



Rowing the Eternal Sea: The Story of a Minamata Fisherman (Asian Voices)

Keibo Oiwa

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In the early 1950s fisherfolk and other villagers around Minamata Bay on the western coast of Kyushu, Japan, began to suffer from mysterious and often fatal symptoms of what came to be known as Minamata disease. It was not until 1968 that the government acknowledged its cause—organic mercury poisoning from effluent released by Chisso Corporation, a chemical manufacturer and the largest employer in the Japanese city for which the disease was named. For decades the company denied responsibility and was joined by the Japanese government in its attempt to cover up the problem despite lawsuits and political protests.

In this compelling oral history, Ogata Masato, fisherman and Minamata disease sufferer, tells of the devastation of methyl mercury poisoning. Spanning fifty years, his story describes the impact of industrial pollution on his own life, on his extended family, and on the fishing culture of the Shiranui Sea. A one-time leader of Minamata disease patients seeking certification and compensation, Masato breaks away to follow his personal path to redemption.

Masato's story begins with the vibrant village of his childhood and culminates with the possibility of return, if not to one's birthplace, then to a spiritual community, to a consciousness that we owe our existence to the web of interrelationships that constitute life. When we turn full circle, explains Masato, we find ourselves again at the water's edge, a place where all life gathers. This is the launching point for "Tokoyo," boat of the Eternal World—a world defined at once by the past, present and future; a state of mind in which we are responsible not only for our own actions but for those of our society and our species. Masato's story, larger than any one man or one incident, raises questions we must all consider as beneficiaries of modern industry and technology.

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