounds.

“Because it’s a festival, it’s not just creating canvases and exhibiting them. People were working day and night to organise it, not only artists but also restaurants, people managing accommodations, workshops. The whole environment of the festival was very different from my usual exhibitions, also because we had a preparation period of two months in that rhythm of

constantly communicating with each other and creating a whole festival from scratch.” (Christophe Riva, 27, Osaka)

Visitors themselves were also diverse. As a graffiti and street art artist, Christophe is used to having clients that are aware of his work and knowledgeable of his art style. But the festival was hosting a variety of artists, not associated with his domain, so people were interested and looking at his artworks with different lenses. He was able to catch the spontaneous emotions of visitors that had no knowledge about his work. He adds that people were very curious and likewise, he was himself curious about their opinion and could directly exchange about their feelings on the spot.

These new networks of people created during the festival generated new points of views and possibilities that contributed to the personal and professional enrichment of RAF stakeholders (Solnit, 2010), mostly non-locals. From there, some also took it as an opportunity to create something new and pursued entrepreneurial activities in collaboration with the small communities they created through the medium of the RAF.

#### **4.3.2 Re-imagining Ishinomaki**

“We hope that the festival serves as an opportunity to express and propose the importance of compassion for others, and the imagination as well as relationships for creating the new normal and essentials in a changing world, all while also reflecting back on what we have done together with artists and local residents.” (Reborn Art Festival 2021-22, 2021)

After the disaster, people found themselves in a city that was like a white canvas, as most buildings were washed away by the tsunami. After the situation stabilised, the locals had to decide how to rebuild the city and, in a sense, had to re-imagine Ishinomaki. Masateru Imamura was one of them. He volunteered two-years with a non-profit-organisation, and after removing the mud and debris, he found himself with others in a “ghost town”:

“At that time, there were no shops in the city, and the people affected by the disaster were in temporary housing, and just before that they were crammed in gymnasiums. I thought it would be great if I could serve some delicious food (...) it was not even starting from 0, it was starting from negative (...). When we were repairing the ships with fishermen so they could start working again, I wanted to see their oysters and not only discover their tastiness but

also work with it. So I took the plunge and borrowed some money to build a restaurant.” (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)

Such initiatives, while also present before the RAF, further multiplied based on the connections developed with the circulation of people generated by the festival.

“There is this owner of a flower shop who used the second floor of his house as an art gallery to create a place for regular exhibitions. As he was originally an artist (...) he became friends with artists from the RAF and with their cooperation, he found an abandoned house to refurbish and create such space.” (Gota Matsumura, 47, Ishinomaki)

When I asked volunteer Kana Abe what she would do during her stay in Ishinomaki when the RAF was not being held, she replied:

“(...) I came to see my friends. There are people that opened shops, so I would walk around and get introduced to people that are doing interesting things (...) last year, there was an artist that was exhibiting at the RAF who opened his own guest house.” (Kana Abe, 27, Hyogo prefecture)

Based on conversations with several respondents, there are new initiatives and projects being carried out since the organisation of the first RAF in Ishinomaki. It is interesting to see how the connections made during the RAF multiplied ideas and cooperation for new entrepreneurial initiatives. These, however, seem to be mostly undertaken by non-locals and new-locals rather than locals that have been living in Ishinomaki for a long time. Akane Suzuki, for example, was born in Ishinomaki, but has lived in the Kagawa prefecture since she left the Tōhoku region after graduating university. She worked as a volunteer coordinator for the two editions of the RAF. She explains that, slowly but steadily, locals from the region start to be involved in novel initiatives including the festival planning and development.

“The approach of the RAF is gradually being understood so more and more people are willing to help. At the beginning it is true that the team from Tokyo were mainly organising it (...). But the RAF wants the recovery process to be advanced with inputs from the locals, and since this idea has

been conveyed and is being transmitted, locals are helping out more and more” (Akane Suzuki, 36, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)

In addition to this, there is another axis that creates a divide between the locals, as explained by Tomomi Kanda. She says that while she has a positive impression about such initiatives taking place in her city, she also recognises that it is mostly young and new-locals involved and that it is not a very ‘popular’ movement across the city. In fact, while the engagement of local citizens that have been living in Ishinomaki is apparently steadily rising, there is also a clear division between some local communities and new locals, mostly young people, as the latter is much more proactive in re-imagining the city differently and creating a new normalcy.

In a Ted talk, Gota Matsumura describes Ishinomaki as a place that used to be “controlled by an atmosphere of resignation” (TED, 2011). The disaster was a big shock, but on the other hand it created a moment to realise that relationships were taken for granted. Confronted to a situation in which they were left with nothing but themselves, opened doors for new choices and possibilities. From there, together with Gota Matsumura, a few members started Ishinomaki 2.0, and started to develop various grassroot initiatives. For instance, the ‘*fukkou bar*’ (recovery bar) served as a place for people to gather and exchange ideas, and the free paper ‘Voice’ gathering different stories from locals and was distributed to the community (TED, 2011). In another interview, Gota Matsumura questions the citizen’s role in Japan, stating that as a member of Ishinomaki 2.0, he wanted to reinterpret the meaning of the ‘public’ and ‘democracy’ pointing out that citizens also have the choice to take action by themselves instead of waiting and relying on the government. For him and for members of Ishinomaki 2.0 as well as others that joined this movement, the disaster was taken as an opportunity to reset the pre-disaster situation and imagine a new city where people, with diverse values and ideas are at the center of the decision-making process and proactively engage in building their city and community as they desire (Orizzontinternazionali, 2016).

In this regard, the RAF is an event that mostly involve new locals and those who are proactively engaged in re-imagining their city, hence leaving out other parts of the community and accentuating the previously mentioned dichotomy.

#### **4.3.3 A catalyst for placemaking processes**

The first editions of the festival did not involve the locals enough, but through time, this seems to change and the festival was received differently by some local residents. This was also something that Akira Oomori, from the local municipality,



expected, pointing out that art festivals could gain local understanding through time. He added that he could already see the difference comparing the first and second editions of the RAF. During the 2019 edition, Ajishima in Ishinomaki became a venue for some of the artworks. According to him, some of the communities within Ajishima would not get along very well, but the fact that it became one of the venues and thanks to some tourists that stayed and communicated with them, a relationship of trust was built among the residents, and the event could be held successfully:

“As a result, after the end of the edition in 2019, the residents of Ajishima asked if they could be part of the RAF and host a venue again for the future edition. That was very big, I think” (Akira Oomori, 46, Ishinomaki)

The food stalls and restaurants in Ogi-no-hama opening for the occasion of the RAF also inspired locals that were not directly involved with the RAF. For example, few locals opened their own food stall to serve ‘*tako meshi*’ (octopus rice) and other local seafood dishes. Their idea did not necessarily originate from a need to compete with the RAF. Rather, they did it for fun during the weekend and to see the satisfied faces of tourists eating fresh seafood products (Gasparri, 2019). In that sense, the RAF could be said to have a motivating effect for placemaking processes for the locals too, as this idea of opening their own food stall might not have happened without the RAF and the resulting influx of tourists.

#### **4.3.4 New ways of using spaces and generating a sense of place**

The RAF enabled people to use the event as an opportunity to start initiatives and push the city to use spaces that would hardly be used outside the festival. For example, the Lonely Museum of Wall Art (MOWA) was an installation set up by a group of artists, including Christophe Riva. Situated in the area of Momonoura in Ishinomaki, the museum was built on top of the seawall. Indeed, the process of building seawalls has advanced rapidly in Ishinomaki, and almost the whole coast’s sea view is blocked by these masses of concrete. The construction has been met by perplexity, if not open defiance, by the local communities. Just Nishimone, a small village in the Iwate prefecture (situated North of the Miyagi prefecture, where Ishinomaki is located) has been spared from the construction of seawalls.



Figure 4 : 'Lonely Museum of Wall Art' by SIDECORE (Momonoura, Ishinomaki)

Picture taken by Christophe Riva (2019)

Akane Suzuki recalls her memories from childhood:

“I still have this image of when I was a kid, looking at the sun shining and glistening on the surface of the sea, it's a shame that we cannot see it anymore (...) it is a waste of not being able to see it closely.” (Akane Suzuki, 30, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)

Artistic installations such as the MOWA might be expressing the complex feelings locals have towards these concrete walls, which are supposed to save the city in case of another tsunami. Its aim is to question visitors on whether safety or the original environment should be prioritised (Reborn Art Festival 2019, 2019) steering visitors' reflections towards this issue. According to Gota Matsumura, such installation would not have been possible outside the festival, but for the occasion of the RAF, artists are given greater freedom in using these spaces.



Figure 5 : : 'Lonely Museum of Wall Art' by SIDECORE Momonoura (Ishinomaki).

Picture taken by Christophe Riva (2019)

Similarly, Roger Smith, who participated at the RAF in two locations, Matsushima and Ishinomaki, explained :

“And I thought it was tremendous, a tremendously positive and great use of the space that never would have happened without Reborn-Art. It was great for people outside of town. It was great for locals. It was great to have national level acts coming to our little island, and this little town, and Tōhoku. And I kind of wish something like that would continue into the future or new versions of it.” (Roger Smith, 41, Kamakura)

The area that Roger describes is situated in Matsushima and was used as a venue for music bands to play outdoors, including Kayama Yuzo, a very famous Japanese musician from the 60s. He depicts the atmosphere of the concert as something ‘wonderful’ explaining how the timeless character of the music attracted people from a diverse range of age.



Figure 6 : Fantasutikku ongaku sai x Reborn-Art Festival 2017 (Matsushima).

Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

He further describes his visit of the RAF in Ishinomaki:

“One that I thought was really interesting was this video art exhibit that was projected inside this little cave. That was really cool because you couldn't have too many people at a time, you put on a hard hat, you wait for your turn and then you go there. And it's kind of like this fantastical story projected on a cave, this little cave that you're kind of like peeking into. So, I mean, a really cool atmosphere. You know, on any other day this would just be like a little cave with little rocks, but on this day it was transformed into something else (...) I had never seen an art exhibition like that.” (Roger Smith, 41, Kamakura)



Figure 7 : Tōwa by Sawahiraki, Ogi-no-hama (Ishinomaki). Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

Takahiro Hino described his visit in a similar vein:

“Right after the earthquake, there was kind of a strong movement to block nature, a movement against nature (...) when I went to the RAF, it made me feel how nice it is to live near the sea (...) I don’t know if it is the artworks or the way they are exhibited that made me feel that way (...) after all, nature seemed to be less hostile.” (Takahiro Hino, 46, Sendai)

The ways artworks have been described by my interlocutors show how it affected their way of seeing that specific place. It gives a novel view, a different way of looking at something that was seen as either conventional for a visitor or frightening for someone that experienced the disaster. The intervention of the artworks within this natural environment generated a special atmosphere, a sense of place, creating a new connection between the visitor and its surrounding environment (Marks et al., 2014). In this regard, the RAF could transform Ishinomaki by changing parts of the landscape, creating a special atmosphere and bringing movement (*nigiyaka ni suru*).



## 4.4 Looking at the RAF from a tourism perspective

This part discusses the RAF by focusing on the tourism aspect. Indeed, through its manifestation, the festival generated an inflow of visitors and incentivised them toward an alternative form of tourism. Moreover, the festival contributed to the attraction of people who would not only visit Ishinomaki in the short-term but also for a longer period to balance their work-life or to potentially settle in Ishinomaki.

### 4.4.1 The first large-scale international event in Ishinomaki

The RAF is the first large-scale event happening in Ishinomaki, attracting visitors, volunteers, and artists from all over Japan and abroad. According to their report of 2017 and 2019, the number of visitors accounted for 260,000 for the first edition and 440,000 for the second edition. In 2019, 53% of visitors stayed in Ishinomaki for at least one night, among which 27% stayed one night and 18% stayed 2 nights. 47% of visitors only spent the day in Ishinomaki. Apart from the entrance fees for the festival, spending for food and other souvenirs contributed to the local economy (Reborn Art Festival Secretariat, 2017; Reborn Art Festival Secretariat, 2019).

While the economic benefits resulting from the entrance fees, restaurants, accommodation and other spending seemed to be significant for a place that was originally not a tourist destination, from a social point of view, the RAF had the effect of bringing movement to Ishinomaki with new flows of visitors. As mentioned previously, the locals' engagement with the RAF itself might have been ambivalent. However, my interlocutors had positive and spontaneous encounters with locals outside the festival venue.

“(...) Ishinomaki locals received us very well, all kinds of people, young, old, workers, mothers of families. They were all very warm people who made us feel welcome, and they seemed very happy to see us there as artists and giving spark to Ishinomaki”. (Christophe Riva, 27, Osaka)

Staff Manager Akane Suzuki shares Christophe Riva's assessment:

“Some visitors and volunteers were offered food by local mothers, who told them ‘bring that with you’ or ‘you can eat this’. A volunteer told me that she was offered local food such as seafood and *hoya*.” (Akane Suzuki, 36, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)

While these interactions did not necessarily take place within the festival, encounters that my interlocutors had with local people demonstrate that locals had a positive feeling towards welcoming visitors. On the other hand, visitors and volunteers themselves were taking the RAF as an opportunity to travel while contributing to the '*fukkou*' (revitalisation) of Ishinomaki.

“Of course you could give money by donating, but if you spend money then it's better if you can enjoy it too, right? So if you regularly go to Tōhoku (...), you have the travel expenses, food and drinks, accommodation, and in the end that's how you can support the affected places”. (Kana Abe, 26, Hyogo prefecture)

#### 4.4.2 Incentivising an alternative form of tourism

Masateru Imamura, a new-local that opened his own restaurant in Ishinomaki after the disaster, has been recently appointed as the food director for the 2021 edition of the festival. For him, the dishes he prepares is a way to express his sentiments towards Ishinomaki:

“There are many sentiments in my sashimi plates. The sashimi is the image of a person from Ishinomaki. The vegetables are, for example, taken from my region of Chiba, or all over the country. It represents people holding hands to complete one plate that represents the town.” (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)

During our interview, he shared his ideas and approach for this year's festival edition explaining that they will be further emphasising the everyday life and activities of the fishermen, as fishing is one of the main economic activities of the area. Hence, fishermen will not only provide food for the festival, but will be offered a space of interaction with visitors to discuss their experiences in relation to the environment and sustainability:

“The general public does not have that many occasions of hearing the fisherman's point of view about sustainability issues, like the recent problem of tritium in Fukushima”. (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)

Previous editions of the festival already featured these kinds of symposiums, but from what Masateru Imamura explained, the next edition plans to involve local producers such as fishermen. In that sense, the festival gives the opportunity not

only for visitors to eat fresh food but to get to know and understand who the fishermen involved are and what their activity looks like. This would not only raise awareness to visitors about sustainability issues that fishermen are confronted with, but also give local fishermen a voice.



Figure 8 : View from Hama saisai, Ogi-no-hama (Ishinomaki). Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

Until now, the RAF has been organising small events around food. One of them, the 'Reborn-Art Dining', is a concept that invites chefs from all over Japan to offer a cuisine that uses local ingredients. Besides, 'Hama saisai' is the restaurant situated on the coast in Ogi-no-hama, a place that invokes the *furusato* imaginary with fisherman's women preparing home-cooking taste dishes (Hamasaisai, n.d.) But Masateru Imamura explained that he has a stronger will that goes beyond just serving food at the Hama sai sai.

"But I would like people to know more about Ishinomaki, I want them to learn from Ishinomaki and to take home and transmit it. I want the next RAF edition to be something that can be experienced and studied together [with visitors]. I will try to express that through food (...) this 2021 edition will be a change compared to the 2017 or 2019 ones." (Masateru Imamura, 40, Ishinomaki)



For my interlocutors, food was an important aspect of the festival. Indeed, as Masateru Imamura mentioned, “the festival cannot be enjoyed if people are hungry”. Moreover, as Haruko Hayakawa said Ishinomaki is “blessed with delicious fish and oysters” so it would not only benefit visitors to highlight local products during the festival but also local businesses and fishermen. As Tagore-Erwin (2018) concludes in her study, food was indeed an essential aspect of the festival for which locals were interested to participate in.

“They put addresses where we could eat well in Ishinomaki (...) you could have small ticket vouchers so you could wander in the city to eat, and that was also part of the festival. So in that sense, it was a bit more connected with the people of Ishinomaki.” (Christophe Riva, 27, Osaka)

Another project that the RAF is supporting is the Momonoura Village project. According to Akira Oomori, the Momonoura area in Ishinomaki has also been damaged by the tsunami, and the number of inhabitants significantly decreased. Yoshiharu Tsukamoto and Momoyo Kaijima, architects from the Tsukuba University and founder of the Atelier Bow-Wow, practice architecture with an ethnographic approach. As a project for sustainably regenerating the Momonoura area, they created, together with Momonoura village locals, a fisherman's school (CCAChanel, 2018).

In an interview, Yoshiharu Tsukamoto discusses how their project started:

“ We’ve always been interested in vernacular architecture, but when you learn about it from the media or from books, it is more about architectural studies than ethnography. But actually meeting the people here, all that I’d learned as architectural studies about village life or vernacular architecture, all of a sudden those issues [became] connected with ethnographic issues (...) in the process of doing this revival work, we met these people who are living here in a fantastic hybrid of both ethnographic and industrial society relations, and I began to think [that] what these people were doing was incredibly interesting.” (CCAChanel interview, 2018)

As Akira Oomori explains, the Momonoura area is surrounded by the mountains and the sea, and as part of their educational project they also included programs such as architecture and forestry by learning from the history and culture of the community. The project aims to raise awareness about sustainability from an ethnographic approach. Apart from offering educational programs, they also offer

accommodations and rental spaces despite the long-term living restrictions enforced in the area.

With the various workshops and symposium organised around the theme of food and fishing, the RAF is promoting an alternative form of tourism based on mutual understanding and environmental sustainability (Kato, 2018) while also supporting educational projects revolving around fishery, forestry and architecture from an ethnographic point of view.

#### 4.4.3 Ishinomaki as second home

“It’s difficult to translate it into words (...) A place that I initially didn’t know became somewhere I know, and there were so many people that took care of me, so I have an attachment to Ishinomaki. I don’t know, I care about it as if I am a local. At first, I was only concerned about Ishinomaki but now I am also paying attention to Tōhoku in general, it even became kind of a daily interest (...) I feel like my *furusato* have increased ” (Miki Hara, 30, Tokyo)

Haruko Hayakawa depicts Ishinomaki in a similar vein:

“The beauty of the sea, the delicious food, the warmth of the people. It is true that the festival attracted a lot of people, but it was in the end generated by Ishinomaki. All in all, it’s like a place where I can feel relieved, a place where I can go back home.” (Haruko Hayakawa, 46, Yokohama)

All these descriptions perfectly match the *furusato* imaginary, as a place that feels like home. The vocabulary used by my interlocutors romanticises Ishinomaki, by using words such as “*odayaka*” (calm), “*kirei*” (beautiful), “*fuko meibi*” (scenic), “*mukashinagara no nihon*” (the old japan), “*shizen ga yutaka na tokoro*” (a place abundant in nature). Through the RAF, non-local visitors discovered the beauty of the countryside of Ishinomaki, and this image they kept with them overlapped and, in some cases, substituted the image they had about the city as a disaster-affected place, as most of them did not see or know about Ishinomaki before the disaster. Indeed, the RAF itself did softly incite the *furusato* imaginary through the communication of the festival on their website. Today, most of them would go there to enjoy the tasty food and the natural landscape.

“The other thing that I am happy about is for example when [I go back there] as a joke I tell the locals from the Kojika-tai ‘*tadaima*’ and they respond ‘*okaeri*’ (...) you know, I’ve always lived in Tokyo so I don’t have any kind of

region like that [to go back to]. In such circumstances, there was a deep sense of hometown that was created with Ishinomaki (...) and last time in March there was an earthquake too. At that time, the faces of the people from the Kojika-tai came to my mind. I didn't have that kind of worry until now, but now I've got people that I know." (Kinoko, 43, Tokyo)

*Tadaima* (I'm back) and *okaeri* (welcome back) are very common terms used in Japan in a family environment. Based on what Kinoko explained, and implied in these words, Ishinomaki not only is a *furusato* for him, but is also something that is acknowledged by locals from Ishinomaki. Even if it is expressed through a joke, locals take and accept the position of being the *furusato* hometown.

Moreover, few of my interlocutors mentioned that they would see themselves living there at least temporarily.

"I've been living in Yokohama since I was born, and I have my children here (...) but when I will be partly done with childcare I would like to go to Ishinomaki short-term. I actually have a friend who has a farm, so I could help her with that or do an internship with Fisherman's Japan (...) I don't think I would change my address, but I would like to live there for one month or so." (Haruko Hayakawa, 46, Yokohama)

By discovering Ishinomaki through the medium of the RAF visitors have developed a meaningful tie with the people and the place, something that could be interpreted as place attachment (Marks et al., 2014; Campelo et al., 2014). In that regard, the RAF was able to create a flow of tourism in which visitors, with the connections they fostered with locals and the environment, will regularly come back for other reasons than the festival. Furthermore, the increasing numbers of new-locals that are living there, could in turn, potentially attract other new-locals that would see themselves settling in Ishinomaki, being it short-term or long-term (Sander et al., 2015; Tagore-Erwin, 2018; Qu & Cheer, 2020).

"I am still wondering if there's a good way to do it, like half of the time in Ishinomaki, and the other half in Kanto. But now that we are in an era where we can work remotely, I will be keeping an eye on the possibilities I guess." (Akane Suzuki, 36, Kawasaki/Ishinomaki)

The movement and new initiatives that arose since the disaster such as the RAF among many others, might even have the potential to re-attract young locals

that left their region to go to bigger cities, such as Akane Suzuki, and, hopefully, reverse the depopulation trend that has been oppressing the city and the region long before the 2011 disaster.

## 5. Discussion

This thesis explores the role of cultural events in post-disaster Tōhoku after the triple disaster of 2011. Specifically, it investigates how and in what ways stakeholders involved in the Reborn-Art Festival in Ishinomaki negotiate their engagement and placemaking processes. In this regard, the findings reveal that stakeholder's engagement with the RAF is diverse, complex and conflicting depending on the individuals involved. Placemaking is defined as the organic, bottom-up approach closely associated with a sense of place, which is "how a culture group imprints its values, perceptions, memories and traditions on a landscape and gives meaning to geographic space" (Lew, 2017, p. 449) as opposed to a top-down process. While it was found that the RAF has enacted placemaking processes, this was mostly serving only a part of the stakeholders, mainly non-locals, exacerbating a cultural conflict between the local and the global, the urban and the rural (Qu, 2019; Bosman & Dredge, 2011). My research disclosed the ambivalence of local communities' commitment to the festival, especially the locals that have lived in Ishinomaki for a long time as opposed to new-locals and non-locals who are much more involved in the event. The RAF mirrors the very complexity of placemaking and *machizukuri* processes. Places are always contested and constantly changing rather than fixed because it involves interaction between tangible elements and diverse individuals with multiple meanings, systems and cultures (Hudson, 2006; Kusakabe 2013). The festival generated a sense of place, but, alienated the majority of locals as it mostly assembled stakeholders that share common practices (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015).

The dichotomy can be explained by multiple elements, but mainly because it did not reflect what a large proportion of the locals wanted (Qu & Cheer, 2020; Qu, 2019). Local communities are not interested in the event because it was implemented by outsiders with greater control from their side (Lew, 2012). The principles on which the festival is built does not reflect the practice of it, and thus it was not perceived as connected to their identity (Qu, 2019). Furthermore, the event was miscommunicated, something that is apparent in, for instance, the cultural insensitiveness of some of the foreign artworks, as described in the findings. When such a festival is designed in that way, the placemaking process is influenced by a dominant narrative, creating a parallel imaginary that is detached from the needs and values of a large part of the local community (Vainio, 2020b).

*Machizukuri* is supposed to be a bottom-up process that reflects local citizen's values (Kusakabe, 2013), but the one taking place through the medium of the RAF is not perceived as genuine because it omits local communities from the decision-making process (Qu & Cheer, 2020). Thus, the placemaking process

happening with the RAF is closer to the one defined by Smith (2002), which is a top-down way to shape the image of a place. In this case, placemaking is controlled by a powerful entity, the AP Bank, partly in collaboration with the local authority, imposing values, ideas, and thus imaginaries that do not align with the ones of locals (Vainio, 2020a) while fulfilling other interests such as increasing the attractiveness of Ishinomaki for future settlers (Qu & Cheer, 2020). This imaginary however aligns with other stakeholders that engaged with the RAF, mostly non-locals but also some (new) locals.

In this thesis, I argued that place attachment, as a concept closely related to a sense of place (Low & Altman, 1992; Marks et al., 2014), is a social construct created through interactions and connections fostered between people in a certain setting (Stokowski, 2002; Relph, 1976). Developing social capital is crucial for post-disaster recovery (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015) and, as stated by Bærenholdt and Aarsæther (2002), outsiders can indeed positively contribute to this. But the clashing values stemming from the organisation of the RAF resulted in an unbalanced diffusion of benefits among stakeholders, ultimately favouring non-locals more than locals. Indeed, the RAF generated meaningful social ties (*tsunagari*) as within the volunteer community forged at the Reborn-Art House (Campelo et al., 2014) and further, succeeded in enacting processes of reflections (Marks et al., 2014) among volunteers. This positively influenced place attachment among non-locals toward Ishinomaki, while also generating attachment to the imaginaries developed through the festival rather than the place itself, with non-locals' own perception of the *furusato* of Ishinomaki (McMorran, 2005).

Possibilities to build placemaking processes upon endogenous capabilities exist, except priority is given to something that does not appeal to a large part of the local community (expressed by *nanika yatteru*) (Turok, 2009), such as urban-centred artworks. As demonstrated in previous studies that concern art festivals organised in Japan as for the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial or the Setouchi International Art Festival (Klien, 2010; Qu, 2019), a similar conclusion arises. "Artists implant their art - which connotes the elite, global, and urban - into the rural context" (Qu, 2019, p. 23). What is shown in this study is that RAF's narrative revolves around their aim to help revitalisation from the 'inside', which is supposed to help locals through endogenous development. But the reality is quite the opposite, as the RAF implemented extraneous elements which were embracing the values of non-locals more than locals (Lew, 2017). As such, imaginaries developed through the RAF aligned better with non-local volunteers' ideals. Although it is indeed crucial for the future viability of the event to attract tourism, for now, the RAF lacks in balancing that aspect with endogenous culture and competencies (Qu & Cheer, 2020). The festival had the potential to reflect local communities' values,

desires, and imaginaries, but did not embrace them enough, omitting local's voices while advertising their activity as the opposite (Vainio, 2020a). Resources are mostly allocated for the artwork-related aspect of the event albeit not including many local artists. Hence, the *machizukuri* process created through the RAF was realised for outsiders by re-imagining Ishinomaki as an ideal place for future domestic immigrants. This accentuated and made even more visible some of the complexities that were pre-existent. It contributed to an increased fracture of the city, something that was already visible after the disaster with, on the one hand, the inflow of new locals (mostly coming from Tokyo) actively engaged in the reconstruction process and creating new networks and on the other, locals that have been living there for a long time (Klien, 2016).

From a broader perspective and taking into account the recent trend in Japan of using art festivals as a tool for revitalisation, I argue that the festival, and especially the art-related aspect of it is a result of serial reproduction (Richards, 2020), a concept imported from other festivals that do not have profound meaning nor appeal to a large portion of the local community (Turok, 2009). Regarding what Vainio (2020b) concludes when discussing the state-citizens relation within post-disaster recovery processes, the RAF could have been used as a lever for creating a dialogue between multiple stakeholders and giving space for exchanges of ideas and opinions. This would have generated mutual benefits and created a space where different imaginaries could co-exist together while also used as an instrument to generate community resilience and a sense of place (Watanabe, 2007; Low & Altman, 1992; Relph, 1976).

These two past editions of the RAF shows that the event was not valuing all stakeholder equally, as the sense of place and community was mostly generated amongst a specific set of stakeholders excluding a large part of the disaster-affected community. Locals were able to perceive this new imaginary by re-evaluating the image of post-disaster Ishinomaki through the lenses of the RAF, which in some cases, provided a more positive image towards their place, but it is not ultimately the one they produced or aspired to. This could be said to have reinforced the urban-rural dichotomy (Qu, 2019; Klein, 2010), as the RAF prioritised the modern over the traditional, the extraneous over the endogenous. This is not only because the local's identity and value differ from the one of the RAF but also because non-locals did not experience the disaster and only discovered Ishinomaki post-disaster. This results in non-locals producing a different placemaking process that is not mutually exclusive but still clashing with one of the local communities (Bosman & Dredge, 2011). However, it should also be noted that this dichotomy can be said to be partly sustained by locals themselves. From the locals' perspective, minimising external influences while maintaining their

values as people from '*inaka*' can be a way to reinforce their cultural identity, which reflects the conservative mindset described by some locals themselves and as shown in past studies about festivals in the region (Klien, 2010).

On the other hand, the RAF had a certain socio-cultural role that benefited all stakeholders engaged with the event. Although opinions and engagement of locals towards the RAF were ambivalent, it is received as an important commemorative event for the disaster of March 11, something that is feared it will be forgotten. Furthermore, the *Rebon-odori* was a valuable element of the festival bringing locals and non-locals together, which can be seen as a point of connection. This in particular enabled them to celebrate the festivity together and create a special atmosphere that could not be seen on other days of the RAF. For the non-locals, the RAF was not only an opportunity (*kikkake*) that made them go to Ishinomaki but was also an occasion to steer reflection, understanding and offering a circumstance to instruct themselves not only about the realities that disaster-affected community are facing but also natural disasters in general. The RAF successfully made use of spaces that would not have been exploited otherwise, and generated an inflow of visitors to Ishinomaki which is something that was unusual for locals. The encounters, even if they did not necessarily take place on the festival ground, created meaningful connections between locals and non-locals (Solnit, 2010). Non-locals took back home the discussions they had with locals and the resulting thoughts and impressions affected them on a personal level and in the long term.

The RAF did not only reinforce the *furusato* tourism already existent in the Tōhoku region (McMorran, 2005), but also developed a type of tourism that is similar to the so-called community-based tourism centred around social and environmental sustainability (Kato, 2018). RAF's initiatives such as the Momonoura project or the food-related aspect of the festival in general, are such examples, as these projects build upon place-based traditional practices and enable communities to preserve their ties with places while at the same time, raising awareness to external visitors (Kato, 2018 & Lin et al., 2018). However, it is difficult to categorise it as 'community-based' as for now the emergence of tourism is not completely enacted and controlled by the local communities (Pearce, 1992) but rather incentivised by the RAF or non-locals and new-local stakeholders. Activities related to food are planned to be further emphasised in future editions, which will potentially increase locals' involvement. This will include fishermen's participating in symposiums to incentivise visitors about sustainable issues, or other collaboration with local cafes and restaurants. Hopefully, the next editions of the RAF will put more effort into communicating clearly the intention of the event and offering more opportunities for locals to engage with it.



## Implications, limitations and future research

This study contributed to the academic discussion of the role of cultural events in a post-disaster context, by specifically looking at Ishinomaki in the Tōhoku region. In particular, my study focused on multiple actors' opinions and experiences during the RAF and how each of them negotiated their engagement and placemaking processes about Ishinomaki by looking at the concept of 'placemaking' in particular. Hopefully, this study sheds light on the socio-cultural impact of the RAF on local and non-local stakeholders, while considering its contribution to the development of tourism in Ishinomaki and understanding its broader impact on the recovery process of the place. This study can also be applied beyond post-disaster contexts such as in other circumstances where socio-political or environmental change occurred leading to a socio-demographic transformation in urban or rural context.

The scope of the analysis in this thesis was limited by time constraints and its exploratory nature. More work is needed for this study to be truly generalisable. This thesis collected data on the two previous editions of the RAF dating back to 4 years and 2 years ago respectively, and some elements experienced or past feelings of my interlocutors might have been forgotten or altered due to the few years separating the festival and the moment of the interviews. On the other hand, this also means that interviewees had the time to take a step back and reflect upon their past experiences with hindsight. Moreover, the analysis was based on a selection of quotes and narratives of respondents which could generate biases.

Reflecting upon these, future research should include more editions of the RAF, since the past two editions I analysed in this study were still in their phases of introduction and hence, relatively new. This is crucial to understand the long-term impact of the event on the local communities and other stakeholders involved and see how the RAF evolve and contribute further to the post-disaster recovery process of Ishinomaki. Future research on the RAF could also include a cultural anthropological perspective to have a more comprehensive understanding of locals communities and the potential impact of such alternative forms of tourism (Stronza, 2001). Finally, taking into account multiple points of views by including a different set of stakeholders within the data collection process is essential in getting a holistic understanding of the RAF.



Figure 9 : Entrance of the cave, Ogi-no-hama (Ishinomaki). Picture taken by Roger Smith (2017, September)

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# Appendix A – Interview Guide

## For visitors/non-locals

- What was your motivation to go to the Reborn-Art festival? How did you hear about this festival?
- How much time did you spend there? What did you do there? Did you go there only for the RAF or did you visit other places? Can you describe your visit, and did you have fun?
- What were your expectations before visiting this festival? Could you describe the atmosphere of the festival and what was your impression?
- After visiting this festival, did you change your perception of the city / region affected by the disaster? How? Can you give me some examples?
- As a tourist, what did you do during your sojourn? Could you give me a timeline and description?
- Did you have any interactions with locals?
- Are there things that particularly impressed you?
- Would you like to visit this place/region again? Would you attend the festival again? Why?
- What did you enjoy the most during the festival? the least?
- Did you have a lot of interaction with the other locals/artists/tourists?
- Have you changed your perception about the festival through time?
- Did it make Ishinomaki more visible? Will you have more understanding? Did you talk about it to other people when you got back home?
- Did the festival make you understand the disaster, the reconstruction, the people there better? Why? Could you give me some examples?
- What remains with you from the festival? What specifically did you see that was helpful for the community? (Ask them concrete examples)

Extra questions: What do you think about your city? Why did you decide to volunteer/come to Ishinomaki? Is it your first time in Tōhoku? Have you volunteered before? Individually or through NPO's? Can you walk me through the festival as if we were there together?

## For locals

- How do you find Ishinomaki? Could you tell me what kind of city is it? What did you think about the city before the disaster? How is it like in Ishinomaki after the disaster? (if you don't want to talk, that is ok).



- Are there any issues with or about the communities? What is it?
- As a local, what do you think about the RAF? Have you participated before?
- Do you think that the RAF engages local people or other local businesses enough? Why? Can you give me some examples? What happened to make you think about that?
- As a local, would you be interested in cooperating with the festival? How and why?
- Is there something that concerns you about the festival being organised in Ishinomaki? If yes, what? Could you tell me more about it? Did something happen in particular?
- Did you have a lot of interaction with the locals/ tourists/artists ?
- Have you changed your perception about the festival through time?
- What did you enjoy the most during the festival?
- Do you think there will be any change or difference between past/future festivals?
- Did you also participate in the after-party/other events such as the *Rebon-odori*? What did you think about these events and activities?
- What do you think could be improved about the festival, and why?

#### For Ishinomaki municipality/ RAF organisers

- Ask general questions, such as their work, age etc.
- Are you originally from Ishinomaki? How do you find Ishinomaki? What kind of city is it? Has it changed after 2011 and in what ways?
- As a person working in the municipality, what does '*machizukuri*' means for you?
- What was the motivation behind organizing an event such as the RAF in your city? Could you recount me how it was organised in practice?
- What were/are the challenges in organizing the event? Did it brought some discussion in the city? What was the reaction of the people in the town? Was that the case for everyone? How so?
- In what way does the RAF engage local people? Do you personally think that it is enough? Or are there ways to improve for the future? If yes, what could be improved? Can you give me some examples?
- Have you attended the festival yourself? If so, have you attended as a tourist or expert? What did you think about it? Is there something that impressed you? What did you enjoy the most during the festival?
- What is the image that the festival want to give of the city?
- Could you describe me or tell me more about the Momonoura village project?

- Is there a specific type of tourist that you are trying to attract? What message would you want the tourists to take home?

Extra question for Matsumura Gota:

- Could you tell me more about Ishinomaki 2.0's activity? How did it started?
- Initiatives such as Ishinomaki 2.0 are flourishing over the past few years. Are citizens who have been living in Ishinomaki for a long time also have been influenced by these initiatives and are engaged in *machizukuri* practices?

## Appendix B – Overview of interviewees

	Interviewees	Age	Gender	Nationality	Place of living	Work	Affinity with RAF	RAF edition in which they participated
1	Christophe Riva	27	Male	FR/JP	Osaka	Artist	Visitor (2017) Artist (2019)	2017, 2019
2	Takahiro Hino	46	Male	JP	Sendai	Work at the municipality for health, prior in tourism development	Mainly as a visitor	2017, 2019
3	Akira Oomori	46	Male	JP	Ishinomaki	Industrial promotion division of the Municipality of Ishinomaki	Visitor and work for the administrative side	2017, 2019
4	Mr. Takahashi	42	Male	JP	Ishinomaki	Assistant of the industrial promotion division of Ishinomaki municipality	For work	2017, 2019
5	Kana Abe	26	Female	JP	Hyogo prefecture	Nurse	Volunteer	2017
6	Haruko Hayakawa	46	Female	JP	Yokohama	Radio personality and coach	Volunteer	2017, 2019
7	Miki Hara	30	Female	JP	Tokyo	Office worker in Tokyo	Volunteer	2017
8	Tsutomu Goto	44	Male	JP	Kagawa	Kagawa Prefectural Office	Volunteer	2017, 2019
9	Tomomi Kanda	45	Female	JP	Ishinomaki	Ishinomaki city kindergarten teacher	Volunteer	2017
10	Akane Suzuki	36	Female	JP	Kanagawa, Kawasaki	Organisation for children after-school activities, (previously: Kojika-tai staff coordinator)	Volunteer manager	2017, 2019
11	Duccio Gasparri	35	Male	IT	Silea	Academic researcher	Visited one free installation	2017
12	Roger Smith	41	Male	US	Kamakura	Environmental non-profit organisation	Visitor	2017
13	Masateru Imamura	40	Male	JP	Ishinomaki	Restaurant owner	Visitor	2017, 2019
14	Gota Matsumura	47	Male	JP	Ishinomaki	Ishinomaki 2.0 representative	Organiser	2017, 2019
15	Kinoko	43	Male	JP	Tokyo	IT system engineer	Volunteer	2017, 2019
16	Yuri Miyamoto (Email interview)	39	Female	JP	Ishinomaki	Artist	Offered personal help to an artist	2017, 2019