

An Anthropological Forum: The Inuit of Nunavik and Ainu of Japan Learn About Each Other

Bob Mesher (Makivik Magazine)

For anyone visiting Japan the first time, you quickly notice that the country is very Japanese. For example most everyone speaks only Japanese, they bow to each other a lot, take their shoes off in the restaurants, and a non-Japanese visitor stands out easily in a crowd.

However, Japan also has its own Indigenous people — the Ainu from the North— just as in Canada we have Inuit. But the Japanese government was not always willing to acknowledge that they had an indigenous population who have lived there since time immemorial. Today, the statement made by former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in September 1986 that, "Japan is a nation of homogenous people," has become infamous.

A delegation of spokespeople for the Inuit in Québec was among the activists and political leaders invited to a symposium in Osaka this past January 13th to 15th. Makivik's corporate secretary, George Berthe; the president of the Association of Montreal Inuit, Victor Mesher; and Donat Savoie from Indian and Northern Affairs Canada made presentations. A number of students, anthropologists, public observers and the mass media were also in the house.

The international symposium, entitled *Indigenous Movements in Plural Societies: The Inuit in Canada and The Ainu in Japan*, took place at the National Museum of Ethnology in Osaka. The objective of the symposium, which was funded by the Japanese hosts, was to discuss the indigenous movements of the Ainu and the Inuit, and their relationships with their larger native societies as well as with the major societies of their respective countries. The two indigenous groups in two different situations were compared and it provided an opportunity for dialogue between the Ainu, Inuit, government officials, and anthropologists.

This event also took place momentarily during the conclusion of the International Decade of Indigenous Peoples. It was soon clear at the symposium that the Ainu are struggling to revive their culture due to a long harsh policy of forced assimilation by the Japanese. The Ainu were discriminated against for using their native language and rituals, and their resources were taken away. Today, for the most part, the Japanese are not very familiar with Ainu issues.

While their word for human being is "Ainu" and the Inuit word is "Inuk", the two northern cultures have other traditional similarities. For example the Ainu used to live by fishing, hunting, and gathering, although they also grew crops. They made clothes from available materials such as animal hides, fur, and bird skins. The Ainu also originally did not have a written alphabet but transmitted their

knowledge orally through stories and songs and they had their own spiritual beliefs.

Sadly, the effect of assimilation by the dominant society has been far greater in Japan than in Canada's North. Unlike the Inuit, the Ainu no longer have territory for a land claim settlement and thus reap the benefits of such a treaty, nor do they have rights to any areas for traditional hunting and gathering practises. As George Berthe pointed out, "Without land, you just float around like a feather."

Not only would there be no profit for an Ainu person to claim their native status; but to do so would mean discrimination by the larger society. Now while many Ainu still deny their own culture, hope and acceptance is gleaned from 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*, established on May 14th, 1997. This law was made to preserve and promote the Ainu culture and to permit the Ainu to regain their ethnic pride.

Various groups carry out activities to recover and transmit the Ainu culture throughout Japan since the law was established but many feel that it has been reduced to a museum topic. However, as George told the symposium, "It's all good to put everything in a museum, but you are not dead. A culture has to be alive."

Without resources for a traditional livelihood, the Ainu discovered that they could create arts and crafts to earn money, which some say has contributed to them becoming "museum people". The authenticity of these products, which are sometimes imitated by non-Ainu producers, is also questioned. Craft production is now on the decline and it is mainly women who are around 50 years old that still produce them. Men's crafts are very scarce because these items are related to traditional hunting rituals and they are unable to exploit resources to use such items.

The Hokkaido Ainu Foundation was also formed, based on the Island of Hokkaido, where it is estimated that 40 percent of the Ainu there are members. Although Kazuyuki Tanimoto is Japanese, he is the president of the Ainu Foundation and a recognized expert on Ainu culture. Fifty percent of the Association's leadership is non-Ainu. Mr. Tanimoto says the philosophy of the Ainu law is to make the Ainu independent, although it does not recognize indigenous rights. "In my opinion, the act is quite effective to make the future a bit rosy for the Ainu," he said, "But we have a long way to go."

The Ainu language is also no longer used by anybody for daily conversation, and there are only a handful of people who are able to speak it, although language courses are attempted. One language book that was published for use in elementary school has not proven to be of much help. "It costs a lot," said

Kazuyuki Tanimoto, "I'm afraid the book has not been useful or effective. The teachers are not too knowledgeable."

"Expectations of the new law have not been met," says Ainu Museum curator, Masahiro Nomoto, who made a presentation entitled, *Contemporary Promotion Activities of the Ainu Culture and Cultural Activists*. He says many Ainu cannot identify with the traditional culture and its images and current projects need to be reconsidered. He also explained that the Ainu made enormous efforts to be like Japanese because of past policies and this history still lingers.

Masahiro described a photo of his great grandmother. It is from her that he feels rooted to his native heritage. "She was a good singer and her songs were recorded" he says. He also remembers from his childhood, seeing traditional medicines being used and experiencing an earthquake that was combated by Ainu spiritual words.

Osamu Hasegawa was the second Ainu representative to make a presentation at the symposium. Wearing a robe, which embodied for him spiritual energy, he spoke on the *Aboriginal Movement of Ainu in the Tokyo Metropolitan Area*. The Ainu in Hokkaido are eligible for more benefits such as welfare security than those who live in other areas. Osamu feels that such government support should be consistent, no matter which part of Japan they live in. Tokyo has the largest Ainu population.

Osamu was born and raised by his grandmother in Hokkaido until the age of six or seven, when she died. Being adopted and removed from his home, he does not speak his native language and remembers little about the culture.

He said the Ainu in Tokyo have four associations, and they are not all involved in each one. When all four groups get together, they only see about 50 people — less than one percent of the total Ainu population in Tokyo. "Those in Tokyo do not get rights, so there is no benefit in exposing themselves," he said. "I believe the Ainu have gone through very difficult times to survive."

Unsupported by the Hokkaido Ainu Foundation, they have a restaurant in Tokyo named *House of the Wind*, which provides a low-income job for one or two people. "We want this to be our centre of activity," said Osamu, "When Ainu get together, we talk like family because we can't usually express ourselves, but if even one Japanese person enters, we become silent."

Meanwhile, Osamu recognizes the need for Japanese expertise in their struggle to become established. "We need the wisdom of the Japanese for the transmission of culture and politics and for the pursuit of our rights," he said. Osamu then joked, "We want to occupy the royal palace of Tokyo."

In George's presentation, *Political and Economic Activities of Makivik Corporation*, he told the AINU, "We have to evolve as a culture. Inuit are very resourceful and that is how we have survived."

He thanked the Japanese hosts, especially Nobuhiro Kishigami — now a familiar face to many Inuit in Nunavik and Montreal — for their invitation. "We [Makivik executives] are invited all over the world and we choose carefully which countries we go to," he said. "People want to hear our story. We share but we don't go to every conference because it is too time-consuming and expensive. So it is a great honour to address all of you people."

Despite the social problems and climate warming in Nunavik, his description of Nunavik Inuit realities was a big contrast to the AINU picture. Inuktitut is still very strong, we still have plenty of resources, and Inuit have the main say in the way things operate at home. "We are strong and independent but in partnership with our governments," George said.

George was especially proud when he described the Inuit leaders who participated in the creation of the *James Bay and Northern Agreement*. "They had hardships and when I hear their stories, I can't believe what they were able to achieve in that short time. The governments had their best lawyers and we had our best hunters negotiating the same thing," he said.

Thanks to his extensive experience and encountering with the Inuit dating back to 1967 in Kangiqsualujjuaq, Donat Savoie was well prepared to provide an overview of major national and international events that have occurred in the Canadian Arctic that have affected the North and the people who live there. He also presented his views of the origins of the Nunavimmiut's movement towards self-determination leading up to the present-day negotiations for a Nunavik government.

During his presentation, *The Indigenous Movement of the Inuit in Montreal: The activities of the association of Montreal Inuit*, Victor Mesher then described the situation of Inuit living in Montreal, whose struggles parallel those AINU living away from their homeland in Tokyo, albeit much less severe. Inuit are generally proud of their heritage and, thanks in large part to contributions from Makivik and other organizations, the Inuit in Montreal enjoy certain benefits.

It is estimated that over 800 Inuit live in Montreal, with two-thirds of them from Nunavik, and life is not smooth for many of them. Although they might have abandoned their deplorable home conditions, many of the social services and community support available in the North are not as easy to come by in the city. The Association organizes monthly country food feasts and other activities to bring the Inuit together for mutual support and socializing. "The Inuit in Montreal are spread out and many have no phones so there is no small-town feeling like in the Nunavik communities," Victor said.

Although the forum did not conclude with any commitment to actions, certain reference points were shown; for the Ainu to set new goals for a more meaningful restoration of their culture, for the Inuit to reflect on our history of similar hardships and appreciate where we are today, and for the anthropologists who wish to further study the indigenous movements of these two indigenous peoples.

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