

## PRESERVATION, PROMOTION AND DISSEMINATION OF AINU LANGUAGE AND CULTURE THROUGH COMMODIFICATION

Theresa Savage  
Swinburne University of Technology  
Australia

### Introduction

Ainu language shift occurred as a result of a combination of official assimilation policies combined with legal and socio-psychological pressures to conform, economic deprivation, diaspora of family groups and prejudice during Japanese endeavors to build a modern nation-state after 1868. More than one hundred years later, in 1997, the introduction of the Ainu Culture Promotion Act (CPA) was enacted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology to promote, disseminate and preserve the Ainu culture.

The CPA has led to renewed hope that efforts to revitalize the Ainu language and culture will increase in Japan. Today, Ainu activists (Anderson and Iwasaki-Goodman, 2001, 45) state that they wish to reverse the decline of their language and promote Ainu cultural awareness. Some of the remaining speakers of Ainu state their eagerness to revive the language for everyday use, together with Japanese. Others seem content to relegate the use of Ainu to the occasional ritual or ceremony (Okuda, 1998, 144). Anderson and Iwasaki-Goodman (2001) assert that the Ainu regard their language and culture as being in a state of renewal rather than one of decline.

On the other hand, critics claim that mainstream Japanese (*wajin*) dominate the Ainu language classes and that only a few Ainu persist in studying the language because they do not have as much time to attend the language classes or to devote to study (Maher, 2001). Richard Siddle (2002) claims that many Ainu people regard the CPA as a law that merely provides funding to add Ainu language and traditional culture to museums and tourist attractions, not as a source of funding for developing marketable skills.

To determine if funding from the CPA to fund museums and tourist attractions is having a positive effect on Ainu language and cultural revitalization efforts, data was gathered using interviews with key informants and focus groups, observation and documented evidence collected throughout Hokkaido from 1988 to 2005. Since my trips to Hokkaido from 1988 to 1990 the Ainu revitalization movement has undergone an undisputed transformation.

Commodification is a process by which an item is exchanged in a translation of payment (Ganahl, 201, 24). A society's interpretation of reality is construed from the goods they consume and the meaning associated with the processes of consumption (McCracken, 1990, xi). Self-definition and collective definition are not possible without consumer goods (*ibid.*). As a developed economy, the Japanese are profoundly connected to and dependent on the exchange of goods and services. Japan or any other developed society would lose processes such as reproduction, representation and manipulation of its culture without consumption.

As language is an inalienable right, one cannot own one, but people are able to use language in many ways for profit. For instance, languages can be learned or translated into other languages. Corporations sometimes register and copyright phrases they use in advertising their products. Although languages cannot be owned, states and government-funded organizations instrumentalize language in an attempt to claim, influence, appropriate and control language (Ganahl, 2001, 24-25).

One argument supporting the commodification of cultural symbols is that these collections are thought to invoke memories and mythologies of the group, resulting in the creation of a renewed interest in cultural traditions, including the use of a traditional language (McCracken, 1990, 133). This is an important facet of political action, arousing feelings of group cohesion and romantic notions of the meaning of membership in a particular ethnic group. Therefore commodification of language and culture is a “potent weapon of the class struggle” (Harvey, 2002).

On the other hand the commodification of indigenous language and culture is argued to be a way to break the spirit and strength of cultures and to increase the profit margins of corporations. This argument sees commodification of culture as a process used by corporations and governments to control the so-called wild elements within a colonized group (Peckinpugh, 2000). In this respect it is clear that, although commodification of the culture and language of indigenous groups may provide an economic base to sustain some aspects of their traditions, it is part and parcel of the process of colonization.

## **Methodology**

Fieldwork was carried out in Hokkaido, the northernmost island of Japan, homeland of the Ainu people. Data on language maintenance efforts, language teaching and learning materials and oral traditions, museum displays and events involving Ainu language, culture and art, and commodification of arts and crafts were sought. A triangulated approach employing open-ended interviews of key informants, focus groups, unobtrusive observation and documentary evidence was undertaken. More specifically, ethnographic methodologies using Milroy’s (1987a and 1987b) participant observer techniques for incorporating the social network approach were used for Ainu events as well as adult and children’s language classes. The data determining commodification of Ainu relied heavily on semi-structured interviews and participant observation of Ainu cultural performances and events designed to teach Ainu cultural forms to the Ainu as well as to the general public. Furthermore, the data for these case studies were collected at different times from 1988 to 2005. This long-term study provided an opportunity to observe what happened before the passage of the Culture Promotion Act (CPA) in 1997 and the effects of the change from the Former Aborigines’ Protection Act (of 1899) to the CPA on the linguistic and cultural revitalization movement.

## **Evidence of Commodification in Tourist Areas in Hokkaido**

Tourism goes hand-in-hand with commodification. Ethno-tourism plays an instrumental role in giving the Ainu a voice to represent their history and culture as the indigenous people of Hokkaido and northeast Japan. Tourist areas include Ainu villages at Lake Akan, Shiraoi and

Nibutani. Chikabumi (Asahikawa) has a traditional Ainu *cise* (“house”) and traditional-style buildings for the museum and gift shop. Other museums located at Nibutani, Shiraoi, Shizunai, Obihiro, Abashiri, Hakodate, Kushiro and Sapporo each focus on a different aspect of Ainu history, traditional lifestyle and culture.

Alongside tours to Ainu villages, museums also display Ainu material culture. Many museums in Hokkaido receive public funding, but some notable exceptions such as the Kawamura Kaneto Ainu Memorial Museum in Chikabumi, Kayano Sigeru’s Nibutani Ainu Museum and *Poroto Kotan-Ainu* Ethnographic Museum in Shiraoi, Hokkaido are privately funded and were conceived by the Ainu people. Ainu tourist areas, including the museums, are helping to promote and disseminate information about the past and present Ainu situation and lifestyles. The enactment of traditional Ainu songs, dances and ceremonies, and the display and sale of handicrafts in these areas contribute to the construction of the Ainu identity as a distinct ethnic group within Japan. Examples of events range from basket-weaving classes to Ainu language classes and classes teaching traditional oral literature such as *kamuy yukar* (“tales of the gods”).

### ***IWOR* – “Traditional living spaces”**

In 2000 the National Round-Table on Measures to promote Ainu Culture and Other Matters was established in Hokkaido. The members of the round-Table selected a committee of experts on Ainu culture. The committee noted the success of ethno-tourism throughout the world in promoting indigenous communities, and proposed a plan to create a network of traditional living spaces for the Ainu in the towns and villages where there is a concentration of Ainu people known as *iwor*, often translated as “traditional living spaces.” *Iwor* is an Ainu word referring to a remote mountain or the hunting ground of one village or a hunting territory shared by several villages. *Iwor* symbolizes the sense of belonging (Cheung, 2003, 958). The intention of *iwor* is to set up a network of heritage sites where the Ainu people will be able to practice their traditional culture and way of life, including hunting, fishing, whaling and the use of the Ainu language. The plan includes building display facilities for cultural preservation, the construction of a cultural exchange hall and a school that promotes the study of traditional Ainu environment and an eco-museum. These experts also plan to carry out research on oral tradition, including an international exchange of research. The current proposal is for *iwor* to consist of a network of places all over Hokkaido municipalities such as Nibutani, Asahikawa, Shiraoi, Muroran and Kushiro.

The main reason for developing *iwor* is to train Ainu children and youth in the various Ainu traditions. One task, according to one member of the planning committee, is to develop a place in which natural resources such as the thatch used to make *cise* (“traditional Ainu houses”) can be easily obtained (interview *Iwor* Planning Committee Panel Member October 30, 2003). It is expected that these sites will become tourist attractions and at the same time stem the progression of the loss of Ainu heritage while simultaneously strengthening social networks, thereby improving the Ainu socio-cultural environment.

Difficulties in the way of the establishment of *iwor* include resource preservation, interpretation and development. Funding to set up the sites comes from the Japanese

government via the Foundation for Research into the Preservation of Ainu Culture (FRPAC), However, as Kazuyuki Tanimoto, Director of FRPAC explained, local governments are responsible for the planning, establishment and running of the sites (interview November 3 and 10, 2004). The panel consists of experts in historic preservation, public history, museum studies, ethnography and folklore together with local government officials. At the time of my data collection, one criticism was that there were no Ainu people on the advisory panel. One member's assessment of the lack of Ainu representation in the *iwor* project is that since the opinions of the Ainu are so varied that it would cause problems for any Ainu who happened to be selected to be on the panel. In fact, several disputes have occurred among regional groups over the past few years because Ainu culture varies significantly from region to region (interview *Iwor* Planning Committee Panel Member October 30, 2004; Cheung, 2003, 958). To avoid disputes the advisory committee decided that it was best to invite a variety of Ainu people to the meetings, especially those who have special expertise in certain fields (interview *Iwor* Planning Committee Panel Member October 30, 2003). Although the experts from amongst the Ainu population do not have the power to vote on issues and they are not permanent members of the advisory board, their opinions are being sought. However, such an approach can be criticized for its lack of enlightened views on how to deal with indigenous people. Exclusion of the very people for whom the panel is making decisions appears to be a continuation of government subjugation and this echoes the popularly held perception that the Ainu no longer exist.

Further hurdles to realizing the establishment of *iwor* as a reflection of the needs and wishes of the Ainu community include official restrictions of such things as, for example, building traditional Ainu houses with thatched roofs within city limits for fear of fires. Informants from the planning committee admit that it is a difficult task to weigh the needs and aspirations of the Ainu community against the fact that *iwor* will be built in areas where Ainu and non-Ainu people live. Informants claim that the delicate balance of public opinion and aspirations of the Ainu community are the main reasons why there are no permanent members on the planning committee who are Ainu. The members believe that the first and most important task is to get the non-Ainu people on their side. Consequently, the committee has to play word games because they cannot afford to alienate the non-Ainu people who live in the areas where they hope to set up the network. The committee's attitude seems to disregard the feelings of the Ainu in Hokkaido completely, as they have not given the Ainu a chance to reach a consensus on issues or even given them the opportunity to vote on problems as they arise.

The planners of *iwor* envisage that apart from traditional Japanese displays, there will be souvenir shops and restaurants (interview *Iwor* Planning Committee Panel Member October 30, 2004) from which non-Ainu people from the local communities will no doubt benefit as employees and service providers. On October 18, 2004, the second joint assembly with the Ministry for Land and Transport agreed to use existing facilities as a course of action for passing on traditional Ainu culture. It was decided to delay construction of new facilities to a later date (*Hokkaido Shimbun*, October 19, 2004, 18).

Even though the establishment of *iwor* has been slow to progress and it is not known exactly how it will benefit the Ainu people, expression through art and cultural performances or displays provides under-represented groups a voice with which they may attract the attention of the elite. Certain images are projected though tourism in order to depict the narratives of a given

people, its places and its past. Mainstream heritage sites in many developed places around the world are being enlarged and transformed from areas that target the professional, affluent and sophisticated segment of the population to places that will appeal to the general populace. One such example comes from America. There heritage sites are being transformed by the popularity of once neglected and powerless minority groups, giving them a voice through the reification of their distinctive heritages (Lowenthal, 2003, 7-13).

This study concurs with Siddle's observation (2002) that the CPA provides only funding to support museum displays and ethno-tourism for Ainu cultural and linguistic preservation, promotion and dissemination. Although the Ainu community is undergoing language shift as a result of colonization and modernization, it is evident that commodification of the language and culture is a reaction to the process of homogenization and assimilation. Some members of the community seem to romanticize about the past glory of the Ainu and feel the loss of their language and culture. Other Ainu, particularly younger Ainu, are asserting their identity through contemporary versions of their language (*i.e.*, through *manga* comics, fusion music and speech contests) as well as traditional songs and dances, and prayers and festivals to the gods. Even though traditional renditions of Ainu culture may seem backwards to some people, this study illustrates that commodification is in fact a contemporary response to reassert the identity of a stigmatized group, which serves to provide impetus for language revitalization.

The common denominator for successful language revitalization efforts involves a strong perception of the language as an identity marker. It calls for the protection of language functions and the socio-cultural systems that support those functions. In the situation for Ainu revitalization, however, it is necessary to reconstruct a supportive socio-cultural system. Many people hope that *iwor* will provide a network of sub-*iwors* throughout Hokkaido and consequently increase the concentration of Ainu people who can live a traditional Ainu way of life and work in one place. If *iwor* does come to fruition in this way, there is a chance that social networks and domains of language usage can be built up and that these will contribute to an improved environment for language revitalization.

Ainu activism to revitalize traditional cultural practices through commodification is part of an effort to gain empowerment for the Ainu ethnic group within the dominant Japanese society. It was found that members of the Ainu community are not in agreement as to the importance of knowing the language to claim group membership and that this weakens the language revitalization movement.

Nevertheless the processes of commodification of Ainu culture and language serve to revitalize and ensure the transmission of Ainu cultural and linguistic knowledge into the future. Ethno-tourism is part of the process and has helped to provide gainful employment for some members of the Ainu community. Consequently, commodification of Ainu is not only enhancing efforts to save the language, it is providing an important dimension to improving the economic environment for the Ainu.

One of the major obstacles for the revitalization movement relates to the demographic situation. There are only a few towns where the number of Ainu is greater than the number of .is used again in the home and community, there needs to be a larger concentration of people who

speak Ainu in one place. My research indicates that the establishment of *iwor* “traditional living spaces” has the potential to provide a remedy for this situation by giving the Ainu a chance to improve group solidarity and create a sense of empowerment.

The vitality of ethnic identity is fueled by linguistic and cultural values. For the Ainu language revitalization movement to succeed, there is a need for a supportive socio-cultural and much improved economic environment with an emphasis on directing energies to maintaining the appeal of the language with the younger generation. The process of commodification may help improve the physical living conditions for some Ainu, but it is not enough on its own. Much more work needs to be done on improving the teaching and learning environments for Ainu children as well as changes of laws that support bilingualism within the Japanese educational system.

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