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Breaking Through Impasses in the Ainu Rights Recovery Movement : A Case Study of one Transformational Activist-Disciple Relationship

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2015-08-13 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Gayman, Jeff メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002339

Breaking Through Impasses in the Ainu Rights Recovery Movement: A Case Study of one Transformational Activist-Disciple Relationship

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1. Introduction

The glee in Ota's voice was obvious as he relayed his thinking about the *kamuynomi*¹⁾ event in Hamamasu to me. The basic ideal, to restore the various place-specific *kamuy*²⁾ of Yaunkur Mosir (Hokkaido) to their due glory by performing group *kamuynomi* at various locations around the island, thus revitalizing the Ainu *kamuynomi* tradition at the same time as reclaiming Ainu ties to the land and practicing one's freedom of religion, had been given an ingenious twist when it was determined that Sinutapka, the fortress of the Gods and most holy of holy places in Hokkaido, was located only two kilometers upstream from one of the most popular regional summer Sea of Japan beaches. Ota went on to explain how last year his young Ainu protégé, age 28, had been terrified when the townsperson in charge of the local Shinto Shrine had approached them during the midst of their ceremony and inquired what they were doing holding the prayer ceremony there (although the incident eventually ended happily as the townsman was sympathetic to Ainu causes), and that the youth's knees had been shaking as he later performed the same rites at the beach before throwing the *inau* prayer sticks into the Sea of Japan and embarking upon the standard fare "cultural program" for a *kamuynomi* event of Ainu song and dance.

Such events, carried out in the high Ainu language of oratory and ceremony, serve also to revitalize the Ainu language and with it the Ainu worldview and value systems.

Ota carried on with increasing zest as he went on to explain how he had singlehandedly increased the number of participants from one (himself) to the current twelve, and proceeded to joke about how he would never "let the local Board of Education" sink their fangs into his baby by giving their "official sponsorship," even if in the future he eventually ended up chaperoning busloads full of participants. He rounded off this explanation with a tongue-in-cheek imitation of the typical clichéd phrases of a bureaucrat from the local town offices MCing for the *kamuynomi* ceremonies which they sponsored, "Ladies and Gentlemen, we are gathered here today..."

Over the course of my six year acquaintanceship with Ota, a charismatic figure who had singlehandedly established an online community with a 1500-person followership over the course of just three years, I had come to expect a certain amount of overkill in his

speech and behavior, a character trait which made people hang on his every word and drew many people to his classes at university, to his online audio and visual broadcasts, and to the *kamuy nomi* gatherings which he holds once or twice yearly.

It was at the latter that I came to realize that the various devices that he employs such as Us and Them discourses, ridicule and humiliation, and rites-of-passage, like that undergone by his protégé at the beach described above, all comprise mechanisms which he employs for hooking his protégés and collaborators.

At the same time, I had come to know the hardship that he had undergone through setting higher standards of discipline for himself than he did for those around him, and to realize that he is deftly and politically adjusting his narratives and the discourse which he broadcasts to achieve maximum effect with least damage to the Ainu movement which he endeavors to advance.

These characteristics, I also came to realize, are not just personal but rather cultural communication styles, arising from Ota's familial and community upbringing, albeit adapted to fit his mode of political strategizing. Ota, in his own ingenious way, was not only employing embodied Ainu cultural practices for cultural purposes, but, by tying them to discursive knowledge discourses and broadcasting them over the internet to both the Wajin³ populace and his Ainu protégées, was efficiently furthering the Ainu political movement.

What is the background to such mechanisms, where and how did they form, and what exactly is their function or effect in relation to the Ainu movement overall? These are questions which this paper will attempt to address, as it examines Ota's movement in light of Ainu activism.

2. Background to the Issues

It is a common argument that the current situation of Indigenous⁴ peoples in the global economy represents a kind of model in miniature of the predicament of modernity. Coming face to face with the forces of global capitalism, the Ainu are fighting not only for social, economic, and political parity, but also for the survival of their culture, a predicament shared with other Indigenous peoples of the world, and one distinguishing them from some of the other movements addressed in this publication. Indeed, in an era in which the headiness of the latter twentieth century has died off, when ambiguity or cultural humanism may have become necessary tropes in which to portray activism in order to maintain recruits and give direction to a movement, worldwide Indigenous struggles are likely to continue to turn to their traditional customs and values as motivators for participants.

Yet amongst worldwide Indigenous peoples the Ainu as an Indigenous group in Japan find themselves in a unique situation worldwide, facing obstacles on several fronts which constrain them from turning to their traditions. First, the strength of discrimination in Japanese society and the ready option of passing as ethnic Japanese, which is prevalent to this day, have created a social environment in which the majority of everyday Ainu prefer to just lead their lives out in quiet (Sunazawa 2002). The close physical resemblance of contemporary Ainu to ethnic Wajin Japanese makes passing a viable and often irresistible option for averting perceived and actual social discrimination. Secondly, this situation hasn't

been alleviated to any great extent by Japanese state policy measures; on the contrary, scholars and activists have interpreted the Japanese state's actions as neglect (Sawai 2014), strategies of divide-and-conquer (Uemura 2010), welfare colonialism (Siddle 1996; Sawai 2014), and stalling (Uemura 2010). At best, to the extent that Japan has never codified their Indigenous policy, the Ainu still have something for which to strive in their Indigenous rights struggle. Yet, in the same sense, they simultaneously possess no secure legal backing, and thus must constantly be watching their backs by paying attention to the effect that their words and actions have on the Japanese populace, a situation brought sharply into relief by the recent Councilman Kaneko turmoil, in which *netouyo* (right-wing internet users) have bashed vocal Ainu for what they see as "unfair" affirmative action treatment.⁵

In this context of frequent incidences of passing as mainstream Japanese for the sake of avoiding social discrimination, "rocking the boat" and threatening the anonymity of ones' relatives or close Ainu friends by drawing too much attention to oneself remains, for the most part, taboo. And, in the event that one has "come out" by broadcasting one's Ainu identity, cultural activities generally tend to be sanctioned by the general Ainu community, but political ones not. Therefore, Ainu youth or would-be activists are always faced with the temptation of focusing strictly on cultural praxis to the exclusion of more critical movement pursuits such as historical study or political activism.

On the other hand, one thing in particular which needs to be highlighted in any investigation of the progress of the Ainu movement is the identity gains achieved, especially by the younger generations and particularly within the past fifteen years. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to state that since the passage of the Law for the Promotion of the Ainu Culture and for the Dissemination and Advocacy for the Traditions of the Ainu and the Ainu Culture (otherwise known as the Cultural Promotion Act, hereafter CPA) in 1997, the prerequisite to Ainu political activism, a solid embrace of one's ethnic and social identity as an Ainu, has been achieved, albeit amidst claims of superficiality (Hasegawa 2005).

Those claims of superficiality, however, represent one of the largest hurdles and most-discussed issues at stake existing for contemporary Ainu. The second is internal suppression. Anyone who has spent a great deal of time with Ainu in Ainu-only gatherings will be familiar with the occasionally explosive, often cross-wise nature of Ainu men's personalities, and the Spartan means of discipline which sometimes accompany it. Occasionally reckoned by Ainu themselves to derive from the danger which goes hand-in-hand with bear hunting, it has been a means of keeping order which is accompanied by the fist. Although I myself have never had occasion to follow Ota's advice to "bring a helmet," I've found myself on the receiving end of explosive anger and very unnerved as a result, and have also been witness to others breaking down in tears when faced with such.

I submit that the reason for the failure of the Ainu movement to catch hold amidst the Ainu youth actually has to do with what until now have been unconscious elements of an Ainu cultural habitus,⁶ in other words the rough-and-tumble facets of Ainu society itself, and that one reason why Ota has succeeded in developing relations with his disciples to the extent that he has is his skillful avoidance of oft-seen Spartan disciplinary habits amongst middle-aged Ainu who were his predecessors.

Meanwhile, Ainu are unique in that they are the Indigenous peoples of one of the most

well-to-do industrialized nations in the world. This has also resulted in them being a prime target for researchers, giving rise to the ironic situation that massive amounts of research were conducted on the Ainu who were simultaneously being labelled as a “dying race.” From the 1970s on this was a situation to which the Ainu reacted vehemently, leading eventually to what I see as an impasse in progress in the field of Ainu Studies. Organic intellectuals⁷⁾ have been responsible for much of the Ainu research going on, a situation which has prime relevance for the discussion in this paper.

Meanwhile, from the 1980s on, we have witnessed the phenomenon of young to middle-aged Ainu apprenticing themselves to elders from all over the island. Since then, a decrease in elders capable of transmitting knowledge about Ainu language and ceremonial protocols has paralleled the (potential) increase in possibilities for academic study. Consequently, one can now witness the phenomenon of those who have experienced Ainu cultures in a lived way through personal study/apprenticeship coming to loggerheads with academic knowledge of Ainu. At the same time, as standards of living have risen and discrimination associated with poverty decreased, a generation of new Ainu who have few negative associations with their identity as well as an interest in becoming reconnected with their culture has arisen. Takamasa⁸⁾ in this paper is one such youth. Clearly, it is time to sort out the issues related to knowledge production. Meanwhile, the internet has now reached to all corners of Japan. This paper comprises a case study of how these factors converge, and an analysis of the ramifications.

3. Theoretical Framework

Variations in definitions of “Ainu people” notwithstanding, it is possible to make the claim that the “Ainu movement” has been ongoing for some 550 years, since the Battle of Koshamain in 1457. This paper touches upon the contemporary manifestations of this movement in ritual, dance, various forms of the Ainu language, as well as ideological discourse against a political agenda on the part of the Japanese state, and amidst various other structural factors, as the movement reconfigures and re-identifies itself in a modern era and changing times.

In order to do this, I have chosen to focus on two actors in the Ainu community from two different regional and familial backgrounds as well as age groups, Ota and his protégé Takamasa Otsuka, as well as to touch upon how one event, the 2008 Indigenous Peoples Summit in Ainu Mosir (hereafter 2008 IPS), served in an incidental way to galvanize their meeting and move them to a relationship of “master” and “disciple.”

In so doing, I also foreground the embodied knowledge that arises in the Ainu tradition, forming the bulk of the communication medium of their relationship, regarding it as it stretches back continuously through the centuries unchanged, and as it has been molded and crafted, transformed and rearticulated as it became part of the Ainu movement of the latter twentieth century, and as it continues to be reinterpreted and rearticulated to this day. Here, in referring to the embodied knowledge of the Ainu tradition, I am employing the notion of performativity as it manifests itself in the Indigenous movement, as a conscious enactment of selected ethnic markers. In this context, Ainu ritual ceremony, and Ainu dance

and song which may accompany or be separated from it, all constitute embodied knowledge which, when manifested as performativity within the context of the Ainu movement, yield particular results with regard to identity strengthening and community building. I submit that the 2008 IPS, as one focal point for the Indigenous movement, served as a catalyst in mobilizing performative elements of the movement at that point in time in contemporary history.

In so doing, I am additionally reinterpreting Ito's notion of the separation of culture and society (Ito 2007), and of how culture can be mobilized to re-define Indigenous society. I differ from Ito in situating culture *vis-à-vis* Indigenous nations as a *sine qua non* component of their identity, and also as premise for their movement. In the Indigenous case, culture is irrevocably intertwined with knowledge and identity of the movement at the individual and collective levels—in other words, culture is not a product per se of the Indigenous movement, but rather it is the movement's core characteristic, its driving force, its legitimacy, and its *raison d'être*.

And yet this culture, the knowledge which comprises it, and the identity which rests upon it, are continually being redefined and reinterpreted as Ainu individuals and groups come into contact with other ethnic and Indigenous cultures and other minority movements. It is in this context that I have tried to provide in this paper a sense for the meetings and exchanges which have occurred between Ainu groups and other minority and ecological movements within Japanese society, and with the larger international Indigenous community (the East Asian region and the world at large). Importantly, some of these exchanges have generated lasting and mutually enforcing ties, while others have fizzled out inconsequentially. By making reference in passing to these fading and lasting alliances I hope to elucidate the role of knowledge production within the Ainu social movement.

Given that at present, Ainu activism is by force of necessity carried out within the framework allowed by the legal parameters of the Japanese nation and the current conservative multiculturalist milieu therein, activism geared toward actualization of Indigenous legal rights per se may be deemed to be a dead-end road by many Ainu individuals. Strident demands for Ainu Indigenous rights which were readily visible until several years ago through several activist groups and organizations (Ainu Ramat Organization 2010; WIN-AINU 2010; 2011; 2012) have almost ceased to be heard. In this sense, the culture being leveraged in Ainu ethnic politics could be interpreted mainly as a tool for working toward the alleviation of social discrimination, one of the major objectives of concerned Ainu individuals for the past century.

Yet on the other hand, one thing which I am constantly reminded of in my work with the Ainu is that I have no right to be involved in this engagement as a researcher unless I am fully prepared to fight the political battle which could lead to actualization of Ainu Indigenous rights of self-determination. It must be remembered that any interpretation which frames the Ainu movement as a social one, and neglects to recognize the Ainu as an Indigenous people, inherently harms the potential of the movement. This is a question which we who would research Indigenous social movements must all ask of ourselves.

That said, as Kapoor and Choudry (2010) argue, in following the progress of social movements, gains are too often measured in terms of material advances rather than in those

of the internal growth of the movement itself. In developing my argument below, I wish to submit that the inertia of the Ainu movement has been guided by a subtle dialectical play between varying movement tactics, between community harmony and rights gains achieved by the movement at large, and that what has remained as its substance must be differentiated from its logistical and rights gains. Multifold levels of articulation are at play, the dynamics of which, when analyzed, I believe contain significant and edifying insights about social movements.

This paper is about the social dynamics of Ainu movement knowledge production at a micro-level, based on ethnographic research, and should thus be distinguished from an approach which would systematically take into account written forms of cognitive knowledge in order to carry out its analysis. While I have made every effort to keep abreast of the current printed debates within Ainu society, these do not comprise the main source of my data. Nonetheless, the movement on which I am focusing here definitely yields cultural praxis for political ends. At the same time, by focusing on Mitsuru Ota, the “Chancellor” of Niko Niko University and an organic intellectual, the discussion could be said to also tangentially shedding light on the project of Ainu scholars creating an Ainu Studies (Hudson et al. 2014).

The following is a case study focusing mainly on the Niko Niko University/Kamuynomi Friendship Society “movement” led by Mitsuru Ota, a graduate of the radical Asahikawa Camp, and on Takamasa Otsuka, a youth influenced by activists hailing from his own hometown in Eastern Hokkaido. While this case study brings to light what I believe to be central issues to the question of Ainu knowledge production/reproduction, it is not by any means the sole instance through which these elements could be explored.

In order to situate Ota and his methods, and the motivations of Takumasa as his future (and now current) protégé, I begin my paper with an overview of the Ainu movement and the role that I see culture playing in it, then move into the specifics of my case study, before again expanding the topic out to the Ainu movement in general during my discussion.

The author, a graduate of a School of Education and current professor of multicultural education, comes at this investigation from a stance inculcated into me during my academic training at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks, that my work should eventuate in the creation of an ethnic education system for the Ainu. My knowledge of the 2008 IPS and the subsequent activities of the World Indigenous Network-AINU (hereafter WIN-AINU), the NPO successor to the 2008 IPS Steering Committee, come about as a result of having been a member of the Steering Committee in the 2008 IPS, and then followed through on these duties as translator and interpreter to a lesser extent as a general member of WIN-AINU. Additionally, I find my connection to the Kamuynomi Friendship Association, the then major sponsor of the Hamamasu event described above,⁹ in a rite-of-passage “forced” upon me by its members. This paper is also informed by approximately ten years of ethnographic fieldwork, including eighteen months of residence in a rural Ainu hamlet.

4. Overview of the Ainu Movement

Given the fact that it reflects the conduct of an entire society, and encompasses a period

lasting over 50 years, the contemporary Ainu movement has manifested itself in a myriad of forms over the last several decades. Again, any attempt at analysis of the Ainu movement remains complicated from the outset, as different Ainu actors have different visions of what constitutes the movement and its aims. As mentioned above, the movement faces a number of structural handicaps, the largest being the ease of shirking one's ethnic identity by passing as a mainstream Japanese. Additionally, politically-speaking, the Ainu suffer from the logistical handicaps of being largely rural. To add to this, ambivalence about the movement, brought about by vague state policies which focus on culture to the detriment of all other potential Indigenous human rights issues, is prevalent. Thus, for some the mere revitalization of culture will suffice; others desire social-welfare parity, while the most ambitious demand Indigenous political rights. In this section I am focusing mainly on elements of the movement whose actors consciously have employed ethnic markers for the advancement of socio-political aims.

Those familiar with Ainu history will know that the recent Ainu political struggle has been advanced in the aim of achieving Ainu Indigenous rights. The IPS can be seen as one of four focal points in recent Ainu movement history, the first being the 1984 Pan-Ainu mobilization leading up to the compilation of the Demands for a New Ainu Law, the second being the IPS Summit, the third being mobilization of Ainu to voice demand to the Japanese government in the deliberations following Ainu recognition as an Indigenous people of Japan in 2008, and the fourth being, I predict, negotiations over how the Ainu are to be depicted to the world on the occasion of the upcoming 2020 Olympics. Additionally, and significantly, the 2008 IPS was a landmark event for mobilization of Ainu cultural capital toward political ends.

The Ainu Association of Hokkaido (AAH) has always possessed an element of resistance (Siddle 1996), although throughout the years this has waxed and waned with the vicissitudes of state policy at any given time, influences from domestic minority groups, and the pull of the international Indigenous movement. Under the influence of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s, followed by the advent of the Indigenous rights movement in the 1970s and 1980s, the Ainu Association of Hokkaido, which until that time had been mainly a society seeking social welfare benefits, rode upon the backs of young activist members to become increasingly vocal about achieving political rights within the context of Indigeneity. In this way, the Ainu Association had possessed a double-sided identity as both a welfare and watchdog association, with the watchdog element actually contributing to Ainu activism, until the past three or four years, at which time they were accused of siding with the state.¹⁰⁾

Meanwhile, separate or related Ainu activist groups with links to Leftist factions in the form of the Buraku Liberation Movement and resident Koreans, which had been characterized by elements of radical denunciation (and mistakenly associated with violence in the minds of many individuals both Wajin and Ainu alike), have continued until the present to provide alternative perspectives to that of the "official" Ainu Association.

The Japanese state has responded to Ainu demands for Indigenous rights by limiting the discussion solely to cultural rights, first with the passage in 1997 of the CPA, then with the submission by the Council of Experts on Ainu Policy Countermeasures in 2009 of their final and official report on Ainu policy, which advocates measures designed to ensure the

maintenance and promotion of Ainu culture in the broad sense, featuring a proposed Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony to be constructed in Shiraoi, Hokkaido (Gayman 2014).

Following this, contradictions in state policy and proposed measures have been joined by an increasingly capitalistic trend in official Ainu support, as Sapporo University, one of the sole higher education institutions providing courses in Ainu Studies, has been led to finance their scholarship programs solely through private donations, which derive mainly from large Hokkaido corporations. Additionally, the state-sanctioned measure to boost the Ainu image through the “Trankarapte Project” has a budget heavily bent toward advertising companies. In the case of the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony/2020 Olympics, Ainu activists have complained that the culture/education nexus is increasingly coming under the threat of co-optation.

The 2008 IPS should be positioned amidst dissatisfaction with the culturally centered CPA (Hasegawa 2005), as well as hopes for an Indigenous policy reflecting the spirit and letter of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) adopted in September, 2007. To this extent, the activities of WIN-AINU were highly political in nature, until financial difficulties in 2012 caused the board of directors to shift to a more finance-generating bent, and the sudden inspiration to create an Ainu Party, followed by the same’s equally rapid insolvency when political funds failed to be gathered, changed WIN-AINU’s character to that of an art/performance based NPO.

As mentioned above, impetus for the increasing politicization of the Hokkaido Ainu Association during the 1970s and 1980s came from within its own ranks, namely, Shoji Yuki, Tasuke Yamamoto, Giichi Nomura, Aku Sawai, Ryukichi Ogawa, and others. Additionally, counter-forces or alternative organizations to the AHH have, notably, appeared in Asahikawa (The Asahikawa Ainu Association) led at present by Kenichi Kawamura; in Biratori, Cikoronai, headed by Koichi Kaizawa; and in the Ethnic Peoples’ Forum (*Shōsūminzoku Kondankai*), led by Yuji Shimizu. On the occasion of the 2008 IPS, these alternative organizations were joined by the 2008 IPS, which, as mentioned above, then splintered into WIN-AINU and the Ainu Party, now non-operational.

In addition, Shimizu, after having joined forces with Hiroyuki Nomoto to create the Ainu Party, also served as one of the driving powers behind the litigation against Hokkaido University for the repatriation of Ainu remains housed on the university. Contrary to the previous Ainu litigations, namely the Portraits Rights Case (1982), the Nibutani Dam Case (settled in 1997), and the Ainu Funds Case (rejected by the Sapporo High Court in 2002), this case has strategically combined litigation with the Indigenous human rights standards espoused in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples with the objective of specifically impacting Japan’s Indigenous policy legislation.

Due to spatial limitations, I won’t delve into the specifics of this case or its ramifications here, but it is important to point out that, with the exception of one 30-year-old Ainu youth who had served as a representative in the 2008 IPS, none of these radical alternative spokesperson organizations are supported by any Ainu people under the age of 45. Reasons which the Ainu youth commonly state for their non-participation are the heavy-handed tactics and disciplinary attitudes of their elders, and the lack of enthusiasm they feel toward an approach that grants them human rights based merely upon their ethnic identity.

Meanwhile, on the cultural front, those who had been practicing culture merely for the sake of nostalgia were joined in the early 1980s by those who wielded it for political purposes, while those who had been utilizing it for making a living, mainly at tourist centers until around 2009, were joined by NPOs featuring Ainu art and music performances, and an NPO combining survey and documentary film-making activities with cultural ones. Along similar lines, the Ainu National Trust movement took form in the shape of a reforestation NPO, Cikoronai, in Biratori, while the Ainu-managed museum circuit saw the addition of the first Ainu literature museum, devoted to the works of Yukie Chiri, the first and most famous member of the Ainu literati, in 2008. Meanwhile, the Ainu music and dance performance scene exploded soon before or after the 2008 IPS, bringing with it the formation of the Ainu Rebels (2007), Team Nikaop (2010), Sanike (2011), and several other bands and performance units in the Tokyo area since.

And yet, once again, youth participation tends to remain at the level of cultural participation, not political. I would like to submit that this cultural trait has also characterized the nature of the Ainu movement up until the present, simultaneously influencing the methods by which Ainu activism has manifested itself, as well as the internal dynamics of Ainu society in terms of transmission to younger generations. In other words, firstly, the tactics employed by the Ainu until very recently—and by some even until this day—reflect methods of confrontational denunciation which were originally propagated by Leftist factions such as the Buraku Liberation Movement and resident Korean organizations. Secondly, seniority relations in Ainu communities between older and younger members have also reflected the same demeanor witnessed in this in-your-face type of confrontation, with younger members in their 20s and 30s having to grimly bear “the pounding from above” until they were recognized at a certain age, usually in their early 40s, as “being able to hold their own.”

Amidst these multifarious and multilayered trends, the significance of the 2008 IPS was that it served as a rallying point for the Ainu Indigenous human rights recovery movement (which, as mentioned above, has since almost fizzled out despite the efforts of Ainu activists), and also as an event for popularizing Ainu art, dance, and ritual. Leading up to the actual event itself, Ainu artists were consulted at length by the Steering Committee as to the designs to be used in advertising and PR for the Summit. This led not only to the creation of the Summit slogan, *mawko pirika* (fine fortune), as well as a Summit logo created by Ainu artist and poet Koji Yuki, but also to the incorporation of Ainu design into the webpage, created by Summit Youth Representative, Mina Sakai and her American husband. Further, *kamuy nomi* ceremonies were conducted accompanying each of the two opening ceremonies in Biratori and Sapporo, in order to pray for the success of the event. Lastly, the finale of the Summit was crowned by a two-hour celebration of Indigenous music during the first Mawko Pirika Music Festival, initiating a tradition which has continued yearly ever since. In this way, the 2008 IPS was what provided the newly formed Ainu Rebels band with the chance to reconnect with their homeland by making their first ever Hokkaido performance. Consequently, Ainu art, dance, and ritual as featured in the 2008 IPS served as a major centripetal force to draw Ainu youth into the movement fold.

5. Case Study: The Fateful Meeting of Mitsuru Ota and Takamasa Otsuka

My first knowledge of Takamasa Otsuka, or “Takamasa” as he is called by friends and most Ainu who know him, was in 2008 through an NHK television documentary about the Ainu band of which he was a member (NHK 2008). In order to get a clearer picture of the cultural/political environs in which Takamasa acquired his Ainu identity, it is necessary to backtrack to late 1990s Obihiro, where Mina Sakai, founding member of the Ainu Rebels, was being shaped by her engagement in the youth support group Tokachi Eteke Kanpa no Kai. Tokachi Eteke Kanpa no Kai, in turn, founded by Masai Kimura, a strong-minded and motherly local Ainu parent, was heavily influenced by the vision and direction—under Masai’s watchful eye—of Mitsuru Ashizawa, a young local high school teacher, Christian, and YMCA supporter. Cultural exchange activities carried out between Obihiro Ainu youth who at the time were mostly in high school, and several First Nations groups in Canada which heavily emphasized Indigenous rights recovery and pride in one’s native culture, effectively brought about a 180 degree turn in Sakai’s self-image and inspired her to pursue Ethnic Studies at Obilin University in Tokyo, and then to go on with her older brother Atsushi to form the Ainu Rebels, which, as mentioned above, was invited to perform during the 2008 Mawko Pirika Music Festival in Sapporo.

Several members and former members of the Rebels have credited the group’s strong insistence on Native pride as the spark which inspired them to take on Ainu activism. One of these is Takamasa.

Even after the disbanding of the musical group, Takamasa went on to gain employment at the Yaesu Ainu Cultural Center, where he has come to occupy a constant presence, and to be selected by WIN-AINU as youth ambassador on two friendship trips to Aotearoa/New Zealand and New Mexico. In short, the fire which had been sparked by the Rebels caught the eye of the WIN-AINU leaders, who, fresh from their empowering exchange experience during the 2008 IPS, were seeking a member of the next generation whom they could train to carry the torch of Indigenous rights activism.

It was about this time that Takamasa was introduced through fellow Rebels member and Mina Sakai’s older brother, Atsushi Sakai, to Mitsuru Ota, or *sensei* (teacher), whom Sakai had met in an Ainu-language training retreat in Hokkaido. At the time, Ota had been experimenting with the possibilities of an Ainu language online community (Ota 2014), the financial parameters of which meshed well with the voluntary nature of the Ainu ritual ceremony revival movement which he has been advancing. Thanks to the capacities of Niko Niko Doga, the internet service via which Ota chose to propagate his Ainu language revival, Tokyo participants were able to view an Ainu ceremonial, along with the recitations of Ainu oral tradition and performances of dance and song which customarily accompany it, via podcast from the comfort of their urban living rooms. This brings us to an entirely different plane of the Ainu movement: that of *kamuyonomi* ritual ceremony practice, and the transmission and study of the Ainu language in Hokkaido, and how Mitsuru Ota came to be known as *sensei* for his role not only in transmitting these cultural elements but also for infusing them with a critical political bent simultaneously engaging and biting.

As mentioned above, Ota came into the fold of the Asahikawa Ainu in the early 1990s,

directly after graduating from Tenri University, where he supported himself through studies in history and languages. He had also spent a stint as an international student at the Communist Academy in Moscow, Russia. Already having been raised “by the fist” by his father at home, here Ota acquired an even more gritty worldliness and the incisive way of thinking which characterize his every word and action these days. In Asahikawa, his experiences commuting from his hometown of Akabira to the language classes in Asahikawa, where he was interacting regularly with elders who were also bearers of the Ainu oral tradition of epic poetry, were also interspersed with a christening into the most radical of denunciatory activism, as he accompanied the highly conspicuous Kenichi Kawamura to demonstrations and affrontations at Hokkaido University and elsewhere. During his time here, he would come to be recognized as the leading speaker of the Ainu language for his age, and to be relegated the task of officiating over most *kamuy nomi* Ainu prayer ceremonies held by Kawamura’s group.

Ota’s dogged persistence in responding to the criticisms and demands of the Asahikawa elders eventually won him their approval as the Asahikawa Ainu language instructor, at the same time as instilling in him a sense of loyalty to local ways of doing things. The combined traits of looking to the elders for knowledge and local patriotism continue to guide Ota’s teaching to this day, and are balanced on the other hand by an open-mindedness to other locales’ similar sense of community, as well as a down-to-earth wisdom regarding local social dynamics, in particular that between the older generations and youth.

Asahikawa has always been known amongst Ainu as a hub of rebellion against Wajin incursion, a free-willed region which often has stood at odds with the rest of the Hokkaido Ainu community. In 1971 the main factor in the Asahikawa Ainu Association’s splitting off from the AAH was Asahikawa resistance to the idea of continuing to be dependent upon Ainu welfare handouts. Ota’s discourse and philosophies bear the trace of this fierce independence. On the other hand, the heavy-handed tactics of the radical left-wing supporters of the Ainu eventually led Ota to distance himself from certain elements of the Asahikawa camp.

Niko Niko University,¹¹⁾ and the corresponding Mina Mina Kotan (Ainu for “Village of Smiles”) for Ainu members only, enjoyed immense popularity in the space of the three short years over which they were aired,¹²⁾ with Niko Niko going from 0 to 1500 listeners and Mina Mina Kotan maintaining a respectable regular listenership of fifteen Ainu. Regular listeners were drawn to Ota’s mesmerizing commentary, and Ainu to the opportunity to join fellow Ainu in a “safe space” where they could study the Ainu language, experience a characteristic Ainu communication style (Ota is very specific in stating that he is making every effort to transmit this to succeeding generations), occasionally view Ainu ritual ceremonies and other events through podcasts, and not least of all, receive personal guidance in a non-threatening manner from Ota.¹³⁾

It is likely to be the Spartan home environ in which Ota grew up, combined with his experiences in gaining the trust of Asahikawa’s Ainu elders, which gave him his “street credit” with the male Ainu youth, but one achievement with which he should be accredited is that his Ainu listenership is over half women. An important factor in securing this female listenership has been Ota’s combination of mastery of the Ainu language and the traditional

ceremonial skills which he honed under the severe guidance of Ainu elders and community members into yearly annual *kamuynomi* events at his home in Sorachi, and recently at Hamamasu, where participation by women is indispensable.

So, in the following way, Ota succeeded in creating a link between the spirit and traditions of the past, and the aspirations of Ainu youth, particularly in the Tokyo region, who have largely been drawn into the movement by the charm of Ainu song and dance. The elements involved have been, first, his having distinguished himself from other central Ainu figures by his knowledge of the Ainu language and ceremony, which came to be his major selling point when, after around 2009, he went live on the internet. Second, there is his never-ending narrative on “what it means to be Ainu,” a discourse characterized by an emphasis on what Ainu traditional communication styles and values are, and what the prerequisites are for the articulation and maintenance of these in modern Japanese society. Third, there are the hands-on opportunities to display these communication styles and values over live sessions on the internet (Niko Niko Doga or Skype) or with active participation in ritual, song, and dance during *kamuynomi* events in Hokkaido.

Fourth, and this has been very important in distinguishing Ota from other outspoken Ainu of his generation, is the extreme adamancy Ota has shown in persistently espousing a view of Indigenous rights—as unucrative and unpopular as it is—as something which must be earned through intra-Ainu solidarity, and not through windfall boons from the Japanese state. Although he does give credence to the possibility of effecting change through Ainu political endeavors, this concession is based upon the premise that such transformations would be achieved through winning over the hearts of one’s fellow Wajin citizens, thus requiring another kind of effort on the Ainu part, one based on a thorough knowledge of Ainu values of generosity and self-sufficiency and how these must be used efficiently to forward the movement.

In all of the above, we can witness Ota’s attachment to Ainu traditional values and communication styles, particularly as they have been cultivated in the fiercely independent community of Asahikawa, tempered by his own moral predilections. To recapitulate:

1) Ota combines the traditional values and worldview encapsulated in the Ainu oral tradition and ceremonial culture with modern technology, in order to broadcast a discourse of Ainu values to be articulated against contemporary issues through narrative, and to give his protégés a chance to embody these via actual experiences of the *kamuynomi* ceremony.

2) Ota has chosen the path of an organic intellectual who first and foremost prioritizes using his knowledge of the Ainu language and Ainu ritual to teach to his fellow Ainu, rather than pursuing riches and fame. His approach—that scholars of the Ainu language and culture owe their knowledge to the Ainu community and are obliged to pay their dues by prioritizing service to the Ainu community over the advancement of their own careers—places Ainu familial and community knowledge in opposition to that being espoused at universities by Wajin scholars of the Ainu (Ota has incidentally referred to those Ainu receiving their training from the latter as artificial Ainu, as opposed to wild Ainu, who have gained their knowledge of the Ainu language and culture mainly from other Ainu).

3) The *kamuynomi* events which Ota organizes and which draw Ainu from all over Hokkaido are based upon the knowledge and experience gleaned during his apprenticeship

in Asahikawa, and to the largest extent possible, they involve the participation of Ainu elders. In this sense, Ota maintains a standard in practice that all actions must be associated with a local community, while at the same time respecting the integrity of other Ainu communities. Ota respects the agency of other communities to carry out their ceremonies according to their own local variations in the protocol. Included in this value system is a recognition of his protégés' entanglement in local social dynamics.

4) Ota maintains that Ainu activists must never become radicals who will resort to violence to achieve their ends at the expense of morality stance which he took when he came to feel that the Wajin supporters of the Asahikawa Ainu were being unscrupulous in their movement tactics.

5) Ota also maintains that whenever possible one should capitalize on the experience and knowledge of elders, given that this is sometimes motivationally impossible given the hard-as-nails attitude toward younger Ainu described above. Additionally, he gives practical advice to Ainu youth during his broadcasts about how to cope with iconoclastic Ainu communication styles.

6. Discussion

In this paper, we have seen that the Ainu political movement is constrained by numerous challenges, including the temptation to pass as a mainstream Japanese, weak Indigenous policy, extremism, and lack of charismatic leaders. Is there a route out of this seeming impasse? Ota and other's Ainu ritualism involves performativity, a reclaiming of the customs and rituals of one's people through the embodied performance of elaborate ceremony, to reconnect with the land and the ancestors.

These days, wielding of culture for political purposes is something which one rarely sees in the Ainu movement. Due to poor timing and a lack of prior discussion at the time of the establishment of the Ainu Party, which as we have seen never got off the ground, followed by the subsequent dismantlement of the political arm of WIN-AINU, such applications of culture have come to a halt. On the other hand, Ainu groups advocating a political or legal stance, as Yuji Shimizu and the Asahikawa Ainu Association do, have been too forthright in their critical stance (Shimizu) or just too radical in general (AAA) to attract young Ainu.

Additionally, as we have seen, even as one embraces one's ethnic identity, it is still possible to be foiled in the Ainu movement by one's social position and responsibilities, particularly the expectation to respond to the perceivably perverse disciplinary patterns of one's seniors—the “trial by pounding” from above. It is at this point, at which Ainu youth begin to experience the stirrings of ethnic pride and curiosity about their culture—as did Takamasa through his involvement in the Ainu Rebels in Tokyo—that Ota steps into the picture, by providing a critical Ainu space replete with explanations of how to get along with one's fellow Ainu and seniors.

Since the late 1960s, Ainu activism as a whole had been heavily influenced by the tactics of the Left, particularly its method of denunciation. My interpretation is that this method has gradually lost popularity given Ainu abuse of its ethically questionable elements

and changes in the mood of the times. It is no longer possible to resort to tactics of confrontation and expect for them to be accepted by society at large. I would suggest that successful Ainu activists have learned to voice the same content via different means. Ota paints the picture of the possibility of this through his broadcasts replete with anecdotes and illustrative examples, which also constitute advice on how to get along with one's Ainu seniors—and the few remaining elders.

Ota's discourse, combined with his means of delivery, is an important one for the act of reproducing the knowledge necessary to further an Ainu critical stance. Crucially, in an age when many scholars have criticized the Japanese state for not granting more assistance to the Ainu, and thus regard the Ainu movement as a failure in terms of material gains, Ota has consistently and adamantly insisted upon the importance of the quality of the movement's discourse. The crucial key after hooking his protégés, who have become interested in Ainu culture, i.e., song and dance, is to combine these with the Ainu philosophy incorporated in Ainu prayer and ceremony, and cement these as the foundation of his narrative. Through combining all of these into live internet broadcasts, he is merging storytelling and performativity all into one experience.

Yet, Ota's approach may also have its limitations. In my experience, he is equivocal about key issues such as Ainu Indigenous rights or the proper role of elders within Ainu society, frequently changing his stance with regards to these issues depending upon his debate rival or conversation partner. In other words, the skills which he is demonstrating to his protégés of "moving quickly on one's feet" are highly sophisticated ones which aren't geared toward the "common man," a trend reflected in Ota's own admission that he is "often misunderstood."

Additionally, the path which Ota advocates constitutes a financially bleak existence. He himself often realistically reminds his protégés that being an Ainu is not about heroism, but rather mere survival, pointing out the precedent of his own divorce, broken health, and near financial insolvency.

Along these lines additionally, it is worth noting that, while Ota himself had engaged in Ainu dance before he underwent a stroke three years ago, his group is not recognized for being performers, a fact which cuts them off from access to progressive lefties who had been drawn to the "Ecological Ainu" image being promoted by WIN-AINU, amongst others.

This brings me to a question at the heart of this volume: what kinds of ramifications do these Ainu sub-movements imply for change in larger society?

While it is difficult to gauge the effect that Ainu activism, be it cultural or political, has on the surrounding mainstream ethnic society, and a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, we can definitely see its influences within the art scene, the environmental movement, and in the form of support for Indigenous human rights causes of the Ainu. It is not an exaggeration to say that the cultural and political activism of the Ainu which resulted in the creation of the CPA has been one of the major forces in moving Japan away from a discourse of ethnic homogeneity.

In this sense, I would also like to submit that the skillful capitalizing on the presence of outside experts, whether they be scholars, lawyers, or entertainment producers, has been key to the gains made in the Ainu movement thus far. Many Ainu activists, and especially

Ota, are aware of this, and maintain a respectful distance from these would-be supporters while utilizing their skills to the maximum within ethical bounds, provided that the outsider in question is sincere in their desire to assist the Ainu.

7. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the mechanisms of production and reproduction of Ainu knowledge and identity by focusing on how embodied Ainu knowledge in the form of being emotionally drawn to Ainu song and dance has led to connections with Ainu individuals who are involved in more discursive knowledge aspects of Ainu culture, and with critical discourses on Japanese society founded on Ainu values and worldview, and conducted in the medium of an Ainu communication style.

By taking up the case of one charismatic Ainu activist who pursues the reclaiming of Ainu space and voice through the use of the Ainu language in public spaces, broadcasting Ainu traditional values, and their ceremonial utilization in the form of symbolic reconnection to and retaking of Ainu sacred spaces, I have illustrated one possible response of an Indigenous people in Asia, constrained as they are by the conditions of being Indigenous in the society and nation of Japan, to the contradictions in state policy and the market economy with which they are confronted. Such a situated analysis should provide us with comparative data for Indigenous peoples in other regions of the world, as well as for with other minority groups within Japan and perhaps in the East Asian region overall.

In focusing on these aspects, I have neglected to go into depth into the historical ideological debates leading up to this case study, which are rightfully the subject of in-depth analysis themselves. By the same token, in order to convey the macro situation, I have opted not to pursue here an in-depth analysis of the fascinating motivational dynamics involved in the study and transmission of the Ainu *kamuynomi* tradition and how the values that underlay this manifestation of Ainu spirituality are being voiced by *kamuynomi* practitioners in relation to the current state-sponsored Inkarapte Project. While the latter represents a crucial debate for the future of the Ainu movement, especially given the threat the Symbolic Space for Ethnic Harmony/Olympics project represents to Ainu spirituality being co-opted into the state/market regimes, it is yet too early for me at this point in time to make a thoroughly informed commentary. Likewise, whereas the legal ramifications of Japan's currently proposed Ainu policy are a top priority issue which researchers such as myself have a responsibility to address, the former topic may be one which my Ainu informants may not allow me to pursue. In any event, I am indebted to Mitsuru Ota and Takamasa Otsuka, amongst numerous other Ainu individuals and activists, for their supportive acceptance of me into their circles and for their generous sharing of their knowledge and culture. *Sonno iyayraykere*.

Notes

- 1) Ainu term for prayer ceremony.
- 2) Ainu term for deities.

- 3) Ethnic Japanese.
- 4) Throughout my work, I have chosen to capitalize the term “Indigenous,” just as one commonly finds the terms “Aboriginal” or “First Nations” capitalized.
- 5) Hokkaido Shimbun, “Ainu minzoku inai” kakikomi mondai kaneko sapporo shigi o shobun sezu jimin kaiha “kojinteki kenkai” (Sapporo City Councilman Kaneko to be Let Off Hook for “Ainu People No Longer Exist” Twit. LDP Deems it “Personal Opinion”), September 19, 2014.
- 6) I am using the term here in the sense of the taken-for-granted values, dispositions, and expectations of particular social groups that become embodied through the experiences of everyday life.
- 7) Here I borrow upon Gramsci’s use of the term, which he used to denote conscious members of the working class, as opposed to the literate clergy. In the Ainu case, I refer to knowledgeable, erudite Ainu individuals who theorize on and actively debate the status quo of Ainu society and culture and who are not necessarily employed in academia or as researchers.
- 8) All names in this paper except for that of Mitsuru Ota and other well-known Ainu activists are pseudonyms.
- 9) Since the original composition of this paper, relations within the Friendship Society have become strained, with the 2014 Hamamasu *kamuynomi* attended by only part of the membership.
- 10) A perspective common to splinter Ainu activist groups based in Sapporo, Ashikawa, and Tokyo.
- 11) Niko Niko University was Ota’s online community for the general public, in contrast to Mina Mina Kotan, which is a closed online community for Ainu only.
- 12) Concerns about covert surveillance have led Ota to cease activities since early 2014, after this paper was originally written.
- 13) In this sense, Ota’s “community” represents what has been termed in regard to the Ainu a “safe space” (Lewallen 2008) or a “culturally safe space” (Gayman 2012). I am originally indebted for the term culturally safe space to Ikko Sakamoto.

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